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PWR 2-2
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Research Proposal

Illuminating the Dark Continent:

Portrayals of Africa in Hollywood

The United States still believes in the Dark Continent. While Sub-Saharan African nations won their independence about four decades ago, the mindset in which our perception of Africa was born still lingers. Africa seems to be either a desolate and dangerous destination for the most courageous of humanitarians, or a wild and exotic game park, worth visiting only for safaris and curios made by faceless locals. But what's common to the cultural perspective of the average American is a basic lack of any solid understanding of Africa. What happens when the bleak images of poverty and AIDS in the news combined with the exoticized representations of Africans in movies create the sole basis for our knowledge of Africa?

In my research project, I will explore the representation of Africa in Hollywood to better grasp the implications of these cultural messages. Using the framework of postcolonial anthropology, I will examine how Africans are portrayed both as a cultural unit and as individuals. I want to explore the underlying themes, assumptions, and illusions built into Hollywood's construction of Africa and discover how they subtly infiltrate our perception. Through my analysis, I expect to find that these representations establish Africans as the "other," an anthropological concept that describes the xenophobic tendency to differentiate and distance the humanity of outsiders from that of our own. I would further like to prove that this process of "othering" is depoliticizing

and dehumanizing, an affect that allows the US to remain apathetic about injustice, poverty, violence, and disease in Africa.

My research will focus on three different films, from three different eras, which appeal to three different audiences.

Movies for analysis: the Africanized royal in *Coming to America*, Disney on safari in *The Lion King*, and humanistic drama in *Hotel Rwanda*. (Source: find-your-poster.com)

First, I will examine “Coming to America,” an eighties-era comedy geared toward African-American audiences, to illuminate how postcolonial views of Africa still pervade our thinking and perpetuate Eurocentric value judgments. Then, I will jump to the 1994 cartoon, “The Lion King,” to see how Africa

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To see the three movie posters, visit <http://find-your-poster.com>

is exoticized as a locale and how Africans are caricatured as a people. Finally, I will look at the recent “Hotel Rwanda,” a critically-acclaimed film in which an African is portrayed as the moral center of the film. This film will represent both a point of comparison and a point of departure from which I can explore the potential futures for Africa in Hollywood in relation to current trends in Hollywood, current events in Africa, and current means of mass media in the United States.

My analyses of these primary sources will be informed by a number of secondary sources, including articles and books that offer analyses of the notion of the “other” and cultural pigeonholing. I will build on Liisa Malkki’s description of how the transnational imagination exacerbates cultural differences into species-like ethnicities. Rounding out my anthropological arsenal will be postcolonial theorists such as Frantz Fanon, Megan Vaughan, and Benedict Anderson. These authors will deepen my discussion on our cultural processes of distancing and also broaden my understanding of postcolonial phenomena.

My secondary sources will also include newspaper reviews, pop culture commentary, and box office statistics, to highlight public response to and dialogue with the portrayals that I present. While I do not plan on making a definitive definition of the causal relationship between Hollywood portrayals and cultural cognition, contextualizing these films will shed some light on how this relationship works. These sources will also help give my analysis a chronological structure that will demonstrate a progression. Both attitudes of political correctness and levels of global awareness have changed dramatically in the last twenty years, and this context lends a rich timeliness to my topic. I will find original reviews and reactions to each of the films through comprehensive databases that offer news sources dating back decades.

I hope to explore innovative ways of presenting my research using the multi-media technology in the “smart” classroom. Showing clips from the movies I analyze will serve not only to illustrate my claims but also to keep the audience engaged in the presentation. By allocating one film for each plasma screen, I will be able to make

visually-organized comparisons that will physically juxtapose the images as I am outlining my analysis on the larger screen in the front of the room.

Once I have begun my research, I expect my to find more nuanced angles to my topic. In particular, I will pay attention to the representation of children, sexuality, and religion. The representation of children could be relevant if interpreted as a move to infantilize or ossify African culture. The latter two themes could gesture to reverberations of colonial perceptions of the African as primitive and sub-human; the colonial pathologization of the African was often “proved” by African sexuality and informed by perceived practices of witchcraft. I expect these angles to deepen my analysis, and possibly refocus my research question and hypothesis.

To challenge my position as a Western researcher immersed in American culture, I have deliberately chosen to analyze movies that I have already watched as a casual viewer and count among my favorite all-time movies. While viewing these primary sources, I must consider my own biases, subjectivity, and experiences to factor them into my analysis in an honest manner. Feminist anthropologist Donna Haraway describes this stance as a “situated knowledge,” in which the perspective may be partial, but is objective in its embodiment of a true perspective. She celebrates this position as one that illuminates the very relationships that it studies. I plan to use her theory to understand my own processes as I watch each film and try to use these reactions in my analysis to better understand the rhetorical appeals of each of the films.

As the political and economic situations worsen in Africa, we must confront our cultural understanding of the continent. We must confront the continent’s colonial legacy and the lingering notion of Africans as the different, dangerous “other.” As Hollywood

begins to flirt with the notion of faithful portrayals of Africans, we must understand how this shift can change not only our cultural comprehension, but also attitude towards the once dark continent. Only once we truly understand and respect the humanity of the “other,” can we recognize and realize international human rights.

Biography

Molly Cunningham is a sophomore planning to double major in Cultural and Social Anthropology and English. After spending time in East Africa, she has become interested in exploring cultural definitions of the orphan within the community and family in light of postcolonialism as well as the AIDS pandemic. She is currently planning a summer research project in Tanzania to do ethnographic research on this topic. Cunningham is also interested in the politics of humanitarian aid and the interplay between community and international donors. Involved in fundraising for a Kenyan orphanage, she hopes to deconstruct the meanings and attitudes that shape the nature and determine the amount of foreign aid going into Africa. She hopes to use this PWR 2 course as a means to expanding her thinking on this topic as well as learning to convey her findings to wider audiences.