

Black Panther

Breakthrough or More Hollywood Marketing?

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2018

a review of

Black Panther; Director: Ryan Coogler 134 min.

On the list of watershed films of 2018 will be *Black Panther*, Marvel Studios' astronomically budgeted blockbuster, which raked in critical plaudits as well as ticket sales on an unprecedented scale. The film has struck a chord with both black and white audiences.

The film, significantly featuring a predominantly black cast, helmed by a black writer and director, Ryan Coogler of 2013's excellent *Fruitvale Station*, topped over \$1 billion in global sales, a success in the metric by which Hollywood films are typically judged and enshrined as culturally impactful.

Most of us will recognize the phenomenon: As the American Empire groans on, oppressive corporate and state institutions are yielding, at last, small tokens on the altar of social justice, sliding a little further opening of the gates they've long held closed for so many.

Since the movie marks an important milestone in black cinema within Hollywood's major studio system, it's not surprising that the film itself argues for negotiation and participation in oppressive systems, rather than a rejection of them.

Using as a *tabula rasa* the fictional African kingdom of Wakanda, which has been preserved by a technology cloaking it from annihilation by colonialism and diaspora, the film debates the future of black engagement with the Imperialist Minority World. In it, there is a good Black Panther—the benevolent monarch T'Challa, a model of modernization theory who will open his hermit kingdom. And against him, a bad Black Panther named Killmonger—embittered, militant, Third Worldist.

With *Black Panther*, Hollywood, historically one of the US' chief organs of anti-black propaganda, has found a way to capitalize on black voices. It has in the past tried, first with the 1970s Blaxploitation cycle, and then with the 1990s black film wave, to harness this market power. These attempts have often met with defiance.

To note two instances, Jamaa Fanaka, whose independent success, *Penitentiary* (1979), found him welcomed into the Director's Guild, only to be expelled after he vocally criticized industry hiring practices of women and minorities. And then Spike Lee's epic, *Malcolm X* (1992), produced by Warner Bros., which opens with the searing, uncompromising image of the American flag intercut with video of the Rodney King beating, before it at last goes up in flames. Lee, who wrested the project from white director Norman Jewison, signaled immediately with defiant and controversial images that his film would not be sanitized for the Hollywood market.

These answers to Hollywood's attempted recuperation of black-produced black images recall a history of black film protest trailing all the way back to fierce resistance over the industry's foundational piece of anti-black propaganda, D.W. Griffith's *Birth of a Nation* (1915).

The height of Hollywood's cultural power in the 1940s, when average weekly movie attendance hovered between 60 and 70 percent of the population (it is under 10 percent today), coincided with an unprecedented growth in

NAACP membership, which climbed from 40,000 in 1940 to 450,000 in 1946. This resistance helped staunch the flow of plantation genre films like *Gone With the Wind* (1939), lucrative white mythologies that portrayed an antebellum fantasy of grateful, loyal slaves and a romanticized planter class.

Black Panther abandons this tradition of challenging Hollywood from within and without. It urges not just collaboration with the organs of racial injustice, but complicity in its depiction of T'Challa's white ally—of all people, a CIA agent named Everett Ross. When reduced, the film's embrace of an autocratic ruler allied with the CIA willingly funneling resources to the West, does not depict a new future for Majority World nations populated by people of color. It depicts the one already created by imperialist intervention.

Still, it is possible to glean positive changes in this film. Adapting to an industry which does not allow serious criticism of the American system still opens new avenues for black filmmakers. Michael Boyce Gillespie, in his book *Film Blackness* (2016, Duke University) points out that Hollywood's near monopoly on the black image has had a limiting effect on the portrayal of blackness in black independent film. Mimesis, depictions of real black experience, have been valued to such an extent that black film has often been judged solely on a film's degree of verisimilitude.

Coogler isolates this realism to a small corner of *Black Panther*, a basketball court in Oakland that opens the film. The rest is a colorful fantasy, in which a black cast is allowed to assume the roles of genre characters, such as spies and superheroes, and occupy a world that bleeds into both fantasy and science fiction. If we see too little of the lived life of Wakandans, and the world doesn't quite open up enough to really invite the imagination, *Black Panther* nevertheless could expand avenues of portraying blackness on the big screen.

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