

Black Struggle Film Production: Meta-Synthesis of Black Struggle Film Production and Critique Since the Millennium

Robert Cummings, Morehouse College, USA

Abstract

The film industry has historically wrestled with consistently producing representative and innovative Black American wide release feature length theatrical films. The limited quantity of films containing a majority Black cast and films with a Black protagonist allows for exploration of the similarities between such films. “Black struggle films,” films focusing on historic or overt racial, ethnic, or social challenges, appear to be one of the few sorts of films cast, led, and produced by Black American creatives. In addition, Black struggle films appear to be more critically acclaimed and recognized than any other sort of Black film. This investigation is part of a case study on the attributes and successes of Black struggle film production. This article focuses on budget, distribution, and other production variables of Black American films released in the last 20 years. Additionally, a meta-synthesis was performed comparing film critiques of one wide-released, theatrical Black struggle film with other Black films. Film critiques were analyzed using a thematic analytical method to identify themes about their production patterns. The findings of this study will allow media researchers to identify trends in Black American film production and influence producers to engage in strategic and representative production of films that document Black experiences.

Keywords: Black struggle film, African American, American film history, White guilt, White savior film, Oscar bait

There has been much criticism about the recent 2018 film *Green Book* (Burke & Farrelly, 2018). *Green Book* was named after the *Negro Motorist Green Book* which helped guide African Americans to welcoming destinations across the racially segregated mid-20th century United States (Negro Motorist Green Book, 1936). The film showcases the relationship between renowned African American pianist Dr Donald Shirley and his Italian American driver and go-to man as they travel through the segregated Deep South. Despite their beliefs that Dr Shirley's life and the *Green Book* (Burke & Farrelly, 2018) are important historical topics, many critics expressed their disdain for the film suggesting it to be racially tone-deaf and misrepresenting (Ide, 2019), historically inaccurate, and faced with issues around talent mishaps and family consent (Wilkinson, 2019). Nevertheless, the film won an Academy Award for the Best Picture and Best Supporting Actor awards.

African Americans encounter misrepresentation in highly distributed film and media yet go to the movies and consume media at rates higher than their White American counterparts (MPAA, 2016; 2017; Nielsen Company, 2018). Overt misrepresentation in media can cause offense (Graves, 1993) as well as lead to audiences having distorted identities and attitudes about the misrepresented group (Pajares, Prestin, Chen, & Nabi, 2009), particularly among children (Fischhoff, Franco, Gram, Hernandez, & Parker, 1999). African American misrepresentation in film and television is contextualized by investigating the history of African Americans in film.

African American Presence in Film

African Americans in film have faced a nuanced history of tragedy and triumph (Moody, 2016). Blackface and minstrel performances in the 19th century and early 20th century unjustly and satirically depicted African Americans as jovial, childlike, aloof, and brutish slaves, sharecroppers, and criminals (Coleman, 2000). However, Black minstrel shows featuring African American performers also developed opportunistically and used comedy and satire to signify relatable messages of the Black experience to their African American audience (Watkins, 1994).

Black audiences relating to the Black behaviors, perspectives, and experiences provided by Black minstrel shows opened a platform for Black theater and road shows which evolved into race films (Acham, 2004). Race films were predominately African American-cast films during the early twentieth century produced for African American audiences discussing politics, philanthropy, and romance (Gaines, 2001). Race films, funded by private companies and filmmakers outside of the Hollywood system, also served as the only outlet for many African American filmmakers to produce cinematic content (Bowser, Gaines & Musser, 2001; Field, 2015). By the mid-20th century, race films were underfunded and unable to keep up with the technical complexity of sound and color film (Berry et al., 2016). Few films began to showcase African Americans in leading and supporting roles if they were accompanied by a White lead actor(s) (Vider, 2011; Jonas-Fowler, 2018). Sidney Poitier's role as a criminal convict in *The Defiant Ones* (Kramer, 1958) and Hattie McDaniels' role as a servant in *Gone with the Wind* (Selznick & Fleming, 1939) are examples of this practice.

Black representation in film changed as response to American nationalism. Though not void of pushback, during World War II and throughout the Cold War and Civil Rights Movement, the NAACP worked to encourage Hollywood film and television producers to depict people of color more favorably to reduce the critique of American policies and race relations (Vaughn, 2002; Cripps, 2005). While some archetypes such as nannies and servants remained, other roles such as Sidney Poitier's roles as a police detective in *In The Heat of The Night* (Mirisch &

Jewison, 1967) and an educated fiancé of a White woman in *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner* (Kramer, 1967) and Bill Cosby's police operative role in *I Spy* (Fine & Friedkin, 1965) represented African American men in highly-regarded careers, generally in a partnership with a White male lead (Vaughn, 2002; Vider, 2011). Duane Jones' role as an educated middle-class leader of a group striving to survive a hoard of zombies in the *Night of the Living Dead* (Hardman & Romero, 1968) pushed the envelope for African American depictions in the horror genre, and in social commentary on race and power (Benshoff, 2000). These partnering roles later became known as interracial buddy films (Vider, 2011, Jonas-Fowler, 2018).

The Civil Rights Movement and the growth of Black power movements and Afrocentrism influenced Blaxploitation cinema beginning in the late 1960s and spanning through the 1980s. (Cha-Jua, 2008). Blaxploitation films reimagined African Americans in a militant, prideful, and powerful positions, featuring protagonists triumphantly prevail over White antagonism. Blaxploitation films spanned different genres including horror, action and fighting, and comedy (Robinson, 1998; Benshoff, 2000). Blaxploitation filmmakers used socioeconomic class as a source of critique in heroism, as many of the protagonists were working class, sometimes criminals, and many antagonists were wealthy (Cha-Jua, 2008). These films told a range of narratives from Vietnam war veterans returning to drug-ridden communities, to Kung Fu films. Films such as *Super Fly* (Shore & Parks, 1972) and *The Mack* (Bernhard & Campus, 1973) were criminal protagonists against major White criminal(s) in the form of "The Man." *Black Gunn* (Heyman & Hartford-Davis, 1972) and *Melinda* (Atkins & Robertson, 1973) told narratives of a Black protagonist new to the middle-class or as a Black government official being subjected by new White peers to exploit the working-class Black communities they recently abandoned.

The period from the early 1980s to the late 1990s witnessed a growth in Black situation and family comedy film and television productions. Television shows such as *The Jeffersons* (Nicholl, 1975), *Different Strokes* (Cohan, 1978), *The Cosby Show* (Carsey, 1984), *Family Matters* (Sandefur, 1989), and *The Fresh Prince of Bel-Air* (Walian, 1990) stretched the Black representative paradigm in film and television in terms of family, marriage, wealth, and White-collar career values. However, many of these productions did not provide a realistic portrayal of the average Black lifestyle or family (Coleman, 2000; Dyson, 2003; Jonas-Fowler, 2018).

Hip-hop culture has been heavily implemented within American film (Watkins, 1998). Hip-hop has been closely associated with many attributes including partying (particularly street dancing and DJ-ing), graffiti, fashion (sagging, tattoos, sneakers, etc.), and African American ethnic symbolism (Motley & Henderson, 2007). Hip-hop culture also incorporates critique and commentary on ethnicity, class, and oppression, and often focuses on rebellion from authority (Motley & Henderson, 2007).

Films began to notoriously feature a single or few African American supporting roles to increase visible diversity such as in the "best friend role". Social scientists describe best friend roles as examples of reflective racial ordering, a psychological behavior that occurs daily as individuals develop nuanced color-consciousness reinforced by social standards of power, privilege, and colorblind racism (Turner, 2012; Smith, 2013). It is also suggested that with films of certain contexts (most significantly romantic films) audience members, particularly White audience members, prefer films with the majority same race (Weaver, 2011).

Defining Black Struggle Films

A recent series of films that have garnered critical acclaim and received attention from films awards feature despair in the Black experience (Obsenson, 2018). This series of films will be referred in this article as Black struggle films (BSFs). BSFs are defined as films that focus on the crude conditions uniquely suffered by Black or African American people such as slavery, the fall of reconstruction, convict leasing, segregation, Black racialized ghettos, and hyper-masculine criminology. These Black conditions are almost always portrayed as a deficit rather than in an asset-based perspective, even when the hero is African American. BSFs seem to support “Oscar bait” films: films awarded with Academy Awards that consist of well-acted character-focused drama, often focusing on historic times periods and with people who experience disabilities or despair (Culloty, 2016). BSFs rarely incorporate elements of fantasy genre such as horror, adventure, and Sci-Fi (Moody, 2016).

BSFs have debuted annually, produced with promising revenues and recognition (Golub, 1998). Some of the most recognized and subjectively talented Black talent have worked on BSFs as the films offer a rare opportunity to tell one’s own ethnic-grounded story with wide-release production value. BSFs provide many opportunities for up and coming Black talent. Within the past five years, new directors such as Ryan Coogler and Barry Jenkins have earned high critical acclaim for their films predominately starring new and underutilized Black talent in such films as *Black Panther* (Feige & Coogler, 2018), *Fruitvale Station* (Bongiovi & Coogler, 2013), *Creed* (Chartoff, Chartoff, Stallone, & Coogler, 2015), and *Moonlight* (Gardner & Jenkins, 2016), and *If Beale Street Could Talk* (Gardner & Jenkins, 2018) respectively. The success of BSF show that it is possible for Black theatrical arts to reach widespread audiences and be well-received.

BSFs are often examined from a perspective of racial reconciliation. “White guilt films” are films identified to be produced and well-received with mainstream success due to the concept of White guilt (Golub, 1998), which describes the discomfort and guilt-related affect experienced by White people due to self-receptive knowledge of social privilege and membership of a community with a violent and discriminative past (Branscombe & Doosje, 2004; Spanierman, Todd, & Anderson, 2009). Often times these films feature an anti-racist White hero or “White savior” that counters the malevolent White antagonists (Schultz, 2014; Bineham, 2015; McFarlane, 2015).

General Method

An investigation was conducted to determine descriptive statistics related to Black struggle films and the implications they have on production and criticism. The major research questions were: 1) What distinguishes different types of Black films?; 2) are BSFs actually over-abundant; and 3) do BSFs have stronger support in terms of budget, revenue, and critique than other Black films? The hypothesis was that there is a variance in the level of effort that goes into the production of BSFs and that Black films remain genre-limited, with a lack of Black fantasy genres such as adventure, action, Sci-Fi, and horror. A two-study approach study was conducted: 1) a data search to identify BSFs and outline how their attributes compare with other Black films 2) a meta-synthesis of critic reviews on the production and distribution of a selected BSF compared with two other Black films.

Black Struggle Film Search and Analysis

Method

Four film related databases were used while conducting the search for Black struggle films: Internet Movie Database (IMDB), The Numbers by Nash Information Services, LLC, Metacritic by CBS Interactive, Inc., and Rotten Tomatoes by Fandango. Using IMDB, films were identified using the annual listing “feature films released between...”. The top 400 films (the list ascends by popularity) were screened to identify theater wide-release Black films; Box Office Mojo suggests on average since 1984 about 146 films are classified as wide release. This process was repeated for each year between 1998 and 2018.

Selection Criteria

For a film to be identified, the film needed to be classified as a Black film. For the purposes of this study, for a film to be a Black film it needed to justify one of the following inclusion criteria: 1) The lead/shared lead character of the film is racially Black; 2) the majority of the cast is racially Black; or 3) a moderate proportion of the cast is racially Black and the subject matter discusses social conditions unique to a Black ethnicity. Each film was identified if they were a Black struggle film (see Introduction, Defining Black Struggle Films) with either a “yes”, “moderate”, or “no”.

From this list a series of details relating to the production of the films were determined. Descriptive statistics of the film including MPAA rating, genre(s), runtime, director(s), writer(s), production studio(s) and domestic (United States) distribution company were identified. Other distribution items included domestic and worldwide gross earnings, budget, and actual earnings of the films were identified. Critique items were also identified which included Rotten Tomato and Metacritic scores and the number of awards received. These data were compared between databases to detect variances.

Results

Black Film Statistics

A total of 54 films were omitted because they were either not released in theaters or they did not have a wide theatrical release; 318 Black films were identified. Proportionately, 4.43% of wide-release theatrical films released in the United States between 1998–2018 were Black films. 37.3% of Black films had a moderate to predominantly Black cast. The genres of Black films by descending order of frequency were drama (180), comedies (162), crime (96), action (79), romance (54), biography (39), thriller (36), adventure (31), family (26), sport (24), music (22), history (21), horror (15), Sci-Fi (11), and animation (3) (see Figure 1). Black films typically range in worldwide gross earnings from \$96,793 to \$1,348,258,244 ($M=\$91,504,032$, $SD=\$128.5m$, $Med=\$49,155,371$), with budgets ranging from \$500,000 to \$215,000,000 ($M=\$36,329.783$, $SD=\$35.9m$, $Med=\$25,000,000$), with a range of -\$92,905,005 to \$1,148,258,224 ($M=\$59,758,334$, $SD=\$104.9m$, $Med=\$28,000,000$) in actual earnings. Black films online critic scores (Rotten Tomato audience and critic scores and Metacritic scores) range from 10.7 to 93.7 ($M=51.5$, $SD=18.9$, $Med=49.7$). The average Black film received 6.9 awards with no Academy Award or Golden Globe nominations or wins, however the median Black film received 1 award.

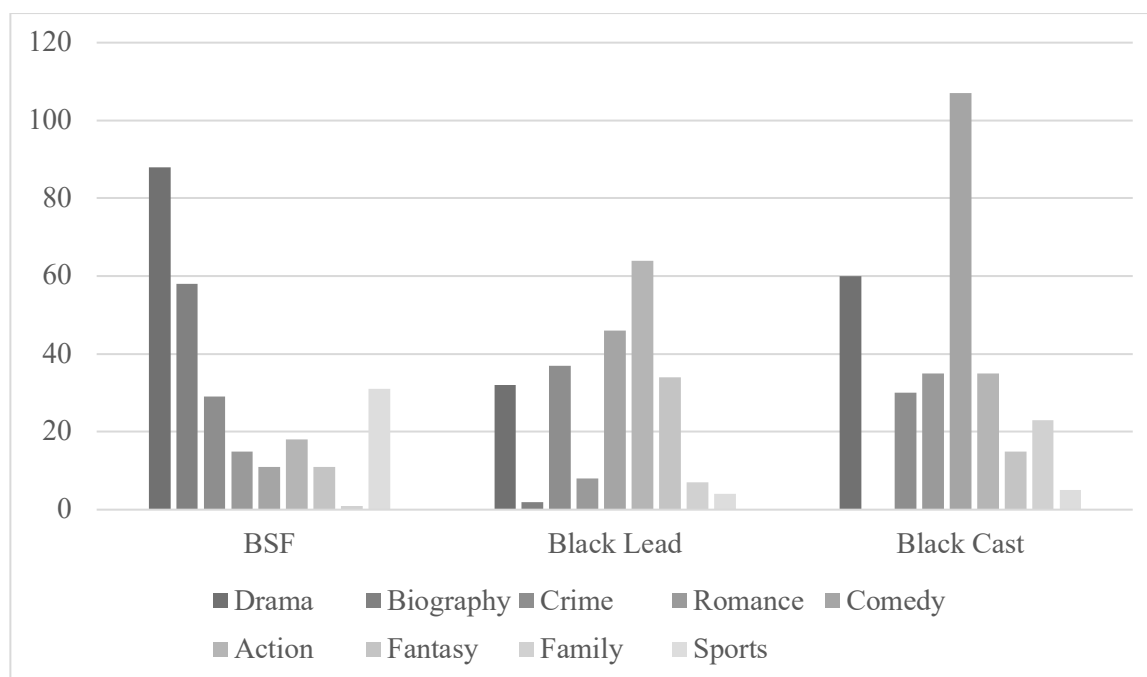


Figure 1: Frequency of Genres in Black Films

Biography consists of biographies and films depicted in a clear historical era. Sport films include sport and music films. Fantasy consisted of adventure films, animation, mystery, Sci-Fi, and horror. All genres were classified by IMDB and Metacritic. Black films were classified as a BSF, a non-BSF featuring a majority Black cast, or a non-BSF featuring a Black lead with a majority non-Black cast. These data represent the amount per genre Black films produced for theatrical wide-release between 1998-2018. Most films featured multiple genres.

Black Struggle Film Statistics

Of the 318 identified Black films, 28.3% (90) are BSFs (see Figure 2). A total of 78 (86.7%) of BSFs had a moderate to majority Black cast. The breakdown of BSF genres in descending order is as follows: drama (88), biography (37), crime (29), history (21), sport (16), music (15), romance (11), comedy (9), action (8), thriller (8), adventure (2), family (1), and horror (1) (see Figure 2). There were no wide-released theatrical animated or Sci-Fi BSFs. BSFs ranged in having worldwide gross earnings from \$254,293 to \$449,948,323 ($M=\$70,045,456$, $SD=\$87.4m$ $Med=\$31,609,243$), with budgets ranging from \$500,000 to \$109,000,000 ($M=\$28,498,026$, $SD=\$23.8m$, $Med=\$23,000,000$). BSF have average online critic scores (Rotten Tomato audience and critic and Metacritic) ranging from 10.7 to 93.7 ($M=67.9$, $SD=14.5$, $Med=69.33$). The average BSF received 18 awards with 1 Academy Award and Golden Globe nomination, however the median BSF received 6 awards.

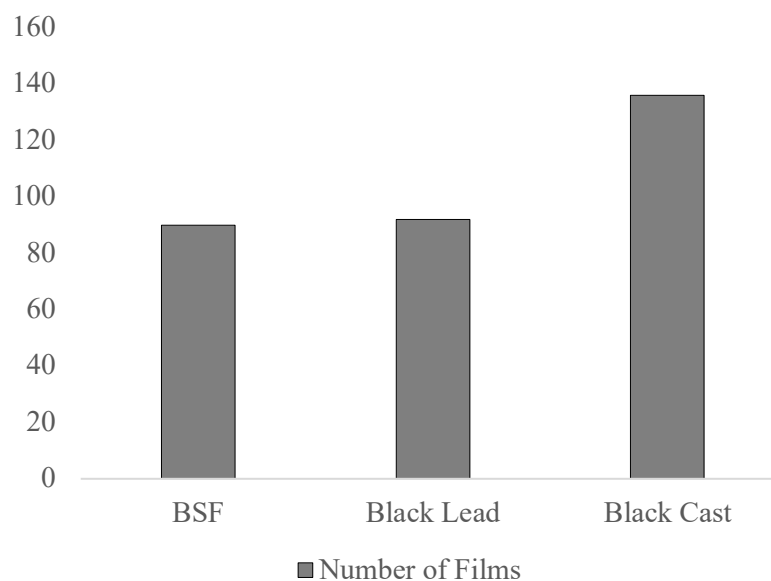


Figure 2: Frequency of Black Film Production.

Black films were classified as a BSF, a non-BSF featuring a majority Black cast, or a non-BSF featuring a Black lead with a majority non-Black cast. These data represent the amount of Black films produced for theatrical wide-release between 1998–2018.

Discussion

From a historical perspective, the films identified follow a similar pattern supported by the literature. Comedy and drama still remain the two most prominent produced Black films, reflecting Black minstrelsy and the race films of the silent era (Acham, 2004, Caddoo, 2014). Comedy and drama have made progressed as a means of Black uplift and expression at a magnitude far greater than other genres, though it is import and for Black narratives to expand across genres. As many of the 92 Black led films were partnered with other ethnicities as protagonists, namely White men on action comedies, on such films as the *Rush Hour* series (Birnbaum & Ratner, 1998; 2002; 2007), *Men In Black* series (MacDonald & Sonnenfeld, 2002; 2012), *Kangaroo Jack* (Bruckheimer & McNally, 2003), *Taxi* (Besson & Story, 2004), *Pain and Gain* (Bay, 2013), *Let's Be Cops* (Greenfield, 2014), and *Green Book* (Burke & Farrelly, 2018), it is clear that biracial buddy films are still produced, mimicking dynamics in the 1960s, despite critique and progression within the subgenre (Vider, 2011; Jonas-Fowler, 2018). The depiction of the Black family experienced a series of changes throughout the last 20 years beginning with some of the 1990s glorified nuclear family on such films as *Doctor Dolittle* (Davis & Thomas, 1998) and *The Haunted Mansion* (Gunn & Minkoff, 2003) followed by a wave of dramatic critiques in family relationships in such films as films from Tyler Perry, *Woman Thou Art Loose* (Cannon & Schultz, 2004), *ATL* (Austin & Robibson, 2006), and *Sparkle* (Akil, 2012) (Dyson, 2003; Jonas-Fowler, 2018). Elements of Blaxploitation and spoof continue to exist mainly in the genre of comedy including many of the films from the Wayans Brothers, *Death at a Funeral* (Horberg & LaBute, 2010), and *Meet the Blacks* (Angelone & Taylor, 2016), as well as remaking and glorifying the Blaxploitation era in such films as *Chi-Raq* (Lee, 2015), and *SuperFly* (Silver & X, 2018) (Benshoff, 2000). Additionally, Hip-hop has influenced the film industry by introducing recurring talent and producers such as Ice Cube, 50 Cent, and T.I. as well as showcasing successful and serious biographical material and

narratives in such films as *Straight Out of Compton* (Gary, 2015), and *Blindspotting* (Calder & Estrada, 2018) as well as influencing the protagonist Miles Morales in the highly-acclaimed animated *Spider-man: Into the Spider-Verse* (Pascal, Persichetti, Ramsey, & Rothman, 2018).

BSFs, though not significantly provided with or having the ability to pursue higher budgets or earning higher revenue, are successful at earning awards upwards to six times the amount of the typical Black film (Golub, 1998; Culloty, 2016). Though it may seem as if there is an overabundance of historic nationalistic films of Black despair, most BSFs were strictly dramatic featuring current Black struggles and crime. This fact reshapes the narrative, if accurate, of a White guilt discomfort of the past to a White guilt discomfort of the present (Golub, 1998). Regardless, race and ethnic consciousness definitely comes into play in while exploring many of the BSFs which feature White savior lead characters such as Dakota Fanning in *Secret Life of Bees* (Lassiter & Prince-Bythewood, 2008) and Emma Stone in *The Help* (Columbus & Taylor, 2011), as well as color-consciousness and racial order such as with Josh Lucas in *Glory Road* (Bruckheimer & Gartner, 2006) (Schultz, 2014), Sandra Bullock in *The Blind Side* (Johnson & Hancock, 2009) (Bineham, 2015), and Sylvester Stallone in *Creed II* (Chartoff, Stallone, & Caple, 2018).

Limitations

Identifying films as a BSF is not a validated or structured practice. Though there were objective features such as historical context despair condition, movements, athleticism, etc.) drama genre, and despair unique to the Black community, at the bottom line it was selected by the author. Films were identified as not BSF, moderate BSF, and BSF. Both moderate BSF and BSF were used to calculate descriptive statistics. As a result many films, particularly biographical films, that were classified as only having moderate BSF elements were included in the BSF group. No interrater reliability was practiced. Award nominations outside of the Academy Awards and Golden Globes were not included, therefore there were films that were nominated to quite a few awards but were identified as having no awards due to no wins. There were also quite a few budgets that were reported as “estimated” or were not accessible. Inaccessible budgets were not included in the comparative analysis. All films with accurate information were included in the analysis; no outlier films were removed, giving reason to provide both the mean and median for clarity. Ultimately, the online database sources may provide inaccurate information, particularly with budgets; thus exact descriptive statistics should be used with caution.

Black Film Production and Critique Synthesis

Method

The selected Black struggle film was the 2015 film entitled *Selma* (Colson & DuVernay, 2014). The film was directed by Ava DuVernay and focused on Dr Martin Luther King Jr. and his efforts to bring voting rights to the people of Selma, Alabama and other areas in the Deep South of the United States. This film was compared with two other Black films: 1) *Changing Lanes* (2002), a representative Black lead film about a lawyer and a businessman’s escalating feud after encountering a minor car accident; and 2) *Welcome Home Roscoe Jenkins* (2008), a representative predominately Black film about a talk show host visiting his Southern family after years of abandonment. These three films were selected by the author to represent each Black film sub-type with a film of a mid-ranged reported budget, awarded recognition, genre, Black representation, and reported revenue per respective sub-type. Three online critic

databases were used to identify film critic reviews: Metacritic, Rotten Tomatoes, and YouTube. All critic reviews were identified with a single search term: *Selma*.

Selection Criteria

One hundred eighty-three critic reviews were identified and screened to ensure the review specifically focused on the three films, 63 for *Selma* (Colson & DuVernay, 2014), 51 for *Changing Lanes* (Rudin & Michell, 2002), and 49 for *Welcome Home Roscoe Jenkins* (Stuber & Lee, 2008). Production items including any mention on the film's budget and studio constraints, revenue, release timing, and other general statements were identified. The selection criteria excluded critic reviews with: 1) no mention of the previously stated production items; 2) had no in-depth critique of the production or distribution or only spoke on the talent and creative output; 3) and reviews with no clear assessment or grade. Video critiques from notable YouTube influencers (over 20,000 views, over 800,000 subscribers) were included if they followed the selection criteria, as these reviewers have influential opinions and represent a substantial following.

Data extraction and quality appraisal

Production critique data was extracted from the critic reviews and synthesized into themes to formulate theoretical constructs. Firstly, the Quality Appraisal Form developed from Atkins et al (2008) was adopted to support film critic reviews as opposed to qualitative research articles (see Table 1). Qualifying critic reviews were then officially included in the synthesis. A qualitative thematic synthesis method was conducted for construct development. Contextual themes were direct inductive themes from the reviews. Contradicting themes were contextual themes with conflicting messages. Theoretical-analytical constructs were recommendations provided to produce Black struggle films determined by analyzing and synthesizing the constructs and literature suggestions.

Adopted Atkins et al. (2008) Quality Appraisal Form Questions

1. Is this study film critical review?
 2. Are the major critical points clearly stated?
 3. Is the approach to determining these major critical points clearly justified?
 4. Is the critique approach appropriate for elaborating on the critical points?
 5. Is the film context clearly described?
 6. Is the role of the film critic clearly described?
 7. Is the context in which the critic viewed the film and came to conclusions clearly described?
 8. Is this context appropriate for the major critical points?
 9. Is the method of data collection clearly described?
 10. Is the data collection method appropriate to the critical points?
 11. Is the method of analysis clearly described?
 12. Is the analysis appropriate for coming to the conclusion about the critical points?
 13. Are the claims made supported by sufficient evidence?
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Note. The quality appraisal form questions verify the quality of a film critic review and were answered by the author for each of the eight selected critic reviews. The adaptation to the quality appraisal question proved challenging to adopt to film reviews as many questions were not answered leaving less than stellar quality appraisal scores. However, each selected review featured contributions to the intended content being researched.

Table 1: Quality Appraisal for Critic Reviews

Results

All selected reviews had justified components with a clearly described role of the critic. All reviews provide supporting evidence for their claims on the production and distribution rollout. Critic reviews were identified with the initial identification process (see Figure 3).

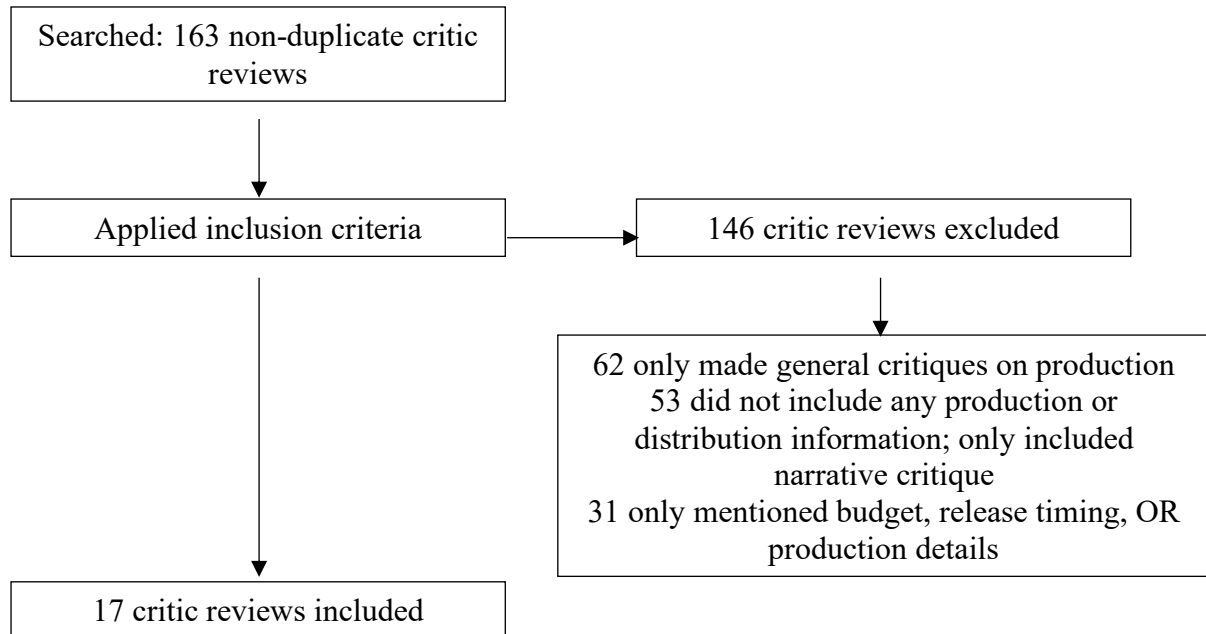


Figure 3: Flow diagram of film critique inclusion process. The diagram represents the exclusion process of identified and screened film critic reviews.

After the full text screening process, eight critic reviews were included in the synthesis review for *Selma* (Colson & DuVernay, 2014). Seven articles were from independent companies and one was from a YouTube influencer (see Table 2). Two reviews had vague mention of production development details. Six reviews from critics representing independent companies were selected for the Black lead film *Changing Lanes* (Rudin & Michell, 2002). Three critical reviews from independent companies were selected for *Welcome Home Roscoe Jenkins* (Stuber & Lee, 2008). All *Welcome Home Roscoe Jenkins* (Stuber & Lee, 2008) reviews provided relatively vague details on production development.

Film	Name	Company/Organization	Review	Film Score
Selma	Andrew O’Hehir	Salon	article	100
Selma	Grace Randolph	Beyond the Trailer	video	95
Selma	David Denby	The New Yorker	article	90
Selma	Josh Larsen	LarsenOnFilm	article	88
Selma	Michael Phillips	Chicago Tribune	article	88
Selma	Chris Hewitt	Empire	article	80
Selma	Richard Corliss	Time	article	80
Selma	Liam Lacey	The Globe and Mail (Toronto)	article	75
Changing Lanes	Robert Koehler	Variety	article	90
Changing Lanes	Mick LaSalle	SFGate	article	75
Changing Lanes	Nev Pierce	BBC	article	80
Changing Lanes	Screenit.com	ScreenIt	article	75
Changing Lanes	Desson Howe	Washington Post	article	80
Changing Lanes	Maira Macdonalds	Seattle Times	article	88
Welcome Home Roscoe Jenkins	Wesley Morris	Boston.com	article	25
Welcome Home Roscoe Jenkins	Elizabet Weitzman	Daily News	article	50
Welcome Home Roscoe Jenkins	Walter Addiego	SFGate	article	25

Note. Seventeen critic reviews were selected for analysis. This table lists the film of discussion, name of the critic, organization they represent, format of the critique, and the score they provided to the respective film.

Table 2: Selected Critic Reviews

Contextual Constructs

Four codes were determined before reviewing the identified critic reviews: budget, revenue, release timing, and picking up the project. No critic reviews mentioned the revenue of the film. Critics discussed the limited budget of \$20 million and how it was not enough to purchase the expensive rights to Dr Martin Luther King Jr.’s speeches guarded tightly by his family estate. It was also mentioned that, even the budget was not exhaustive, the film still featured a large cast of prominent Black actors willing to perform despite the low pay. A few critics believed the marketing campaign for both award season and for the general public were poor stating that “seeing Selma based on the advertising material seems like a chore; it seems like a TV movie...that’s so totally a rental and this is so not totally a rental-type of movie” (Randolph, 2014). According to the critics, Selma was released at an advantageous and meaningful time. *Selma* (Colson & DuVernay, 2014) benefited from following after the well-received *Lincoln* (Kennedy & Spielberg, 2012) – a film featuring a historical hero during a specific period of their life – and *12 Years A Slave* (McQueen, 2013) produced by the same company (Plan B Entertainment). *12 Years A Slave* (McQueen, 2013) also featured a Black American historical narrative directed by an up-and-coming Black director and featuring a predominantly Black cast, many of whom were of Black British ethnicity. The film also was released at a time of

racial hostility in the United States with the untimely deaths of Eric Garner and Michael Brown at the hands of police, the rise of the Black Lives matter movement, and contentious regulation changes to voter ID. It was also the 50th anniversary of the voting demonstrations in Selma, Alabama. Other critics discussed how the film was picked from a wandering screenplay written by Paul Webb. The director, Ava DuVernay, is a Black American filmmaker who at the time had two independent intimate character drama feature films using her skill set with her first big budget feature to ground the epic narrative of King. As studio proprietors are claimed to have agendas in their selling points, DuVernay integrated classic theatrical narrative with the support of independent, big name actor-producers including Oprah Winfrey and Brad Pitt.

The selected critics reviews did not mention the projected revenue of *Changing Lanes* (Rudin & Michell, 2002). Critics noted the film was picked up with a big budget due to its high concept nature. A few critics compared the high concept film to a recent film they felt was similar in that regard such as Sam Raimi's *A Simple Plan* (Jacks & Raimi, 1998). Critics also highlighted the new and fresh screenwriter being supported by a seasoned co-writer that built anticipation for the film. In general, critics credited the film's notability and ability to take off due to the two lead actors; the very experienced Samuel L. Jackson and the decent celebrity actor Ben Affleck: "[Changing Lanes] may put off a portion of Affleck's fan base while fully satisfying Jackson's" (Koehler, 2002, para. 1).

No critic review mentioned the budget of *Welcome Home Roscoe Jenkins* (Stuber & Lee, 2008). Only one review mentioned revenue suggesting it was as expected for this kind of film. Critics believed the project was developed primarily due to the director Malcolm D. Lee's positive track record and having a line of successful Black comedians on board. Response to the film was varied, with a few participants referring to the project as a film produced because Lee had already "gotten all the sweetness out of his system" (Weitzman, 2008, para. 2) with previous films. Critics also suggest this film ties the crude Blaxploitation humor from Lee's *Undercover Brother* (Lee & Lee, 2002) and romance charm from Lee's *The Best Man* (Carraro & Lee, 1999). Consequently, critics referred to the films content as a bit outdated. A critic explicitly stated the film "isn't the recipe for an award winner, but it will feed crowds hungry for a good time" (Weitzman, 2008, para. 2).

Contradictory Constructs

Critics mentioned the film should "sweep the Oscars" due to the stellar performances, strong direction, and social relevance. However, a few critics mentioned the lead actor and director were not nominated. These themes are not contradictory because one perspective is a projection while the other is reported, yet the disparity between critic projection and Academy nomination is notable. It is not clear why the film was not nominated, though it does reinforce the idea that the Academy Awards has biases in film types. This supports the data of Black Struggle Films receiving substantially more awards than other Black films. There were no contradictory themes for the selected Black lead film or the predominately Black film.

Theoretical-Analytical Constructs & Discussion

Critique of the production and distribution of *Selma* (Colson & DuVernay, 2014) is representative of the findings of Black filmmaking literature and findings from the data search. Just as race films were groundbreaking, this film took a nuanced, authentic approach and incorporated a predominantly Black cast and Black director. As Caddoo notes: "If Hollywood was waiting, consciously or otherwise, for a Black filmmaker to come along who could handle

this topic, then Ava DuVernay (who spent many years working as a film publicist, and has made only two previous features) was worth the wait” (2014).

As a film taking place during the Civil Rights Movement, its progressive admiration is interestingly similar to that of the improvement of Black depictions encouraged by the NAACP during the actual Civil Rights Movement (Jonas-Fowler, 2018). White guilt admiration may be a factor, however White saviorism was challenged as there are no particular White saviors depicted in the film (Bineham, 2015; McFarlane, 2015). The two closest would be James Reeb, a minister who died after traveling to Selma to fight for voting rights alongside King, and Lyndon B. Johnson (LBJ), the president who signed the Voting Rights Act. In scenes featuring King and Johnson, a buddy-film relationship appears to exist, but not consistent enough and diluted with other subplots further marginalizing LBJ’s role in the fight for justice (Vider, 2011). This marginalization of LBJ brought criticism which may be somewhat accurate or could be a response to the reduction of what should have been the White savior role. The role of the Black family was handled quite realistically and in a nuanced manner, featuring threat, infidelity, support, and openness unlike the Black sitcom era (Dyson, 2003; Jonas-Fowler, 2018). Hip-hop culture (and of course authority rebellion) is sprinkled throughout the film’s marketing material highlighting its signature track “Glory” performed by rapper and actor Common and John Legend (Motley & Henderson, 2007). The film focused on historical accounts where Black Americans faced ethnic-specific adversity lacking fantastical features and received two Academy Awards, supporting the Oscar bait notion (Culloty, 2016). Though the \$20 million budget was not extensive, the film received strong recognition and a revenue earning over \$66 million.

Unlike BSFs and predominately Black films, *Changing Lanes* (Rudin & Michell, 2002) has a high-concept for a drama thriller. Critics mentioned how the depiction of Samuel L. Jackson’s character had depth, a role rare for Black characters in films where they are the minority (Smith, 2013): “Jackson, playing the entire movie as a man on the verge of desperation and utter collapse, has an aching close-up at the end. He makes us believe, despite everything, in goodness” (Macdonald, 2002, para. 7). *Changing Lanes* (Rudin & Michell, 2002) plays like an interracial buddy film with a darker morale.

On the other hand, *Welcome Home Roscoe Jenkins* (Stuber & Lee, 2008) lacked critical commentary; in fact, many critics were rather dismissive. The film’s childlike humor and satirically flat characters were continually compared to Black minstrelsy by critics (Acham, 2004). A more in-depth look into the origins of the genre come from critics’ comparisons to Lee’s previous films *The Best Man* (Carraro & Lee, 1999) (romantic drama), *Undercover Brother* (Lee & Lee, 2002) (Blaxploitation comedy), and *Roll Bounce* (Tillman & Lee, 2005) (music drama). Many inspiration of the Black sitcom era of the 1980s and 1990s inspired the plot beats, character types, and romantic interests in this family-oriented over-the-top comedy (Dyson, 2003). Lee’s work on *The Best Man* (Carraro & Lee, 1999) debuted during the end of this era. The post-Blaxploitation elements of both *Welcome Home Roscoe Jenkins* (Stuber & Lee, 2008) and *Undercover Brother* (Lee & Lee, 2002) harness the fighting and comedy integrated with the Black pride and triumph motifs of the Blaxploitation era films (Robinson, 1998). The character of Roscoe resembles the common Blaxploitation protagonist of the newly middle-class (in this case upper-middle class) Black protagonist returning to the working-class country he abandoned (Cha-Jua, 2008). Hip-hop music and culture were not explicitly used throughout the film, unlike many of its contemporaries (Motley & Henderson, 2007). Instead, *Welcome Home Roscoe Jenkins* (Stuber & Lee, 2008) used the soul, funk, and R&B genres throughout the soundtrack to resemble a traditional Black American family reunion. The usage

of these musical genres increased its resemblance to Blaxploitation films (Robinson, 1998). As predicted by a critic, the film did not receive many awards. However, it is unclear if this was due to the lack of technical and nontechnical achievement of the film or if it is due to the genre choice.

Limitations

Due to the use of quality appraisal and critic reviews, findings are insufficiently generalizable. Online film critics' credibility varies. It was challenging accessing online reviews as many of the pages have been taken down or the link did not function, particularly with the two older films. There could be differences between critical perception and awarding of films across the timespan that remained undetected.

Conclusion

BSFs offer many beneficial attributes such as introducing new, great talent in front of and behind the camera. Historical BSFs also introduced significant moments from the past that helped shape new generations and promote new talent. On the other hand, BSFs often portray the Black experience with a focus on deficit, rather than from positive perspectives. This deficit portrayal leads to the misrepresentation of contextual conditions and existing privileges. Encompassing only a fourth of all Black films created, the quantity of the films is not necessarily the issue, rather the lack of critically qualifying Black films. General and representative critical and production support is needed for Black films in existing genres, as well in fantasy genres.

This review answered many assumptions on the production of Black films yet raised even more questions. There were clear disparities between critic reviews and audience reviews, particularly with Black comedies, leaving much to be explored particularly in the area of scoring where, more often than not, critic scores averaged much lower than audience scores. Additionally, a substantial amount of the awards received by films were at Black competitions. Further investigation is required to clearly detect the weight that Black awards have on the majority of the identified Black films and how many awards the films receive without these underrepresented minority platforms. Many Black lead films featured the same handful of Black leads such as Will Smith, Samuel L. Jackson, and Denzel Washington. Often, predominately Black film featured large concentrations of notable Black actors. As discussed with *Selma* (Colson & DuVernay, 2014), what are the implications of being able to cast so many notable Black actors in miniscule roles, and why isn't there a more rapid turnaround rate for new talent.

Future investigations within this case study plan to observe the other areas in the production including pre-production, writing, talent scouting, directing, marketing and distribution. Additionally, future studies plan to determine trends and changes in the types of Black films developed throughout the last 21 years.

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Corresponding Author: Robert Cummings

Email: robert.cummings@morehouse.edu