Oppositional Gaze: Disrupting the Controlling Images of Black Women's Development in Film

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Abstract: As a pedagogical tool, film can help adult learners understand diverse narratives and disrupt ideology domination, specifically regarding Black women. Despite the increase in visibility in Hollywood, Black women remain negatively depicted in films. The negative depictions often minimize or simply ignore the development or self-actualization of their characters. The purpose was to examine the depictions and adult development of Black women's characters in American films. Based on our oppositional gaze of 12 Black female-led American films, four themes emerged: #noBlackgirlmagic, the transition from object-to-subject, the lies you tell, and hair it is. Practical implications for educators across the adult and higher education landscapes are discussed.

Keywords: Black women, film, adult development, oppositional gaze

The quality and quantity of Black women have progressed in American film. However, an oppositional gaze is still needed to critically interrogate images, differences, gaps, and connections that reinforce ideologies of domination. Oppositional gaze is a space of resistance where spectators critically examine the "absence of meaningful Black representation" in mass media, including film (hooks, 1992/2014, p. 117). The US media and entertainment industry (M&E) provides us with countless hours of entertainment through its subsector - film. This visual art form entertains and educates us.

Most importantly, film shapes and/or reinforces historical and cultural beliefs and attitudes about an individual or a group of individuals, notably Black women (Andrews & McClain, 2022). The American film landscape has made improvements toward diversity and inclusion of Black women. Sadly, the industry continues to perpetuate caricatures and racist images of Black women that frequently minimize or simply ignore their characters' developmental milestones or self-actualization. In this study, our goal was to examine the depictions and adult development of Black women's characters in American films. The next sections will provide a review of literature related to Black women in American film. For this empirical study, the literature review is situated within three areas: American film, Black women in American film, and adult development.

Literature Review

American Film

In 1891, Thomas Edison introduced the concept of a motion picture in the US; however, in 1895, the Lumière brothers aired the first motion picture to a mass audience in Paris (Science and Media Museum, 2020). The author asserts that the US became the principal player in the global film industry during World War I and continues to show its dominance. According to the United States International Trade Administration (n.d.), in 2022, the US generated the largest earnings in the M&E industry with more than $660 billion of the $2 trillion global market. It incorporates numerous subdivisions like film, television, and streaming content. While these earnings have not

reached pre-pandemic years, M&E leaders are aggressively modifying their business and financial models to realize growth and set their institutions up for future success (Harrison, 2022). Sadly, they lack the same tenacity when addressing inequities, notably in their film division. This viewpoint was noted in a recent McKinsey & Company study in which Dunn et al. (2021) suggested that if the film industry determinedly dealt with *just* the racial prejudices, it could yield M&E leaders an additional $10 billion in earnings. However, these aggressive steps mean narrowing the representation gap for Black talents who work behind the screens (e.g., directors, writers, producers) and funding more Black-led films, such as those with Black female protagonists.

Black Women in American Film

Film is one of the most important social and cultural artifacts that embody the thoughts, attitudes, and behaviors of society, particularly against minoritized groups, more specifically Black women (hooks, 1992/2014). Historically, Black women were seldom cast in film. When opportunities arose, they were often depicted as "controlling images" like mammy, welfare queen, sapphire, and jezebel. Controlling images "make racism, sexism, poverty, and other forms of social injustice appear to be natural, normal, and inevitable parts of everyday life" (Collins, 2001, p. 69). The controlling images of Black women are ever-present in contemporary American film.

For example, McTaggart et al. (2021) revealed that Black female leads (39.6%) in family films were more likely to be depicted as unemployed than White female leads (10.4%). This description perpetuates the welfare queen trope, in which Black women are seen as lazy mothers who abuse the welfare system (Brockell, 2019). In addition, Black female leads were nearly 14% more sexualized than White female leads (9%) in family films. This finding enforces the dominant ideology that Black women are jezebels or sexual aggressors, which gives individuals the justification to objectify and dehumanize them (hooks, 1992/2014). Optimistically, McTaggart et al. (2021) point out that Black female leads in family films were depicted as *smarter* than their White counterparts (54% and 44%, respectively). Also, Black women were more likely to represent an employee in a STEM occupation than White women (14.3% compared to 9.6%). Although the quality and quantity of film roles for Black women have progressed, they are often cast as characters with linear stages of development (Andrews & McClain, 2022).

Adult Development

Adult development is often equated to change and growth. Adult development is a dynamic and complex process encompassing meaning-making and reasoning (Merriam & Baumgartner, 2020; McClain, 2019). Traditionally, scholarship on adult development was developed from a White male perspective and psychological-centered; however, this perspective was limited to understanding psychological development and life transitions across various societies and cultures (Merriam & Baumgartner, 2020; Wheeler et al., 2002). While more contemporary work has offered richer perceptions of adult development across sociocultural differences, this awareness often does not translate effectively to the portrayal of Black women's developmental learning on the cinematic stage.

Even though Black women live at the intersection of diverse microcultures, the portrayals of their experiences in film lack complexity (hooks, 1992/2014, 1995; Tapp, 2021). We argue three persuasive points. First, the lack of complexity in film diminishes or disregards Black women's

adult development and learning. Second, it continues to perpetuate superficial and stereotypical depictions that fail to capture the multidimensional experiences, oppositions, and growth that Black women go through. Lastly, we argue that lack of complexity distorts their characterizations, which limits diverse narratives and deprives spectators of the opportunity to learn from and connect with the rich journey of their characters.

Research Design

Theoretical Framework
In this film analysis, we utilized Black feminist thought (BFT) as our theoretical framework to critically gaze at Black women's depiction and developmental milestones in American film. Our rationale lies within the tenets of BFT. First, it inherently is Black women-centered and recognizes that their experiences intersect across numerous social identities (Collins, 1991/2022). In addition, it empowers Black women to be resistant, which involves deliberate intellectual efforts that combat hegemonic ideologies. Lastly, BFT creates a critical awareness that licenses Black women to self-define and self-value their Black womanhood.

Data Collection
To be included in the film analysis, the data needed to meet four criteria: 1) American film with a Black female protagonist, 2) release years, 3) adult development, and 4) film of choice. The initial criterion was established based on our familiarity with American films featuring Black female protagonists, yielding a total of 61 visual data. Our second criterion narrowed the focus to American films with Black female protagonists released between 2010 and 2020, yielding 54 visual data points. The third criterion, focusing on adult development and the evolution of Black female protagonists' roles, led to the elimination 31 films, leaving us with 23 American films for analysis. Lastly, we narrowed the films based on the researchers' choices with an emphasis on "insight, discovery, and interpretation rather than hypothesis testing" (Merriam, 2014, p. 42). Based on the film of choice, 12 American films with Black female protagonists emerged. Table 1 illustrates data that were compiled from the Internet Movie Database (IMDb): title, release year, running time, director, and writer. While beyond the nature of this analysis, it would be neglectful of us not to underscore the underrepresentation of Black women as directors of these films. Black men were more than four times as likely to control the films' artistic aspect than Black women (75% compared to 16.6%).
Also, Black women were less likely to be writers (30.4%) than Black men (34.7%). But they were more likely to be writers than White women (13.0) and White men (21.7%).

Findings

This study identified four themes: #noBlackgirlmagic, transitioning from object to subject, hair it is, and the lies you tell emerged:
#noBlackgirlmagic
The Black Girl Magic mentality is a double-edge sword. Although empowering, it implies that Black women are required to magically manifest strength and suppress emotions in the face of adversities (Porter & Byrd, 2021). In this study, #noBlackgirlmagic emerged to challenge the problematic belief that Black women are seen as mythical beings who are impervious to life's challenges. Ali, "What Men Want," was shown as a superhuman character because she was able to navigate through a White male-dominated workplace as the token Black woman sports agent

and handle the strain of invisibility and hypervisibility. The finding, like previous studies (e.g., Porter & Byrd, 2021), suggests that the Black Girl Magic mentality continues to contribute to Black women's mental health and health disparities.

Table 1

American Films with Black Female Protagonists, IMDb (n=12)

Film	Release Year	Running Time (mins)	Director (RaceGender)	Writer (RaceGender)
For Colored Girls	2010	134	Tyler Perry (BM)	Tyler Perry (BM), Ntozake Shange (BF)
Pariah	2011	86	Dee Rees (BF)	Dee Ress (BF)
Sparkle	2012	116	Salim Akil (BM)	Mara Brock Akil (BF), Joel Schumacher (WM), Howard Roseman (WM)
1982	2013	90	Tommy Oliver (BM)	Tommy Oliver (BM)
Dear White People	2014	108	Justin Simien (BM)	Justin Simien (BM)
Almost Christmas	2016	111	David E. Talbert (BM)	David E. Talbert (BM)
Girls' Trip	2017	122	Malcolm D. Lee (BM)	Erica Rivinoja (WF), Kenya Barris (BM), Tracy Oliver (BF)
Widows	2018	129	Steve McQueen (BM)	Gillian Flynn (WF), Steve McQueen (BM), Lynda La Plante (WF)
Queen & Slim	2019	132	Malcolm D. Lee (BM)	Lena Waithe (BF), James Frey (WM)
What Men Want	2019	123	Adam Shankman (WM)	Tina Gordon (BF), Peter Huyck (WM), Alex Gregory (WM)
The Forty-Year-Old Version	2020	123	Radha Blank (BF)	Radha Blank (BF)
Ma Rainey's Black Bottom	2020	94	George C. Wolfe (BM)	Ruben Santiago-Hudson (BM), August Wilson (BM)
		1,362		

Transitioning from Object-to-Subject

The perception of self-importance is frequently associated with the dichotomy of object versus subject (Morrison, 2017). The author points out that normalizing someone as an object is a divisive tool that portrays an individual or a group as inferior or as the *Other*. In this study, most Black female protagonists are portrayed as objects or commodities. In "The Forty-Year-Old Version," Rhada is seen as the "White gaze's eroticism of Black pain" because of her fear of failure as a playwright. Rhada's transition from object-to-subject occurred at the end of her successful opening night, when she positioned herself center stage and reclaimed her voice and soul through freestyling.

Hair It Is
Hair It Is centers on hair representation across the dataset. Our oppositional gaze revealed that Black female leads and co-leads with professional careers were more likely to be depicted with Eurocentric hair compared to those in non-professional positions. For example, Cheryl was cast as a physician who wore a synthetic straightish weave/wig. Jo played a magazine editor with a short-tapered haircut with straight hair. Also, we discovered that films that *did* depict Black female protagonists with natural and protective styles were more likely to have Black female directors and/or writers. For example, Queen wore a tiny-weeny afro, Pariah rocked tight twists, and Radha styled head wraps to protect her natural hair.

The Lies (You) Tell
Traditional adult developmental theories are largely shaped by White and male ethnocentrism, emphasizing linear and individualized progressions. These types of developmental progressions were found in films such as *What Men Want* and *1982*. Alternatively, when examining the films, we observed that some addressed the developmental milestones of Black female protagonists in connection to their sociocultural, personal, spiritual, and psychological aspects.
In *Queen & Slim*, Queen's personal growth and identity are not just a solitary journey but are significantly molded by the challenges of cultural and political authority, familial relationships, connections within the Black community, and spirituality.

Implications and Conclusion

We set forth three practical implications for educators in the fields of adult and higher education. First, we recommend exploring alternative adult development theories that consider sociocultural factors and psychological growth (Merriam & Baumgartner, 2020). These alternative adult development theories can be incorporated into instructional content, group activities, and expert-led discussions to provide diverse perspectives for adult learners (Andrews & McClain, 2022). The second implication suggests embracing oppositional knowledge, a self-defined perspective empowering marginalized groups in their resistance efforts (Collins, 2016). It offers alternative viewpoints through various pedagogical activities, promoting cultural competence and facilitating dialogue about disenfranchised communities for all learners. Lastly, we recommend using diverse films as a pedagogical tool to help adult learners grasp concepts of learning and development (McClain, 2019). Films enable learners to engage with different narratives, fostering reflection, insights, and emotional responses (Kroth & Cranton, 2014; McClain, 2019). Film opens avenues for learners to analyze stories and social phenomena in relation to their own experiences, promoting alternative interpretations (Wright & Sandlin, 2009). In conclusion, although there is an increase in both the quality and quantity of Black women's representation, especially as protagonists in film, being a passive consumer is not an option. Cultural criticism is always necessary in mass media, notably in film, to scrutinize and comprehend the intricacies of the experiences of marginalized groups within media narratives (hooks, 1992/2014).

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