

African Americans’ Civil Rights and Cinema in the Twentieth Century

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Abstract

This paper seeks to study the history of African American civil rights through cinema, from the 1910s to the 1960s. In the twentieth century, the fight for black civil rights became a defining moment for American history, and the film industry played an essential role in the evolution of the civil rights movement. Black representation in Hollywood could impact a broad audience; it could influence how the general white public perceived African Americans. Thus, by analyzing six films from six different decades (and the historical context), the aim is to see the historical and social influence of the film industry on the topic of African Americans' civil rights.

Firstly, the analysis will start with a look at the 1910s *The Birth of a Nation* (1915) and its link to historic presidents and organizations, like Woodrow Wilson and the Ku Klux Klan. Secondly, the paper will continue with the 1920s and the movie *Within Our Gates* (1920) by Oscar Micheaux; the Roaring Twenties will be characterized in this paper by black progress, the Harlem Renaissance, and the Republican-led political sphere. Thirdly, the 1930s will be represented by *Gone with the Wind* (1939) and issues such as the start of sociopolitical awareness in cinema due to fascism, the Great Depression of 1929, Franklin D. Roosevelt's first term, and the New Deal. Then, the 1940s will be examined through the lens of World War II and its impact on American unity; therefore, *Stormy Weather* (1943), a musical, will be representing this decade. Subsequently, *The Defiant Ones* (1958) will introduce the 1950s and the civil rights movement; thus, black historical moments and the shift in representation of black Americans in cinema will be mentioned. Finally, *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner* (1967) will demonstrate the relevance of representation regarding interracial marriage and the change in the civil rights movement, which will lead to a general conclusion about the importance of film and Hollywood in the sociopolitical field.

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Introduction

This paper will examine the issue of race in the United States from the 1910s to the 1960s through six films. Racial issues are still a topic of social relevance in the United States and the world, especially after last year's civil rights marches motivated by the death of George Floyd. The Black Lives Matter movement has given birth to what some would call the second civil rights movement and has started a conversation about race and discrimination. Moreover, in the last years, the portrayal of African Americans and other minorities in media has become a topic of conversation, and there have been calls for more diversity in the entertainment industry. However, to achieve this, and before moving forward, one has to understand the history of black representation in media and the history of civil rights in the United States. As a result, the analysis of the historical context behind the civil rights movement and the evolution of black representation in the film industry is fundamental to comprehend today's movement.

The goal is to analyze black representation and African Americans' civil rights in media, from the 1910s to the 1960s. Furthermore, the objective is to see how history and historical events can impact the film industry and how certain movies can also influence politics and change history. The six motion pictures are used in the paper as a way to show the importance of film and demonstrate the not only cultural and historical influence of filmography but also the fact that they can encapsulate the politics, trends, events, and ideas of a decade or period, almost as historical sources and part of a historical archive. Especially with regard to racial discrimination and civil rights, film, whether it is to endorse discriminatory behaviors or to combat segregation, has played an essential role in African American history, and showcasing this is also the aim of the paper.

Six films have been chosen to attain the paper's goal: *The Birth of a Nation* (1915), *Within Our Gates* (1920), *Gone with the Wind* (1939), *Stormy Weather* (1943), *The Defiant Ones* (1958), and *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner* (1967). Each movie represents one decade, from the 1910s to the 1960s; they will be presented in chronological order. The paper will start with a contextualization, which will touch on the history of civil rights and the African American community in the United States. Then, each film will be analyzed from a social and historical point of view, followed by a historical contextualization and analysis. Lastly, the paper will finish with a conclusion that will take into account all the facts acquired in the previous chapters.

Contextualization: from the Slave Trade to Theodore Roosevelt

From the founding of the United States of America in 1776 to the passage of the Thirteenth Amendment in 1865, slavery was a legal and common practice carried out by Europeans that wanted to profit from the production of crops. When it comes to African Americans, the United States has always struggled with the idea of freedom. The Declaration of Independence was the first clear example. The claim “all men are created equal” was included in this document, despite slavery being legal. The American Constitution also shows this dichotomy. It has always been considered a symbol of liberty and unity; however, the Constitution and the famous Three-Fifths Clause¹ gave slaveowners and Southern states disproportionate political power at the time. The so-called Age of “Slave Power” lasted until the Civil War (1861-1865).²

Even though the slave trade was mostly located in the South, the North also benefited from it. When discrepancies regarding slavery and local sovereignty came to the forefront, the friction between the North and the South became apparent. Peace came to a halt when eleven Southern states left the Union after Republican Abraham Lincoln’s presidential win.³ Quickly after Lincoln’s win, the Civil War started on April 12, 1861, and in the end, the Union won the war on April 9, 1865. Although the war resulted in tragedy, it also led to a national political change. After the war, Congress ratified and signed the three Reconstruction Amendments⁴—the Thirteenth Amendment, the Fourteenth Amendment, and the Fifteenth Amendment—and the Civil Rights Act of 1866⁵ that guaranteed certain civil rights to African Americans.

The war destroyed the South; thus, the Reconstruction Era (1865-1877) commenced with a government-controlled recovery program. This era was supposed to help the South settle back in the country. The government introduced Republican values to the South; consequently, the Freedmen’s Bureau was created to help new freedmen settle into a life

¹ The Three-Fifths Clause stated that every slave would be counted as three-fifths of a person for taxation and representation purposes in the House of Representatives.

² Masaki Kawashima: *American History, Race and the Struggle for Equality*, London, Palgrave Macmillan, 2017, p. 42.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 48.

⁴ The Thirteenth Amendment officially abolished slavery, the Fourteenth Amendment granted citizenship to everyone born or naturalized in the United States (including slaves), and the Fifteenth Amendment gave African American men the right to vote. The Reconstruction Amendments are relevant because they were essential when the civil rights movement began.

⁵ The Civil Rights Act of 1866 declared that everyone born in the United States was a citizen and had certain inalienable rights.

of freedom.⁶ Even though the Civil War liberated African Americans from slavery, segregationists did not give up and created the Jim Crow system in the 1890s. The system enforced segregated public spheres based on race and, for example, legalized the use of literacy tests and the Grandfather Clause⁷ to prevent all blacks from voting.⁸ The objective was to “deeply engrave African American inferiority by legalizing segregation.”⁹

Still, many white Southerners thought that the Jim Crow laws were not enough to suppress the freedom that African Americans had achieved after the war. They saw black suffrage as a threat, and to fight against it, they resorted to violence and created the Ku Klux Klan (KKK) in 1866. The Klan first resorted to intimidation; they did this to “frighten Negroes into compliance and especially into staying away from the polls.”¹⁰ But when the strategy became unsuccessful, they resorted to open violence: “Negroes, carpetbaggers and scalawags were shot, beaten, hanged, burned or driven out.”¹¹ By this time, Congress was already working to respond to the Klan’s violence. It first signed the Force Acts of 1870 and 1871, but then it took more severe measures and signed the Ku Klux Klan Act of 1871, which outlawed the organization.¹² Other white supremacist groups like the Knights of the White Camellia also found support in the mid-1860s. The Knights of the White Camellia also saw black suffrage as a threat and used violent tactics to cause terror among the black population.¹³ Unlike the KKK, the Knights of the White Camellia only operated in Louisiana. Its prominence was short-lived as the organization began to decline in 1868, a year after its founding. Yet, white supremacist ideas lived on and were embraced by more aggressive paramilitary organizations, such as the White League, in the mid-1870s.¹⁴

The United States used its power only to suppress its citizens during this time, but they also used it to colonize territories during the Spanish-American War (1898). In fact, the United States started to see itself as a colonializing country: “What had begun as a

⁶ Maldwyn A. Jones: *The Limits of Liberty: American History, 1607-1992*, New York, Oxford University Press, 1998, p. 237.

⁷ The Grandfather Clause granted people who had been entitled to vote before the abolition of slavery, as well as their sons and grandsons, the right to avoid literacy and property tests.

⁸ Kawashima: *American History*, p. 66.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 69.

¹⁰ Jones: *The Limits*, p. 256.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 257.

¹³ James K. Hogue: *Uncivil War: Five New Orleans Street Battles and the Rise and Fall of Radical Reconstruction*, Baton Rouge, Louisiana University Press, 2006, p. 66.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 116.

war to liberate Cuba became one to acquire colonies.”¹⁵ The war made the United States a great power internationally because when victory was finally proclaimed on December 10, 1898, with the Treaty of Paris, the Philippines, Puerto Rico, and the Pacific island of Guam were recognized as United States territories.¹⁶

Nonetheless, the Spanish-American War did not only provide the United States with colonies, but it also gave the country a *new war hero*: Theodore Roosevelt. After fighting as a volunteer in Cuba, the doors to the political arena opened, and in a matter of months, he was elected governor of New York. Then, he rose through the ranks expeditiously; in 1900, he was already vice president of the United States, and after the assassination of McKinley in 1901, he became president.¹⁷ Although he was a progressive that “redefined the presidential office,”¹⁸ he did not change African Americans’ position in society. The Progressive Era (1897-1920) dominated well into the 1910s, with other presidents following Roosevelt’s lead.

¹⁵Jones: *The Limits*, p. 402.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Ibid., p. 377.

¹⁸ Ibid.

The 1910s: *The Birth of a Nation* (1915), White Supremacy and The African American Struggle in the World War I Era

The Birth of a Nation (1915) perfectly illustrates how America viewed the Civil War, African Americans, and segregation. The film presented white citizens' contemporary perspective regarding the Civil War, supported by then-President Woodrow Wilson. The film was a setback for the black community; it idolized and romanticized the rise of the KKK and white supremacy, slavery, discrimination, and lynching. In fact, it mixed white hegemony with classic American ideals, like liberty and unity: "Liberty and union, one and inseparable, now and forever!"¹⁹

The motion picture saw the Civil War from the white Southerners' lens, and its portrayal was not objective. Southern slaveowners were seen in the film as victims that wanted to preserve their rights, fighting justly against the radical Northerners that pushed for the liberation of black slaves. It played on the white Southern idea that blacks were inferior to whites, needing to be controlled. The antebellum ideals were portrayed utilizing a racist narrative that negatively depicted blacks and romanticized slavery. The movie demonized blacks: African Americans were represented as vindictive, lazy, violent, and drunks—the film showed the theme of Prohibition by presenting alcohol as a corruptive substance that helped the Northern cause. Even the Freedman's Bureau was depicted as an evil organization that used valuable resources to encourage blacks to vote: "The Freedman's Bureau. The negroes getting free supplies. The charity of a generous North misused to delude the ignorant."²⁰ However, mixed-race people were represented even worse. Mixed individuals, portrayed by white actors in blackface, were seen as corrupted and deceiving beings. They had the same qualities as blacks; yet, they could gain much greater power because of their mixed origin.

Nonetheless, the motion picture also encouraged whites to use violent force against blacks, with the clear example of the KKK: "The Ku Klux Klan, the organization that saved the South from the anarchy of black rule."²¹ The movie also glorified the early Klan, inspiring its comeback in 1915. This time "the Klan did not direct its hostility only against blacks, it directed it as well against other minorities who, along with drink,

¹⁹ David W. Griffith: *The Birth of a Nation* (USA, David W. Griffith Corporation, Video).

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Ibid.

dancing, and short skirts, were supposedly undermining American values.”²² However, it only became popular in the 1920s.

Meanwhile, the African American community struggled through the 1910s. Jim Crow laws were still enforced; therefore, blacks had to deal with segregation and discrimination. Violence against African Americans, sometimes motivated by films like *The Birth of a Nation*, was still practiced regularly by organizations like the KKK, especially in the form of lynchings. As showed in the film, this practice was commonly defended as a “defense of white womanhood against Negro sexual assault.”²³ During the 1910s, housing segregation became apparent due to the first wave of the Great Migration (1910-1940). However, the decade also brought progress to the black community. In 1909, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) was founded to fight against racial discrimination and segregation. The association would be one of the most relevant campaigners against *The Birth of a Nation*, even asking for its censorship. With time, the NAACP would change the civil rights movement and make black advancement a reality.

Nevertheless, only one individual could perfectly personify the 1910s: Woodrow Wilson. From 1913 to 1921, he marked the United States with his policies and his handling of World War I (1914-1918). He was known as the first Southern president since the American Civil War. His Southern roots defined his political views, especially regarding racial relations: “During his administration Negroes were systematically segregated from whites in government departments; black officeholders in the South were discharged or downgraded. Thus for the first time, the Southern caste system was openly endorsed by the federal government.”²⁴ He publicly endorsed *The Birth of a Nation*; he even had a screening of the film at the White House.²⁵ He supported the KKK and white supremacy, as seen by the following personal quote from the movie (originally from his book, *A History of the American People*): “The white men were roused by a mere instinct of self-preservation until at last there had sprung into existence a great Ku Klux Klan, a veritable empire of the South, to protect the Southern country.”²⁶ However, he might be more known for his leadership during World War I. During most of the war, the United

²² Jones: *The Limits*, p. 440.

²³ Ibid., p. 269.

²⁴ Ibid., p. 388.

²⁵ Alice Mikal Craven: *Visible and Invisible Whiteness, American White Supremacy through the Cinematic Lens*, Palgrave Macmillan, 2018, p. 46.

²⁶ Griffith: *The Birth*.

States emphasized its neutrality in hopes that it would benefit trade. Unfortunately, after three years and various German provocations, Wilson had to intervene. On April 2, 1917, he asked Congress to declare war on Germany.²⁷ At the end of the war, the United States confirmed its international diplomatic power with its involvement in the Paris Peace Conference (1919-1920) and Wilson's contribution to the founding of the League of Nations.

Technical Sheet

Title: *The Birth of a Nation*. Country: United States. Year: 1915. Running time: 195 minutes. Sound Mix: Silent. Color: Black and White. Production: David W. Griffith Corporation. Director: D.W. Griffith. Screenwriters: D.W. Griffith, Frank E. Woods. Music: Joseph Carl Breil. Cinematography: Billy Bitzer. Starring: Lillian Gish, Mae Marsh, Henry B. Walthall, Miriam Cooper, Mary Alden, Ralph Lewis, George Siegmann, Walter Long, Robert Harron, Wallace Reid, Joseph Henabery, Elmer Clifton.

²⁷ Jones: *The Limits*, p. 422.

The 1920s: *Within Our Gates* (1920), The Roaring Twenties and Black Progress

With the 1920s came the Roaring Twenties and a decade of change for the film industry. This time, it was about portraying a positive image of African Americans, a portrayal more in tune with reality and progress; it was the start of the race films.²⁸ These films were a triumph for the black community because they aimed to discredit the racism shown in the white-funded movies, like *The Birth of a Nation*. One of the main rebuttals to the 1915 film was the motion picture directed by Oscar Micheaux, *Within Our Gates* (1920)—a film centered on a young teacher determined to start a black school for poor children in the rural South.

The movie showed the reality of being black in the South during the Jim Crow Era; it portrays white supremacy and especially lynching in an accurate manner. In fact, “the lynching scene was so graphically well done that it almost caused it to be censored.”²⁹ The film centers around the life of middle-class blacks, portraying it as something aspirational for rural blacks to follow: “He felt that the black community should be given something to aspire toward instead of accepting the life of perpetual poverty and inadequate living conditions.”³⁰ He made most of his films during the first wave of the Great Migration when around 1.6 million blacks moved to the North, attracted by the demand for labor in the urban North after World War I and upward mobility.³¹ Therefore, the movie encouraged blacks from the rural South to move to the industrial North, where there was a greater possibility for improvement. Cinema has always mirrored history well; it reflects the mood of each decade, and in the 1920s, Oscar Micheaux painted a perfect picture of the era.

However, the motion picture also showcased some of the issues present in race films, such as colorism. Like many other black producers, Micheaux tried to convey the “white is right” theme: “Many of the black produced films of that day copied the themes of the white film industry and thus fell prey to the myth that if you can get close enough in appearance to look white, you will be accepted without prejudice or discrimination.”³²

²⁸ These were films that mainly starred African Americans, were produced by black producers, and were showcased in black cinemas; hence, creating a black film industry.

²⁹ Herb Boyd: “Oscar Michaux, pioneering Black filmmaker,” *New York Amsterdam News* 104, 44, Nov. 7-Nov. 13 2013, p. 32.

³⁰ M.D. Jefferson and S. Roland: “The Black Experience and the Film Industry,” *Journal of the National Medical Association* 68, 2, 1976, p. 139.

³¹ Kawashima: *American History*, pp. 88-89.

³² Jefferson and Roland: “The Black Experience,” p. 139.

Nevertheless, Oscar Micheaux was a visionary and out of all the black-produced films of that era, his were by far the best.³³ He was not only technically superior but “his characters were free of the ridicule derived from blackface minstrelsy, sheet music artwork and offensive marketing gimmicks that had long been popular.”³⁴ Although brilliant, Oscar Micheaux struggled financially; he died in 1951, unknown and forgotten. The same happened with the black films and film renaissance; the cultural boom only hid reality. No matter how much money or how educated African Americans were, they were always considered second-class citizens.

Nonetheless, the 1920s in the United States are synonymous with advancement: “The country entered an era of unparalleled prosperity.”³⁵ Improvements came with the growth of businesses, wealth, and culture, especially in the North due to the growth of newer industries.³⁶ After seeing job opportunities in the North that did not exist in the South due to the fall of farm prices after World War I, black Southerners decided to migrate to industrial areas in the hopes of a better future.³⁷ Although they still met severe discrimination, they found more rights: Northern states did not have local laws that disfranchised the black vote; therefore, when a significant number of African Americans moved to the North, they became eligible voters.³⁸ They also found a black social and cultural awakening represented by the Harlem Renaissance and the New Negro movement. During the 1920s, many blacks settled in New York City, especially in Harlem, where black talent prospered during the era known as the Harlem Renaissance. Moreover, Harlem saw the rise of the New Negro movement, which encouraged education and believed that in order to find true freedom, American blacks had to go back to Africa.

Yet, the black community still struggled. On the one hand, the influx of migration to the North resulted in housing segregation. On the other hand, the community still had to deal with discrimination and violence. One of the most horrific race-related violent events that took place was the 1921 Tulsa race massacre; a white mob in Tulsa, Oklahoma, terrorized black residents because of a supposed assault committed by a black

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Eric Veillette: “Director Oscar Micheaux blazed trails through a dangerous world,” *Toronto Star*, 1-II-2014, p. E.1.

³⁵ Jones: *The Limits*, p. 444.

³⁶ Ibid., p. 445.

³⁷ Ibid., p. 447.

³⁸ Kawashima: *American History*, p. 75.

man against a white woman.³⁹ The KKK also “expanded phenomenally”⁴⁰ during the 1920s, especially in urban areas. With this second KKK came a new element: women. Even though women had cooperated in the movement before, the role women took during this time became greater and, in 1923, the Women of the Ku Klux Klan (WKKK) was created.⁴¹ The KKK and the WKKK became a political movement. They transformed “fears and resentments into political action,”⁴² and women were able to share the message through their support of social work and social welfare.⁴³

Despite all the violence against African Americans, the country and its leaders found other political priorities. With prosperity came a change of gears; the United States moved from the Wilsonian 1910s to the Republican-led 1920s. The political change started early on with the ratification of the Nineteenth Amendment.⁴⁴ Yet, the Republican sphere still endorsed racialism: Congress ratified the Immigration Act of 1924, which included immigration quotas to each country according to its contribution to the existing American population and prohibited immigration from most Asian countries.⁴⁵ Furthermore, Prohibition during this era led to a movement that championed censorship and demanded high moral standards from its citizens. “Anything authorities deemed obscene or immoral was liable to seizure or suppression,”⁴⁶ even in film (the motion-picture industry established its own censorship board in 1922).⁴⁷

Technical Sheet

Title: *Within Our Gates*. Country: United States. Year: 1920. Duration time: 79 minutes. Sound Mix: Silent. Color: Black and White. Production: Micheaux Book & Film Company. Director: Oscar Micheaux. Screenwriter: Oscar Micheaux. Music: Philip Carli. Cinematography: Oscar Micheaux. Starring: Evelyn Preer, Flo Clements, James D. Ruffin, Jack Chenault, William Smith, Charles D. Lucas, Bernice Ladd, William Starks.

³⁹ Ibid., p. 77.

⁴⁰ Jones: *The Limits*, p. 440.

⁴¹ Kathleen M. Blee: *Women of the Klan – Racism and Gender in the 1920s*, London, University of California Press, 2009, p. 27.

⁴² Ibid., p. 155.

⁴³ Ibid., p. 40.

⁴⁴ The Nineteenth Amendment guaranteed American women the right to vote.

⁴⁵ Jones: *The Limits*, p. 439.

⁴⁶ Ibid., p. 443.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

The 1930s: *Gone with the Wind* (1939), The Great Depression and the New Deal

After more than twenty years from *The Birth of a Nation*, Hollywood decided to revisit the antebellum South with *Gone with the Wind* (1939)—a movie based on the 1936 novel written by Margaret Mitchell. However, African Americans would be depicted differently this time, and the movie’s political alliance would not be as implicit, which was a sign of the times.

The 1939 classic has always been compared to *The Birth of a Nation*—mostly because both are set in the South during the Civil War and Reconstruction Era. Nonetheless, the differences are clear: *The Birth of a Nation* and *Gone with the Wind* are racist movies; yet, the connotations and degrees of bigotry shown are not comparable. While *The Birth of a Nation* was openly racist, the director and producers of *Gone with the Wind* tried to be cautious in their portrayal of the black community. The motion picture aimed to be apolitical; David O. Selznick (the film’s producer) did not want to produce an anti-Negro film.⁴⁸ Moreover, he wished to transform the book about Southern despair and hope into an “American *Iliad* of Civil War and Reconstruction that neither slighted Northern victory nor taunted Southern defeat,”⁴⁹ therefore omitting certain historical truths. The erasure of historical facts was because Selznick did not want the movie to promote intolerance at the onset of a war grounded on fascism.⁵⁰

The motion picture used stereotypes to represent blacks and erased a chapter of black history in order to make the film more marketable.⁵¹ The motion picture maligned black women through the characters of Mammy (Hattie McDaniel) and Prissy (Butterfly McQueen). They were used by the white film industry to “solidify the image of black women as caricatures that lacked sexuality, were aggressive and at the appropriate time, hinted at insolence.”⁵² It made an effort not to offend the black community, even though it did not achieve this successfully; Selznick consulted the black cast on certain issues, and the n-word was not included in the script after journalists raised their concerns over its use.⁵³ However, it was mainly a public relations strategy to win the approval of the black community; he even invited a black journalist on a tour of the movie lot, which

⁴⁸ Thomas Cripps: *Making Movies Black: The Hollywood Message Movie from World War II to the Civil Rights Era*, New York, Oxford University Press, 2003, p. 3.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Ibid., p. 4.

⁵¹ Ibid., pp. 4-5.

⁵² Jefferson and Roland: “The Black Experience,” p. 140.

⁵³ Cripps: *Making Movies Black*, p. 21.

helped appease and lure black audiences.⁵⁴ The producer won the public relations game: Selznick avoided criticism from the black community; Southerners supported the movie; Northerners accepted the South tragedy as their own, and he made one of the greatest movies ever.⁵⁵

Although *Gone with the Wind* is one of the most successful and significant pictures of film history, presenting a world of opulence and beauty, this era showed a completely different reality. If the 1930s had to be defined by a singular event, that would be the Great Depression (1929-1939). The effects of the Great Depression were catastrophic for black Americans everywhere.⁵⁶ While in the South African Americans depended on cotton, in the North, blacks were the last to be hired and the first to be fired, making unemployment among blacks twice that among whites.⁵⁷ However, when Franklin D. Roosevelt became president in 1933, several programs known as the New Deal affecting unemployment relief, industry, agriculture, labor, transport, banking, and currency helped the economy recover.⁵⁸ Blacks derived a big deal of benefits from the New Deal; about a third of all federal housing went to blacks, and by 1939, more than a million African Americans had Works Progress Administration (WPA) jobs.⁵⁹ Yet, some of its policies and programs were discriminatory, thus perpetuating Jim Crow laws and segregation. For example, early federal relief funding threatened Southern employers, particularly landlords with black tenants, and the Fair Labor Standards Act facilitated the replacement of black workers by whites through its minimum wage provisions.⁶⁰

Nevertheless, the black community saw the New Deal as an advancement; it even shifted ethnic voting trends. After receiving benefits from the New Deal programs led by Democrats, blacks voted for them en masse on the next election; in the 1936 elections, 71% of African Americans voted for Roosevelt.⁶¹ From then on, Americans of African descent became a loyal Democratic voting bloc, thereby breaking the historic bond between black voters and Abraham Lincoln's party. Yet, President Franklin D. Roosevelt

⁵⁴ Ibid., p. 20.

⁵⁵ Ibid., p. 19.

⁵⁶ Jones: *The Limits*, p. 467.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ Ibid., p. 458.

⁵⁹ Ibid., p. 468.

⁶⁰ Gavin Wright: "The New Deal and the Modernization of the South [Forthcoming in Federal History]," *Working Paper*, Aug. 2009, pp. 16-19.

⁶¹ Kawashima: *American History*, p. 90.

ignored demands for civil rights and refused to support a national antilynching bill.⁶² Still, his wife, Eleanor Roosevelt, made amends for him by working against racial discrimination, and in the early 1940s, with the beginning of World War II (1939-1945), he would start to change his mind on this topic.

Technical Sheet

Title: *Gone with the Wind*. Country: United States. Year: 1939. Duration time: 238 minutes. Sound Mix: Mono. Color: Technicolor. Production: Selznick International Pictures. Director: Victor Fleming. Screenwriter: Sidney Howard. Music: Max Steiner. Cinematography: Ernest Haller. Starring: Clark Gable, Vivien Leigh, Leslie Howard, Olivia de Havilland, Hattie McDaniel, Margaret Mitchell, Butterfly McQueen, Ann Rutherford, Thomas Mitchell, George Reeves, Evelyn Keyes, Alicia Rhett, Barbara O'Neil, Oscar Polk.

⁶² Jones: *The Limits*, p. 467.

The 1940s: *Stormy Weather* (1943), Race in Hollywood and World War II

The 1940s were a decade full of progress and change motivated by one single event: World War II. The United States needed to implant a sense of unity in every American to fight against external forces. So, if the United States wanted African Americans to contribute to the cause, their image had to be restored. And what better way to do this than through movies? Hollywood, the NAACP, and the Office of War Information⁶³ (OWI) worked to entertain and unify the nation with musicals that showcased minorities' talent and national contributions, like *Stormy Weather* (1943)—a musical based on Bill Robinson's life tells the story of a dancer after World War I.

The need to entertain the country and the desire to allure the African American community into the war efforts called for a more vivid black presence on the screen and a better metaphor for race relations.⁶⁴ It was time to leave the Southern stereotypes aside and portray “the Negro as a normal member of society.”⁶⁵ The demand for entertainment asked for musicals in Hollywood; this genre would enable black entertainers to show their talents, and, at the same time, the United States government and the OWI could use these movies as propaganda for their political purposes. *Stormy Weather* was “culturally black in its roots, wearing its black patriotism on its sleeve, laded with cross-over black performers.”⁶⁶ The motion picture highlighted the essential role of African Americans during World War I and the “magnificent contribution of the colored race”⁶⁷ to the entertainment industry.

Yet, the film presented several issues. Firstly, it ran the risk of portraying black America as “a happy place with happy problems,”⁶⁸ thus denying the existence of suffering. Secondly, apart from the original music, every other aspect left a lot to be desired; the actors' range was limited, the chemistry between the two romantic leads was awkward, and the story was so devoid of heavies that it lacked dramatic conflict.⁶⁹ The film lost its propagandistic and political goal, but not for long. The movie's release coincided with the 1943 Detroit race riots; the decision to run the film earned praise from black activists that pointed to *Stormy Weather* as a provider of “affirmative prevention”

⁶³ The Office of War Information connected through different forms of media the battlefield and civilians.

⁶⁴ Cripps: *Making Movies Black*, p.80.

⁶⁵ Ibid., p. 53.

⁶⁶ Ibid., p. 83.

⁶⁷ Andrew L. Stone: *Stormy Weather* (USA, Twentieth Century Fox, Video).

⁶⁸ Cripps: *Making Movies Black*, p. 85.

⁶⁹ Ibid.

that could help the country's communities get along.⁷⁰ So, to a certain extent, this tragic circumstance offered the motion picture with the political and propagandistic push that was missing.

The 1940s in the United States were defined by one historical event: World War II. For the United States, the troubles started in the Pacific. Japan's desire to dominate South-East Asia worried the United States, and to avoid its expansion, Roosevelt froze all Japanese assets in the United States and banned all oil exports to the country.⁷¹ If the Asian country wanted to continue its expansion, it only had one option: war. Following numerous diplomatic attempts, Japan finally accepted its fate and decided to attack Pearl Harbor, Hawaii, on December 7, 1941. After declaring war on Japan, Italy, and Germany, the United States became a necessary international force in the war. Its involvement in the conflict had some significant national ramifications.

For African Americans, World War II was a historical episode that defined their future. Wanting to portray unity through policy, Roosevelt signed Executive Order 8802,⁷² which contributed to the end of a segregated military. However, after coming back from war, a lot of young African Americans realized the need for change and freedom. The unity promised by the government disappeared for the black community. The return of white soldiers to the United States and the introduction of automation reduced the demand for black laborers, and even if they found jobs, wage cuts and layoffs were frequently imposed.⁷³ The start of the second wave of the Great Migration (1940-1970) also complicated their lives, especially with regard to housing. The ratio of African Americans living in urban areas rose to 80%, and therefore, black ghettos were formed everywhere.⁷⁴ It seems that the urbanization of the black community was forced; it was part of a plan to avoid the integration of African Americans during the white suburban

⁷⁰ Ibid.

⁷¹ Jones: *The Limits*, p. 497.

⁷² Also known as the Fair Employment Act of 1941, it banned discriminatory employment practices in defense industries and federal agencies. It also established the Fair Employment Practice Committee (FEPC).

⁷³ Kawashima: *American History*, p. 88.

⁷⁴ Ibid., p. 89.

boom. To join their white counterparts, black Americans would have to face housing segregation and redlining⁷⁵ from the Federal Housing Administration (FHA) and banks.⁷⁶

The political consequences of World War II were significant. This decade established the legacy of Franklin D. Roosevelt as one of the most important and renowned presidents in recent American history. His role became crucial during the war. The World War II victory was one of his last achievements before his sudden death on April 12, 1945, leaving Harry S. Truman as the new inexperienced president. By contrast, he ended his first term without major complications and successfully won the election of 1948 against Republican Dwight D. Eisenhower. Notwithstanding being an unexpected president, his policies and opinions regarding topics like civil rights were very forthright. He always supported African Americans' fight: Truman submitted antilynching and anti-segregation legislation to Congress in 1948, and that same year, he signed Executive Order 9981, which ended segregation in the armed forces.⁷⁷

Technical Sheet

Title: *Stormy Weather*. Country: United States. Year: 1943. Running time: 78 minutes. Sound Mix: Mono. Color: Black and White. Production: Twentieth Century Fox. Director: Andrew L. Stone. Screenwriters: Frederick J. Jackson, Ted Koehler. Music: Cyril J. Mockridge. Cinematography: Leon Shamroy, Lee Garmes. Starring: Lena Horne, Bill Robinson, Fats Waller, Cab Calloway, Katherine Dunham, The Nicholas Brothers, Ada Brown, Dooley Wilson.

⁷⁵ Redlining was a practice used by the FHA in 1944 when they allowed the use of "redlining maps," which would categorize black neighborhoods as dangerous. Its residents would not qualify for federally assisted housing loans and in a bank would receive above-market interest rates, making it more difficult to leave the area.

⁷⁶ Ibid., p. 132.

⁷⁷ Ibid., pp. 526-527.

The 1950s: *The Defiant Ones* (1958) and the Start of the Civil Rights Movement

After the war era came the decade of the postwar booms and social justice. While the country grew economically, the minds of the American people grew more socially aware. For the black community, this was the start of the civil rights movement and of a national social awakening, represented by message movies like *The Defiant Ones* (1958)—a film about two escaped convicts, one black and one white, who are chained together and that must work together to survive.

Given that it was a race-based message movie, *The Defiant Ones* was very conscious of the times. During the Postwar Era (1945-1960), message movies started to become popular. It began with anti-Semitic movies; then, after realizing how lucrative this genre could be and how audiences displayed “a significantly more favorable attitude towards Jews,”⁷⁸ executives and black advocates decided to enter the message movie cycle. Filmmakers, like Stanley Kramer, exploited white guilt and acknowledged that problems between the black and white social order existed to lead a social and political agenda.⁷⁹ The message was that blacks and whites could live together if they only tried,⁸⁰ and to do so, the industry needed a very specific representation of the black man. The “lone Negro,” a righteous character, was introduced to a larger white group that would have to face their racial prejudices.⁸¹ This image would also be portrayed in real life—for example, in *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka*, Linda Brown was the only black person able to attend a white elementary. Consequently, motion pictures were used as a medium for anticipating change.

The Defiant Ones was a great message movie; it showed the two Americas, their differences, and how the view of white America could change from racism to brotherhood. It also showed the “lone Negro” image through Sidney Poitier’s character. Nevertheless, it differs from some of the message movies of the era. While in many message movies like in *Home of the Brave* (1949), equal completely abled black men to disabled white men, in *The Defiant Ones*, the only difference in status between Sidney Poitier and Tony Curtis is their skin color. Still, as many message movies, the motion picture fails to deliver its message of hope. In the end, one leaves with the same question

⁷⁸ Cripps: *Making Movies Black*, p. 218.

⁷⁹ Jefferson and Roland: “The Black Experience,” p. 142.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 142.

⁸¹ Cripps: *Making Movies Black*, p. 220.

Gavin Lambert raised: “Do we really have to chain a white man and a Negro together, then set bloodhounds after them, before they reach any understanding?”⁸² The motion picture misses the point of integration; it is not about forcing one community to accept the other; the two races must be eager to join forces in this effort.

During the 1950s, in fact, white Americans began to join the black cause thanks to the start of the civil rights movement. However, this would not come to be until 1955. Before that, the United States had to deal with other affairs. In 1952, Republican candidate Dwight D. Eisenhower won the presidency and became the first conservative to win the election since 1928. In his first term, he faced some issues in foreign affairs: Eisenhower dealt with the Cold War (1947-1991), the threat of Communism, and the Vietnam War (1955-1975). Moreover, as he had promised during his campaign, he had to put an end to the Korean War (1951-1953). Nevertheless, this did not guarantee national stability. Civil rights proved to be the most irksome problem during his presidency. The movement is said to have started in 1955, with the year-long Montgomery bus boycott⁸³—led by Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and his ideal of Gandhian civil disobedience. It ended successfully when the Supreme Court declared segregation in buses unconstitutional in 1956. Yet, some may say the civil rights movement really started a year earlier with the Supreme Court’s decision in *Brown v. Board of Education*, which reversed the 1896 decision in *Plessy v. Ferguson*.⁸⁴ In the ruling, Chief Justice Warren stated that segregation in public schools was unconstitutional since “separate educational facilities are inherently inferior.”⁸⁵ Furthermore, in 1955 the Supreme Court ruled that desegregation in schools was to begin “with all deliberate speed.”⁸⁶

Both black and white Americans started demanding the end of segregation and the national improvement of the African-Americans’ situation. Nonetheless, these demands were not always met with political support. For example, regarding black voting, the NAACP and black leaders condemned Southern voter suppression for years. Finally, they achieved their goal in 1957 when Congress passed the first Civil Rights Act since the

⁸² Gavin Lambert: “Review of *The Defiant Ones*, directed by Stanley Kramer,” *Film Quarterly* 12, 1, autumn 1958, p. 41.

⁸³ The Montgomery bus boycott was motivated by the arrest of activist Rosa Parks and her refusal to give up her seat.

⁸⁴ The case ruled that segregation did not violate the Fourteenth Amendment, it legalized segregation on the theory of “separate but equal.”

⁸⁵ Jones: *The Limits*, p. 535.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 536.

Reconstruction. Although the Act was not effective in the Deep South, it aimed to establish a Civil Rights Commission to investigate denials of voting suppression.⁸⁷ Regardless of the integration in education, public transport, and even voting, Americans of African descent still struggled with hatred and violence, exemplified by the murder of Emmet Till, a 14-year-old who was killed because he allegedly flirted with a white woman.⁸⁸ The photo of his corpse was made public and shocked the American public. Like in *The Defiant Ones*, white Americans were forced to discover their prejudices, especially after the murderers of the child were declared innocent. Finally, this led to white allyship.

Technical Sheet

Title: *The Defiant Ones*. Country: United States. Year: 1958. Running Time: 96 minutes. Sound Mix: Mono. Color: Black and White. Production: Curtleigh Productions and Stanley Kramer Productions. Director: Stanley Kramer. Screenwriters: Nedrick Young and Harold Jacob Smith. Music: Ernest Gold. Cinematography: Sam Leavitt. Starring: Tony Curtis, Sidney Poitier, Theodore Bikel, Charles McGraw, Lon Chaney Jr., King Donovan, Claude Akins, Lawrence Dobkin, Whit Bissell, Kevin Coughlin.

⁸⁷ Ibid.

⁸⁸ Kawashima: *American History*, p. 78.

The 1960s: *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner* (1967), Interracial Relations and the Civil Rights Era

The 1960s changed the fabric of American identity. The country made several breakthroughs in the civil rights fight, one of them being in the institution of marriage, mentioned in *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner* (1967)—a comedy-drama about a black man, Dr. John Prentice (Sidney Poitier), and a white woman, Joanna Drayton (Katharine Houghton), who get engaged and seek her father's approval, Matt Drayton (Spencer Tracy). Yet, the 60s also brought to the surface the contrast between black and white Americans, as shown in the film.

In the 1960s, message movies started to change as white Americans realized that the portrayal of the black experience in these movies was neither accurate nor productive. Still, in comparison with the message movies of the 1950s, *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner* showed some improvements in the depiction of African Americans. Although the director used the “lone Negro” image, the movie's portrayal of black Americans was more diverse, from Tillie (Isabel Sanford), the uneducated housekeeper, to Dr. Prentice himself, an intelligent and sensitive black man. Nevertheless, the motion picture could be considered an inaccurate representation of integration, which is patronizing and demonstrates classism and misogynistic tendencies.

On its release, activists put down the motion picture because it only presented integration from a white, rich, and male lens. By denying black and lower-class characters a vote in the final decision, the film implied that integration could only be negotiated by the white upper class. Consequently, the movie supported white hegemony and suggested that class could control racial categories.⁸⁹ Martin Luther King Jr. and the religious middle-class personified this idea of integration.⁹⁰ Yet, in the late 1960s, Martin Luther King Jr. was already dead; this opened the door for Black Power movements, which saw integration as hopelessly directed by the white elite, and they aimed to eschew it.⁹¹ The movie seems to demonstrate a lack of awareness regarding class and gender. In the motion picture, Sidney Poitier's character asks her fiancé's father's permission to marry her; he is given absolute power over her daughter's sexuality and future. Moreover, the

⁸⁹ Anne Gray Perrin: “*Guess Who's Coming to Dinner*: The Web of Racial, Class, and Gender Constructions in late 1960s America,” *The Journal of Popular Culture* 45, 4, 2012, p. 850.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 849.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 857.

simplification of interracial marriage exposed the classist perspective. The motion picture does not offer insight into “the social challenges an interracial couple faced in the late 1960s”⁹² and, by just sending them off to Europe, the film ignores the reality interracial marriages faced in America.

Flaws aside, politically speaking, the movie could not have come at a better time. The motion picture was released six months after the Supreme Court declared miscegenation laws⁹³ unconstitutional, thanks to *Loving v. Virginia*.⁹⁴ Miscegenation laws could no longer be enforced in any state: “Boundaries of race and place lost their salience under the law and from this point forward had no more bearing on interracial couples who wished to marry than they did on same-race couples.”⁹⁵

During the 1960s, while having Martin Luther King Jr. as one of its most relevant representatives, black American theory evolved expeditiously. Although he became known in the 1950s, his notoriety grew in 1963 after the famous “I Have a Dream” speech. It motivated then-President John F. Kennedy to invite Martin Luther King Jr. to the White House, as he also was interested in creating an ideal American society.⁹⁶ Unfortunately, John F. Kennedy would never see this America—he was assassinated on November 22, 1963. His successor, Lyndon B. Johnson, carrying on with Kennedy’s legacy, enacted the Civil Rights Act of 1964.⁹⁷ A year later, pushed by the violence witnessed in the Selma-Montgomery marches,⁹⁸ President Johnson stood for black suffrage and signed the Voting Rights Act of 1965.⁹⁹

Notwithstanding the success of the first half of the decade, the second half would bring the popularization of new African American sociopolitical theories, and it would also show the discord between races and movements. Just two weeks before the Selma-Montgomery Marches, on February 24, 1965, one of the most influential black figures of

⁹² Ibid., p. 851.

⁹³ Laws that prohibited and criminalized marriages between members of different races.

⁹⁴ It is a case that involved Mildred Loving, a black woman, and her white husband, Richard Loving. In 1958, they were sentenced to a year in prison for violating Virginia’s Racial Integrity Act of 1921, which prohibited their union.

⁹⁵ Peter Wallenstein: “Law and the Boundaries of Place and Race in Interracial Marriage: Interstate Comity, Racial Identity, and Miscegenation Laws in North Carolina, South Carolina, and Virginia, 1860s-1960s,” *Akron Law Review* 32, 3, 1999.

⁹⁶ Kawashima: *American History*, pp. 100-101.

⁹⁷ The Act explicitly prohibits discrimination against any individual based on race, color, religion, sex, or national origin.

⁹⁸ A series of marches in support of black suffrage where hundreds of demonstrators were violently attacked by the state and local police.

⁹⁹ As its name suggests, it prohibited any discrimination in voting rights.

the decade, Malcolm X, was assassinated. In his early years as an activist, he became the leader of Black Separatism,¹⁰⁰ which had first been introduced in the United States through the Back-to-Africa and New Negro movements of the 1920s. Meanwhile, many black Americans had become critical of Martin Luther King Jr.'s methods and hence moved towards the militancy of black nationalist groups that promoted white and black division—this reality contrasts enormously with the depiction of black thinking in *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner*, where discord is suppressed. The last legislative attempt for integration was the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1968, Title VIII-IX, commonly known as the Fair Housing Act.¹⁰¹

The Civil Rights Act of 1968 symbolized the end of an era. The movement started to lose its exposure, and other sociopolitical campaigns became more well known. This new period also opened the door for a new president in 1969, Republican Richard Nixon. From then on, the United States had to face other issues, and although integration became part of American identity, race divisions did not cease to exist.

Technical Sheet

Title: *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner*. Country: United States. Year: 1967. Running Time: 108 minutes. Sound Mix: Mono. Color: Technicolor. Production: Columbia Pictures and Stanley Kramer Productions. Director: Stanley Kramer. Screenwriters: William Rose. Music: Frank De Vol. Cinematography: Sam Leavitt. Starring: Spencer Tracy, Sidney Poitier, Katharine Houghton, Katharine Hepburn, Cecil Kellaway, Beah Richards, Roy Glenn, Isabel Sanford, Virginia Christine, Alexandra Hay.

¹⁰⁰ The movement encouraged the independent economic and cultural development of African Americans.

¹⁰¹ After the death of Martin Luther King Jr. in 1968 and the riots that it infused, the Fair Housing Act was a landmark law that prohibited discrimination in housing, although there was no plan to enforce it.

Conclusion

Since its birth, the film industry has experienced a profound transformation. The medium of motion picture was essential in shaping African American representation and attaining civil rights. Cinema has proven to have an impact on social issues, history, and politics. Motion pictures have shown to be focused on more than entertainment; some motion pictures, including the films analyzed in this paper, have a sociopolitical agenda to promote. Furthermore, Hollywood has proven to be a great narrator and source of information regarding American history, representing and recording historical events and changes.

As aforementioned, the evolution of Hollywood cinema embodies the change of perspective with respect to African American representation. The films studied show how over time, black American culture and people became more mainstream. In fact, there is a big contrast between the first film, *The Birth of a Nation* (1915), and the last one, *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner* (1967). American cinema changed dramatically; it went from romanticizing slavery and violence against African Americans to representing black Americans as equal citizens and even portraying them romantically—as able to marry someone white. And although black representation was not perfect and sometimes relied on certain negative stereotypes, it improved, and the depiction of African Americans became more complex and nuanced. Therefore, cinema can be seen as a force of change in this matter, especially in the first half of the twentieth century, with directors like Oscar Micheaux, the 1940s musicals, and messages movies. Yet, in recent years, with the democratization of the entertainment industry, Hollywood films have regained this social force thanks to blockbusters like *Black Panther* and black directors like Steve McQueen and Spike Lee, who have centered their work around the black experience and African American history.

Cinema has also become a force in the political sphere; films now can determine how the general public remembers certain historical moments. Consequently, the viewpoint or perspective, the topic, and even the technique used in a film are influenced by contemporary sociopolitical and historical events. Nowadays, Hollywood is more political than ever, and it is almost required for everyone in the industry to have a political stance. Although this political trend seems to have grown in the last years, as mentioned in the paper, the trend began almost a century ago, during and after World War II.

In conclusion, progression is not a straight line; the film industry does not get every issue right on the first try, and racism is a clear example. Despite the difficult start of race relations in film, the shift towards better representation and social accountability has become more visible. Hollywood has become more politically and socially aware of racial issues and diversity. Yet, it has not reached the level of equity and diversity desired by some. Progress is never-ending; therefore, in the upcoming years, the film industry will once again transform, thus shifting its cultural and social influence.

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