

People Painted Over: Whitewashing of Minority

Actors in Recent Film

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In 1972 the iconic television series *Kung Fu* first aired. The shows inception and concept were owed to the Asian martial artist Bruce Lee, who had hoped to play the main character. Instead, the actor David Carradine was cast, despite the fact that he had little martial arts training. This decision was due to, as one producer put it, “If we put a yellow man up on the tube, the audience will turn the switch off in less than five minutes.” (Mako qtd. in Michelle). Thirty-eight years after *Kung Fu*, the film *The Last Airbender* released with all three of its main roles filled by white actors, despite taking place in an Asian fantasy world. Even though *Kung Fu* and *The Last Airbender* are separated by nearly four decades, both suffer from whitewashed casts. Whitewashing is the practice of erasing people of color either through replacing a minority character with a white character, or more commonly with a white actor replacing a minority actor in the portrayal of a character of color. Although arguments in defense of whitewashing and other forms of discriminatory casting are less blatantly offensive than in 1972, many still support and perpetuate these practices.

Certain forms of whitewashing are today no longer considered acceptable. Foremost among these is blackface, which is now considered a virulently racist practice.

The history of blackface dates back to the early American minstrel shows. In these, white performers would darken their face and hands, usually with burnt cork, so as to appear black, and perform routines in which they portrayed African Americans negatively. This was continued in film, most notably with the 1915 popular release of *The Birth of a Nation*, which portrayed the formation of the Ku Klux Klan in the aftermath of the Civil war. *The Birth of a Nation* used largely white actors in blackface to portray blacks as subhuman savages. Blackface spread misconceptions and stereotypes, and was used as a tool to define what constituted 'blackness' (Blackface.com). This had a tangible impact: *The Birth of a Nation* is credited as one of the main catalysts for the revival of the Ku Klux Klan, and was widely used as a recruiting tool (Calney).

The use of white actors to portray other races was not limited to blacks. Early yellowface featured white actors in the role of Asians, often with the use of eyelid prosthetics and makeup. Much like blackface, yellowface was used to impose a distorted illusion of Asian identity, to the point where actual Asian actors were seen as inauthentic. In *The Good Earth*, a highly acclaimed film set in China, the majority of the roles were filled with actors in yellowface. When questioned in an interview about his use of white actors, the producer of *The Good Earth*, said, "I'm in the business of creating illusions." (Thalberg qtd. in Yellowface!). Actual Asian actors were sidelined into the roles of villains and secondary characters. One of the major contributors to the predicament of minority actors was the Hays code, which prohibited the onscreen depiction of miscegenation (interracial pairings). This discouraged the casting of actual minority actors in favor of white actors, as the minority actors would be unable to portray a romantic relationship with a white actor. Anna May Wong, a prominent Chinese

American actress was considered for the main role in *The Good Earth*, but was rejected because the male actor she would be acting opposite was white, and their characters romantic pairing would lead to a violation of the Hays code (Yellowface!). While blackface is now widely condemned, the erasure of Asian actors through yellowface and the institutional discrimination of the Hays code has been largely forgotten.

Whitewashing is still prevalent today in such films as *21*, *Dragonball: Evolution*, *30 Days of Night*, and an upcoming production of *Genghis Khan*, to name a few (Michelle). Of the many recent films that have been whitewashed however, none has engendered so much controversy as *The Last Airbender*. The film was based on a popular cartoon series populated and set in an entirely Asian and Inuit inspired world. Yet when the film was cast, the only actors of color were sidelined into the roles of villains and minor characters. Because of the outrage over the film's casting and its dishonesty to the source material, *The Last Airbender* provides an ideal case study for contemporary whitewashing.

When questioned in an interview about the casting of *The Last Airbender* the director, M. Night Shyamalan, answered that: "When we were casting, I was like, 'I don't care who walks through my door, whoever is best for the part...'" (Shyamalan). This is the most common refutation to accusations of whitewashing: that the best actor for the job should be cast regardless of race and that casting should be 'colorblind'. While initially seeming fair, claims of colorblind casting are often of questionable validity. Early casting calls for *The Last Airbender* read, "Caucasian or any other ethnicity" (Frequently). This already biases the casting process in favor of white actors. And despite Shyamalan's protestations to the contrary, the odds of true colorblind casting producing a

white actor in the three separate cases of the main characters of *The Last Airbender* are unlikely.

Another frequented argument in favor of colorblind casting transposes ‘star power’ for talent. In a Los Angeles Times article about the whitewashing controversy in *Prince of Persia* and *The Last Airbender*, Camille Alick, project manager for Muslims On Screen and Television explains that financial considerations take center stage when casting for a major film, and that studios do not aim to be discriminatory (Lee). There are two flaws to this argument. The first is that studios still gravitate to white, even when actors have accumulated no star status. In the example of *The Last Airbender*, the credibility of the actors who were cast in the main roles was not established: of the three actors, the actor for the main character was unknown and the two others virtual unknowns (FAQ). The second aspect is that if deprived of even entry level work, minority actors have no chance to accumulate experience or notability. Dante Basco, a Filipino American who has worked as an actor since childhood, and was a voice actor for the cartoon series that *The Last Airbender* was based on spoke out against the casting. He described the casting process as a self-perpetuating system that leaves actors of color out of the loop, saying that, “Stars don’t just happen out of thin air, Hollywood helps make them.” (Basco).

Whitewashing roles, whether from a desire to cast colorblind or to cast for financial motivations, must be taken within the greater context of the marginalization of minority actors in film. Whitewashing robs actors of color of the few important, positive roles available to them. In a letter to Media Action Network for Asian Americans the producers of *The Last Airbender* said in defense of the casting of the film:

From the outset of the creative process, the Producers and the Director have envisioned embodying the Airbender universe with a large and ethnically diverse cast that represents many different heritages and cultures from all corners of the globe... Early casting includes an Indian actor, born in Mumbai and raised in the UK and the US; a Persian actor born in Tehran and raised in the UK, Switzerland and the US; a Maori actor born and raised in New Zealand; a Korean-American actor, born and raised in Chicago; an American actress of Italian, French and Mexican heritage; among several others of varied nationalities from around the world. (Paramount Producers)

This argument is disingenuous: while all the actors they cite are in the film, the roles they were cast in are those of secondary characters and villains. This is already all too common a fate for actors of color. A study in 2009 by the Screen Actor's Guild found that the number of total minority actors in film and television had fallen from 29.3% in 2007 to 27.5% in 2008 (McNary). While this does not seem like much of a drop, the study fails to take into account the quality of the roles actors of color were cast in. In a study examining Paramount, Racebending.com found that the percentage of people of color in leading roles in the years between 2000 and 2009 was 14% (Paramount Pictures). This marginalization of minority actors extends even to the conceptual level. In an interview discussing his attempts to finance a film on the Haitian independence hero Toussaint-Louverture, actor and producer Danny Glover lamented: "Producers said 'It's a nice project, a great project... where are the white heroes?'...." (Glover qtd. in Danny).

Often the question is raised of whether representation in media is of any importance. In regards to the controversy of his casting, Jake Gyllenhaal, the lead actor of the whitewashed *Prince of Persia*, asserted that the film was non historical, and therefore to focus on a single inaccuracy was incongruous (Lee). However, even in a fantasy film, media representation still holds importance, and can have subtle, but pervasive effects. Research in this area was pioneered by George Gerbner, who established Cultivation Theory, the theory that television can heavily influence perceptions of reality (McDonnell). Linda Holtzman, a professor of Communications and Journalism explains in her book *Media Messages: What Film, Television, and Popular Music Teach Us about Race, Class, Gender, and Sexual Orientation*, "...the repetition of certain themes and stereotypes produces a socialization of audiences that unconsciously take in this misinformation as the truth." (Holtzman, 224).

This 'TV reality' can have an especially toxic effect on the subjects of its erasure. This is most noticeable in minority children. According to Birgitte Vittrup, a researcher of Early Childhood Development and Education:

It is important that children see themselves represented on television – not just in terms of race, but also in terms of socioeconomic status and family structure. Being represented on television makes them feel "normal" – that there are others like them.... For white, middle-class children this is usually not a problem. But for minorities, children from lower-socioeconomic status families, and children in single-parent, blended, or mixed-race families, this is not always the case. They either don't see themselves represented at all, or they see negative stereotyped

representations of themselves. This can over time influence children's self-esteem and feelings of self-worth and "fitting in." (Vittrup)

Whitewashing deprives minority children of the feeling of normalcy that seeing a depiction of a person of their same race in a positive role would engender. Concrete evidence of the internalized racism that this can cause can be found in a study carried out by Kenneth and Mamie Clark in the 1950's. In the study, African American children were found to prefer and associate good qualities with white dolls over black dolls. A similar pilot study conducted recently by CNN showed that children today continue this disturbing trend (Study).

Films are arbiters of culture and bear a responsibility to the public discourse. Much as blackface and yellowface were used in the latter half of the nineteenth century and early part of the twentieth century to define actual African and Asian Americans, media today still holds the power to shape reality. Though film has largely moved away from the overtly racist practices of the last century, whitewashing still persists. Abetted by arguments of denial or rationalization that are deaf to the abundance of evidence that marks it as a discriminatory practice, whitewashing robs minority actors of work and further negatively stereotypes people of color.

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