

iDENTIFY: Theorizing Race in Films and Sports Media

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Outline

Content

The final project is in the form of a documentary on race representation in films and its similarities to race representation in sports media. The overall plan for the structure was to introduce the topic of representation by looking at *The Hunger Games*. Then, the film transitions to focus on race in sports media and then back to film to wrap it all up. The goal of this project was to find the similarities between *The Hunger Games* and sports media in terms of race representation, as well as to see if two of the most relevant race representation theories by Manthia Diawara and bell hooks play out in a context other than film theory. Ultimately, I found that these theories do apply to spectators of sports media, however one theory may be more prominent than the other.

In the first section of the documentary the issue of unequal race representation in films and the media is introduced. This is where the participants are asked to guess the statistics of representation in the film industry for both on-screen characters and the people behind the cameras. The actual statistics are revealed to them and their perceptions of the film industry will be compared to the reality. Finally, the statistics about casting directors serve as a transition into the next part.

The second section of the documentary discusses some of the controversies viewers had with the casting choices in *The Hunger Games*. This includes mentioning how the film was adapted from a novel and how the film does not do a great job casting actors and actresses that fit

the descriptions from the book. The participants are shown some of the tweets from this controversy and we discussed why people may have felt that way. In this section we also discussed the analysis that Moore and Coleman make about *The Hunger Games* makes a statement about how society takes small glimpses of people's lives and uses them as a form of entertainment or sport. This served as a transition into the similarities between *The Hunger Games* and racial stereotypes in sports media. Some of these similarities are how the games themselves are structured like professional sports are today; in an arena with spectators and commentators. Also, the fact that tributes who have trained their entire life for the games are all white, but Thresh (one of the two Black tributes) makes it to 4th place with implied natural strength and skill. This served as a smooth transition into the next section on sports media.

The third section of the documentary discussed race representation in sports media. This is when clips from sports broadcasts were shown to the participants. After the clips from sports media were shown, there was an interview that asked questions about how they identified with the athletes that were shown or talked about in the clips. Then a few scenes from the hunger games were shown and they were asked the same questions about their identification experience. Afterwards, Diawara and hooks' theories on race representation and identification were presented and explained to them in the hopes that there were similarities between these theories and how the participants identified with the people on-screen.

The last section of the documentary wraps up the findings and makes any last comparisons between *The Hunger Games* and sports media. And finally, to explain that there is still much work to be done in the fight for human rights. The documentary ends with voice over encouraging the viewer to continue to have conversations about race and representation until everyone has someone they can identify with in the media.

Style

The stylistic inspiration for the documentary is coming from *13th*. There are several aspects of this documentary that inspired the aesthetic of this project. First, having multiple camera angles of the interviewees to cut between to keep the attention of the viewers. The interviewer, (myself) is shown a few times in reflections of the back of shots to emphasize that this is about my process as well. Also the overlapping of audio between the interviews and the b-roll and vice versa is very pleasing to the eyes and ears. For example, when I am quoting one of the sources from the literature review, there are images or text on screen to demonstrate that quote. This breaks the constant view of people and gives the viewers something else to look at. Another way I do this in the film is by including montages of archived footage between the sections of the documentary.

Another documentary that inspired the voice over is *Shirkers* by Sandi Tan. In this documentary Tan uses first point of view in her voice over and I really enjoyed how personal it made the film even though we did not see her much at all. I decided I would also use a first person point of view for my voice over because I wanted the documentary to include my process and experience just as much as the experiences of the people I interviewed.

Literature Review

Theories of Representation and Identification

Stuart Hall is arguably the single most influential theorist of representation of race, gender, religion and class in the mass media. The main purpose of part one of his “The Work of Representation” essay is to explore the relationship between representation and language. Hall

aims to explain why representation is so significant to cultural studies and mass media. First, the definition of “representation” is analyzed and Hall discusses the two “systems of representation” (Hall, 3). This first system is the way humans organize and classify different concepts to understand how they are similar and different, what Hall calls a “conceptual map” (Hall, 4). When humans have similar conceptual maps, they have what is called a shared culture. The second system of representation is language. These two systems combined are the reason humans are able to communicate. Then, Hall explains how language is just signs that represent the real object. For example, the word cat is not an actual cat and does not even look or sound like an actual cat looks and sounds. Next, Hall discusses three theories of representation. First, the reflective approach suggests that language reflects the meaning of objects like a mirror. Second, the intentional approach suggests that the speaker forces their personal meaning onto a word. The third is the constructionist approach and it suggests that meanings are constructed with concepts and signs.

Next, author Anne Friedberg’s essay “A Denial of Difference: Theories of Cinematic Identification” discusses identification rather than representation. Early on in Friedberg’s essay she states that “identification with a film star does not entail a cognitive choice, but draws upon a repertoire of unconscious processes” (Friedberg, 36). Friedberg brings up Metz’s signifiers to explain the primary cinematic identification and secondary cinematic identification. The primary cinematic identification is “with the ‘look’ of the camera and projector” (Friedberg, 40). The secondary cinematic identification is with the actors or characters. She then goes on to give three limitations to these two theories of identification. First, the fact that the spectator is never introduced to the entirety of the person they are identifying with. For example, a character could be known for their face, or voice, or an actor can be only known for one role they played. This

can be an interesting limitation to discuss in contrast to sports broadcasting because professional athletes are usually known for their skills. However, the rise of social media has encouraged teams to mic up their players to give their fans a more personal experience with the player. The second limitation is the role gender plays in identification. Friedberg gives the example of a female spectator only having the choice to identify with a submissive female character or a dominant male character; neither of which really provide the sameness that is necessary for identification. Thirdly, identification could occur with non-human-like characters such as R2D2 from *Star Wars*.

In 2010, Juan-José Igartua conducted a study on the effects of identification with on-screen characters. The paper begins with an overview of the relevant research that has been done so far and how he is going to take their findings further. Igartua comes up with five hypotheses and does three experiments. The first hypothesis was “the individuals who identify more with the characters will enjoy the film more” (Igartua, 353). The first study they did found evidence to support this hypothesis. In this experiment the participants were taken to see one of two fiction feature films and then filled out a questionnaire after. These questionnaires were then analyzed using different scales to come to the conclusion that the people who identified with the characters more ended up enjoying the film more overall. Igartua conducted two other studies within this paper which provided two other interesting findings. First, the more a spectator identifies with a character, the larger the emotional impact the film will have on them. For this experiment the participants filled out a mood evaluation prior to watching the film as well as after. Finally, that identification allows for a larger impact on one’s views and beliefs. For the third study, Igartua had the participants fill out a questionnaire about their beliefs before and after

showing them a film about immigration. Each of these conclusions gives an interesting insight to how identification can affect the spectators.

When representation and identification are combined in the context of films, there are two main authors to discuss: Manthia Diawara and bell hooks. Manthia Diawara's piece, "Black Spectatorship: Problems of Identification and Resistance" is about identification with films particularly for Black men. He is questioning prior studies on identification because he feels as though they do not include Black people. Diawara suggests that people of different races will have different experiences with identification. His main point is that identification with on-screen characters is a forced action; something he calls "resisting identification" (Diawara, 67). Diawara backs this up with several interesting points. First, he discusses a scene from *The Birth of a Nation* and analyzes the shot compositions, editing, *mise-en-scene* and narrative content. In his analysis Diawara points out that all of these aspects of filmmaking are heavily implying that Black character in this scene represents evil while the white character does not. Throughout the article, Diawara gives several other examples of how the Black spectator is "denied the opportunity to identify with the Black characters as credible or plausible personalities" (Diawara, 72).

However, bell hooks' views on representation and identification differ from Diawara's because she takes his views further. bell hooks' piece "The Oppositional Gaze" is focused more on Black female spectatorship and identification. She begins with discussing the history of looking for Black people and the power the gaze holds. This history is what developed the yearning to look, what hooks calls "the oppositional gaze" (hooks, 116). Her reasoning for focusing on female spectatorship is because Black women were the objects of the male gaze, therefore making their experience much different. This leads her to discuss Diawara's

perspective later in the chapter. hooks takes Diawara's idea of resistance one step further and says that Black females "do more than resist," they "contest, resist, revise, interrogate, and invent on multiple levels" (hooks, 128). This is interesting because both hooks and Diawara are suggesting that Black spectators are resisting the dominant reading, but doing so in different ways. hooks suggests that "Black female spectators actively chose not to identify with the film's imaginary subject because such identification was disabling" (hooks, 122). This raises a possible research question of how possible it is to resist identification with certain characters. The patterns of film casting may have a role in how spectators identify with on-screen characters.

Statistics on Race Representation

The USC Annenberg Inclusion Initiative's Report on diversity in the film industry is a great starting point when discussing race representation in the media and specifically films. This report includes research on gender, race/ethnicity, LGBTQ+, and disability representation in 1,300 films from 2007 through 2019. The main findings of each of these categories was broken down into two subgroups: people on-screen characters and people behind the camera. This paper will focus mostly on race representation in films with a slight discussion of gender. USC Annenberg's findings on race show that, unfortunately, not much has changed in the 13 year span of time that they assessed. In this report, 3,891 total on screen characters were analyzed to gather their data. Of these characters, 65.7% were white and only 15.7% were Black. One interesting finding was that the genre played a big role in the diversity of the film. This was an area where positive change was made. For example, in 2007 only 21.5% of characters in action films were from minority groups, but in 2019 it rose to 42.3% (Annenberg Inclusion Initiative Research Group).

One action movie where the effects of such statistics are clear is the 2012 film *The Hunger Games*. In a 2015 case study on this film the research method was a symptomatic reading that considered inclusion, roles and control of production. In terms of inclusion, the only Black characters in the film are in supporting roles. These roles are explored deeper by authors Moore and Coleman as they analyzed each of the three main Black characters: Cinna (Lenny Kravitz), Rue (Amandla Stenberg) and Thresh (Dayo Okeniyi). Cinna and Rue are both concluded to not be defined by their race/ethnicity. However, Thresh is slightly compared to a wild animal through his behavior in the film.

As far as for people behind the camera, the statistics are much worse. Across the 13 year time frame, there were a total of 1,447 directors and only 6% of them were Black. This is significant because 13.4% of Americans identify as Black, therefore the percentage of Black directors should be more than doubled to be considered representative of the general population (US Census). One interesting finding is that 100% of the films that were directed by a Black director featured a Black lead, whereas only 14.3% with Non-Black directors did so. This leads to another shocking statistic for casting directors. 54.8% of casting directors in 2019 were white women, 27.4 were white men and only 17.8% were individuals of minority groups. (Annenberg Inclusion Initiative Research Group).

The case study on *The Hunger Games* discusses the controversies about how the casting for the film shows the conflicts between race and commercial media. The article goes into the specific controversies around the fact that teenagers were angry that there were Black actors playing supporting roles in *The Hunger Games*. This proposed the question of why were they so mad, if Black actors playing supporting roles was a fairly common practice in 2012 when the film was released, especially in action films as mentioned above. The casting director for *The*

Hunger Games was Debra Zane, who appears to be a white female. Casting the leads in *The Hunger Games* as white actors, only contributes to the very unequal statistics of race representation in Hollywood. Moore and Coleman also mention that this film questions the pervasiveness of social media as well as how our society “uses mediated glimpses into individual’s private lives as a form of entertainment or ‘sport’” (Moore and Coleman, 3). The second critique mentioned there will help make the connection between *The Hunger Games* and sports media.

Race Representation in Sports Media

“Sport, the Media, and the Construction of Race” by Andrew Grainger, Joshua I. Newman, and David L. Andrews discusses race representation within sports media. The authors of this piece do so by analyzing common stereotypes and how the media emphasizes them and racism in general. First, the types of coverage that African American athletes receive in the media. The main point here is that the amount of coverage is not proportional to their participation. They also point out that people can interpret the coverage of Black athletes as a sign of the end of racism, when in reality the content of the coverage is doing the opposite at times. An example of this comes from another source about race representation in sports media, “Marking the Boundaries of the 'Normal' in Televised Sports: the Play-by-Play of Race” by Toni Bruce. This article does its content analysis on what the commentators are saying rather than on how stereotypes are emphasized by the types and amounts of coverage. Bruce analyzes how commentators address the athletes; if they use first names, last names, or both names when talking about a player. The findings were sort of mixed and did not give a clear connection to race. Whether it was a home or away game and if the athlete was a star seemed to play more of a

role than race did. However, some commentators shared that they tend to use first names when they are unique. This is where patterns pointing towards racial differences were shown. It seemed that Black athletes were more likely to have unique enough first names for the commentators to call them solely by their first name. This is worth mentioning because first and last names are used very differently in society. First names tend to be used more casually, whereas last names are used in professional settings and signify respect.

In Grainger's piece sports cinema is also analyzed and it is concluded that even when these films are trying to make a statement about racism, they are still contributing to the myth that sports is one of the only ways for Black people to gain success and economic freedom. Another stereotype that is analyzed by both Grainger and Bruce is the idea that African Americans are naturally athletic. The interesting implication that is pointed out is that when Black athletes are called naturally skilled it implies that white athletes are harder workers and have higher IQs in their sport. This also plays a huge role in the job opportunities athletes have. For example, in 2013 the National Football League was 67.3% Black people. However, 82% of quarterbacks were white (Lapchick, 2014). This position is considered to be one of the safer positions which also is associated with being smart. Grainger, Newman, and Andrews' overall conclusion is that the current coverage of Black athletes is giving the impression that racism and discrimination are ending. However, the content of the coverage is not actually living up to this impression.

Conclusion

After completing this project, I will have demonstrated if Diawara and hooks' theories on representation and identification for film are applicable to other contexts such as sports media.

This will connect two very large industries in our society: film and athletics in a way that explains the similarities between the experiences of film viewers and sport spectators.

Process

Creating a documentary for my honors thesis project was such a rewarding experience. I always knew I wanted to do a creative project for my thesis. The pre-production process included creating an annotated bibliography on the preexisting research that has been done on the topic, and then creating a proposal and outline for the actual project. Completing the annotated bibliography helped me make the topic of my documentary more specific and concise. Then I outlined the project above and discussed my goals with my committee members.

Once I had a clear vision for the documentary I reached out to about 20 student athletes, but only ended up interviewing 12 of them. After all of the interviews were conducted I went through all of the footage and found the answers that I wanted to keep in the final project. Once I had all of the interview shots in order, I had to use found footage and text to fill in the transitions. Then I added the finishing touches like tags on the interviewees and the clips of movies I used, and credits at the end.

Reflection

Looking back on the entire process, I am extremely proud of the final project. I feel as though the documentary provides a clear and concise issue in the beginning, and a “solution” or call to action at the end. I did my best to edit the interviews in a way where they all sounded like they were having a conversation or finishing each other's points. This made the project easy to

follow since it flowed so nicely. The most rewarding part of the whole experience was how willing all of the interviewees were to participate in such a difficult conversation and how they all mentioned that they learned something after participating. Being able to not only educate myself on such an important topic but my friends and classmates as well was so gratifying. I am so thankful to Dr. Buel, Dr. Sanborn, and Coach Dez for helping me through every step of this project and encouraging me to be creative.

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