Hollywood—The Power of Representation

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For whoever is familiar with Ryan Murphy’s work since Glee (2009)—which made him famous to the big public—his new work’s references to themes like discrimination and minorities’ representation in the media won’t be anything new. Anyway, Hollywood—landed on Netflix earlier this year with a season composed of seven episodes—is an exquisite piece of work born by the idea of reconstructing a “what if” Hollywood of the 50s. Throughout the story, fiction mixes with real events and personalities of the time, giving them different lives, stories, and even opportunities to have more relevant roles in demolishing social prejudices and stereotypes.

Hollywood deals with the vicissitudes of a group of actors, directors, producers, and writers who first desperately try to have a chance of working in the big movie industry and then—after being hired by a fictional production house named Ace Studios—try to realize the first movie in history (titled Meg) with a Black leading actress, a Black homosexual writer and an half-Asian director. Meg is the story of a young actress who fails to become the star she has always wanted to be and decides to commit suicide jumping from the Hollywood sign. The movie is fictional, but based on the true story of the late actress Peg Entwistle (on the topic see Zeruk 2013).

As these facts are narrated, a series of topics regarding gender, race, and sexuality related discrimination are disseminated throughout the episodes, starting with a special attention to Asian representation in Hollywood productions and the exclusion of Asian actors and actresses from leading roles, in Episode 2.

Asian lead, Half-Asian director. Who do you think would go see this picture? [...] They don’t want a leading lady who looks like me. That’s the only thing the audience cares about. You need proof? My entire career... oversexed, opium-addled courtesans, dangerously exotic, Far Eastern temptresses. That’s what they wanted to see from someone who looks like me. (Episode 2, 6:06)
To embody the issue, Murphy uses the true story of Anna May Wong: indeed, the American-Chinese actress—the first one in the industry (see Leong 2015, 57-105)—was the victim of a terrible injustice when, in 1935, she was rejected as leading actress in the movie The Good Earth because of her origins (Chan 2003, 258-260). The most upsetting side of it was that the movie actually dealt with Chinese characters, but for the leading part they chose a White actress (Luise Rainer), who won the Oscar for the role afterwards. Rainer was the first woman ever winning two consecutive Oscars (The Great Ziegfeld, 1936; The Good Earth, 1937), which made her both a symbol of White supremacism in the movie industry and a key figure for women representation and recognition at the time.

During episode 2, it is explicitly said that the movie was a big success especially because of Luise Rainer being White. Choosing Anna May Wong in order to give a better representation of Asian people on the screen or to reward her talent would have led to a failure, because of the public expectations to see only White actors in pictures.

At some point of episode 2, Raymond Ainsley (Darren Criss), the half-Asian director, also talks about what could actually be the main theme of the series: the real aim of the movie industry and the power of films on people’s minds and lives.

[...] sometimes I think folks in this town don't really understand the power they have. Movies don’t just show us how the world is, they show us how the world can be and if we change the way that movies are made, you take a chance and you make a different kind of story, I think you can change the world. (Episode 2, 12:20)

So, Ryan Murphy is not just trying to change the world, but more specifically to rewrite history, showing his public how our society could have been better if we accepted minorities representation when we first had the chance to do it. It is another character, Archie Coleman (Jeremy Pope), a Black and homosexual screenwriter, who summarize the series’ intent to the viewer in the clearest way possible, again in episode 2: “See I wanna take the story of Hollywood and give it a rewrite” (27:08).

The absence of minorities representation in the 50s was not just a widespread discrimination, it was institutionalized. It is Ace—head of the Ace Studios—to explain it to the viewers at the beginning of episode 4: “Have either of you fuckwits ever heard of the Hays Code?” (4:34). The Hays Code took its name from Will Hays, an American politician who was also the president of the MPPDA (Motion Picture Producers and Distributors of America). Implemented under the pressure of religious organizations, the code was made by a list of rules written and applied to film production with the aim of preserving the public morality between the 30s and the 60s. These rules implied a strict abolition of any form of repellent subject matter, that is to say any representation of deviant sexual behaviours (which also meant homosexuality at the time or even interracial relationships), anti-national feelings (for example the wrong
use of the American flag), as well as celebratory representation of homicide, drugs and alcohol intake, and, in general, attitude viewed as “immoral” (Black 1989).

When Ace finds out that his staff is trying to produce a movie with a Black protagonist and her White love interest, written by a Black homosexual writer and directed by an half-Asian man, he is sure that this will cost his studio to sink for breaking the Hays Code. He will eventually accept to produce the movie but with some precautions: another writer will have to sign the script, which will have to be revised in order to result as up to standards as possible. After Ace has a heart-attack that almost kills him, it will be his wife, Avis Amberg (Patti LuPone) to become the head of the studio and take the risk to produce Meg without incurring in any censorship. The decision isn’t easy for Avis either. While her husband was worried about the future of the studio, she cares more about her staff’s safety. In particular, she fears that everyone who is working not only in the movie but also in the whole studio, could become a target for the Ku Klux Klan. To make her change her mind takes nobody less than a former first lady: Eleanor Roosevelt (Harriet Sansom Harris). In Ryan Murphy’s fictional Hollywood, Mrs. Roosevelt is one of Avis’ dearest friends, who decides to visit the studio right after hearing that there was the possibility to see a Black leading actress in a movie. When in the Ace Studios with the other two producers of Meg, Eleanor gives a moving speech which finally convince Avis to do the right thing.

What it might mean to a dirt poor little black girl living in a shanty, in some cotton town where she’s told she’s free, but really her life is no better than that of her grandparents who were the owned property of another human being. Think about her, what it would mean to see herself up there on that screen. Vaunted, dignified, valued. [...] I used to believe that good government could change the world. Well, I don’t know that I believe that anymore. However, what you do [...] can change the world. (Episode 4, 44:16)

She is speaking not only about the importance of representation especially for minorities and excluded groups of people, but she is also underlining once more what Ryan Murphy is trying to do with this show: proving that the big screen has and always had the power to actually change the world. Showing a Black girl as a normal person, with values and flaws, with an interesting story, feelings and human characteristics could have helped people in the 50s to see every Black person around them as equal human beings.

However, there is a more complex conversation to make about representation and particularly about wrong representation. This discourse is highly connected to the character of Camille. Camille Washington (Laura Harrier) is a young, Black, extremely talented actress who only had the chance to play the part of the maid until her boyfriend, Raymond—director of Meg—involves her in the casting for the leading role.
What Ryan Murphy is trying to denounce is the tendency of masking Black people discrimination with Black people representation. We can observe this phenomenon even in our age, noticing that it is really hard to find a Black main character, both male or female, in Hollywood productions. Nevertheless, there is often a Black companion (Artz 1998), and we also get to see black people portrayed as disadvantaged or criminals quite usually (see, among many, Covington 2010). (The proposal of a complete different set of roles for Black characters is possibly one of the reasons why when Marvel’s Black Panther came out in the cinemas, it broke every existing record in the history of superheros film adaptations).

Anyway, Camille is very aware of the types of role she is destined to play in Hollywood, but still hopes that someone in the industry will notice her talent and decide to give her a part worthy of her skills. Raymond’s involvement in her casting is not a recommendation: everyone in the Meg’s cast loves her interpretation of the role and thinks she is the best person to play it.

The habit of portraying Black people in secondary or tertiary roles—and often in servile positions—in movies has helped consolidating and perpetrating the idea that Black people are inferiors human beings for years, and that is also what the Meg’s crew is trying to fight. This issue is highly discussed in the last episode of the series. In fact, in the last, moving episode of Hollywood, we see the whole crew of Meg going to the Oscars ceremony. Earlier in the series, Hattie McDaniel (Queen Latifah), told Camille about her terrible experience at her first and last Oscars ceremony: even though she had an official invitation from the Academy with a reserved seat in the front row (as a nominated actress in the awards), the security at the hotel entrance didn’t let her in because they had a no coloured policy. They suggested that she should wait outside and, if she had won, someone would have called her. Feeling already insecure and out of place in that temple of white supremacism, Hattie decided to give up and lost her unique possibility to live every actor’s dream. Therefore, she begged Camille not to repeat her mistake and to fight for her right to be in the front row as a leading actress, but especially as a human being having the same rights as everyone else in the room. As Hattie anticipated, the security of the Academy reserves to Camille the same racist behaviour, but the young woman decides to stand still, with the help of the rest of the cast, and finally succeeds in sitting at the place that was rightfully reserved for her.

What Queen Latifah’s character narrates in the series is actually happened to the real Hattie McDaniel, who is however protagonist of a more complicated and controversial situation regarding the aforementioned issue of misrepresentation. She surely has the merit of being one of the first Black women on the screen and the first one winning an Oscar as Best Supporting Actress, but her representation of Black people and more specifically Black women is not one of the best (Sturtevant, 1999). Indeed, she received the nomination for her role in Gone with the wind (1939), where she portrayed a highly stereotyped Black woman (a maid with a strong African
accent). She interpreted the same kind of role several times during her career, perpetrating, according to some, an indissoluble connection between Black people and slavery. Often represented as maids and servants at best, African American women in particular have had to negotiate between being offered stereotyped roles and trying to represent their community (Wanzo 2006). With the strong belief that an exclusively discriminatory representation is worse than no representation at all, a lot of associations led by people of color decided to distance themselves from her. Moreover, she never openly supported the protest movements for the civil rights of Black people, and she rejected the idea that she was damaging her community instead of creating more space and acceptance for them. As a matter of fact Ann Rutherford, a colleague of her, told in an interview how some black friends of Hattie were disgrutled by her availability to portray black women always as servants of the whites, and that she was used to respond “I’d rather play a maid than be a maid” (AP 2006).

Going back to the last episode of the series, it is in this finale that the true power of representation is portrayed. It shows us the impact representation can have on people’s life, especially the marginalized one. When the medias never show you someone who looks like you and, therefore, you can identify with, it is easy to think that your life does not matter like the other ones and that there is no way for you to change the situation. In her book Keywords for Media Studies, Lisa Henderson noted that “in the early 1990s, critic Patricia A. Turner (1992) recalled her family’s excitement, when she was a child in the 1960s, whenever a black actor was going to appear on television. It was an occasion for a long-distance phone call to alert family members far away, a gesture usually reserved for births and deaths” (2017, 174). This exact scene is shown when Anna May Wong, who got to play a small part in Meg, wins the Oscar for Best Supporting Actress: an Asian family sit by the radio, impatiently waiting for the winner name, showed while cheering and crying of happiness for Wong’s victory.

Another similar sequence is the one where Archie accepts his Oscar for Best Original Screenplay. While the writer gives his speech, the camera shows the viewer a young black man listening to the Oscars and realizing that a black man has just won an award. The total upheaval in his eyes is peculiar, and soon he gets on his knees, almost praying to the radio that what he is hearing is true. It is in this moment that Archie closes the discussion on representation started in episode 1:

> And to everybody listening, your story is important. Don’t go thinking otherwise, don’t let your story go untold. You are important, Your life has value. You go out and you live your life with your head held high, and you tell your story, ’cause I’m proof that there are folks out there who want to hear it. (Episode 7, 33:14)

After these two very symbolic scenes, something else happens: Camille wins the Oscar for Best Leading Actress. In a few, fast, fragments, we see a Black family in the same
position of the Asian one, but the viewer can notice that they are in a smaller room and that they are wearing very humble clothes, revealing of their financially lacking condition: they are probably farmers living in the South. The public sees a little girl literally crossing her fingers for Camille, and the disconcert in everyone's face when she wins.

Like Archie, Camille gives a moving speech who resamble the series main message:

When I was a little girl walking down the street, I was called a lot of things. "Movie star" wasn't one of them. My daddy worked in the coal mines, but every time he could spare a quarter, I'd escape to the movies. I loved looking up at that screen and I kept waiting to see someone show up onscreen who looked like me. A girl who was smart, and strong, and glamorous. Thank you to the Academy for making sure that no little girl staring up at that screen will ever again be told that there are limits to what you can achieve. (Episode 7, 36:53)

In conclusion, Hollywood appears like some sort of allucination, where discrimination and racism don't just disappear but are treated differently by the ones who have the power to fight them. It is not only a critic to the 50s movie industry but to the Hollywood of our age, where Black and Asian people, women and all the other excluded categories, still have to fight to find their place in pictures and, therefore, in our society.

BIBLIOGRAPHIC REFERENCES


