
Counterstory and Representation Through Media

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Course Design: Critical Analyses

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Over the years film, literature, and television have provided a way for minority groups to tell their own stories for large mainstream audiences. These can be stories that are passed down from generation to generation that hold great meaning within their communities or personal experiences that would not normally appeal to general audiences that are outside of the storyteller's local population. Marginalized and disenfranchised groups such as Black and Indigenous communities have histories of being under and misrepresented throughout different forms of media over the years. How have historically neglected communities managed to provide an outlet for their creativity and to elevate their people?

Over the years there has been a shift in the media landscape where these disenfranchised voices have been uplifted and grabbed the brass ring to assert that their art is to be taken just as seriously as their white peers. I will be primarily focusing my lens on film. Some of the most culturally relevant film and television is being written, produced, directed, and starring Black, Indigenous, Asian, and Latine talent. The increase in diversity has allowed actors belonging to disadvantaged populations to shine. Their work is even, unsurprisingly, receiving critical acclaim. These works utilize counterstory to share their experiences to explore issues that are related to race, gender, class and other forms of oppression within the framework of critical race theory.

However, the entertainment industry and general audiences weren't always so welcoming to media that wasn't made specifically for white audiences. The Blaxploitation genre of films is one of the most iconic forms of counterstorytelling that we have ever

seen. Blaxploitation was a way to provide a platform for Black filmmakers and actors who had been largely excluded from mainstream Hollywood productions. These films were a way to address social and political issues that were relevant to Black audiences. Not only that but the way that black characters were portrayed served as a weapon to challenge stereotypes that dominated the silver screen.

However not all Blaxploitation films can be considered counterstories. Some films within the genre, explicitly those made by white producers, were made solely to cash in on the aesthetic. These colonized versions of the genre relied heavily on stereotypes and negative portrayals of Black characters. This led to perpetuating more harm than the original intention of the originators of the Blaxploitation genre. Overall, it is a complex subject that was able to challenge cultural norms regarding race and representation in The United States.

One of the most successful films of this era was 1971's *Shaft*, directed by Gordon Parks, which starred Richard Roundtree as John Shaft. The film was a critical success. It is notable for its portrayal of a Black hero that paved the way for years to come. In "What's The Big Deal?: Shaft (1971)" Eric Snider states that, "Prior to this, you hardly saw black characters in movies who weren't servants, slaves, yes-men, criminals, or buffoons." Not only were Black people being presented in a positive light, but Black people were also able to see themselves fight back their oppressors and outsmart their white antagonists on screen. Providing a brand-new experience and outlet for Black moviegoing audiences. The success helped to create a market for African American films and destroyed the notion that films with Black protagonists were not commercially viable.

Director Spike Lee is another filmmaker whose art has done a tremendous amount of work to highlight important social issues in the Black community. His films explore themes such as systemic racism, police brutality, and the everyday experiences of African Americans in urban environments. One of the most highly respected works among his filmography is 1989's *Do the Right Thing*. This film portrays the tensions that brew between Black and white

residents in a Brooklyn neighborhood. The film's use of music, visuals, and unconventional storytelling techniques challenged typical Hollywood conventions and helped establish Spike Lee as a major voice in independent filmmaking.

Do the Right Thing utilizes counterstory in many ways. Spike Lee engages his personal experiences as a Black man who was born in 1957, but the film is also inspired by the racially-motivated killings of local Black community members in New York City. In "Do the Right Thing": Why Spike Lee's Masterpiece Remains Essential Cinema 30 Years Later" by Tambay Obenson offers insight on the film, "*Do the Right Thing* doesn't provide answers to the problems it exposes. Instead, the film reflects back to its audience their own perspectives on prejudice and compliance. The film was made as the result of provocations, and so it in turn provokes." This film's message is just as relevant today as when it was first released. We're still fighting through systemic racism and police brutality, which go hand in hand, to this very day. Obenson goes on to say that "It's quite damning that so little seems to have changed in three decades."

Spike Lee's commitment to telling the hard-hitting truth to audiences is quite the remarkable feat. He is a groundbreaking artist who inspires storytellers of all kinds. Another example of telling the hard-hitting truth through counterstory was the highly praised *Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee* by Dee Brown. By sharing the story of the American Indian Wars from the perspective of Native American tribes, Dee Brown was able to pass down generational knowledge that went on to be adapted into film and television movies. Another example of stories passed down is the 1998 Indigenous coming-of-age film *Smoke Signals*.

Smoke Signals draws inspiration from traditional Coeur d'Alene stories and features a cast full of young talented Indigenous actors. Ellen C. Caldwell asserts in "What *Smokes Signals* Means 20 years later" that "The film is constantly playing with and dismantling and challenging dominant Native stereotypes." The film is inherently political not just in providing a platform for Native voices in the form of actors but also actually casting American Indian Movement activist John Trudell. Native American Studies Scholar Joanna Hearne, whose work is featured in Caldwell's article goes on to mention that "Trudell's mellow, humorous performance as a radio host suggests the film's self-conscious presentation as a new indigenous voice in popular culture." *Smoke Signals* quite literally amplifies Native voices to the fullest ability.

Challenging dominant cultural narratives is what counterstory is all about. Through counterstory these films offer alternative perspectives that center marginalized communities' experiences and magnify our causes. Another such filmmaker who has been able to do this is Jordan Peele. He may have gotten his start in comedy but has certainly made use of his skills as a horror genius to thrill and provoke audiences through the subject matter of his films. In his directorial debut, *Get Out* (2017), Peele uses horror

as a metaphor to explore the experience of being a Black man in America. Peele exposes the sinister ways that racism operates in the United States. The idea that racism is just a relic of the past is challenged in the film.

Get Out uses the fear and anxiety that many Black people feel through their everyday life as a device to challenge nonblack audiences to think about their place in our society. The horror genre is utilized to the fullest extent to elevate the emotional impact of the story. Jordan Peele's use of counterstory through his filmography is a powerful tool. Peele has the ability to create narratives that are both socially and culturally relevant, while also providing opportunities for Black communities to tell their own stories in their own ways.

Many of the filmmakers and authors mentioned within this essay share one common interest: To tell their personal stories and make an impact. The doors that are open to their white colleagues aren't always there for underrepresented and socially excluded populations. United through art, they were all unknowingly participating in Critical Race Theory. Like the scholars that we've been analyzing in class, fiction or even non-fiction is a useful tool that makes learning the material accessible for people of many backgrounds.

In particular Derrick Bell's short sci-fi story, "The Space Traders" is a great example of making Critical Race Theory easy to comprehend. The story and language are meant to be understood by people of various backgrounds. Bell establishes a great relationship with the audience and challenges them with such a complex topic this is simultaneously entertaining. "The Space Traders" conceptually explores race, power, and moral dilemmas in America, forcing the audience to confront any Anti-Black biases that are prevalent throughout the story.

Despite ruling class interests to keep marginalized communities down by silencing their voices, storytellers of diverse backgrounds have been able to rise above and share truly remarkable work that will go on to influence generations down the line. Counterstory allows creativity to thrive along with uplifting the community and provides a spotlight for actors, writers, and directors of diverse backgrounds. Storytelling is one of the most fundamentally important traits that people all over the world share. As a hopeful future filmmaker, being able to potentially create art that is as intellectually stimulating as any of the work discussed within this essay is something that I can only hope to achieve even a fraction of.

Works Cited

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