



Tell Me Who I Am

race representation at the movies

A Report by the Grand Rapids Institute
for Information Democracy
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www.griid.org

Major Findings

- ◆ The majority of films had White lead characters - 44 out of 50, only 12 had minority lead characters (10 Black, 2 Asian).
- ◆ Only 1 film had a non-white hero character, *Ali*.
- ◆ Most films typecast minorities: African Americans are disproportionately depicted as criminals, drug dealers and gang members; Latinos as gang members or servants; Asians as martial artists or prostitutes; Native Americans as exotic or mute; and Arabs as terrorists.
- ◆ The movie *Black Hawk Down* clearly associates the religion of Islam with violence.

Contact Us

Grand Rapids Institute for
Information Democracy

www.griid.org

459-4788 x122

Director - Jeff Smith
jsmith@grcmc.org

711 Bridge St. NW
Grand Rapids, MI 49504

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of books, videos and
curriculum materials.*

Films Reviewed

A Beautiful Mind
I Am Sam
Slackers
Life as a House
Kate & Leopold
American Psycho 2
Mothman Prophecies
Harry Potter
Jeepers Creepers
The Others
Vanilla Sky
AI
Bubble Boy
Jay & Silent Bob Strike Back
Riding in Cars with Boys
From Hell
Soul Survivors
Bandits
Don't Say a Word
The Glass House
Hearts in Atlantis
Corky Romano
Max Keeble's Big Move
Serendipity
The Musketeer

Behind Enemy Lines
K-Pax
The Majestic
Zoolander
Original Sin
Black Hawk Down
Ocean's Eleven
Rat Race
Spy Game
13 Ghosts
Not Another Teen Movie
Domestic Disturbance
Orange County
Ali
Bones
Training Day
Hardball
Monster's Ball
O
Snow Dogs
Black Knight
How High
Rollerball
The One
Kiss of the Dragon

Introduction

During the 2002 Movie Oscar's something happened that had never occurred before – the Best Actor & Best Actress Awards went to African Americans – Halle Berry won for *Monster's Ball* and Denzel Washington for *Training Day*. Some commentators proclaimed that this was a triumph for racial equality in America and that popular culture was now reflecting diversity on the screen.



To see if this was the case, we conducted a study of 50 Hollywood films released on video during the first 6 months of 2002. We looked at the racial representation of both lead & secondary characters to see how often minority characters appeared in films.

Psychologists and media researchers believe that the images we see in media effects our perception of people. Being exposed to the same types of images over a period of time can have what is called a cumulative effect, where we believe that the dominant image is the norm. As you can see

Films with White lead only characters

A Beautiful Mind

I Am Sam

Slackers

Life as a House

Kate & Leopold

American Psycho 2

Mothman Prophecies

Harry Potter

Jeepers Creepers

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Vanilla Sky

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Don't Say a Word

The Glass House

Hearts in Atlantis

Corky Romano

Max Keeble's Big Move

Serendipity

The Musketeer

Behind Enemy Lines

K-Pax continued

The Majestic

Zoolander

Original Sin

Black Hawk Down

Ocean's Eleven

Rat Race

Spy Game

13 Ghosts

Not Another Teen Movie

Domestic Disturbance

Orange County

Films with Black lead characters

Ali

Bones

Training Day

Hardball

Monster's Ball

O

Snow Dogs

Black Knight

How High

Rollerball

Films with Asian lead characters

The One

Kiss of the Dragon

from the list of films by racial makeup of lead characters, there is a disproportionate amount of lead White (only) characters. When looking at the total number of films with White lead characters (that also might have Black or Asian lead characters) the number goes up to 44 out of 50.



Not only does the repeated images of White lead characters contribute to the normalization of the dominant culture in the US, it also contributes to low self-esteem.

The group Children Now has studied how minority children perceive themselves based on TV programming. "I love watching TV. I believe what I see. I'm still looking for ME," are the opening words of a Children Now study that focused on Native American children. The study found that since TV shows rarely had Native characters in them, they contributed significantly to low self-esteem amongst Native children. (www.childrennow.org)

While the cumulative effect is important, the focus of this study is how characters were portrayed along racial lines. We will look at Native, Asian, Arab, Latino and Black representation in specific films and draw some general conclusions, based on the 50-film study.

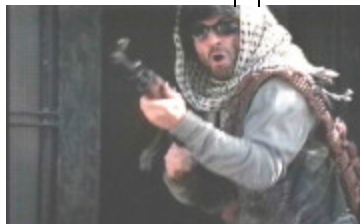
Native representation

There was only one film in the 50-movie study that had any Native representation, *Snow Dogs*. This film is centered around an African American character (Cuba Gooding Jr.) who goes to Alaska to search for a family member. He encounters two Native residents, one who is a stoic older Native man, and the other is a Native woman who runs a bar. The Native woman is instantly attracted to the lead character and at one point in the movie Cuba Gooding Jr.'s character fantasizes about her wearing a furry bikini on the beach. In some ways this Native female character is strong and independent, but she is viewed only through the eyes of men in a sexual way.



Arab representation

Here again there is only one film with Arab representation in the movie *Spy Games*. This film affirms the typical US stereotype of Arabs as violent or as terrorists. There is a lengthy scene with fighting amongst two Arab factions in what the film claims is downtown Beirut. Arab men, many wearing Kafias (a scarf-like garment that men wear on the heads or around their necks) are shooting at someone who is driving a truck into a building in what appears to be an attempted suicide bombing.



Viewers hear no dialogue and are given no historical context for why these acts of violence are being committed.

Although all Arabs are not Muslim and all Muslims are not Arab, we felt it was important to mention that there was one depiction of someone who practices Islam in the 50-film study. Since the 9/11 terrorist attacks there has been increased discrimination against those who practice Islam (<http://www.adc.org/>), especially since Islam tends to be associated with violence.

In the film *Blackhawk Down* there is a scene with a Somali man praying in Islamic fashion. As soon as he finishes his prayer he picks up a rifle, thus associating Islam with violence.



Asian representation

Asian representation was slightly higher in quantity than either Native or Arab, but each Asian character perpetuated stereotypes. There were two lead Asian characters in the 50-film study, both were played by Jet Li and both characters were focused on martial arts abilities. (*The One* and *Kiss of the Dragon*) A minor Asian character role in *Ocean's Eleven*

is also focused on his athleticism. We rarely hear this character utter a word, which again suggests that Asians only know martial arts, but have nothing important to say.

The other two films with Asian representation are even more racist than the typical martial arts depiction. In *Corky Romano* the lead White character is in a scene where, out of ignorance, mocks an Asian language. The scene is meant to be funny, since this film is a comedy, but there is little humor in making fun of another culture's language.



The last example is from *I Am Sam*. Sean Penn's character is approached by an Asian woman in a restaurant. They begin talking and at some point she suggests that he come home with her. Just then a police officer arrives to catch her in the act of solicitation. It is unfortunate that the only female Asian representation we saw in the entire 50-film study was that of a woman playing a prostitute. This representation perpetuates the notion that Asian women are overtly sexual. A scene like this just builds on the countless Vietnam theme films, where GI's were "overwhelmed" by Southeast Asian prostitutes.



Latino/a representation

Just like all previous racial groups, representation of Latinos is limited and stereotypical. The film *Training Day* has Latinos in two different roles. The first is a Latina woman who plays a small role as the lover for Denzel Washington's character. We see her only twice in the film, both when Denzel shows up for sex. The other role for Latinos are a group of men depicted as gang-bangers. They appear only in one scene, playing cards, drinking beer and almost killing Denzel's partner played by Ethan Hawke.



The only other film with Latino representation was in the movie *Orange County*. Here the main family (which is White) has a maid who is Latina. The main scene with this character is when she is being harassed by the mother, who accuses her of stealing. The woman threatens to quite in



Spanish, when the movie's main character intervenes and offers her more money to stay. This scene also has significant class implications, but the racial depiction reflects that Latina women are not only hot headed, but can be bought off.

We never see the maid engaged in any positive interaction with the family and more importantly we have no insight into her life outside of being a maid.

African American representation

Not surprising the bulk of the minority representation in our film study was African American. Not only were there numerous films with Blacks playing secondary characters (13), but there were also 10 films with lead Black characters (see page 4). The representation however, was quite narrow. Here is a listing of the African American roles :

Jeepers Creepers - *paranoid resident*
Don't Say a Word - *criminal*
Max Keeble's Big Move - *greedy student*
K-Pax - *doctor*
The Majestic - *usher*
Original Sin - *servant*
Black Hawk Down - *angry mobs & warlords*
Rat Race - *race participants*
Spy Game - *secretary*
13 Ghosts - *victim*
Not Another Teen Movie - *student*
Domestic Disturbance - *cop*
The One - *cop*
Bones - *vampire, club owner, victims, drug dealers*
Training Day - *corrupt cop, drug dealers, gang members*
Hardball - *inner city kids, gang members, victims*
Monsters Ball - *prisoner, obese kid, poor mother, mechanic*
O - *student athlete, drug dealer*
Snow Dogs - *dentist, mother*
Rollerball - *athlete*
How High - *students, drug users, girlfriend*
Ali - *athlete, photographer, wife, religious leader, lawyer*

While there were a few examples of Blacks in professional roles, most representation was stereotypical. The most common representation themes were criminal/drugs/gang members, wacky/comic relief and athletes.

Criminals

Probably the most stereotypical of all images, Blacks portrayed as criminals is so normal (see our local news studies at <http://www.griid.org/pdfs/racialProfiling2002.pdf>), that most movie viewers wouldn't even have a problem with it. It is true that Blacks commit crimes, but the problem lies in the fact that Blacks are disproportionately represented in criminal roles as compared to the hero role.

Blacks are gang bangers in *Training Day* and *Hardball* (in this photo). Ironically enough, in both films it is a White male that is the hero or the "good guy."



Blacks sell or use drugs in *Bones*, *O*, *Training Day* and *How High*. In *O*, a Black athlete rapes, then kills his White girlfriend, and in *Hardball* there are two Black on Black violence scenes. The only movie that deals with Blacks outside of the US is *Blackhawk Down*, where Blacks (in this case Somalis) are depicted



wacky/comic relief

The second main theme in Black representation in this study was of characters who played wacky characters, characters that were comic relief, or in a more critical assessment characters who played the role of a bafoon.

Historically, these characters were represented in Black face. More recently, we think of actors like Chris Rock, Eddie Murphy or Richard Pryor. In this study, we saw Cuba Gooding Jr. play the bafoon role in *Snow Dogs*,



where a big city dentist is out of his element in Alaska. In *How High* there are 2 Black men who smoke a great deal of pot and end up going to Harvard. It's sort of a *Animal House* meets Cheech and Chong, where the 2 main characters party, have sex and get their frat brothers to do the same.

The other film with a strong bafoon role is *Black Knight*. Martin Lawrence goes back in time to a Medieval setting and has a difficult time adjusting to a life of peasants, kings and jousting.



heroes - Black & White

For many who go to the movies or rent them to watch at home, it is common to see lead characters who play the hero role as White. Just think of major block busters in recent years - *Star Wars* (episode I & II), *Spiderman* and *Lord of the Rings*. In each case the main protagonist, the hero is White. The same was the case in this film study. there were numerous White heroes, in films such as *I Am Sam*, *The Musketeer*, *Hearts in Atlantis*, *Behind Enemy Lines*, *Life as a House* and *A Beautiful Mind*.

In contrast, the only film with a Black hero is *Ali*. This is an important film on many levels in that it dispels some of the myths and



hatred directed against Muhammad Ali, especially in the 60's and 70's. Ali has become a more mainstream ambassador of good will since being inflicted with Parkinsons disease. Despite

the positive themes of this movie and its depiction of a boxing great, the film still limits movie goers, particularly White movie goers, in seeing Black heroes only in an athletic role.

the white savior

By way of conclusion, we thought it was important to talk about the use of film to promote the “great White savior.” Previously, films were very blatant in their promotion of the idea that Blacks, Native or any other “minority” group need to be saved by a White hero. Whether it was in films that dealt with themes overseas or domestically, it was common for Hollywood to use the great White savior character.

In this film study there was one film that continued this tradition....*Hardball*. In *Hardball*, the main character (Keanu Reeves) is recruited by his bookie to coach an all Black inner city baseball team. Reeve’s character reluctantly agrees, but in the process turns the boys into a team.



In one amazing scene, you have Keanu conducting one of his first practices. He’s hitting the ball around and several kids begin to put other down when they miss a ball. They use offensive language and flip each other off. The whole time this is happening there is hip-hop music playing in the background. Reeves then hits a line drive at one of the kids, almost taking his head off. He mocks the kid for being afraid of the ball. Once he has the group’s attention

he then proceeds to create some rules, like “no one can say anything bad about another player.” The very next time he hits the ball the kids get it right and a smile comes across their faces. When this part of the scene occurs there is now soft music playing in the background. So, in the period of about 5 minutes the White savior was able to get these kids to respect each other and follow the rules.....simple as that.

Methodology

The Grand Rapids Institute for Information Democracy viewed 50 films released on video between January 1, 2002 and June 30, 2002. We chose the most heavily marketed films release on video - films that had significant promotions while in the theatres and upon release on VHS and DVD. For a listing of the films in the study see page 3.

We documented who the lead or primary characters were in each film and the secondary or background characters. We looked at what roles each of these characters played - such as hero, villain, criminal, etc., and whether or not these roles perpetuated traditional racial stereotypes.

The following GRIID staff were involved in this project: Erica Freshour, Rob Dodde, John Kroondyk, Troy Hort and Jeff Smith.

For a video version of this report and other race & media resources contact GRIID. (see page 2)