

The Black Image in the

Media and Race in America

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2000-2001

2002-2003

2004-2005

2006-2007

2008-2009

2010-2011

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4 The Meaning of Blackness in Network News

MURKOVSKAYA WATCH local television news three times a week, and network news twice this week, six times next week, and just once the following week; they may read a newspaper on most days, or on few. They go to a movie occasionally, they watch television entertainment and advertising in prime time and on weekends. Their friends and co-workers do the same. Some individuals talk about what they see in the media all the time, others rarely. As we have seen, it is from this shifting and varied mélange of images and ideas, combined with interpretations of direct observation and experience that each individual builds his or her own impression of the world and, in significant measure, of race.¹ Given such a media environment, it would be a mistake to look at any one genre in isolation. But we must begin somewhere, so we launch the detailed exploration of the media's racial texts from the traditional platform in the field: network television news. We look particularly at the way network news helps to construct Whites' sense of what blackness means, what traits a representative African American possesses. The news is not terribly good. But before we consider directly those troubling results, we need to make sense of how Whites develop schematic thinking along lines that create animosity or, in more extreme cases, racism.

Cognitive Inertia and the Rise of Prototypes

Prototype—a code habitual ways of thinking that help people make sense of a complicated and uncertain world. These are, however, often formed swiftly and inaccurately, which is understandable given the limited time people have to work through all the fact assumptions, prototypes embodied. “[W]here we to approach every induction task without preconceptions, the manifold hypotheses that we could come up with to be tested in any given set of data would make the inference process unmanageable.”² Consequently, the judgments that result conceal complexity and make it less likely that people will notice exceptions to culturally driven, stereotyped expectation and understanding.

It is theoretically possible that people could overcome this downside of schematic thinking with their thoughts driven largely by data, not by prototypes. If they operated this way, the world would imprint upon their minds unique memories of clarity and detail from which they would inductively build categorical understanding. As the details from continuing experience were added, people would readily and dispassionately reclassify the objects of their experiential world or mint fresh categories. In the real world, people *are* data driven to a degree—they do change their assessments of reality based on their experience with an obdurate world. There is compelling evidence, however, that people more often make on the fly judgments using theories that satisfy pragmatic and emotional necessity rather than engaging in exhaustive and dispassionate case-by-case analysis. Indeed, evidence from studies of social cognition paints a picture of flawed and fuzzy human judgment driven by convenience and emotion, and informed by deeper influences of culture and individual psychology.³

The work of psychologist Eleanor Rosch is suggestive of these twin influences. She has used individual perceptions and classifications of ordinary objects to determine how people think in categories. Contrary to what the data-driven model would predict, she found that some members of a category enjoy a privileged status. For example, people judge robins more representative of the category “birds” than chickens, penguins, or ostriches, and desk chairs more representative of the category “chair” than rocking chairs, beanbag chairs, or barber chairs. These most representative members are called *prototypical*. Prototype theory posits that people abstract out a central tendency—a summary mental representation of a concept—sometimes based on experience but often on ideal characteristics derived from cultural lessons.⁴ Prototypes serve as ideal examples of categories and as such induce what are called “prototype effects.” To use the bird example, prototypical thinking leads people to rate robins and cardinals as better examples of the category “bird,” to reduce the time in assigning them to that category, and to ease their recall as examples.⁵

Prototypes are important in social cognition because they aid people in their appraisal of others. These appraisals are stimulated by characteristics perceived as marking category membership, as in the case, for example, of skin color.⁶ Skin color is often sufficient to stimulate expectations of stereotypic behavior. Once activated, these expectations drive social perceptions and act as inertial restraints on peoples’ ability to interpret behavior that is

incompatible with their stereotypes. The ideal examples that structure the categories and expectations come from the culture, which as Douglas observes, establishes boundaries between things or persons valued and things or persons condemned or feared. These assessments are subconscious and nuanced themselves in everyday mental shortcuts that lead us to make snap judgments that appear to be reasonable and natural—although they are in fact deeply problematic.

Proton type theory explains why Whites may assume that a Black person in a White-dominated, high-status setting— an exclusive restaurant, for example—is a waiter. Whites expect the typical Black, if not a criminal, to be a member of the serving class. Such humiliating cases of mistaken identity are frequently reported by Blacks with high achieved status, even when they attempt by dress, grooming, and other communication behavior to signal their acceptance of mainstream norms and strive toward similar cultural ideals as Whites. Close describes the rage of a Black senior partner in a law firm accused by a suspicious White junior associate when he came in to work early one day.⁷ Notice that this does not mean the White attorney was a racist, although for the Black senior partner on the receiving end of the prototypical expectation and social judgment, he might as well have been. And such experiences, even if exceptional, don't have to happen very often to a Black before he or she is induced to see over racism as more pervasive than it actually is—to see the prototypical White as racist.⁸ In this way, prototypical thinking operates to diminish racial comity, feeding a vicious circle.

Black Representations in Network News

To probe the racial prototypicality of network news, we rely upon two kinds of data sets: analyses of videotapes of the evening news shows on the three major networks and analyses of verbatim transcripts for ABC's *World News*. The main videotape sample encompasses four randomly chosen weeks of evening news from the ABC, CBS, and NBC networks in 1997.⁹ Another videotape sample covers three ten-day periods of these nightly news programs taped during 1990. The full transcripts of the nightly ABC *World News* program cover two one-year periods, 1990–91 and 1997.¹⁰ The three-network tapes provide a sense of the overall *visual* and *aural* (soundbite) representation of Blacks. The ABC transcripts allow us to determine which Black leaders are mentioned and the contexts in which they made the news. They also permit an in-depth examination of precisely how Black persons

are portrayed when the words *Black* or *African American* are mentioned explicitly on *World News*.¹¹

Videotape analysis included all stories in which Blacks caused or clearly helped cause the newsworthy event, or where Blacks were *causally involved* in the story.¹² An overview of ethnic representation in the 1997 three-network sample is revealing. Approximately 75.5 percent of the stories focused exclusively on Whites. That is, three-fourths of the stories did not contain any clearly identifiable members of non-White groups in any thing but peripheral roles (such as people in a crowd scene). Just 6.3 percent of the stories (Blacks 2.9 percent, Latinos 1.3 percent, and Asians 2.1 percent) focused on activities of non-White ethnicities. The remaining 18.2 percent of stories were ethnically mixed, meaning they depicted central involvement of at least one identifiable member of an ethnic minority, but what is striking is how much the doings of Whites alone pervade the news. Whites were twelve times more likely to have a network news story to themselves than were all the other ethnic groups combined (75.5 percent versus 6.3 percent).¹³ The figures would be even more skewed if we excluded foreign news—most reports emphasizing Asians or Latinos concerned the members of these groups who are citizens of *other countries*. Incidentally, census figures break down the U.S. population as 72.1 percent non-Hispanic White; 12.1 percent non-Hispanic Black; 11.4 percent Hispanic; 3.7 percent non-Hispanic Asian and Pacific Islander; and 0.7 percent non-Hispanic American Indian, Eskimo, or Aleut (U.S. Department of Commerce 1997).

In one sense this pattern seems empirically and even symbolically "accurate": Whites do dominate nearly every arena of American society. On the other hand, as these images display, America's status and power hierarchy, they also may serve to reinforce it. At the most general level the color pattern of the news conveys a sense that America is essentially a society of White people with minorities—the very word rings pejoratively—as adjunct members who mainly cause trouble or need help.¹⁴

What were the chief topics of stories that included Black or White voices? Consider table 4.1, which lists the soundbites attributed to Black and White persons in the 1997 three-network sample and the topic of the stories in which they appeared. A pattern can be distinguished among stories where Blacks receive voice and those where they do not. In our sample, only one Black person said anything in an economics story, compared with eighty-six soundbites uttered by Whites, and just one Black said something in foreign

Table 4.1. Topics of Soundbites for Whites and Blacks, 1997 Network Sample

Topic	White Soundbite	Black Soundbite	Ratio
Sports/Entertainment	33	11	3.2
Disasters/Rescue	32	10	3.2
Human interest	106	23	4.6
Crime	49	24	6.2
Deaths/Rituals/Anniversaries	32	3	13.0
Government/Politics	54	12	21.2
Science/Technology	84	3	28.0
Disasters/Risks and weather events	143	5	29.0
Education	86	1	86.0
Health/Sounding	178	2	89.0
Foreign Affairs	99	1	99.0
Environmental	79	0	
Total	1289	98	13.9

Note: Values based on percentage of network sample, 1997.

affairs coverage that featured ninety-nine White quotations. Not one Black person said anything, at least in this sample, in stories on electoral politics, while White voices were heard seventy-nine times. The lopsided disparities were nearly as great in coverage of science/technology, health/smoking, disasters/rescues and weather events, and deaths/rituals/anniversaries. Only in human-interest features, sports/entertainment stories, and discrimination reports did Black voices achieve more prominent access. Stories that either invoked the common experiences or interests of Americans as a whole (disasters, foreign affairs, politics, and deaths/rituals) or that involved technical expertise (science, economics) offered hardly any Black voices. Such patterns of racial inclusion and exclusion, if typical, would reinforce an image of Blacks as a distinct group whose identity, knowledge, and interests are both narrower and systematically different from Whites.

We see here the outlines of the way media help construct the prototypical Black person, that is, the traits characterizing the most representative members of the category.¹⁴ He or she is an entertainer, sports figure, or object of discrimination. Unlike Whites in the news, the prototypical Black can be pigeonholed into a narrow array of roles and traits. We can suggest even more subtle ways that network news may provide a map of the cultural alienation of Blacks and Whites, framing Blacks as separate from the core (White) community, by looking at the distribution of the soundbites (figure 4.1).

Sixty-three stories featured at least one soundbite by a Black person; of these, more than half, thirty-five stories, contained just one quote by a Black

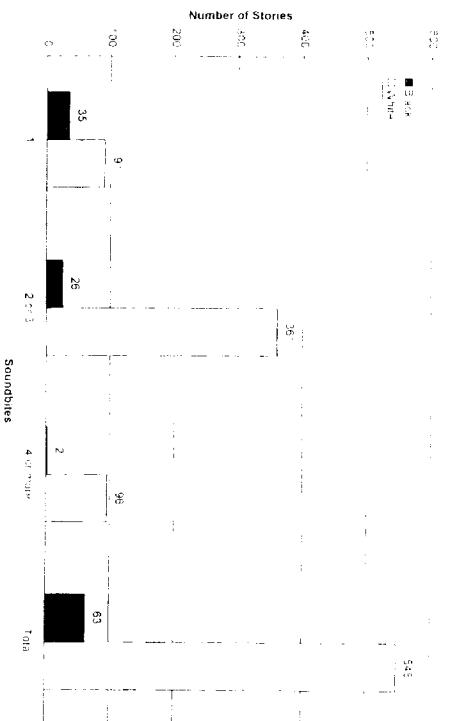


Figure 4.1. Numbers of Stories with One, Two, Three, and Four or More Soundbites for Black and Whites

Only two stories had four or more Black soundbites, and twenty-six had two or three bites. In comparison, 548 stories transmitted a White person's words, and ninety-six offered four or more. In this sample, at least, viewers were forty-eight times more likely to hear four or more soundbites from White than Black persons in a news story. Hardly any stories were saturated with Black voices, if we define "saturation" as four or more soundbites (not counting reporters), whereas nearly a fifth (18.9 percent) of the stories include four or more instances of White voices. And the two stories with the heaviest presence of Black voices were features rather than hard news.

The Blind Black

Beyond the constricted speaking roles for Blacks in network news, another dimension of representation comes in the uses of the word *black*. We recorded the subject of every story in which that word appeared on *Night News* during the two transcript periods (1990–91 and 1997). ABC ran 214 stories explicitly mentioning Black people in the earlier year-long period, ninety-four in the more recent one. The decline is misleading. Much of the difference appears due to the virtual disappearance of South Africa as a subject by 1997. Representation of African Americans was about the same during the two periods (112 versus 94 stories), and it was considerable.

On the other hand, there was a noteworthy rise in the *nominal* use of "black." In 1990–91, just 20 of the 254 uses of the word were nominal. In 1997, "black" appeared in 167 stories, fully 73 of them with nominal meaning. Repeated use of terms such as *blackmail*, *black hole*, or *black market* reflects the negative symbolic associations of darkness written deep in Western culture.¹⁵ Whether the negative metaphorical connotations of the word *black* unconsciously spill over to Whites' thinking about Black persons is unclear, but the link cannot be very helpful. Strictly as a communication strategy, it might be worth considering replacement of "Black" with "Afro American" as the preferred term for this ethnic group.¹⁶

We also looked more specifically at the topics of stories in which the word *black* or equivalents appeared. For this analysis, displayed in appendix table A.3, we also searched for the term *African American* and counted as equivalent the terms *inner city*, *ghetto*, *race*, *racial*, *racist*, *racism*, *underclass*, and *minority*, where the uses clearly (though not necessarily explicitly) referred to Black people. It is difficult to know if contrasts in story topics between the two samples represent random fluctuations or real trends.¹⁷ However, network news throughout the 1990s generally moved toward lighter, more sensational fare and away from political or policy-oriented stories. That movement seems compatible with our findings.

Proportionally, Blacks appeared three or four times more often than Whites in crime or sports stories in the later sample, and about one-third as much in political stories.¹⁸ In a sense, then, the image of Blacks deteriorated: the network's coverage more heavily featured African Americans in stereotypical roles associated with crime and sports, as it less frequently depicted Blacks in political or governmental roles. On the other hand, ABC ran more stories on discrimination related policy in 1997, reflecting in part the controversies over affirmative action.

We can more clearly see the Black image on ABC by considering the specific story topics in those reports that mentioned Blacks (or words connoting the group) explicitly. To conserve space, and readers' patience, we list in appendix table A.4 only the reports for the period from July to December of 1997. The list is rather depressing—as we suppose would be most enumerations of specific story subjects. No matter the ethnic group, quite generally, good news is not news. Nonetheless, we are struck by the paucity of neutral, let alone positive, contexts in which words referring to Black persons come up. For instance, not one political report and only two human interest stories appear in this list.

Can we generalize from the ABC data to the other two major networks? Researchers have found few, if any, systematic differences among the Big Three.¹⁹ In our own three network samples we found nothing to change this impression. For example, in the 1997 tape sample, African Americans were represented in 10 percent of the stories on ABC, 11 percent on CBS, and 14 percent on NBC. The same data set, on all three networks, also revealed a dearth of Blacks in stories that have as their central theme either Blacks as positive contributors to American society or as human beings whose racial identity is incidental. If therefore seems likely that, were transcripts of CBS and NBC news subjected to close analysis, they would reveal similar representations of Blacks.

Judging from the transcribed years of ABC, the network mainly discusses Blacks as such when they suffer or commit crime, or otherwise fall victim and require attention from government (and, perhaps, taxpayers). By tying appearances of Blacks so frequently to narratives of crime and victimization, the news constructs African Americans as a distinct source of disruption. Because stories featuring Whites in these circumstances are so much fewer as a proportion of all stories with Whites, the news can easily imply a baseline or ideal social condition in which far fewer serious problems would plague the society if only everyone in the United States were native-born Whites.

Incidentally, the portrayals of at least one other minority, Latinos, may be drawn similarly to that of Blacks, at least in some respects. Analyzing full-text verbal transcripts of every broadcast in a three-month subsample, we found that the word *Latino* appeared in just two stories and the word *Hispanic* in seven, all in relation to U.S. events. One of the two mentions of "Latino" came in a story on school segregation, the other in a report on diplomatic training where a man described as "Latino" played a terrorist in a simulation. "Hispanic" was mentioned in stories with the following topics: alleged vote fraud by Hispanics; segregation; the growth of Hispanic stars in baseball; police brutality against Haitian immigrant; Abner Louima; the never-found third suspect in the terrorist bombing of the Oklahoma City federal building; school dropouts; and illegal immigration. The range of topics here too is narrow and arguably stereotypical.²⁰

In such ways, the news may construct images that partake of the first component of racial animosity, the exaggerated sense of group differences recorded in negative stereotypes. Network news suggests that the distribu-

tion of traits characterizing representative Black persons coincides very little with the distribution of traits among Whites. And this fits right into the tendency noted by Rothbart and John to "maximize the difference between the boundaries of groups and often mean overlapping distributions of characteristics if they were non-overlapping."²¹

Blacks as Experts

Blacks do sometimes appear as knowledgeable persons with news worth the insightful things to say. Such people, by the very act of being consulted, show themselves to have positive social utility, to be valued parts of the community. This is particularly true when Blacks are not ghettoized as experts only on "Black" issues; therefore, we analyzed issues on which Black experts spoke as "Black related" or not. The former covered racial discrimination, unemployment, homelessness, inadequate health care, welfare, crime and drugs, housing, gangs, and Martin Luther King (considered "Black" issues because television news discourse, visual and verbal, makes them so, as further documented in chapter 6).

Looking at the 1990-91 sample, the stories concerning "Black" issues featured thirty-three Black experts and twenty-seven Whites. In those stories about non-Black issues in which Blacks appeared, White experts markedly outnumbered Blacks—ninety-four to fifteen. Recall that this subsample consists exclusively of those stories that met our criteria for prominently featuring Blacks. In other words, that as many as fifteen Black experts appeared in this subsample is due largely to the fact that we looked only at stories in which Blacks played a prominent role.²² So, within the total sample of 1,980 minutes of network news, Blacks spoke as experts outside the realm of Black-related issues little more than fifteen times, whereas Whites were likely quoted more than seven hundred times.²³

These findings can be tested further using the 1997 network data, which Burns and Munoz coded for the ethnicity of the persons uttering every soundbite.²⁴ Appendix table A.5 lists the topics on which all Black persons commented, along with their apparent occupational status. The largest share of the 111 utterances by Blacks came from persons on the street, followed by government officials. Black experts (defined as scientists, professors, think tank personnel and the like; professional persons unaffiliated with government) spoke fourteen times. In comparison, White non-governmental professionals made 496 assertions. The ratio of White to Black non-

government experts is thus about 36:1 (496 to 14). In this sample the Black experts were not confined to "Black" issues, and of course the audience might have attributed expertise to some of the twenty-two quotes from Black government officials or to those in other roles. So images of knowledgeable Blacks are appearing on the networks. But there remains a relative dearth of high status, credentialed Black persons providing insight on the network news across a wide range of issues.

Although African American expert sources on television are few, the networks do feature Blacks as correspondents—experts in journalism itself. This turns out to be a slight exception to the general paucity of authoritative Blacks. For the 1997 network sample, the race or ethnicity of the correspondents for all nine hundred stories was coded. Non-White reporters covered about 8 percent of stories on ABC and 6 percent on CBS and NBC. As for reporting specifically by Blacks, ABC registered 6 percent; CBS, 4 percent; and NBC, just 2 percent. Blacks appeared underrepresented as reporters on all three networks, relative to their population percentage.²⁵ But for ABC and CBS, at least, the disparity with Whites was less when it came to interviewees (correspondents) than it was when it came to interviewees (expert newssources).

"Reality"

Some might explain disparities in the news as conveying "reality." If we divide news topics broadly into those involving persons suffering or perpetrating social problems and those involving all other newsworthy activities, we might expect such a racial disjunction. African Americans do experience many social ills at a higher rate than Whites, and their appearances in the news tend to involve those ills because they make minority individuals newsworthy in the first place. Members of the current majority group, on the other hand, control almost all newsworthy institutions—government agencies, legislatures, corporations, interest groups. As the dominant power holders, Whites naturally predominate in news reports not involving social problems because journalists focus most heavily—justifiably so—upon the most powerful individuals and institutions in the society. In those communities where African Americans (or Latinos or other non-White ethnic groups) control government or other important institutions—say, cities with Black mayors—we would expect exceptions to the pattern in the national news analyzed here.

These patterns can be traced in part to important elements of the structure of power in the United States, and they highlight the difficulty of changing the media's racial imagery as long as conventional journalistic forms and incentives remain in place. We reiterate that there are no allies in this piece. But even if the racial patterns are explicable and even defensible on these grounds, the story cannot end there.

The network's choices are highly selective and incomplete. Consider the example of crime. We know many Whites tend to equate African Americans and crime, and feel intensely negative emotions—anger, fear, a desire for vengeance—more in the face of Black crime than of White crime. As a result, Black crime has long carried a potent political charge.²⁶ Although Blacks are indeed more likely to commit violent crimes than Whites, the difference declined after 1970 and the general trend in Black committed violence has been downward since the early 1970s; further, some evidence suggests that Blacks are more likely to be arrested than Whites committing similar crimes, in which case the media might be accurately representing Blacks' higher *arrest* rate but exaggerating the comparative rate of *committing* violent or drug crimes.²⁷ Also, controlling for employment, there is no difference in crime rates; employed Blacks over the age of twenty-one are as law abiding as employed Whites, a message obscured by the typical representations in television news,²⁸ and one that establishes quite clearly the importance of unemployment to crime rates.

None of this is to deny that poor Blacks, especially males, engage in certain unlawful activities at a tragically and indeed frighteningly high rate, much higher than Whites on average.²⁹ But these same lawbreakers are subject to very much higher rates of discrimination, unemployment, ineffective schooling, single-parent upbringing, and other experiences that account for the difference in criminality. It is these experiences that tend not to be reported within the narrative of each specific crime. Stories that depict just the crimes themselves therefore provide a context-free version of Black crime, both in the aggregate and in the cases of individual defendants (and victims).

A Model of Racial Communication

How might we explain the Black presences and absences in the media documented in this and the following chapters? Why does network news select the elements it reports, such as Black crime, and leave others, such as the employment status or discrimination experience of Black defendants, out of

the picture? The sources of the media's racial images are complicated and systemic. If anything, the average White media worker probably feels less racial animus than the average White American. But even if most media personnel actively sought to advance a progressive racial project through the media, perhaps even to promote awareness of the structural handicaps African Americans face, they would be impeded by the operation of the strong forces we identify in this section. (The concept of a "racial project," a strategically managed effort to frame racial issues, and relations in particular ways, comes from Omi and Winant.)³⁰ The *Cosby* show of the 1980s offers a prototypical case study of the way contradictory forces shape and become manifest in mainstream media products. On the surface, it attacked racism in laugh-out-loud ways, like Mr. Morgan, the young man at the Town Hall meeting with President Clinton whom we quoted in chapter 1, to see Blacks and Whites as equals. Yet Whites also interpreted the success and assimilation of Bill Cosby's television family as confirming the disappearance of racial discrimination; the show abetted denial.³¹

How might we explain the most prevalent media content, the material that, like the *Cosby* show, attains sufficiently wide distribution to influence public sentiments? Five closely woven forces interact to determine which messages obtain extensive and repeated distribution—and thus social and political force—and which remain either unexpressed or marginalized in obscure media channels. These forces act simultaneously on every media production, which means just about every message we might analyze is over-determined: it has several simultaneous explanations. Briefly, the kinds of messages that receive wide distribution are shaped by

- the mainstream culture, which influences
- the creative needs and limitations and professional norms of individual media personnel and their organizations, which respond to
- the evolving economics of media industries, as shaped by new technology, global market competition, and government policy decisions,
- by political elites seeking to manipulate media content (both news and entertainment), and
- by the changing national and international economic structure and the requirements of its healthy growth.

We have already detailed our understanding of the mainstream culture, the widely shared mental constructs that shape individuals' responses to the

■ Race at the Movies

CONSIDERING EXAMINISTS on the liminal status of African Americans, and the resulting ambivalence among White producers and consumers of cultural products that feature Blacks, this chapter examines the elements of progress and the continued racial divide in mainstream movies. We find something like parity between Whites and Blacks in sheer visibility: Black actors, especially males, now commonly take major and minor roles in expensive productions and box office blockbusters. Unlike advertising, where—celebrity exceptions aside—tokenism reigns, movies often highlight African American characters. Hollywood has arguably done more to integrate Blacks into productions than any other mass medium. Yet exclusion of minority actors from certain roles and actions persists. The racial differences mark non-Whites, insinuating a racial hierarchy and a need to limit interracial contact. We conclude our comprehensive exploration of mass media with movies not only because they represent the most inclusive genre, but because they embody and summarize most of the book's themes.

Background

The literature on representations of Blacks in film is, perhaps unsurprisingly, largely critical. Images of Black males and females' "recent criticism not merely for calling upon stereotypes of irresponsible and irrepressible Black sexuality and criminality, but for presenting one-dimensional characters who lack the rounded complexity of real people. In our terms, these critics are charging that by applying distinctive, stereotyped traits, movies make Blacks appear less individualized, more homogeneous. Whites already know that the members of their group come in all moral and intellectual shapes and sizes. They know much less about Blacks, and the critics suggest that film reinforces Whites' ignorance of Blacks' variety and humanity."

Critics have also dissected the regressive themes in most of the major Hollywood films that feature Blacks as stars or co-stars, notably the Black

White (male) buddy films popular from the 1950s into the 1980s.² Examples include *7½ Hours* and *Lethal Weapon*, both of which scored well at the box office and spawned sequels. "These and many other films subordinated the Black characters who, laden with stereotypical qualities, become helpers to the White leading man who holds them in 'protective custody....' Other scholarship critiques the heavy concentration of movies on the "Black criminal milieu,"³ noting among other things the apparently close relationship between the fictional portraits and the negative images of African Americans arising from television news and tabloid "infotainment" stories on crime. As it conveys information about African Americans' putative flaws, such content also participates in the prevailing White discourse of blame and denial that undermines racial comity.

In order to develop and perhaps qualify these insights, this chapter probes the top earning films of 1996, those that earned \$25 million or more at the box office in the United States, excluding animated films or movies with largely nonhuman casts.⁴ We begin with a qualitative analysis of race in the three highest-earning films with White-dominated casts in which a Black was one of the top two male protagonists: *Independence Day*, *Twins in Kill*, and *Jerry Maguire*. We also assess reviews of these movies, treating them as a kind of cultural sensitivity gauge. Then we move on to a quantitative content analysis. The story is mixed: heartening progress combined with indications of continued subtle stereotyping and distancing or exclusion of African Americans—patterns, incidentally, that are compounded when it comes to Latinos and Asians by sheer neglect.

Complexity in Ethnic Representations on Film

The three 1996 films that earned the most at the box office while employing majority-White casts and a Black as a central protagonist conveyed prominent and arguably quite positive images of Black persons. As such, these films provide useful examples of the mixed racial messages that Hollywood produces. This analysis sets the stage for the more data-intensive discussions later on.

The first setting for multiple meanings was *Independence Day*, the highest-grossing film of 1996 (over \$308 million in domestic box office revenues) and one of the biggest hits of all time. Will Smith as Captain Steve Hiller was not only the top-ranked cast member, he was unambiguously heroic. Yet this film also takes frequent refuge in classic ethnic stereotypes to gain laughs or

audience recognition. Thus Randy Quaid plays a drunken Latino pilot whose alcoholic stupor is supposed to be funny, although he later sobers up and redeems himself. A nerdy, brilliant Jewish scientist (Jeff Goldblum) is befriended for comic relief by his Yiddish-accented, over-protective father, though the scientist too becomes a hero. Minor characters shown reacting to the scary alien ship landings feature an array of ethnic stereotypes: chartering Arabs; a Black street person holding a liquor bottle (along with a White companion); a by-the-way and apparently Jewish man with an intrusive mother ("Ma heard for Ann Fisher's," he screams over the phone); Black and seemingly Latino kids playing basketball in an inner-city neighborhood with rap music blaring. In scene after scene we see Black faces in the background of busy war rooms, meeting rooms, and the like, while White experts occupy center stage.

Black-White conversations almost all involve hierarchical relationships with the White in charge of critical decisions and the direction of the plot. Perhaps most noticeable on close analysis is that although the film does endow Steve with many heroic traits, he continues to be marked by stereotypically negative "Black" traits as well. Despite his presumed college education (as an Air Force officer) he still speaks in ghetto slang. Thus he says to an alien he captures: "You got me out here draggin' your heavy ass . . . with your dreadlocks stickin' out of my parachute. . . . You come down here with a (sic) attitude." Along with the Jewish scientist and the president, Steve saves the world, but they and other Whites devise the plans; Steve's contribution is physical skill and bravery.

On the personal side, Steve is committed to a monogamous relationship, but lives with a woman to whom he's not married. A stripper, Jasmine Dubrow (played by Viveca Fox) has a child by another man. Even though involved with an Air Force officer and living a middle-class lifestyle, she apparently has no occupational options beyond trading on her sexuality. Her intellectual capacity appears impaired; she fails to grasp the seriousness of the alien ships hovering all over the world, even the one over her own neighborhood. After complaining about Steve's having to go on active duty to deal with an alien menace she barely notices, she continues on to her job, apparently unperturbed, with little concern about her child's fate . . . despite seeing her neighbors furiously packing and heading for the hills. Later, however, like all the main characters, she transcends her limitations and becomes heroic in her own way. The data analysis will show that the implicit derogation of Black woman here is not exceptional.

A Time to Kill provides our next repository of complex images. This film attempts to evoke White empathy with the Black experience of racism. Yet the heroes and the suffering that occupy the bulk of the film's time are those of the White stars, not the Black actors. And in its world, racism consists of flaws within individual bigots, curable through White paternalism, not Black organization or self-help.

The two White racists who brutalize a young Black girl and annihilate the plot are wholly evil, snarling and stupid, unlike any human most of us would admit to knowing . . . but one that most of us recognize as the stereotyped rural drunken, uneducated White Southern bigot. The father of the girl, Carl Lee Hanley, played by Samuel L. Jackson, kills the two criminals before they can come to trial, and the story revolves around his own trial for murder.

Matthew McConaughey plays attorney Jake Brigance, the White savior of the film who represents the defendant. After Carl Lee shoots the villains, we see a little blond girl, Jake's daughter, in tight close-up; this is apparently intended to stimulate empathy in the White audience; to show how the majority of those implicitly addressed by the film would feel if their own little girl were attacked. Just to make the equation clear, Jake's wife (Ashley Judd) asks, "Isn't she the sweetest thing?" to which Jake responds, "When I look at her I can't help thinking about 'Lonya' (the Black girl).

Although the plot emerges from the crime committed against Carl Lee's daughter and then by him, the movie spends the bulk of its time on the White protagonists. Carl Lee and his family have just a small fraction of the dialogue that Jake and his family do. The audience spends far more time mulling the injuries and suffering of the White stars, who are repeatedly threatened and attacked for courageously standing up to bigotry; it sees much less of the difficulties experienced by the Black characters. Reinforcing this reading, we coded the close-up shots accorded the top-billed characters. Close-ups are a mechanism for "focalization," for concentrating the audience's attention and identification.⁶ We found that costar Sandra Bullock, playing an apprentice lawyer, received almost twice as many as Jackson—and McConaughey four times as many.

Here we see how the political economy of mainstream movie production, built around the star system, affects the ideological message of character and dialogue. To have focalized the film through the Black family's experiences, to have expended the bulk of the dialogue and close-ups on Samuel L. Jackson and other (essentially unknown) Black actors, would have

transformed this film's market position. For studio executives, it would have gone from being a potential (and actual) blockbuster to a niche market movie likely appealing mainly to African Americans.

As it is, arguably, the movie simultaneously conveys an image of racial hierarchy as it attacks old-fashioned violent racism. When it subordinates the Haley family's suffering to that of Jake and his family and friends in order to secure the involvement of the dominant audience, the film signals the choice to focus so heavily upon the Whites reflects (recalling our multiple determinant theory) the mainstream culture and the market at work on the filmmakers, and therefore on the audience. Moreover, by focusing on absurdly overdrawn, frothing-at-the-mouth Klansmen, the movie implies that organized hate crime looms among the largest and most fearsome problems created by racism. Like other movies and television shows made in the 1990s but rooted in the ethos of the pre-civil rights South, including television's *1776: (In)A* and the film *Mississippi Burning*, this approach provides White audiences a basis for complacency or denial by directing attention away from current manifestations and effects of racism.

Perhaps as an unrecognized outgrowth of this perspective, the film stands against organized political action by ethnic groups. Reflecting a strong chord in late-century elite discourse and news media themes, the movie assumes a cynically antipolitical stance, assuming that every side in political action deserves equal condemnation. It portrays a Black minister from the NAACP who marched with Dr. Martin Luther King as a corrupt self-seeker trying to exploit a situation for his own benefit. The minister tells Carl Lee he should hire an NAACP-sponsored lawyer who has sensitivity to the "needs of the movement." The organizers raise funds ostensibly to support Carl Lee and his family, but use it to line the coffers of the NAACP and Carl Lee's own crooked minister. Carl Lee refuses the NAACP's offer of help, condemns their political agenda, and chooses the White lawyer over affiliation with an organized effort by African Americans. The moral of this story is that individual cooperation, apolitical and ad hoc, provides the only real path to racial reconciliation. Collective organization and action are either corrupt or dangerous. How ever one feels about this position, it is clear that this "entertainment" vehicle, like so many, does take a covert political (and antipolitical) stance.

Finally, consider *Jerry Maguire*, starring Tom Cruise and Cuba Gooding Jr. (who won an Oscar for best supporting actor). The nature of the main characters and their relationships, the subtle blend of traditional stereotypes

with a promotion of interracial friendship, testify to a complex racial text. On the one hand, the movie shows a burgeoning closeness between a White and a Black man, one in which each depends on the insights and understanding of the other. There is not the merely professional relationship of polite distance that characterizes many of the interracial friendships we saw on prime time television. On the other hand, playing a sports agent, Cruise, the opening man, does the uncharacteristically firing. Although his client, an African American football player, client named Rod Tidwell (Gooding) and Rod's Black wife Marcee both possess a college education (she majored in business), they cannot succeed financially, they are powerless without their agent's economic wisdom. The chief advice Jerry gives Rod is to act less cynically egotistical about the game of football and to submerge his anger at inferior treatment by the White owner. Jerry instructs Rod to curb his selfish emotions and his barely controlled instincts, attributes shown in several scenes of Rod dancing, yelling, and brow beating Jerry. (One give rise to a briefly famous catchphrase, "Show me the money," which Rod humbly forces Jerry to chant responsively with him.)

Rod — who against stereotype shares a deeply committed monogamous intimacy with his spouse — does teach Jerry how to relate better to his wife, Dorothy. Yet Rod and Marcee, despite their college degrees, speak in ungrammatical street slang, and she habitually uses vulgar profanity in ways a mainstream movie would rarely if ever show a wealthy, educated White female character doing. The contrast between the aggressive, abrasive Marcee and Jerry's docile, worshipful Dorothy constructs a hierarchy of racial desirability, at least for most White male audiences. Furthering the stereotype, a sportsmaster describes Rod's childhood as encompassing "your father who left the family on Christmas eve, the mother who cleaned the steps of a prison to make your tuition." In this way the film gives Rod an irresponsible Black father and long-suffering, cleaning-lady mother who sweated to pay his tuition. By making Rod the rare (if not unique) NFL star who excelled in football at a major college program without receiving a scholarship, the movie sacrifices realism to connect with the stereotypes.

Movie Reviewers as Mops of Hollywood Conservatism

In our multifactor model of the forces that produce messages shaping racial comity, we suggested that a complicated interaction arises between market pressures and the mass culture that affects the thinking of producers and consumers of media messages. At the same time, political pressures

from elites seeking political gain operate on this industry, as on all others. And the economy connects to trends and themes in Hollywood films as to political discourse: bad or unstable economic times seem to produce different types of films than those from prosperous epochs. Mainstream Hollywood films — the ones produced and marketed in hopes of earning tens or hundreds of millions of dollars in profit — are expensive, high risk investments in which the force of the market is obvious if not overwhelming. Yet those who make films are also creators with something to say, however trivial, derivative, or dumb it may sometimes be.

We believe film reviews may provide an indicator of the play of these market and cultural forces through the racial images of films. Reviews are critical to the marketing of modern Hollywood films. Though they cannot make or break movies, they can help create a positive or negative “buzz” around a film, especially in the big cities where first weekend ticket sales can determine a movie’s fate. When movies “open big,” studios tend to invest more in advertising and ensure distribution to more theaters. Reviews can augment this all-important opening reception. Perhaps this is why film companies spend lavishly to influence reviewers with special screenings, receptions, access to star interviews, conveniently packaged press materials, and junkets. The judgment of the review does not have to be positive to help. A review that labels a picture implausible and ultraviolent may, especially if it praises the special effects and sound track, help sell the film to its target audience. Whether they give a film thumbs up or thumbs down, reviews help to set a context, a series of expectations that tell audience members what a film is about, what pleasures or annoyances it promises.

Given their central role in the marketing of film, we decided to test the sensitivity of reviews to the racial subtexts that we detected in the three movies. How many reviewers picked up on the racial stereotypes and other political content? If the people who look at movies for a living either fail to notice such material, or find it unworthy of comment, we can hardly expect the average White viewer to notice them. Such a void in the text of reviews would buttress the insensitivity of the White audience to the negative stereotyping, racial hierarchy, and distancing. The institution of reviewing would be a component in a Hollywood machine that perpetuates, however unintentionally, racial alienation. On the other hand, if reviewers do discern and discuss the problematic material, it would indicate racial sensitivity among these cultural arbiters. Reviewers could even be leading forces

in reshaping Whites audiences’ sensibilities, tastes, and ultimate market demand.

Political pressure may be the least obvious of the forces at work here. But what elites say and don’t say in part reflects the global political economy; the “national mood” they both set and amplify seems to affect what Hollywood produces. The cover story on *Independence Day* that appeared in *Time* articulates the linkage of political zeitgeist and film production: “The U.S. is desperately in search of an enemy,” says Paul Verhoeven, who has directed some stunning sci-fi (*RoboCop*, *Total Recall*). . . . [The communists were the enemy, and the Nazis before them; but now that wonderful enemy everyone can fight has been lost. Alien sci-fi films give us a terrifying enemy that’s politically correct. They’re bad. They’re evil. And they’re not even human.]”¹⁰

Alien villains do not bring to mind any politically controversial, real-life enemies of ordinary people. In turn, we speculate, perhaps reviewers unknowingly attune themselves to elite discourse in deciding what in the movies they regard as relevant, timely, and acceptable to observe. If most reviewers failed to comment on the ethnic stereotyping and hierarchy in some of the year’s hits, it may be because elites in 1996 were not saying much about racial equality and discrimination. If anything, as we saw in the chapter on affirmative action, the word in the mid-1990s was that Whites were tired of organized political demands among Blacks and other minority groups. In that political environment, criticizing racially tinged images might have seemed uninteresting or excessively “politically correct,” that is, unfashionable and punctiliously liberal. Reviewers, like the filmmakers themselves, must worry about pleasing their audiences and bosses.

We culled reviews from the “major paper” collection in the Lexis-Nexis database¹¹ and from *Time* and *Venueweek*. We found a total of thirty-nine reviews of *I Time to Kill* and forty-three each of *Independence Day* and *Tory Maguire*. First we searched for the occurrence of the words *Black*, *African American race*, and *stereotype*. There were no references to ethnic stereotypes in any of the reviews of *I Time to Kill* or *Maguire*. Three of the reviews did gently chide *Independence Day*: Only the *New York Times* expressly noted the ethnic stereotyping, criticizing “one obnoxious, regrettable ethnic stereotype” — not of Blacks but of the Jewish father (emphasis added). The *San Francisco Chronicle* mentioned “slightly overstated stereotypes” and *Time* wryly noted that “an ensemble cast fleshes out the stereotypes,” but reviewers in these instances did not make clear the ethnic

offensiveness involved. (Three reviewers also mentioned the anti-gay stereotyping.) Most film reviewers did not even discuss the ethnic stereotypes, and the three who did barely identified them. Their tone was never condemnatory or even particularly critical so much as ironic. No reviews of *Indignance Day* alluded to the racial subtexts, just one mentioned the word *Black* (in describing Will Smith's character), and none mentioned "race" or "racism" (except in talking about the "human race" or "alien race").

As for noticing the issues around Black-White contact, the reviews of *Torn* *Hazmat* managed almost entirely to avoid them. (The words *race* or *racism* never appeared in any review. Just one review mentioned the word *Black*, in describing Rod Tidwell (Cuba Gooding, Jr.) and in quoting his line "I love Black people" as funny. "Moments like these will bring down the house" (*Hastington Post* review).) To its credit, at least this review mentioned that the film occasionally alludes to Black-White doings, but the critic found its use of identity politics funny. Viewers saw a Black man repeatedly cavorting around in uncomfortable resemblance to the cake-walking, dancing "coon" stereotype of old¹⁰ as he charmed phrases like "I love Black people" "Lost in the laughs may have been the irony of this line! Rod is never shown loving anyone but himself and his immediate family; he never evinces any solidarity with other African Americans. In any case, the notion that an audience composed largely of Whites can innocently laugh at such an image disturbingly denies the serious issues underlying the choices about Black identity confronting wealthy African Americans. DeMott has written about the falsely comforting denial abetting assumptions of interracial courtship and friendship that infuse some films and television shows. Rod's "I love Black people" proclamation, with its supposition that we can all laugh together at race, provides a prime example.¹¹

It is not as if the troubling allusions to race relations in *Torn*, *Hazmat* are buried very deeply. When Rod decides to stick with Jerry as his agent (really, like Carl Lee in *A Time to Kill* and Steve in *Independence Day* on White expertise), Rod's brother derides him: "An African-American man running with a little ball, working for White owners and White agents. It's the coming raphy of racism. . . ." Here the screenwriters tweak the intellectual critiques of race, sports, and culture. In so doing, arguably, they trivialize the criticisms. The script even includes an observation on the image of Blacks in film and the market demands of African American audiences: "During a dinner scene, Marcee says, 'So I go to see a so-called 'Black' film the other day. . . ."

Twenty minutes of coming attractions. All Black films, all violent. I'm talking about brothers shooting brothers, Wesley Snipes with guns the size of our house, killing, blood flowing, cars crashing. . . . Blood, blood, blood, blood. Is this all they think we want to see? Come on! Enjoyed *Schindler's List*? Give me a little credit."

But Marcee's behavior may rub her of such credit. She often acts as if barely in control of her emotions and uses vulgarities freely. For example, while watching his father make a great pin on television, their son, Tyson, dances around and says to his family members: "That's my motherfucker!" Marcee grabs him and admonishes: "Why don't you be the first man in your family not to say that word? And then we'll let you live." Several stereotypes are bound up in this little colloquy. It's difficult to imagine the filmmakers having the cute White kid in this film (Dorothea's son) say such a thing. Tyson's antics recall the pickaninny stereotype, the Black child as rascally comic relief.¹² The fact that Tyson swears is an implicit indictment of his parents and other relatives—of this Black family's values. And indeed, before threatening Tyson only half-jokingly with physical punishment, the mother says all the men in the family speak in this off-putting fashion. (Of course viewers of the film know that this indictment marks the foul-mouthed Marcee as hypocritical. When responding to stingy contract offers, she says, "Please remove your dick from my ass!" and "You're gonna never this shitty contract. You're gonna play out your existing shitty contract and go be a free agent next year and the hell with Arizona. . . ." The use of profane language by unexpected characters serves to distance and differentiate Blacks in many movies.

None of the reviewers in major newspapers explore this hardly subtle racial subtext. This may be an index to the discomfort in the wider cultural confronting the complexities of racial alienation and stereotyping heard on—unless, perhaps, it is murderous old-fashioned racism in the South, the sort tackled and denounced in *A Time to Kill*. Reviewers of *A Time to Kill*, of course, could hardly miss the racial content of the film. (Three noticed its overwhelming focus on the White characters' perspective to the neglect of the Blacks' (e.g., Roger Ebert in the *Chicago Sun-Times*, 24 July 1990). Two did point out the film's exclusive concern with a kind of racism that holds less significance in the lives of most Blacks and Whites lives than most other contemporary forms of discrimination. But even with this text to work on, most reviewers passed over the problematic racial themes.

Although movie reviewers are not academic film theorists and their readers are not cinema studies majors, it is surprising how little attention reviews paid to racial images in movies that featured African American stars and often commented directly on Black-White relations. For the reasons we have suggested, reviewers may fail to notice these messages or believe them to be inappropriate material for commentary. Either way, the absence of more sensitivity in reviewing may be both symptom and cause of problematic movie images.¹³

In suggesting this we do not mean to imply that if only reviewers would demand it, Hollywood would suddenly start disgorging a steady stream of positive message movies. We know Samuel Goldwyn spoke for most of this industry when he said he'd use a Western Union telegram (not his movies) if he wanted to send a message. Action dramas, sci-fi extravaganzas, and farcical comedies will remain Hollywood staples. We only wish to suggest that reviewers' failure to discuss the gratuitous and unconscious racial material provides a useful indicator of the mainstream culture's concerns—and obliviousness. We turn now to our broader samples.

Cast Analysis

To see whether people of color are obtaining not merely visibility but also centrality in the influential characterizations of Hollywood, we analyzed the race or ethnicity of the top ten cast members, as determined by official cast listings,¹⁴ in the sixty-three films grossing more than \$25 million during 1996.¹⁵ The films are listed in appendix table A.16. This analysis is a rougher undertaking than may at first appear. Many films center their action on four or five speaking parts. Even an actor listed sixth or seventh in the credits may appear on screen for just a few minutes and have only a handful of lines; in some cases this made it difficult for us even to determine the names of actors in a film, let alone their ethnicity. At the same time, this very problem demonstrates why mere visibility in films cannot be equated with having a noticeable or memorable role that might influence audience perceptions.

Whites continue to dominate the casts of mainstream films: 496 of the 630 actors were White, 106 were Black, and 28 were Asian, Latino, or other. Nineteen of the films listed exclusively White actors in the top ten cast positions; six listed exclusively Black and one exclusively Asian. That left thirty-seven integrated films with at least one non-White among the top ten billings. Although not our primary concern, we do want to note before moving

on to look closely at African American images that no movies featured a majority Latino cast and only one was majority Asian. The latter was *Rangin' in the Bronx*, a karate film starring martial artist Jackie Chan. This is of course the prototypical role for Asian male stars. In the other films where they did appear in the top ten cast rank, the Asian actors played cursory parts, often as assistants appearing on screen only briefly.¹⁶ Most Latinos, also featured rarely, were confined to negative or menial roles.¹⁷

Twelve of the sixty-three top movies of 1996, at least one Black person had a starring (i.e., top three billing) role. And Black males were represented somewhere in the top ten cast ranking for slightly over half of all the films albeit when they star in films, the plots usually focus on sports, crime, or violence.¹⁸ There is a marked gender disparity in treatment of Black actors: Black females receive most of their starring roles in movies with mostly Black casts that cater to Black audiences.¹⁹ Just 27 percent of the films listed a Black female as a top ten cast member, about half the rate for Black males. Over half (seventeen of thirty-three) of the Black women appearing in top ten positions did so in just four films—those with essentially all Black casts. These were *The Preacher's Wife*, *Set It Off*, *Haining to Ashdale*, and *I Think I Love Between Love and Hate*.²⁰ For men these four films provided twenty-three of the seventy-three appearances in the top ten cast positions.

Black males received top billing in seven films, three of them majority-White: Will Smith in *Independence Day*; Denzel Washington in *Courage Under Fire*; and Sinbad in *First Kid*. The fact that three White-dominated and majority-aimed films could star Black persons and earn solid (in the case of *Independence Day*, spectacular) returns at the box office marks real progress. These films were not about race and their stars' racial identity was incidental to the stories. Although some might criticize the films for just that reason—saying that the dominance of White actors and perspectives effaces the Black identity of the Black stars—there is surely a positive function to showing African Americans as just plain people.²¹

When we calculated the average cast rank of each group (which could theoretically run from 1, the highest-billed actor, to 10), we found that Blacks and Whites were not as far apart as one might expect. Black males ranked about as high as White males, although Black females ranked lower in the integrated films than White females.²²

Another way of looking at the cast rankings is through the lens of money. Is there a relationship between the number of Black actors in the top ten and

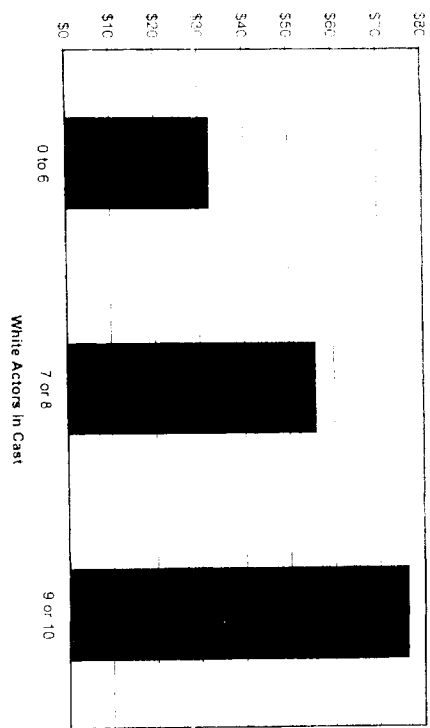


Figure 11.1. White Casting and Average Box Office Gross. (Excerpting "Two Blackbusters," Vol. 1. The relationship between number of White actors in top cast ensembles and box office grosses in mid-1960s dollars. Numbers of films with 0 to 6 White actors in top cast: 7; with 7 or 8 White actors: 21; with 9 or 10 White actors: 33.

* 0 to 6 include the two boxbusters: *7th Ave.* (*Profit*) and *Spey* (*Profit*). The seven one- and two-filmers are all those earning over \$25 million at the box office in 1966; the featured bumper casts

the box office returns? Omitting the two exceptional cases—*Natty Professor* and *Spectacular*, fantasy films loaded with special effects and starring respectively the most popular "crossover" Black comedian in movie history and the most popular basketball player in history—we find an apparent "tipping point." In examining residential integration, scholars have discovered that a majority of Whites can accept as many as about 25 percent Blacks in a neighborhood or school (or at least say they can). But around 30 percent we reach a tipping point when Whites are scared off.²² Perhaps it is only coincidental, but as figure 11.1 shows, once the number of Whites in the top cast reaches 70 percent, the average box office gross nearly doubles; and with nearly all White films (those with nine or ten Whites in the top ten), there is another jump up in revenues. We shall return to this implicit political economy of racial images in film.

Occupation and Role Analysis

The films provided a narrow range of roles for most Blacks. Only occasionally portrayed a Black male character in a starring role of complexity and

subtlety. Denzel Washington in *Come See Under the Fire*. Playing a lieutenant colonel who happened to be African American, Washington was depicted as both admirable and flawed. Audiences got to know him more intimately in his authentic humanity than is usually the case with Black characters in entertainment (including prime time television, with its distanced, idealized star Black characters).

The most frequently shown occupations among the 106 characters played by Black actors were military and police (twenty-two), blue-collar service workers (eighteen), and athletes (ten). Of the six characters portrayed as owning businesses, *all appeared in the same, ostensibly all Black films mentioned earlier (Thin Line, Preacher, Set It Off, Humme)* and four of five (the owner) business executives are in the same films.²⁴ This does suggest a benefit of films that serve the niche minority audience: even if seen by relatively few Whites, these films do challenge some stereotypes. On the other hand, the occupational data also show the failure of mainstream film fully to integrate Blacks into a wide range of roles.²⁵ Incidentally, every one of the five minority characters whose role was coded as "criminal" was a Latino. That no top-ten ranked cast member was a Black (or White) criminal suggests that making Latinos the bad guys may expose filmmakers to less danger of criticism for stereotyping than would their choosing Blacks.

Behavior of Minority and White Characters in Film

We analyzed behavior on four dimensions that initial observation suggested might distinguish Black and White characters in these major releases. Our thinking was shaped in part by our findings in television news, entertainment, and advertising:

1. We expected that Blacks might be depicted as more violent and more in need of restraint by responsible authorities than White characters, on average. We counted whether characters committed acts of physical violence and how often they were physically restrained, handcuffed, or in jail. Readers may recall our finding that Blacks are more likely to be shown restrained in local news programs, and we were curious to see whether the same fearsome image of the Black male is repeated in film.

2. An age-old stereotype of Blacks is hypersexuality. There were some indications in our investigation of television advertising that Black sexuality was indeed more exploited, for males if not females. We assessed in-

stances of characters having sex in bed or without clothes and being otherwise sexualized versus instances of hugging, kissing, cursing, and othering. "I love you" not in bed or naked. The idea was to test whether Blacks more than Whites are pictured as purely sex-oriented rather than interested also in close human relationship and nurturing intimacy in which sexuality is secondary.

3. Pilot study and the close analysis of the three films discussed earlier showed an apparent tendency for African American characters to use language differently from Whites. Language use is a genre cultural and social marker of status and acceptability, and Black characters seemed disproportionately likely to utter street profanities and to speak nonstandard English, even when their characters' social class and education would predict otherwise. In assessing profanity, we counted only strong vulgarity (e.g., "motherfucker"), not standard cursing ("damn").

4. Despite the success of a handful of Black actors (mostly males) at achieving stardom in mainstream movies, tokenism of the sort present in advertising continues to be practiced in Hollywood. A pilot study indicated a disproportionate use of African Americans in roles where they might have speaking lines yet play no part in advancing the story. By practicing tokenism, movie-makers can include minority cast members without truly incorporating them into the narratives. Based on the pilot study, we looked specifically for Blacks occupying entry guard or security agent positions. These are functionaries who speak but have no important impact on the plot.

This portion of the study is based on analysis of the top twenty-five movies of 1996-97 (excluding animation films). Listed in appendix table A.16. It was impossible to test every possible dimension of behavior, and we recognize that unmeasured elements of behavior might not show racial differences, or might even show more negative White images than Black. We submit this evidence as an effort to offer quantifiable and systematic evidence of Black-White differences in movies. We do not represent the findings as definitive, but as exemplars of the kind of detailed content analysis necessary to penetrate to the deep, subtle level at which most racial image making in the media now operates.

Eleven elements of the narratives were coded. To be coded, characters had to utter at least one full sentence; have their names mentioned in the

movie dialogue, or somehow help forward the story line. If a nameless character appearing in one or two scenes had lines like "Hi," and "Yeah," their behavior was not coded. Where characters did meet this standard, their behavior was coded for actions that we thought might distinguish Black and White actors. The movies were coded by two graduate students.

In figures 11.2 and 11.3, the percentages should be interpreted as the proportion of the ethnic-gender group shown in the specified guise. The differences in the size of the bars in figure 11.3 illustrate especially graphically the contrast in portrayals of Black females and White females. Contrast for Black males and White males are illustrated by a similar bar graph in figure 11.2. For those who want the details, numerical data for both genders are displayed in appendix table A.17. The first row in that table shows the numbers of characters of each group who qualified by being named, speaking a sentence, and/or advancing the plot. Looking only at this row, we see that 240 White characters met this standard, and thirty-six Black African Americans achieved considerable visibility in the films, although it is also clear that males predominate over females.²⁷

The rest of appendix table A.17 provides the data to test our initial ex-



Figure 11.2 Percentages of Black and White Male Characters Shown in Different Guises

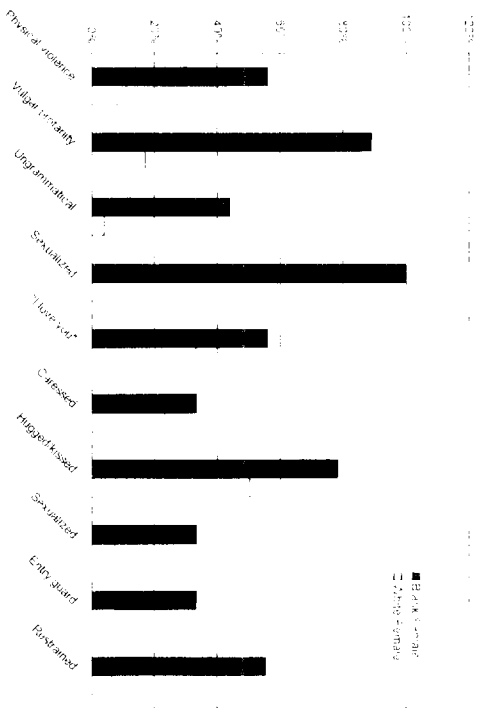


Figure 11.3. Percentages of Black and White Female Characters Shown in Different Causes

perceptions by comparing percentages of characters in the different ethnic and gender groups that engages in each of the coded behaviors. Thus under Black male, for "Physical violence," the numbers "10" and "37 percent" appear. This means that ten of the twenty-seven named Black male characters committed physical violence. That number represents 37 percent of the twenty-seven Black males. By comparison, 40 percent of the 170 named White males acted violently. Looking specifically at images of violence and restraint, a gender difference emerges. When it came to portrayal as violent or requiring incarceration or restraint, at least in the top 1996 Hollywood films, on average Black males did not seem more violently inclined than White. However, Black females were markedly more violent than White, in percentage terms five times more so. And they were nine times more likely to be shown in conditions of restraint—55 percent of Black female characters versus 6 percent of White females. This finding accords with other results discussed below that suggest that movies portray Black females as less civilized than their White counterparts, less obedient to societal norms usually followed by women.

The second postulate was that Blacks would be disproportionately associated with an implicitly animal or biological sexuality and less so with more

romantic and sensitive versions of affection and intimacy. Again there is partial support, again with special respect with Black females. Depictions in scenes showing partial nudity or emphasizing sexual stimulation of other characters (and presumably the audience) are equivalent for Black and White males, but not for females. Every Black woman was sexualized, although White women were far more likely to be depicted in this guise than White men; they were far less sexualized than Black females. Thus arguably, traditional gender roles, the use of women as sexual objects, continues in Hollywood's top films—but especially so for Black women.

As for actually portraying sexual acts, both Black males and females were much more likely to have sex than their White counterparts. Based on our admittedly limited sample, this finding suggests that Hollywood depicts Blacks as more sexually driven on average than Whites, perhaps because filmmakers assume audiences expect this of Black characters. This tracks with a general conclusion that Black characters are more likely on average to violate what might be thought of as middle-class conventions of sobriety and restraint. We can speculate that some Whites' perceptions of Blacks as lacking in middle-class virtues, as lazy and unwilling to work hard for success, may receive fortification from the subtle contrasts in movie characterizations. Such perceptions were evident in our own interviews and in national survey data. Black characters seem more likely on average to seek and receive immediate physical gratification. White audiences know from the news that Black women in particular bear children out of wedlock at comparatively high rates, reinforcing such impressions. We can conclude nothing definitive, but the differences are *consistent* in the direction of greater Black sexuality.

On the other hand, looking at depictions of characters in nonsexual intimacy, measured by uttering the phrase "I love you" or engaging in nonsexual hugging, kissing, and caressing, differences between Blacks and Whites are not consistent. If anything, Blacks are shown to be more affectionate than Whites. This image could counteract, at least in part, the implications of all the sexualization. In this sample, as in the advertising study, no instances of interracial sexuality or nonsexual intimacy occurred.²⁵

Turning now to language use, we suggested that Blacks would engage in significantly more profanity and ungrammatical speech than Whites. The pertinent data from appendix table A-17 reveal striking contrasts. Black males were more profane than White males, though a majority of both used

profanity in this sample of movies. All but one of the Black females swore, 89 percent, compared with 17 percent of White females. The disparities in grammatical usage were even greater—in fact barely any White characters spoke ungrammatically compared with around half the Blacks. Part of this finding may be due to Blacks tending to portray less educated characters. Still, as already noted, we found examples of Blacks with high education using ungrammatical, perhaps stereotypically “ghetto” speaking styles. And even if occupational differences partially explain the differences in language use, this pattern nonetheless constructs African Americans as occupying a different, quite separate cultural universe from Euro-Americans. Filmakers may believe audiences, Black as well as White, expect African American characters to speak in certain ways and would not relate to them as typically recognizable “Black” if they spoke differently. At the same time, this difference in symbolic behavior depicts Blacks as possibly less restrained, less governed by middle-class conventionality, which parallels the disproportionate sexuality attributed to Blacks.²⁹

Our final expectation concerned the depiction of Blacks in menial roles. Movies show cab drivers, cashiers, clerks, street vendors, and so forth in profusion, but they are rarely given lines to speak, let alone a name. That is why we chose to look specifically at entry and security guards, which preliminary study revealed as a frequent assignment for African American actors. Society depends upon security guards; trusts them, and thus there is a positive component to the image of a minority person in that position. On the other hand, casting a Black in this role smacks of tokenism; it earns a filmmaker credit for ethnic diversity without affecting the overall plot development or marketing appeal. In any case, the hypothesis was strongly confirmed: fully fifteen of the twenty-three guards shown in the sampled films were Black.

As in prime-time television, interracial intimacy was missing from most films. Only work or professional relationships developed across racial lines.³⁰ Again, romance across racial boundaries was absent. If even when film conventions would otherwise lead one to expect it. Thus in several major studio productions of the 1990s, a Black male with legal authority assists or works closely with a vulnerable White woman. Examples include Samuel L. Jackson's relationship to Cicely Davis in *The Long Kiss Goodnight*, Morgan Freeman's to Ashley Judd in *Kiss the Girls*, Denzel Washington's to Julia Roberts in *The Pelican Brief*, and Wesley Snipes's with Diane Lane in *Harbor at Dawn*. All chastely avoided romance. The presence of Black men as

competent professionals with trusting relationships to White women does mark an important advance, but the absence of romance between the leading man and woman where a thousand White movies have inserted it exemplifies the enduring racial distance. These examples of Blacks' continuing cultural liminality provide a fitting note on which to conclude.

Conclusion

As we said at the outset, film is an intricate site of cultural expression about race. By combining qualitative examples with quantitative methods for analyzing content usually applied only to news, this chapter attempts to capture the complicated flavor of race images in Hollywood's most popular movies. Hollywood has improved its contributions to race relations significantly over the past thirty years. But the dominant movie images of Blacks still create voids where White viewers might *potentially* find more consistent challenges and correctives. Different kinds of movies could nurture the more positive side of Whites' ambivalent ledgers, their empathy, hope, and yearning for connection. We do not mean to suggest that having big-budget movies with African Americans as “positive role models” and hence of complexity would by itself significantly alter race relations. Rather, the scarcity of such films records as it contributes to the persistence of misunderstanding, stereotypes, and animosity.

We recognize the complicated task that the film industry faces. Part of the reason for the movie images of Blacks lay in the way stereotypical movie representations interact with human perception. In a sense, each member of the ethnic group bears the burden of representing his or her entire category. For some film viewers, if a character conforms in any way to negative stereotypes, that is what they will notice and remember; they will disregard any nonstereotypical qualities the same character demonstrates.³²

There may be no easy solution to this conundrum. Market pressures loom even larger in the realm of movies than in journalism. It may be unrealistic to expect films aiming for the widest possible audience—the kind that constituted our sample—to be much different from what they are. Movies with more complicated and varied representations of minorities do get made, but they generally do not break through the \$25 million ceiling set for the sample. Often marketed as if they will only appeal to a minority audience, such movies can become victims of studio executives' unimaginative, self-fulfilling prophecies. Frank Price, former head of Columbia Pictures, ex-

pressed what appears to be an industry consensus when he spoke about *Rosewood*, a serious film concerning a massacre of Blacks, before it went on to do poorly at the box office: "If you're looking at this as a studio executive, you've got [director] John Singleton in the plus column and nearly everything else in the minus column. . . . It's a period piece. It's disturbing. And to cross over, Whites will have to plunk down \$7.50 to feel heavy gain."³² Another studio executive, a vice president of development, observed:

When I'm in an meeting about a big film, if the script doesn't call for a black or minority character, it really doesn't cross my mind to put somebody black in it. If not racism, though I'm sure that's what everyone wants to call it. But all white movies sell. There's no black in "Saving Private Ryan" or "There's Something About Mary," and they sold at the box office. So there's not a lot of incentive to make changes. It's wrong, but that's the reality.³³

Perhaps the studio bosses are correct: maybe films featuring too serious a Black subject or too many Black actors can only appeal to minority audiences. If so, the economics dictates another vicious circle: low projected revenues from a limited audience dictates lower spending on production and marketing, which yields lower audience appeal — and lower revenues.³⁴

Yet surveys suggest that Blacks and Latinos may make up about one third of the movie-going audience.³⁵ This points to another problem: the vicious circle may be compounded by restricted demand for serious, nuanced movies among all ethnic groups. Just because a minority group faces serious problems in the United States does not mean its members will have more somber tastes at the box office than the majority group. In recent years, a series of thoughtful and provocative films about the African American experience, such as *Boyz n the Hood* and *Get on the Bus*, have done poorly at the box office even among Blacks. At the same time, pure entertainment fare like *Boyz n the Hood* and *Set It Off* generated major financial returns, largely from African Americans.³⁶ Whites usually spend the largest share of their ticket money on less challenging entertainment as well. If indeed minority groups have similar entertainment preferences to the dominant group, then serious films may never attain the distribution and influence we might like.

Ironically, an element of cultural commonality between ethnic minority and majority groups — shared taste for high entertainment — may work to reinforce perceptions of cultural difference by creating market pressures that discourage filmmakers from giving minorities wider-ranging roles in mass-

appeal movies. But at least in the current environment, Blacks (though not Asians or Latinos) regularly star in mass-oriented films. Moreover, serious niche-market films featuring minority perspectives do get made and seen, although mostly by minority group members. To improve this situation will require interest and cooperation from audiences, not just from the film industry.³⁷

In this regard, the experience of *The Preacher's Wife* may be particularly instructive. Patrick Goldstein writes that this film was a kind of "great White hope" for Hollywood.³⁸ Made by the highly successful Disney studio with the largest budget ever for an all-Black picture (over \$60 million), *Preacher's Wife* was directed by proven box office winner Penny Marshall (a White woman) and starred two African Americans of established stature among Whites and Blacks, Denzel Washington and Whitney Houston. Disney "carefully positioned *The Preacher's Wife* as a cozy family film promoting the universal themes of romance and redemption" and the studio was "determined to make the film appear as safe as milk." Disney boosted the film's chances with "a heavily promoted Houston soundtrack." With *Preacher's Wife* the hope was to challenge the prevailing belief in Hollywood that "films without White stars still attract only Black audiences."³⁹

Before the movie was released, *Time* quoted Whitney Houston herself as saying "What's so alien about us? I don't understand why there's such a big thing about all-Black casts. I've seen movies with all-White casts. . . . It's a movie. Either you like it or you don't."⁴⁰ In the end, *Preacher's Wife* wound up grossing \$31 million at the box office, less than *Thin Line Between Love and Hate* or *Set It Off*, fares targeted more narrowly to Black audiences. These figures suggest that very few Whites went to see *Preacher's Wife* despite all that it had going for it — and not all that many African Americans. The market has sent a strong message to the film studios: making a big budget all-Black film is a risky proposition indeed.⁴¹

A simple survey of the top box-office hits of 1999 reveals continuity with 1996. Four of the top twenty-five movies (excluding three animated features) showcase a Black man in a starring role (top-three billing). All are one-dimensional characters in gimmicky, violent movies (*The Matrix*, *Hill Hill Hill*, *Heat*, *Entrapment*, and *Deep Blue Sea*). Lawrence Fishbourne plays a rebel, Will Smith a hired gun, Ving Rhames a crooked FBI man, and Samuel L. Jackson a brilliant entrepreneur who is also adept at fighting genetically engineered, vicious sharks. None of the top twenty-five films starred a Black

woman. A film starring another Black man, *Blue Streak*, with Martin Lawrence as a jewel thief, ranked twenty-sixth at the box office in these calculations. *Life*, an integrated comedy starring Eddie Murphy, Martin Lawrence, and Cuba Gooding Jr. as convicts, was the highest-ranking film (ethnically first) in which Blacks occupied all three top roles. The top movie with an essentially all-Black cast—and the highest-earning feature with a Black woman in a starring role—was *The Best Man* (\$33.5 million, in fifty-third place). Resembling *The Preacher's Wife* in its attempt to deal with contemporary African American life in a realistic and nuanced way, *The Best Man* once again confirmed the maxim that films with mostly Black casts that do not feature violence (or Eddie Murphy) cannot earn more than about \$40 million.

Demographics increasingly create market pressures for inclusiveness. Projections indicate that by 2010 one-third of the U.S. population will be non-White; by 2030, there may not be a majority racial or ethnic group (i.e., Whites will constitute less than 50 percent and no other group will make up more than 50 percent).¹⁵ Since Blacks and Latinos already constitute a disproportionate share of the box office audience, the influence of minority tastes on Hollywood—already felt in the frequent casting of Black males (such as Wesley Snipes and Will Smith during the 1990s) in action films for young male audiences—will grow. Beyond this, a large portion of Hollywood's revenues, in some cases more than half, arises from *foreign* markets. The majority of the world is non-White; many nations' audiences are non-White, and ethnic and racial inclusiveness should only facilitate profitability in many overseas markets.¹⁶ Indeed, as the movie and video production industries in foreign countries grow and become more competitive with the now-dominant American industry, it may make rational business sense for Hollywood to attend more carefully to non-White audiences. In this way, there is the potential for the extremities of Hollywood profit-seeking to turn more positive. The path to highest profits might lead through even greater ethnic diversity, and that could spill over into casting Blacks and other minorities in a greater variety of roles and films. Some of them are bound to offer (like *Boyz n the City*) the kinds of nuanced images of genuine humanity that might contribute to racial equity—understanding in place of denial and rejection, acceptance in place of fear and stereotypes.

12 Reflecting on the End of Racial Representation

IN SIXTY YEARS, relationships, and communication signs we have documented emerge from a long cultural tradition in the United States. They also arise from an inherent human tendency to form group identities. In writing a book exploring the media's role in all this we do not mean (and) to emphasize their culpability. We have sought a better understanding of how media may unintentionally reinforce the negative tendencies in racial group dynamics, even as they also contribute to positive movements in some respects. We have employed the media as a kind of leading indicator, a barometer of cultural change and variability in the arena of race. In this chapter we summarize our findings and their possible significance and suggest a new goal (or end) for media operations in the realm of race: on encouraging audiences and media producers alike to become more critically self-aware as they deal with the culture's racial signals. Such activity would serve not only the social interest in racial equity, but the media's long-term economic interests as well. And it would set the stage for an eventual cessation—an end in the other sense—to color consciousness, for arrival at the time, however far off, when "race" no longer holds meaning for media producers and their audiences.

Benedict Anderson's work on "imagined communities" helps explain the cultural-cognitive process that draws the lines between groups. All community is imagined; as Anderson shows, this was true hundreds of years ago when the earliest mass media, by creating common information space, enabled collective group consciousness to transcend geographic space and become national identity.¹⁷ Today, the same processes operate; common identification is shaped by mediated images of who constitutes one's own people and nation. It stands to reason that Blacks' media images will be critical in determining the degree to which African Americans are imagined by White Americans (and even by themselves) to be part of the community.

