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Princess Politics: The Postmodern Movement to Immobilization

Times of destruction and sadness often warrant a change in human thought and interaction. After the events of the Holocaust and WWII, artists and thinkers transformed ideas to incorporate the experience of marginalized groups across the world. This movement of inclusionary thought came to be known as postmodernism. Postmodernism is even relevant paying homage to Disney animation studios with their multi-cultural Disney princess franchise. In 2009, Disney released *The Princess and the Frog* with the first black princess, Tiana. The setting, depiction of characters, and theme of the film are covertly racist, but racist all the same, lending itself to the solidity that racist thought still exists even behind the blanket of postmodern thought.

The setting is Jim Crow Louisiana in the 1920’s. A good point of contrast between Tiana’s setting and that of her counterparts is she faces a harsh reality through the external conflict. Being that she lives in a world where she is not treasured, and looked down upon by those in power, she is closed off, and faces more blockades to reach her goals than Cinderella or Sleeping Beauty might. In Cornel West’s essay “Postmodernism in Black America”, he makes the statement “the postmodern debate consists of reflections about how to live, think, and act in a world that no longer rests on European hegemony and domination” (2015). It is interesting that this film seems to do the exact opposite at it highlights the fact that the whites are in power.

A character worth noting is Tiana’s prince, Naveen. The most important thing about Naveen is he appears to be white, while Disney spokespeople claim that he is “racially ambiguous.” The main point is that no other Disney princess marries outside of her race. Tiana is the exception, and this should be explored. This coincides with Neal A. Lester’s statement that
“the film’s attention to race is distractingly social and schizophrenic” (300). On one end, Disney addresses some very interesting social and racial issues, but on the other, the issues they address are overwhelmingly unrealistic, and politically incorrect for the time. bell hooks mentions in *Postmodern Blackness*, “Postmodernist discourses are often exclusionary even as they call attention to, appropriate even, the experience of “difference” and “Otherness” to provide oppositional political meaning” (2009). This postmodern representation rewrites the true Black experience. In order to fully “appropriate” the issues, Disney would need to go ahead and tackle the realities of segregation, inequality, and intersections of race, gender, and class. This film portrays situations that would have been cause for arrest, social unrest, and ultimate chaos; but these issues are swept under the rug.

The main purpose of the prince in these films is a savior. The princesses are damsels in distress who cannot survive, or breathe, or make a single decision without his aid. The question needs to be asked: Why does the black princess need to be saved by a seemingly white prince? One point of looking at his function is it shows the preference of white over black. Tiana could have been “saved” by a black prince as the other princesses are assisted by a prince of their race. This insinuates that black men are worthless and incapable of use, as a man of her own skin color cannot rescue Tiana. The writers are insinuating that the black man is not, and cannot be the savior as he is absent and deemed unworthy of value in the context of the film, but more importantly, the way popular culture view the world today.

The final, and most important aspect of the film is the theme of hard work. In “Animated Representations of Blackness” King, Lugo, and Lugo offer an intriguing aspect to the argument: “we might ask to what extent *The Princess and the Frog* represents a new animated representation of blackness, and to what extent it relies on familiar racialized, or racist tropes”
Tiana repeats that she works two jobs, says she “works real hard each and everyday”, and “I worked hard for everything I got” ad nauseam during the course of the film’s 98 minutes. Pulling oneself up by his/her bootstraps is an American value that functions to portray the importance of hard work, conviction, and responsibility, and this is a great value, but it is skewed as it is used to make those who are “have-nots” solely responsible for the absence of wealth. Clearly, hegemonic outlook, and the distinction of the other are present.

This is not a mistake that Disney wants black children to have someone to look up to who is overly obsessed with hard work, as some Whites assume that Blacks do not like, or take any interest in working. Writers always have a target audience, and they feed messages to specific people to learn certain lessons about how our society wants us to behave.

This film is great for entertainment, but it is more so a critique of Black America. Barbara Christian argues in *The Race for Theory*, “Western dualistic or “binary” frame which sees the rest of the world as minor, and tries to convince the rest of the world that it is major” usually does this through “force and then through language” (1860). Christian highlights the dichotomy relevant to the postmodern goals. The western world already has the “Orient” by force artistically, as the West previously decided what “theory” is. They also have the privilege to decide when, and more importantly WHY they want to write about the “other.” Language is a means of communication through thought and ideas. Through the language and dialogue, Disney has the ability to create an ambiguous nature of a film void of racism, but dripping with bigotry and historical inequity. Through the language of the text, Disney is still pointing out that Blacks are subordinate to whites in America.

Further insight into Disney’s goals lead to the issue of class struggle. Christian realizes “ideologies of dominance, such as sexism and racism, dehumanize people by stereotyping them”
(1863). The language fostered reveals itself as inherently racist and further marginalizes groups and achieves the opposite motive of what the postmodern movement claims it is doing.

This film, and arguably all art of the “orient” or “other” would be more realistic if these groups could represent themselves, however, there is a fear that if they represent themselves, the margins might widen and the isolated “other” might gain power. Postmodernism is only available as a display of inclusive activity. The language used to describe the other further places them behind the group in power and strips them of their ability to speak. Postmodernism is another tool to silence marginalized groups, removing their power all in the name of displaying unity.
Works Cited


http://www.academia.edu/344728/Animated_Representations_of_Blackness

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