

Mammies to Zombies

The Evolution of the “Magical Negro” and Racial Stereotyping in Film

By Justin Schwab

It may sound egregious that a film set and produced in 2024 features a Black protagonist whose sole mission is to improve the lives of White people. However, in March of that year, *The American Society of Magical Negroes* premiered in theaters to contentious audiences, with many skeptical of whether or not it would hit the mark. Black director Kobi Libii explained that the film satirizes the “magical negro,” which is a stereotype found throughout cinema of a “Black supporting character [who] exists solely to serve a white protagonist’s storyline” (Piper; qtd. in Lowry). The “magical negro” has become a notorious example of a racial stereotype that continues to find its way into popular media even in the present day, and, in an attempt to criticize it, Libii chose to pick it apart through humor. Whether or not he achieved this mission, the persisting awareness of this archetype reveals a sour underbelly of American film that traces all the way back to the origins of cinema. Burdened with the context of literature and historical discrimination, it’s no surprise that video media, even with good intentions, has drawn from a deep reservoir of invented stereotypical Black characters. In this paper, I aim to explore the foundations of these characters, as well as using

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them as context for the creation of the “magical negro,” which held a different association years before it was applied to film. Then, I will examine ways that these characters evolved over time, as well as the defiance of the Black community in challenging these stereotypes. Finally, I will theorize what this progress means for the future of independent Black representation in film, particularly as it has been playing out in the horror genre. The “magical negro” stereotype is not yet gone; however, the progression of Black film and the subversion of stereotypical stock characters has begun to redefine the cinematic space for Black culture, hinting at a new era of media for everyone.

The origin of cinema, particularly blockbuster movies, is interwoven with racial dialogue; as a result, the field has been uniquely susceptible to racism from the start. The “watershed moment of the modern cinema,” D. W. Griffith’s *The Birth of a Nation* (1915), is the poster child for this inseparable connection (Rocchio 29). In the early 1900s, film burst onto the scene as a new medium, garnering a following dedicated to defying its limitations and cementing its reputation as a new artistic form. This period was also marked by the evolution and intensification of Jim Crow laws that began in the 1870s following emancipation during the Civil War, as well as the normalization of quietly ignoring Black struggles through President Woodrow Wilson’s legislative decisions (Haygood 6). The cultural weight of Confederate defeat and resistance sat heavily with southerners, becoming a staple in their identity, and by extension, their art. One prominent filmmaker during the 1910s, D. W. Griffith, felt that “the story of the South had been absorbed into [his] very being,” and sought to use it as inspiration for his new “epic ambitions” (qtd. in Haygood 9; Haygood 9). The result? Cinema’s first towering blockbuster, a

film adapted from a novel glorifying the Ku Klux Klan and depicting Black characters (who were Whites in blackface) as “thieves, rapists, [and] wild-eyed fools” (Haygood 11). *The Birth of the Nation* is an important and disastrous creation for a number of reasons, among them: the immediate impact it had on Black communities across America, the tone it set for future Hollywood films, and the fact that President Wilson essentially endorsed it and its racist messaging by premiering it in the White House. In his book *Reel Racism: Confronting Hollywood’s Construction of Afro-American Culture*, Vincent Rocchio points out that Griffith did not intend for the film’s messaging to be racist – that many at the time did not view it as such, merely accepting it as the contemporary “truth” – but the signifiers included in the film nonetheless reproduced racist attitudes (30–31). In this way, the start of American cinema was inextricably linked to Black hate and white supremacy, paving the way forward for similar attitudes in the growing industry.

As the popularity of moviegoing spiked and the art of cinematography became more developed, familiar Black stereotypes became standardized within the new medium. One of the most famous examples is the Mammy character, a Black maid with “no interior life” who is “content and fairly happy” with her situation as a servant to the lead White lady of the house (Haygood 74). The Mammy character did not originate in film, nor did it stay there – journalist Wil Haygood traces it back to southern minstrel adaptations of Harriet Beecher Stowe’s novel *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* and all the way to the terrifyingly recent character Aunt Jemima of pancake fame – but I posit that film served it to the public in a more visual way (73–74). Take, for instance, the next film after *The Birth of a Nation* that took the country by storm, *Gone with the Wind* (1939). Yet again, viewers were dazzled by sweeping scope,

charged action, “film wizardry,” and, of course, a stereotypical depiction of antebellum life for Blacks (Haygood 87). *Gone with the Wind* and the Mammy character in general contain more nuance than the racism of Griffith’s film over twenty years prior, though, revealing the developments and standardizations of racist stereotypes that lent more authoritative credibility to them. In his book, *White Screens, Black Images: Hollywood from the Dark Side*, James Snead observes that the Black maid in film lends “purity and chasteness” to the White lead by serving as “darker counterpart” instead of a dangerous or ugly “opposite,” a tactic usually carried out by the friendly relationship between mistress and maid (69). And it cannot be forgotten that Scarlett O’Hara’s maid was played by Hattie McDaniel, a black actress, rather than someone in blackface. Clearly, this new stock character served a different purpose than the broad racism in *The Birth of a Nation*: rather than frightening White audiences, the Mammy soothed them, assuring them that the racial divide was logical, permanent, and justified. Similar stereotypes served the same purpose, blending racist ideology with film cornerstones.

While not directly affiliated with cinema, the original “magical negro” character was created around the same time, a correlation that reflects the social landscape of the period. Frantz Fanon’s 1952 book *Black Skin, White Masks* delves into the complexity of this idea: drawing from stereotypes of Blacks being “backward, naive, and free,” both Whites and Blacks entertained the idea of African descent infusing Blacks with “poetical power” that “the white man has never understood” (106, 107). Connections to a “magical black culture” are represented through “drums jabber[ing] out the mystical cosmic message,” “Black magic...[and] pagan ceremonies,” and a “bond between Man and the Earth” (Fanon 102, 105, 106).

While Fanon contemplates this as a potential mode of reclaiming Black identity and power, he concludes that it can too easily be used to justify the treatment of Blacks as a “third-rate humanity” that has “not kept pace with the evolution” of society and therefore cannot fully adopt it (105).

This concept of the “magical negro” is displayed vividly by the large murals *Magic in Medicine* and *Modern Medicine* that were painted by Black artist Charles Alston in 1940 for the Harlem Hospital as part of the Works Progress Administration’s Federal Art Project (Community Works). The works, which were displayed directly across from one another in the entrance to the hospital, juxtapose traditional African healing through idol worship and dancing (*Magic in Medicine*) and the development of modern science with a microscope and surgery (*Modern Medicine*). While it advocates for progress, the diptych acknowledges and belittles the presumed “magical negro” that knows nothing of how medicine actually works. I argue, too, that this “magical negro” did in fact appear in film during this period through the character of Uncle Remus in *Song of the South* (1946). While not magical per se, Uncle Remus, a kind old Black man, brings colorful animated characters into the otherwise live-action film, signifying a connection with unreality and childhood magic. Unsurprisingly, this film was also based on a problematic book that glorified plantation life. Much like the Mammy character, Uncle Remus as the “magical negro” coddles the audience, serving the “rhetoric of *harmlessness*,” as Snead puts it (84). Inserted into a film meant for children, the racial stereotyping is overlooked because “we tend to condescend to cartoons, just as many adults condescend to children,” encouraging audiences to gloss over the realities of plantation life (Snead 85). And, even worse, it strengthens the connection between Blackness and childishness.

However, the implementation of the “magical negro” in modern film is different; at its core, it is a mere evolution of the original, mystical caricature. During the Civil Rights movement in the 1960s, Black Americans began using film as a method of convincing White audiences to support them, giving birth to the stereotype of the “friendly, desexualized black man” who acts as a “nonthreatening confidant to virginal white women” (Hughey 545). I argue this “Noble Negro” laid the groundwork for the revamped “magical negro” of the 1990s. They share much in common: both “[pull] the White character through a crisis,” “draw upon the superior moral nature associated with the oppressed,” and are almost always Black men (Glenn and Cunningham 137-138). For example, *The Green Mile* (1999) features a gentle Black man with healing powers who makes the White protagonist see the wrong of his ways as a death row overseer (Glenn and Cunningham 141). John Coffey, the “magical negro” of the film, becomes less of a character and more of a symbol—or a blueprint of a character that is seen in countless other films from the period. I also find they bear a strong resemblance to Uncle Remus in that they produce innocent kindness for the other (White) characters. Thus, while I agree with sociologist Matthew Hughey that the “magical negro” is not another manifestation of the classic Uncle Tom character, I disagree in that I believe the racial stereotype is entirely adopted from the past. Film, as established with the Mammy character, has served to convince audiences that Black people are harmless for decades, and the “magical negro” is another installment in this long history of cinematic stereotypes. An interesting subversion is that the stereotype bends backwards to flip the original association of the “magical negro.” No longer is the magic it possesses savage, wild, or primal; instead, this stereotype is a purely cinematic creation,

building off of the magic of Uncle Remus rather than the magic of Africa.

The new iteration of the “magical negro” was soon challenged, though, and the attention drawn to its problematic nature forced America to consider its history of media representation. *The American Society of Magical Negroes* is far from the first film to defy this trend, though most others challenged it indirectly. Within the last twenty years, films have moved toward acknowledging the full ramifications of the history of slavery, racial violence, and segregation rather than pretending that “magic” and one kind man will solve society’s issues. The growing popularity of Black cinema in the mainstream consciousness is a likely reason: calling back to “race actualities,” short films from the early 1900s meant “‘not just to address previous stereotypical images, but, [as] an attempt to present the black reality,’” critically acclaimed works like *Fruitvale Station* (2013) aim to avoid stereotypes through representing the lived Black experience (Bowser qtd. in Kerr; Haygood 376). Creating oppositional texts is another historic precedent in Black film, as shown by Peter Jones’s film *Rebirth of the Nation*. Released the same year as *The Birth of the Nation*, this lost film cataloged Black success stories following emancipation, asserting the existence of Black America as serving itself, not the White population (Kerr). Modern equivalents such as the box office hit *The Butler* (2013) conduct similar dialogue; in this instance, the film comments on the bungled production of *Mississippi Burning* (1988), which depicted White FBI agents as heroes of the Civil Rights movement, by presenting a nuanced and Black-centric narrative. On a more direct level, research like Hughey’s article “Cinethetic Racism: White Redemption and Black Stereotypes in ‘Magical Negro’ Films” has raised awareness of semi-

autonomous stereotyping within these films, replacing “synthetic” with the homophone “cinethetic” to draw the connection between the racializing of Blacks and normalizing of Whites in cinema (551). Hughey’s point aligns with my argument that these stereotypes are explicitly supported by and flourish especially in film, which is why the new wave of realist Black cinema is necessary. The abandonment of a sanitized, necessarily good Black character indicates a slow shift of the needle toward a more frank, unbiased representation of the Black community in media.

It’s important to note that the “magical negro” has not been the only stereotype to be challenged: all Black caricatures have been scrutinized and torn apart, particularly by Black filmmakers themselves. *The Watermelon Woman* (1996) challenges the Mammy character not by creating a foil but by targeting a specific flaw with the stereotype: by removing her asexuality and making her lesbian, the film questions how much humanity the original Mammy had at all (Mason). Meanwhile, *Le Grand Blanc de Lambaréné* (1994) addresses not a Black stereotype but a racialized stereotype of the White savior, depicting the destruction of colonialism that would ultimately lead to the creation of other harmful tropes seen in film. The record-smashing Marvel film *Black Panther* (2018) redefined a number of tropes, among them race as an indicator of good or bad, Black films being necessarily grounded in realism in order to carry a message, and the superhero genre itself (Haygood 429-430). Innovation and ingenuity have finally begun to stomp on the racist themes that have existed in film since its very beginning.

As these old stereotypes have been broken down, a curious trend of creating new ones has emerged, although these stereotypes are more akin to archetypes that symbolize the

struggles of the Black community. A majority of these lie, surprisingly but not coincidentally, in the horror genre. The shining example of this is the “zombie film hero” who struggles to survive against hordes of “violent cannibal” creatures (McAlister 476, 474). As explained by Elizabeth McAlister in her article, “Slaves, Cannibals, and Infected Hyper-Whites: The Race and Religion of Zombies,” the zonbi is a rare example of a popular monster in the West that does not have European origins, like vampires or werewolves (472). Originally, Hollywood spun the American zombie as black workers through a hyperbole of racist fears about barbarism – as expected, given its track record. However, this radically changed with the independent film *Night of the Living Dead* (1968), which both established the American zombie as we know it today and placed a calm, logical, independent Black man as the protagonist of the film (McAlister 478). In the ensuing zombie craze, films like *I am Legend* built on this idea, establishing “zombies as the monsters black men are to vanquish” (McAlister 478). This is no mistake: as well as holding ties to Haitian culture, the zombie is used as a representation of “white people...[as] insatiably destructive consumers” and even carries residue of slavery (McAlister 479). This trope, McAlister argues, though similar to the “magical negro” because it works to save humanity, is different in that the zombie film hero is fully humanized and flawed (481). I argue that it is different because its purpose from the start has been to prove Black independence out of a need to survive despite the ineptitude and neediness of White characters. Every other stereotype – Uncle Tom, Mammy, the “magical negro” – demonstrates a sense of self-sacrifice. Meanwhile, Ben, the protagonist of *Night of the Living Dead*, attempts to keep everyone alive but is willing to do whatever it takes to preserve

himself, and does end up being the last character alive. Thus, we have witnessed the birth of a new trope that celebrates Black independence at long last. A similar iteration of this idea is seen in the runaway blockbuster *Get Out* (2017), in which the Black male protagonist escapes the horror of slave owners who extend their lifespans by controlling Black bodies. *Get Out* is in particular dialogue with the reformation of the audience's gaze as historically assumed to be White, twisting the zombie film hero trope and contributing to the work of other Black films in questioning the fascination with the Black male body (Baker).

In this evolving world of Black media depiction, the future promises a more hopeful world than the one it came from, although the restructured archetypes have many pitfalls to look out for. Stereotypes exist across all races, genders, and ages throughout film, and while the introduction of new, non-negative tropes for Black characters suggests that media is becoming more equal in terms of narrative ability, it is imperative that the industry aim for more independent Black characters and beware its roots in racist stereotyping. In his article, "The Black Image on the White Screen: Representations of African Americans from the Origins of Cinema to The Birth of a Nation," Ben Urwand argues that Griffith knew exactly what he was doing in villainizing the Black population in *The Birth of a Nation*. If so, this would make the "black menace" one of the earliest examples of film stereotyping – and one of the most widespread (Urwand). Even today, *The Birth of the Nation* is ranked on lists of greatest American films, with critics downplaying its problematic nature in favor of its technical excellence. Society has come a long way since 1915, and its progress has been reflected in film. The rise and fall of the "magical negro" must remain a closed chapter in the history book of cinema. And we must be careful going forward with

new Black archetypes. Even if the stereotypes are positive ones, they are still stereotypes.

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