

Whitewashing in the U.S Film Industry

By Claire Starling

My piece on whitewashing is related to the theme of diversity in many different ways. It brings attention to an issue in the lack of diversity in the U.S film industry and the erasure of different races and cultures. This erasure acts as an attempt to whitewash our history and many different stories because of the perceived notion that whiteness is the preferred standard. This not the case of course, and this work argues that fair representation and diversity within films and television is vastly important for audiences who are consuming this kind of media.

The Hollywood film industry plays an enjoyable and consistent role in the lives of many people in the United States. As a form of entertainment, the film industry provides countless hours of stories and performance for a substantial amount of profit. Although many aspects of the Hollywood film industry are extremely popular and lucrative, there are undesirable aspects to the industry that can cause ethical issues for the movies it creates as well as the audiences watching them. One issue that has been present in the film industry for many years is the act of whitewashing. Whitewashing occurs when film producers actively seek and cast white actors for roles that were originally meant for people of color, whether it is that the character is described as a certain race or their ethnicity is clearly defined within the story. This phenomenon creates a complex and harmful issue within the film industry that many people are opposed to for good reason. The continuous instance of whitewashing within the film industry produces an issue of

ethics by creating a system of values that prefers and praises white actors over other races and in response, creates harmful effects on audience members of color through the lack of minority representation.

Whitewashing is not a relatively new phenomenon within the film industry world. In fact, whitewashing in film has been a regular occurrence since the early 1900s. One example was *The Thief of Baghdad* in 1924, where a white Douglas Fairbanks was casted to play an Arabian man. Film producers defended that role by stating that his tanned skin was enough to make it seem as though he was actually Arabian (Falvey). Another example of whitewashing in early film was in the movie *Breakfast at Tiffany's*, where Mickey Rooney was casted to play a Japanese man. Not only was he a white man playing a Japanese man, but also the portrayal was greatly offensive and a poor representation of the Japanese and their culture. Rooney created the character through ignorant and disrespectful stereotypes. One would think that this harmful phenomenon would be non-existent in films today, but the problem continues to persist. A very recent case of whitewashing in film happened in 2017 with the movie *Ghost in the Shell*. The movie was an adaptation of the popular Japanese manga; however, it did very poorly at the box office due to the controversy behind the casting of the lead character. It was revealed that Scarlett Johansson, a white actress, would be playing the role of Major Motoko Kusanagi, a character that was meant to be portrayed by an Asian actor. Johansson defended her role, stating that her character is a, [“human brain in an entirely machine body, she is essentially identity-less”](#) (Herreria). Many fans considered her response and the crafted ‘backstory’ behind her character simply a poor way to justify the casting of a white woman for the role. LeiLani Nishime stated, “Whitewashing can be condemned for unfairly depriving Asian actors of film roles and for perpetuating the invisibility

of Asians in U.S. media” (Nishime 32). Ultimately many people were disappointed with the movie and the lack of Asian representation within the story. Keiko Agena, a Japanese American actor, commented on the movie by saying, “We’re looking at these beautiful white bodies saying these Japanese names, and it hurt my heart a little bit” (Herreria).

Another recent example of whitewashing includes the film adaptation of the Nickelodeon cartoon *Avatar: The Last Airbender*. Fans were outraged when four white actors had been cast in lead roles in which the characters from the cartoon were of a different race. Fans quickly responded to this misrepresentation by creating a website that not only brought attention to the whitewashing incident, but opposed it firmly, titling their website racebending.com (Lopez 433). These fans not only demanded that society recognize the injustice of this minority misrepresentation, but that it also stresses that a change must be made in order to stop this typical phenomenon. Both of these examples of recent whitewashing within film illustrate the idea that white actors are given more privileges and praise than nonwhite actors, as well as that they are often considered what the industry and their producers may deem as the ‘standard’ within films. In fact, a Hollywood diversity report found that in 2013, only 16.7 percent of lead roles in the 174 films examined belonged to minority actors (Hunt 9). This idea of racial superiority and frequent casting of white actors can create a wide variety of issues. Whitewashing not only eliminates roles for nonwhite actors, but it creates negative consequences within the industry for its viewers. One consequence of this phenomenon includes the idea of white superiority in response to lack of minority representation. When film producers continually cast white actors in favor of nonwhite actors, they create the idea that white actors are the ‘better’ choice in comparison to nonwhite actors. Since white actors are the dominant race within film, they are

often seen as or considered the standard within the industry. Nonwhite actors then are less appealing to audiences and often overlooked or substituted for white actors within a story. According to Daniel Bernardi, the institutionally created “color line defined by whiteness has directed the trajectory of the Hollywood style” (Moore 954). Film producers can erase nonwhite actors from the story simply because they do not match the ‘standard’ of whiteness, which then creates a dual issue.

Whitewashing causes the minority culture and representation within a film to be removed from the story, which then produces a lack of cultural portrayal for viewers and replaces it with the standard of whiteness. It also creates the idea that other cultures are defined by whiteness and white actors, or those who are not part of the culture. This is shown through the example of whitewashing in the movie *Kill Bill*. The movie features a white, female protagonist who tells the story of Asian culture. The main character, although she is white, masters exemplary skills in martial arts and proves to be superior to her Asian counterparts. In the movie, the white character defeats an Asian character while both are using martial arts skills. This demonstrates an inferiority of nonwhite characters in their own cultural context. Tierney states within his article, “A repetitive framework of superiority in which the white person achieves and/or comes to possess skill, mastery, and recognition displays a colonialist attitude that reinforces Western hegemony by ‘producing the East discursively as the West’s inferior Other, a maneuver which strengthens—indeed, even partially constructs— the West’s self-image as a superior civilization’” (Tierney 614). This proves to be an issue because these kind of films not only use

an outside source to tell the story of a certain people and culture, but they negatively represent that culture as the inferior in comparison to the dominant white race.

Although white actors are often considered the 'standard' within the film industry, producers claim there are valid reasons why they choose to cast white actors over other minority actors time and time again. Producers argue that film casts that are primarily made up of minority actors will not make much money and are considered more of a risk than casting a predominately white film. Producers claim that white actors are necessary for their film to do well financially because white actors are often seen as more profitable than nonwhite actors. In contrast, producers believe that movies with large casts of nonwhite actors will not seem appealing to white audiences and the white identity; therefore, they will do poorly in profits. However, this idea has been easily refuted. "A recent report has found that more diverse casted films actually perform financially better than predominantly White casted films and that there are many all-White films that financially fail" (Aumer 1315). Perhaps then film producers create this theme of whiteness and whitewashing in their films because it is habitual process that is directly related to their personal values. This would suggest then that film producers are more concerned with the social norm and standard of whiteness than creating an accurate cultural representation within their films.

Not only does whitewashing create a lack of minority representation, it creates an issue of self-identity and self-worth for those who are watching who are not white. According to social identity theory, group membership plays an important role in one's self-concept. People are strongly motivated to maintain a positive self-concept and thus tend to favor groups they are a

part of in groups and discriminate against outgroups (Weaver 370). Therefore, the continued preference for white actors to be represented in films creates a positive self-esteem for audiences who feel they relate to or identify with being white. Those who do not identify with white actors on the other hand do not gain that sense of positive self-esteem because they do not see themselves represented in the media nor do they have any role models or positive figures to look up to and identify with as a result of whitewashing. A study that was done by Helen Yang found that the underrepresentation of both Asian American individuals and Pacific Islanders negatively correlates with the self-esteem of these minority groups (Yang 2). This creates an issue of ethics and values through which minorities feel the effects of greatly.

Although many people are aware of the issue of whitewashing and openly denounce its prevalence in the film industry, there is little change that has occurred in order to move the film industry and its producers in a more diverse and culturally accurate direction. In order to further understand the complex subject, I conducted research of my own on the popular topic. A poll was created on Facebook in order to look at the people's opinions of whitewashing in the U.S film industry. The question in the poll asked Facebook users whether or not it personally bothered them when roles meant for a specific race had been whitewashed. Out of the 24 people that answered the survey, it was found that 74 percent of poll users said whitewashing personally bothered them, while only 26 percent of poll users said that it did not bother them. Then, six of the poll users who stated yes were asked whether or not they would still go see the movie even if they were aware that it was culturally lacking and inaccurate as a whole. Half of the users stated that they would not go see the movie, while the other half stated that they probably would. This information proved to be very interesting to the overall research. While awareness about the

issue is key to creating change, it seems almost counterproductive to criticize the whitewashing of films and then pay money to still go see it. In order to truly bring about change, audiences need to fully support the issue of whitewashing so they can see a direct change. A halfhearted attempt to voice the issue of whitewashing will only result in film producers believing that their actions are still permissible.

Whitewashing is a negative issue among the film industry that has continued to occur in society for far too long. Whitewashing not only creates a standard of white superiority that favors and values white people exclusively, but it also produces a negative view of minorities in response. Minorities have little representation in the film industry and are often seen as lesser in comparison to white actors. In order to stop this phenomenon, film viewers need to work together to eradicate this issue from the film industry. While people are aware of this issue, there is little change that has occurred in response. Audiences must come forward and make it known to the film industry and its producers that whitewashing is unacceptable and films that support this notion are not ones that they wish to see. Perhaps then if society can show that diversity in film is a positive trait, then producers will make the change in order to include minorities and accurate cultural representation. Diversity among people of different races is a natural phenomenon and is meant to be celebrated and represented fairly, not overlooked and silenced by the majority.

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