

THE QUARRY

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Adjust Your Sets

Chinese filmmakers recently made their first ever foray into the International movie-making scene. *The Great Wall* is an action and fantasy movie directed by Zhang Yimou, an acclaimed Chinese director. The cast features young Chinese stars Wang Junkai, Lu Han, Jing Tian and Andy Lau as the supporting cast. The lead of the film – a film funded, produced and directed by Chinese individuals, starring a Chinese supporting cast, filmed and set exclusively in China – is Matt Damon. Matt Damon as in *Ocean's Eleven* Matt Damon. Matt Damon as in *about a hundred of those Bourne action movies* Matt Doman. Matt Damon as in *very, very white, so white that he probably eats casserole at least once a week* Matt Damon. Damon responded at New

York's Comic-Con, 'it was a f---king bummer... When I think of whitewashing I think of Chuck Connors when he played Geronimo. And look there are more nuanced versions of it and I do try to be sensitive of that.'ⁱ

Matt Damon's role as white savior is nothing new in film. For decades movies have not only featured overwhelmingly white actors, they have also cast white actors to play people of colour. From Mickey Rooney's vaguely Asian Mr. Yunioshi in *Breakfast at Tiffany's* to Jake Gyllenhaal's portrayal of Middle Eastern royalty in *Prince of Persia*, whitewashing runs rampant. The 2016 Hollywood Diversity Report believes that this casting has become the norm. In the report, it is detailed that between 2011 and 2014 protagonists were white in more than 80% of films.ⁱⁱ During this time, casts were always predominantly white with most films featuring a cast with only 10% or less people of colour.ⁱⁱⁱ Gender was also imbalanced with roughly 74% of films featuring men as leads during this time.^{iv} What has caused this massive underrepresentation of women and minorities in film? If you ask Hollywood you'll be met with a huge range of answers and a whole lot of awkward stammering.

Actress Viola Davis, star of the wildly successful television series *How to Get Away with Murder* and a physical manifestation of the #blackexcellence twitter trend, believes that the issue extends beyond recognition through awards. 'The problem is not with the Oscars, the problem is with the Hollywood movie-making system... How many black films are being produced every year? ... The Oscars are not really the issue. It's a symptom of a much greater disease.'^v Michael Caine, a self-described *bourgeois nightmare*, has made comments suggesting that diversity shouldn't be forced. 'You can't just say, "Oh I'm gonna vote for him, he's not very good, but he's black" ... you've got to give a good performance.'^{vi} What Caine's comments are indicative of, is how a dangerous disregard for the historical treatment of minorities continues to disadvantage POC actors and actresses today. With already overwhelmingly white casts, it's understandable that minority actors are frustrated when the few roles reserved for them are instead handed to white people.

So why are people of colour endangered in film? Why do moviemakers continue to believe that white led and predominantly male casts are a guarantee of cinematic success? Ridley Scott's *Exodus: Gods and Kings* was completely overwhelmed with criticism as the film, set throughout the Middle East and Africa,

featured a wholly white lead cast slathered in fake tan like an Aussie teen on schoolies. Scott defended his choice by saying, ‘I can’t mount a film of this budget, where I have to rely on tax rebates in Spain, and say that my lead actor is Mohammad so-and-so from such-and-such. I’m just not going to get it financed.’^{vii} Despite showing an immense amount of cultural insensitivity Scott’s opinion supports how the problem has been institutionalized. Still, Scott maybe should have considered caring even a *miniscule* amount about the historical accuracy of his movie, which had a \$140 million dollar budget didn’t even make half of that domestically. It only ended up bringing in \$65 million.^{viii}

Is there a direct correlation between whitewashing and a movie’s financial failure? *Pan*, a live-action prequel to the famous *Peter Pan* drew criticism after they cast Rooney Mara, a white actress, as Tiger Lily, a Native American character. Whilst Mara defended her choice to play the role, ‘I feel like there really hasn’t been a proper interpretation of the character’^{ix}, critics and audiences canned the film. Even Hugh Grant, Australia’s greatest export, couldn’t save the movie, with it only earning back \$35 million domestically of its \$150 million budget.^x Whilst it did make a final international total of \$128 million, this doesn’t make up for the total budget or the extra marketing budget, which has not been disclosed.

A departure from the action genres was *Aloha*. The choice to cast Emma Stone, who played Allison Ng, a character who was a quarter Chinese and a quarter Hawaiian who instead looked like a British person two months into winter, was heavily criticised. The film only made back \$26 million globally of its \$37 million budget.^{xi} The 2014 film *The Lone Ranger* starred Jonny Depp, notable white man and dog smuggler, as the Native American Tonto. A poor casting choice? Definitely. Worsened by poor writing? Absolutely. Throughout the film Depp spoke in disjointed sentences such as, ‘do not touch rock. Rock cursed’ and ‘it better you not hit him. Him plenty weak from journey.’ The movie domestically made back \$89 million of its \$219 million budget,^{xii} which was presumably a nice change of pace for Native American activists who are still struggling to change the name of the Washington Redskins.

So why is there a perception that white-washed and non-diverse films are successful? *Star Wars: The Force awakens* is perhaps the greatest piece of proof that diversity is not a roadblock to success. *The Force Awakens* was already due to be a

financial success, but critics praised the fact that of the new trio of protagonists, not a single one of them was a white male. The LA Times lauded the casting choices; ‘Part of the power of "Star Wars" movies has been how they have invited generations of audiences to imagine themselves as heroic characters in the fantastical, detailed world George Lucas conceived nearly 40 years ago. In 2015 — spoiler alert — it is not only white males who get to harness the power of the Force.’^{xiii}

When Star Wars introduced aspiring Jedi master Rey, young girls felt welcome in a space usually reserved for men, despite the fact that a woman, Mary Shelley, created the genre. When Finn pulled off his storm-trooper helmet, black children felt that they could be heroes in a world that was, until recently, overwhelmingly white. When Oscar Isaac flew his X-Wing into the Starkiller Base and completely destroyed budding Sith Lord and continual disappointment to his mother Kylo Ren’s dreams, Latinx children were reminded that they have the capacity for greatness. And the films showcasing of diversity certainly paid in dividends. Whilst it was always set to be a box office success, the total earnings of over 2 billion, for a film with a budget of 245 million, was aided by the positive press surrounding the casting choices.^{xiv}

Despite the overwhelming success of Star Wars, both financially and creatively, film is still being left behind in regards to diversity. This year’s newest blockbuster and to-be-expected flop *Ben Hur* features a predominantly white cast despite the Middle Eastern setting. Similarly, *Gods of Egypt* only just made back its production budget, despite its token casting of African-American Chadwick Boseman, scene-stealer of *Captain America: Civil War*. Ground has been made in diversifying casts on new forms of media. Viewers have applauded Netflix’s self-produced content and the lengths taken in diversifying casting. 2015s *Sense8* featured a main cast with a transgender woman and tech guru, a Kenyan man trying to cure his ill mother, a Korean businesswoman and kick boxer, an Indian pharmaceutical worker disinterested in her arranged marriage and a gay Mexican film star in a long-term relationship with his boyfriend. The diversity of the cast and the effort taken to film at locations all around the world made the series a success.

Also released in 2016 was the sci-fi hit *Stranger Things*, which was celebrated for its portrayal of female characters. It featured Eleven, an earnest young telepath, Joy, a mother desperate to find her missing son and Nancy, a gun toting teen on the warpath to avenge her friend’s death. The three main female characters were

applauded for having their own emotional and fleshed out storylines that were not reliant on male intervention to progress the plot. The women were also given their own agency throughout the eight episodes. When Jonathon, elder brother of the missing Will Byers, realized that Nancy was a better shot than him he quickly handed the gun to her. Chief of Police Hopper never wrote off Joy's belief that her son was alive as her being 'crazy'. Mike, Lucas and Dustin never once questioned befriending Eleven because she was a girl. In fact, women go on to save the day. Nancy orchestrates the plan to trap and wound the show's monster, the Demogorgon. Joy ventures into the alternate universe titled, the 'Upside Down', a horrific dystopia, to save her son Will. Eleven ultimately destroys the monster by sacrificing herself and saving her friends in the process.

Netflix's dedication to diverse characterization and casting has led to the generation of a great deal of exciting content. In the next year alone they've already slotted a sizable list of shows. The revamp of *Gilmore Girls* will be released in late 2016, and is known for its sundry portrayal of women. *A Series of Unfortunate Events* will also be released in late 2016, featuring Indian and Black actors in lead roles. Season two of *Sense8* is set to air in 2017, along with Marvel's *Luke Cage*, which will showcase a predominantly African American cast. Also rumoured for a 2017 release are season two of *The Get Down*, season two of Aziz Ansari's *Master of None*, the continuation of *Orange is the New Black*, part two of *Stranger Things* and Marvel's *The Defenders*, which has a main cast of superheroes comprising of a disabled man, female rape survivor, and Luke Cage, as well as an immensely diverse secondary cast.

Why is a dedication to diversity in film and media necessary? Film theorists Laura Mulvey and Anna Backman Rogers assert that film is a reflection of the world and as such should be honest in its portrayal of the human experience. 'If the ethics of film are to do with understanding how to live, how to die, how to speak, and how to listen – then surely difference, and understanding, respecting and recognizing that difference, needs to lie at the heart of that thinking.'^{xv} In some circumstances an authentic reproduction of our world can be quantified. Hailed as an example of feminism ruining the sanctity of iconic movie making, the Bechdel Test was created to highlight the inequity of development given to male and female characters in film. Critics of the test have argued that it sets an unnecessarily rigid standard for creators and believe that the test is incompatible with iconic moviemaking. So what does a

movie need to do to satisfy the Bechdel Test? Two named women in the film have to talk about something other than a man. Once.

No, the other elements of the test haven't been forgotten. That's it.

American Beauty, *Requiem for a Dream*, *Donnie Darko*, *Jaws*, *Pulp Fiction*, *The Godfather Part II*, *Star Wars: The Force Awakens* – these are just some of the movies that pass the Bechdel test, most of which are acclaimed. Many of them went on to win Oscars. *Jaws* won three Oscars and a Golden Globe. *American Beauty* won five Oscars and three Golden Globes. It is curious that there is a belief that the Bechdel test is placing unattainable standards upon filmmaking. It doesn't seem like too much to ask that two female characters in *Jaws*, whose names we happen to know, have a single conversation about the giant shark gobbling up children and scantily clad teenagers. It isn't too much of a burden, to expect that at some point, while saving the galaxy from a tantrum-throwing adult male who fundamentally misunderstands the beliefs of his grandfather, that Leia and Rey have a quick chat about how they're going to destroy the Starkiller base.

Female characters should not be used as props and devices for the development of their male counterparts. If filmmakers are meant to accurately reflect society, then they should do so by showing women that they are more substantial than an untimely death at the hands of their partners arch nemesis. To do otherwise is dangerous, and perpetuates societal beliefs that women exist as an extension to men. Similarly, theorists Carole Gerster and Laura Zlogar believe that images of race depicted in films can contribute to the disenfranchisement of ethnic minorities. 'Hollywood learned its lesson... Euro-American audience consumed a steady stream of images whose function was to marginalize African Americans, Asian Americans, Latinos/as and American Indians.'^{xvi} In today's shrinking world issues regarding gender, sexuality and ethnicity are no longer separate. The rise of intersectional feminism across cultures has meant that critiques of racial diversity in films go hand in hand with feminist critiques. The need for representation is universal.

To not care about honestly portraying the world in media is dangerous. Visibility creates attainability. It allows a young girl who watches the revamp of *Ghostbusters* to imagine herself existing in a space traditionally reserved for men. It allows a young *black* girl who sees the trailer for *Hidden Figures* to believe that her

dream to work for NASA isn't impossibility. It allows a child of colour who watches *Luke Cage* or the upcoming *Justice League* or *Black Panther* to see themselves as a hero. When it is normalized for children to see those who they identify with as heroes, they themselves will grow up believing that they can be the hero of their own life. Film and television is one of the most easily digestible sources of information, and informs our opinions and understandings of the world in which we belong. It has immense power in shaping our interactions with one another, both positive and negative. Surely we want film and television to influence the world to be more tolerant, peaceful and compassionate. Unfortunately, we still have a lot of work to do before diversity in film is universal. Thanks Matt Damon.

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