
African American And Film Industry

The film industry in the world has come a long way. Since the first motion pictures were made and “The Last Machine” created, the world of film making has continued growing. In this growth, different parties have played critical roles, and one of the most neglected ones is that played by the Black Americans. The apparent ignorance of their role in the early days of the industry can be associated with the fact that at the time, racial bias and segregation on the basis of color was rampant in the United States. The archiving of the history of the film industry was therefore, mainly, a preserve of the majority in the US, who are the whites. Notable individuals such as Oscar Micheaux had their work go without being recognized until recently when the history of his work has been reevaluated and his films been restored in the United States.

As such, researching the role of African Americans in the film industry during the silent period and in the transition to sound changes the way one thinks about the film industry as a uniformed development that – in itself – did not borrow heavily from the social dynamics of the day. This research addresses these issues in light of Oscar Micheaux’s work amidst other research sources to identify the point where the information publicly about the history of filming meets the African Americans and their input to the field.

To begin with the history of filming, different films that expound on this rich history are assessed. First of them is “The Last Machine Episode 1 - Space and Time Machine” (2015). The film starts with the oldest moving pictures from persons such as the Lumia brothers and Thomas Edison. Watching the film, what strikes the mind of the viewer is the efforts that went into creating the films. The cameras were underdeveloped but developed for their time, and they captured the minds of the viewers. In another film “Cinema Europe I: Where It All Began” (2012), the film gives a good view of the development of silent comedy from the French and filmmakers of the early 19th century. Up to this point, it is clear that no black producers are brought to the limelight yet as the American film production industry is yet to be brought to focus.

It stands out that the demand for the films was driven hugely by the masses who sook the excitement brought by suspense and uncertainties. This pushed producers all the more to come up with different concepts. When the film industry went into the United States, it borrowed hugely from acts and cinematics. At the time, filmmakers had learned the art of editing films to further augment simple films with advanced effects.

When the fil got to the United States, African Americans also joined their counterparts in contributing to the development of art. Their films were mainly targeted towards the people of color and their films were often referred to as “Race films”. The race films were produced between 1910 and 1950 and as producers, the African American producers had a distinctive practice community who were the recipients of their work of art.

For most mainstream filmmakers that targeted the white population, and which were not race-specific, so much of their work still remains to this day and they were effectively documented by those who came after them. Unfortunately, for the African American filmmakers, their works

were not properly kept. As a result, just a handful of their films actually remain today. The history of the African American input is therefore deduced from all documents that were produced by the race film industry at the time. These documents include posters, theater programs, and notes written by the filmmakers and their contemporaries and advertisements in newspapers.

In the recent past years, historians in the field of film making have gone to every length to give a glimpse of the black American input in the film industry. From this research, it is apparent that the earliest forms of black community films were made by the African American movements that looked to lift their communities up and hence advocated for this uplift through the films that they made. Institutes such as the Hampton and Tuskegee contributed immensely to the creation of the movies with the likes of "A Trip to Tuskegee" and "A Day at Tuskegee". These movies were created by black producers to voice the issues facing the African American communities with a view to uplifting them.

At the time, there was a widely known item in the creation of movies that tried to portray African Americans in a bad light. One of these "The Birth of a Nation", a widely opposed movie by the black community that was produced in 1915 tried to portray the black people as devilish individuals who only cared for sexual satisfaction and raped the innocent individuals in the society. On the other hand, it went ahead and portrayed the white supremacists, the Ku Klux Klan in good light. This showed a distaste for African Americans and their portrayal in the then white directed films was negative. This could be associated with the fact that racism was a huge problem at the time and it affected almost all facets of the industry, including films. Due to racism, there were theaters for the black populations and those of the white populations and producers appealed to their viewers differently.

With such films as the "Birth of a Nation", the racial segregation that needed to be bridged only got wider as negative perceptions of either race, especially by the white producers, were instilled into their audiences. Up to this point in time, the image of the African American was tainted and going forward to modern times, one would think that the advent of the film industry brought the much-needed bridge between cultures.