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The Portrayal of African-American Culture in
Films Through the Lens of a Supremacist
Hollywood.

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ABSTRACT

The aim of this dissertation is to determine the way in which the Hollywood representation of African-American culture has evolved throughout the history of cinema and establish if this image is based on stereotypes assigned to this culture over the years or on real images of it. In order to carry out this investigation it has been necessary to compile the most relevant historical facts of the USA concerning African-Americans, as well as a deep analysis of three films from different periods of time whose common denominator is the representation of African-American culture.

The conclusion reached is that, even though the image of African-American people portrayed in movies has improved over the years, nevertheless the films made in Hollywood continue to distort historical facts about African-American culture, and this creates new stereotypes which are regarded as being true by cinema-goers.

Keywords: African-American culture, racism, Hollywood, imagology, stereotypes, cinema.

RESUMEN

El objetivo de esta tesis es determinar la manera en la que la representación de la cultura Afro-Americana en Hollywood ha evolucionado a lo largo de la historia del cine y establecer si esta imagen está basada en estereotipos atribuidos a esta cultura o en imágenes reales de la misma. Para llevar a cabo esta investigación ha sido necesaria la recopilación de los hechos históricos más relevantes de la historia de America concernientes a la población Afro-Americana, así como el exhaustivo análisis de tres películas pertenecientes a diferentes épocas cuyo denominador común es la representación de la cultura Afro-Americana.

Podemos concluir que a pesar de que la representación de la cultura Afro-Americana en el cine ha mejorado durante los últimos años, Hollywood continua distorsionando los hechos históricos relacionados con la cultura Afro-Americana, lo que crea nuevos estereotipos que serán interpretados como una realidad por los espectadores.

Palabras clave: Cultura Afro-Americana, racismo, Hollywood, imagología, estereotipos, cine.

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Introduction

Despite the progress made against racism during the last years, if one pays enough attention, one can still appreciate how Hollywood has not been able to completely put an end to prejudices and stereotypes against African-American culture in movies. Cinema, like any other art form, represents reality. This representation may either be faithful to the facts or distort them. This is one of the reasons why cinema is one of the most important media that instructs us about reality and attempts to conform the cinema-goer's view of the world. The fact that a movie may be watched by several millions of people makes cinema a hugely influential medium in the shaping of a society's opinions and Weltanschauung.

All this implies, as Fabio Nigra asserts, that Hollywood's film industry is a cultural-industrial machine of unique dimensions because of its capacity to impose cultural conditions (20). Furthermore, this author claims that in the great majority of Hollywood movies that deal with the history of the USA, the white man is portrayed as the bringer of civilization and democracy against the barbarism of Indians or the stupidity and brutality of black or oriental people, as for example in David W. Griffiths' *The Birth of a Nation* (1915) (Nigra 20). This idea has been also emphasized by Marc Ferro, who pointed out that in the USA, cinema has played a vital role in social and cultural life (99).

Throughout history, the black community has been one of the most enslaved, persecuted and mistreated peoples. This treatment towards black people has been portrayed to a greater or lesser extent by numerous movies since the birth of cinema. The wide presence of African-American culture and its portrayal in Hollywood movies is going to be the research focus of this final-year dissertation. In order to carry out this work of research, I am going to analyze three movies from different years in which African-American culture is the main subject or has been portrayed in any other manner. As it is the case of *The Birth of a Nation* (D.W. Griffith, 1915), *Mississippi Burning* (Alan Parker 1988) and *The Help* (Tate Taylor, 2011).

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Before addressing the subject matter, it is necessary to review some important historical events regarding slavery and racial inequality that one can find throughout the course of history in the USA. As part of this process, it is also important to gather information about those racist organizations that have been present since the early days of slavery in the USA and have helped perpetuate racial inequality. The Ku Klux Klan is perhaps the best-known of these organizations, but is certainly not the only one.

With a view to understanding every movie, I will also examine a number of articles and associated theories on the subject of African-American culture and the perception of audience through the medium of Hollywood film. The interest in the subject this paper deals with, comes mainly from the fact that even though there are many examples of films from Hollywood that are dedicated to addressing the issues of slavery and racial inequality in the USA, there is ample space to carry on studies on the topic of how this community is portrayed in the aforementioned movies. In addition to that, in recent years different social movements have formed to defend and demand the rights of those who remained silent until recently, and this fact marks a turning point that signals the necessity of an in-depth analysis of the cultural representations of the African-American community and of the pervasive discrimination that the community suffers. If 2018 was the year for women to denounce sexual harassment in the industry of cinema, 2016 was the year for African-Americans to claim their rights and to protest the under-representation of black people in the annual Academy Award Ceremony of the Oscars by using the hashtag #OscarSoWhite on social media. A combination of these issues has prompted me to try to shed light on this so-far-insufficiently-studied topic, which I consider to be of great importance.

The principal aims of this piece of research are to (I) analyse the way in which Hollywood movies portray African-American culture; (II) establish the common factors one can see in the representation of African-American culture in movies; and finally (III) to consider if there remains a tendency to portray African-American culture in a manner that is considered racist in modern-day Hollywood film-making.

The first concept to be analyzed will be the historical framework and origins of racism in the USA. This first part of the paper will also consider the imagology and stereotypes that surround African-American culture. The analysis of these topics is essential for the development of this research owing to the fact that the study of cross-national

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perceptions and images, as well as the attitudes, stereotypes and prejudices portrayed in the movies I am going to analyze, will allow me to reach a final and consistent conclusion at the end of this dissertation.

The second step in this process will involve an in-depth analysis of three Hollywood movies in which African-American culture is the main subject or has been portrayed in any other way. What has led me to select these films has been their unquestionable impact on the world of cinema such as in the case of *The Birth of a Nation* (D.W. Griffith, 1915) or a combination of their marketing success and subject matter, as is the case with *Mississippi Burning* (Alan Parker 1988) and *The Help* (Tate Taylor, 2011). The fact that these three movies belong to different time periods helps obtain a clearer contrast and a perspective on the topic.

The analysis that I am going to carry out will be focused on those aspects and scenes of movies in which African-American characters appear and the overall roles they portray. Finally, in the last section of this dissertation, I will discuss the conclusions reached after the investigation, research and viewing of the films.

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1. Slavery in US. From its origins to the end of Civil War.

In this chapter I will summarize the main points relating to the issues of slavery and racism in the USA in order to contextualize the situation of African-Americans throughout history. This section will deal mainly with the beginnings of slavery in the colonial period, the creation of a racist code, the birth of African-American culture as well as the Declaration of Independence and its promises of liberty and equality that were unfulfilled for the black community.

1.1. *Brief account of the beginnings of Slavery in US.*

African-Americans can arguably be regarded as the major, although not the only, example of an ethnic group targeted by racism in the United States. As Zinn points out, "there is not a country in world history in which racism has been more important, for so long a time, as the United States." (23). Taking this into account, if one were to seek the earliest date or event to begin considering racism in the USA on a large scale, one should unquestionably return to the years of slavery. When the first European colonizers arrived in North America, the land was vast and there was much to do to extract benefits from it. For this reason, African slaves, who were considered physically suitable for hard labor, were seen as a solution to the colonies' needs. As Buell asserts, slavery in what we know today as the United States of America was introduced in 1619 when a Dutch boat reached Virginia, bringing to the city of Jamestown nineteen blacks from Africa to work as slaves. The need for cheap labour, prejudices against black people and the huge expanses of plantations (especially in the South), helped to establish the institution of slavery in the USA (9-10).

As Taylor asserts, from 1660 some southern colonies introduced the concept of institutionalized slavery, bringing into effect Slave Codes following the Barbadian model systematized in 1661. The slave code was created with the premise that black were "an heathenish, brutish and an uncertain, dangerous kind of people" (213); most of the codes made slavery a lifelong condition ensuring that slaves' descendants would inherit that condition, forbade them from voting, gathering in large groups, marrying white people or going to court when abused by their masters. These codes also provided

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the masters with almost total control over the lives of slaves, allowing owners to use physical punishment as brutally as they considered fitting. By around 1700 every southern colony had recognized and implemented the slave codes into legislation (Taylor 213). In 1700 the number of slaves who came to colonial America increased dramatically, and even though every colony benefited from slavery, around four-fifths of the slaves worked in the Southern plantations (Jones 22-23). In 1793, with the invention of the cotton gin, cotton plantations became the main and most profitable activity in the South, making slave labour crucial to its economy. In the same way, slavery became progressively less profitable in the North owing to the increasing significance of industry and manufacturing ("Slavery in America").

Prior to the Civil War in the South, around one-third of the population was made up of slaves. The living conditions of domestic slaves was slightly better than that of slaves who worked in the fields, owing to the fact that, although they worked very hard, their tasks (mainly cooking, cleaning and washing) were less exhausting than working the plantations where slaves were forced to work endless hours enduring physical and moral punishments at the hands of masters. Frederick Douglass, a slave who managed to escape, wrote about slave conditions in his autobiography:

> We worked in all weathers. It was never too hot or too cold (…) Work, work, work, was scarcely more the order of the day than of the night. (…) I was somewhat unmanageable when I first went there, but a few months of this discipline tamed me (Douglas 45)

1.2. *Birth of African-American culture.*

African slaves varied widely in their ethnic identities and cultures. Generally their languages differed from one another more than English did from French or Spanish. As Taylor claims: "thrown together as neighbours in a distant colony, they had to find a new commonality of identity, dialect, and costume. By necessity, they developed a composite culture borrowed in part from their new neighbours. African words and music infiltrated the popular culture of their enslavers, while the African adapted Christianity to their own needs. In such exchanges and composites, we find the true measure of American distinctiveness, the true foundation for the America of our time." (xii) Separated from family and friends, receiving orders in a language they did

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not understand, and put to work for hours on end beside strangers with whom they only shared their skin colour, they had to find a new common bond as Africans in America. Out of tragedy, African slaves turned their trauma into something good: they laid down the basis for the birth of African-American culture.

1.3. *The Declaration of Independence.*

Ironically, at this time, slaves were not the only ones who felt oppressed in America. As Jones claims, when George III's ministers attempted to tighten their control over the colonies, they encountered strong resistance; years of controversy gave rise to the American Revolution, by which America became an independent nation (37). The Declaration of independence, drafted by Thomas Jefferson and officially proclaimed on July 4, 1776 claimed:

> All men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness. — That to secure these rights, Governments are instituted among Men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed, — That whenever any Form of Government becomes destructive of these ends, it is the Right of the People to alter or to abolish it, and to institute new Government […] But when a long train of abuses and usurpations, pursuing invariably the same Object evinces a design to reduce them under absolute Despotism, it is their right, it is their duty, to throw off such Government, and to provide new Guards for their future security. (*Declaration of Independence* 1776).

The Declaration of Independence, explicitly against any form of oppression, silenced the underlying racial division that America was living through; this fact, of course, undermined the great ideas of equality, liberty and the pursuit of happiness that they presumed to defend. However, as we can observe in the draft of the document, Jefferson had written a paragraph of the Declaration that apparently expressed moral indignation against slavery.

> He has waged cruel war against human nature itself, violating its most sacred rights of life & liberty in the persons of a distant people who never offended him, captivating & carrying them into slavery in another hemisphere, [...] the Christian king of Great Britain. determined to keep open a market where men should be bought & sold. (*Original Rough Draft of the Declaration of Independence* 1776)

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This paragraph, which constituted a condemnation of the slave trade that flourished under the British rule and maybe an early attempt to abolish slavery, was removed by the Continental Congress, owing to the fact that slavery was the basis of the colonies' economy. We should not be surprised by the atrocities committed in the USA when over the struggle to achieve human rights, the economic aspect prevailed; economic interests were stronger than morality. The Declaration of Independence is a contradiction of itself; if the basis of the nation were established upon freedom and equality, how is it possible that they did not end slavery as soon as they became an independent nation? In addition, as Zinn puts it, "Jefferson's personal distaste for slavery must be put alongside the fact that he owned hundreds of slaves to the day he died" (72).

1.4. *Abolitionist movement.*

During the process through which America became an Independent nation, voices of abolition were raised especially in the North where slavery was not as important for the economy as it was in the South. The period lasting from the adoption of the Constitution (1789) until the outbreak of the Civil War, was marked by the rising tensions between abolitionists and supporters of slavery. As has already been mentioned, the economy of the South was based on slave labour, which is why slave-owners defended the institution fiercely. Of course, advocates of slavery had different arguments with which to convince people of the benefits of slavery or at least to try to justify it. They claimed for the white race supremacy over the black race, both intellectually and morally, and indeed black slaves were considered as inferior and incapable of taking care of themselves. With this argument, pro-slavery advocates argued that masters were acting as paternal figures and slavery was a benevolent act towards them, since they were fed, clothed and given work. Within the economic argument, they maintained that the end of slavery would lead to the breakdown of the South's economy. However, the personal experiences of slaves who managed to escape, as it was the case of Frederick Douglass or the novel *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852), which showed the suffering of slaves and the cruelty of masters, contributed in the birth of the abolitionist movement. Religion also played an important role in the abolitionist movements: even though the Bible did not

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condemn slavery directly, Christian morals and values condemned slavery and the violence and vexation slavers suffered, claiming that all men should be treated equally. This religious outbreak based on the love of God for every person gave a moral background to the abolitionist movement to support their demands.

1.5. *The Civil War.*

After the American Revolution, most northern states abolished slavery over time, while in southern states it grew and flourished as a key element to their economy. Several citizens of the southern states felt more like Southerners than Americans; they claimed that their culture was different from the rest of the nation and they defended their economic system based on slavery. There was a growing tension between anti-slavery North and pro-slavery South, there was also disagreement between North and South over the issue of the 'States' rights'; those in the South claimed that states should not be subjected to the authority of a central government, whereas the North defended the view that states had to be under the authority of the US constitution and be an unified nation. Such contradictions were impossible to resolve and resulted in secession and civil war.

As Farmer asserts, In November1860, Abraham Lincoln became president, considered by southerners to be a "rabid abolitionist who would encourage slavery insurrections". In February 1861, the seven states of the Deep South (Alabama, Florida, Georgia, Louisiana, Mississippi, South Carolina and Texas) seceded from the Union creating the Confederate States of America in an attempt to preserve their way of life based on slavery. Led by the anonymously elected Senator Jefferson Davis, the Confederacy wanted to be allowed to proceed peacefully; nevertheless, as Farmers asserts, "Northerns were unwilling to accept the dismemberment of the USA.

Over the winter, the Confederacy took control of most of the forts and arsenals in the South; however, as Farmer points out, "by March 1861 Fort Sumter had become the symbol of national sovereignty for both sides". On the one hand, the Confederacy claimed the full right of a sovereignty nation which implied that they could not allow a "foreign" fort in the midst of its main harbors; on the other hand, Lincoln intended to cling to the remains of federal property in the South. On 12 April 1861, confederate

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forces opened fire on Fort Sumter claiming its property and demanding its surrender, and this act of aggression marked the beginning of the Civil War (Farmer 85-96).

The Civil War was the bloodiest military conflict in the US history, it lasted for four years and ended with the victory of the Union, and eventually with the publication of the 13th Amendment. Slavery was finally abolished. As Foner states, at the beginning, despite the fact that they condemned slavery, the Union did not have any intention of interfering with the institution. However, President Lincoln saw in the abolition of slavery a method to debilitate the Confederacy (548). Abraham Lincoln, the so-called liberator of slaves, father of freedom and equality, freed slaves with a political and not a moral target in mind. Whereas his intention was to preserve the Union and undermine the Confederacy militarily and economically during the Civil War, slaves were his instrument. From all his many speeches, the ones that attract my attention are two extracts from the Lincoln-Douglas debate held during the campaign before the elections.

> Anything that argues me into this idea of perfect social and political equality with the negro, is but a specious and fantastic arrangement of words. [...] I will say here, while upon this subject, that I have no purpose directly or indirectly to interfere with the institution of slavery in the States where it exists. I believe I have no lawful right to do so, and I have no inclination to do so. I have no purpose to introduce political and social equality between the white and the black races. There is a physical difference between the two, which in my judgment will probably forever forbid their living together upon the footing of perfect equality, and inasmuch as it becomes a necessity that there must be a difference, I am in favor of the race to which I belong, having the superior position. (Fehrenbacher 105).

> I will say then that I am not, nor even have been in favor of bringing about in any way the social and political equality of the white and black races, that I am not nor even have been in favor of making voters or jurors of negroes, nor of qualifying them to hold office, nor to intermarry with white people;[...] there must be the position of superior and inferior, and I as much as any other man am in favor of having the superior position assigned to the white race (Fehrenbacher 106).

In contrast to the saviour-of-the-oppressed image that history infuses about Lincoln, through his own words, we get the image of a person who does not even remotely believe in freedom and equality for all human beings. As stated before, his main aim was to preserve America as a united nation and erase conflicts and tensions, and he did what was necessary to achieve it. He clearly did not believe that blacks were equal to whites; he was an abolitionist but just because circumstances forced him to be so. As he

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said in one of his letters: "If I could save the Union without freeing any slave I would do it. What I do about slavery, I do because I believe it helps to save the Union" (Basler). Once again, as it already happened with the Declaration of Independence, politics and economy prevailed over morality in the "land of the free and the home of the brave".

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2. The Achievements of Civil Rights

In this chapter I will summarise the main points relating to the African-Americans struggle for freedom, equality and justice as well as the means by which they were willing to achieve Civil Rights. This chapter will deal mainly with the unquestionably importance of the Great Migration after the Civil War for African-Americans, The Civil Right Movement and its principal leaders.

I consider it is of vital importance to acquire an awareness of the historical events that took part at this time in the USA in order to be able to interpret whether the image of African-Americans that Hollywood portrays is consistent with reality or, on the contrary, is a view based solely on stereotypes as a result of directors' choices who consider a box-office hit to be more important than historical accuracy

2.1, *The Great Migration and the Harlem Renaissance*

The end of the Civil War was followed by the period of 'The Reconstruction'. Although slaves were newly freed and granted basic civil rights after the Civil War through the passage of the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments to the U.S. Constitution and, despite the elimination of Slaves Codes, other forms of discrimination and oppression towards black people were implemented such as Black Codes or the so-called Jim Crow laws. These backlashes were counter-attacked by the Radical Reconstruction that the Federal Government implemented, though it received a harsh response from Southerners. During this period, white supremacists began mobilising in order to browbeat, push, harass, lynch, torture and even kill African-Americans. In 1866 the first Ku Klux Klan nucleus was created in Tennessee, a secret organization made up of members of the working classes (Jones 257). Over time, the influence of this group spread across the Southern states, with the aim of re-establishing white supremacy in the region. At that time, Jim Crow laws allowed owners to show racial discrimination in the use of public services; these laws were little by little introduced in all the Southern states relying on a biased interpretation of the Fourteenth Amendment; equal opportunities between whites and blacks were ensured by means of separated public services (separate but equal). Unsurprisingly, the public services designated to the black

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population were far from equal to those allocated to the white population. These differences acted as a means of institutionalising and legalising racial discrimination. By 1900 those statutes were fully implemented in all Southern states and had written into law the segregation of black people which would last for another fifty years (Zinn 207). However, the biggest impact of the Civil War would be 'The Great Migration' which took place when World War I broke out in Europe in 1914 and due to the need for manpower in the Northern industries, for these two reasons black people started to migrate to the Northern States in search of a better life. By the end of 1919, around one million blacks had left the South and in the decade between 1910 and 1920, the black population in Northern cities grew enormously ('Great Migration'). As Zinn asserts, while not written into law in the North, racism and segregation were practised there (208); many blacks ended up creating their own cities or 'ghettos' within big cities, bringing into being a new urban African-American culture. One of the most important black protest leaders in the United States during the first half of the 20th century was W.E.B. Du Bois (1868-1963), an African-American sociologist, historian, author, editor and activist who, after witnessing the ferocious racism Jim Crow segregation laws promulgated, concluded that social change could be only accomplished through protest. Through his writing, he promoted black nationalism and Pan-Africanism, urging his readers to see "Beauty in black" (Rudwick).

Du Bois played a prominent part in the creation of the National Association for the Advancement of Coloured People (NAACP) in 1909, an organization created to work for the abolition of segregation, discrimination, lynching as well as to oppose racism, and to ensure African-Americans their constitutional rights, including their right to vote (Jones 273). The experiences of black people during the Great Migration became an important source of inspiration for a new artistic movement known as the Harlem Renaissance, that would have an unquestionable impact on the cultural scene of the time.

In the early twentieth century, the Harlem neighbourhood in Manhattan attracted nearly 175.000 African-Americans, giving the place the largest concentration of black people in the world. Harlem became the cultural mecca for African-Americans of all backgrounds that shared common experiences of slavery, racial oppression, emancipation and a determination to create a new identity as free people, that is why

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this period is considered a golden age in African-American culture: writers, musicians and artists praised African-American traditions, creating new ones at the same time. The Harlem Renaissance embraced diverse art forms united by their realistic presentation of what it meant to be black in America, as well as a new attempt in the achievement of civil and political rights ('A New African American Identity: The Harlem Renaissance'). The Stock Market Crash of 1929 was the beginning of the Harlem Renaissance decadence; however, its effect on America was significant; the movement gave exposure to African-American art, and the culture that emerged from it was conveyed to the world opposing the racist and segregational stereotypes of the Jim Crow South. Nevertheless, the most important aspect of the Harlem Renaissance was that it brought about a new social consciousness, the necessity of political activism, all of which would provide a basis for the Civil Rights Movement of the 1950s and 1960s, which would come under the leadership of Martin Luther King ('A New African American Identity: The Harlem Renaissance').

2.2. *The Civil Rights Movement*

In December 1955, almost a century after the Civil War, NAACP activist Rosa Parks refused to give up her seat to a white person on a bus in Montgomery, Alabama, leading to her being arrested for violating the segregationist laws of Alabama. The African-American activist community of Montgomery formed the Montgomery Improvement Association (MIA) and, run by Martin Luther King, massively boycotted the buses of the town for 381 days and, even though many African- Americans were imprisoned, in 1956 the Supreme Court made segregation in buses unconstitutional. By the time the boycott ended the Civil Rights Movement was at its zenith, and non-violent protests led by Martin Luther King and his new organization the Southern Christian Leadership Organization (SCLC) developed across the South. Other organisations such as The Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) or the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE) also attracted African-Americans into the Civil Rights Movement and its non-violent protest to end segregation. All of these organisations, as well as the NAACP, worked towards ending segregation by peaceful means (Harris). From this moment on, Martin Luther King would become the movement's most influential

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spokes-man until his death by assassination in 1968 (Burson 39). His leadership based on peaceful resistance and violence rejection was a key factor of the movement's success in ending the legal segregation of African-Americans in the United States.

> In our protest there will be no cross burnings…. We will be guided by the highest principles of law and order. Our method will be that of persuasion, not coercion. We will only say to the people, "Let conscience be your guide" … [O]ur actions must be guided by the deepest principles of our Christian faith. Love must be our regulating ideal. Once again we must hear the words of Jesus echoing across the centuries: "Love your enemies, bless them that curse you, and pray for them that despitefully use you.

Two of the most important goals for the Civil Rights Movement were accomplished in the years to come: the Civil Rights Act of 1964 was signed, which ended legal discrimination based on race and sex in employment and education, as well as the Voting Rights Act of 1965, which granted the right to vote for African-Americans (Edelman). However, not every African-American believed in King's peaceful methods to achieve Civil Rights, some of them claimed immediate social changes opting for violence and confrontation manifesting their resentment towards white society that limited their aspirations and opportunities, they rejected King's pacific approach to the issue. Having lost their faith and hope in the law of whites, this group of African-Americans demanded the creation of institutions, organisations and their own political movements in order to be able to define their destiny without having to rely on white people in order to achieve their goals. This new movement which grew out of the Civil Rights movement was called 'Black Power'.

As a counter figure to Martin Luther King, leading Black Power was Malcom X; both men followed different paths as leaders of the black freedom movement. As Baldwin asserts: "they did not work with the same organizations, and they frequently disagreed with each other concerning love and hate, violence and nonviolence, separatism and integration" (395-416). Malcom X, after been released from prison in 1952, converted to Islam and joined the Nation of Islam. He would soon become one of the most important figures of the African-American Muslim community. According to Malcolm, black people should be proud of their blackness as well as of their African heritage. Opposing King's thoughts, Malcom insisted that African-Americans should achieve their liberty by any possible means, including violence. In 1965 he was assassinated,

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anticipating King's murder three years. In 1966, The Black Panther Party of Self-Defence was founded, the most famous organisation defending African-American self-determination which drew on violence and confronted the police and the FBI on numerous occasions. The same spirit of racial pride that made Black Power so popular, also became a dangerous problem. Many whites and some blacks started to see the movement as a black separatist organisation whose objective was segregating blacks and whites, undoing the important achievements of the Civil Right Movement. Despite the fact that the Black Power movement did not succeed in creating a separate society for black people, nor in ending racism and discrimination, it encouraged African-American self-esteem and racial pride ('The Black Power Moment Through the 1959s and 1960s'). All that has been mentioned above would be the beginning of African-Americans' battle to obtain real equality; however, they did not attain economic equality, and they continued to be a socially underprivileged sector of the population.

This is a state of affairs which will come through clearly in two of the movies that will be analysed later on, as it is the case of *Mississippi Burning* (1988) and *The Help* (2011). If commercial success rather than historical accuracy is actually Hollywood's motivation, this unquestionably creates a distorted image of African-Americans that differs significantly from the truth; an image that might well create stereotypes that will be seen as real by the audience.

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3. Imagology and African-American Cultural Stereotypes.

Imagology is the study of intercultural relationships in terms of reciprocal conception, images and self-images. A variety of discourses, including literature, cinema and the media, express the way in which ethnic, cultural, racial or national characters and their identities are perceived. As Beller and Leerssen assert, this is because focus relies on perception and not on the real image or its accuracy. Hence, we can conclude that the aim of imagology is to understand the structures of images and analyse their nature, by focusing on the intersection between linguistic (aesthetic/rhetorical) and historical (ideological/socio-cultural) aspects of discourse. Linking this to our theme, we can conclude that imagology deals with the three elements involved in the dynamic of texts: that which represents (Hollywood), what is represented (African-American culture), and those who interpret that representation (the viewers) (Beller and Leerssen 271).

It is well known that when we make images of others, in one way or another, we create an image of ourselves. As Eva Navarro points out: "Images of the other, so-called hetero-images, depend not only on the context in which they have been created but also on the context in which they will be later received and interpreted" (4). With this in mind, we can say that how a nation portrays a culture says much about its own, or at any rate, about its own ideological orientation. In the same way, cinematic imagery mirrors the popular culture that produced those images; by this means, we can assert that generally an ethnic group will be represented in a film according to the image that the group has within the society in which the film is made.

Eva Navarro states that when dealing with representations of others, the subjective image that films project, which is the matter at hand, can have a dual origin. On the one hand, there are those images of others created with a specific aim, whether that be social, political or ideological; this can be seen in the cases of propaganda movies. On the other hand, there are those representations which recreate unquestioned images of national characters that are already anchored in the collective imagination. The latter portrayal, undoubtedly, is the one that broadcasts stereotypes. Despite this, in both cases, movies will usually represent others in a way that is expected by the public (Navarro 4). Thus it is that one wonders if Hollywood films establish social values and political opinions, or if they simply reflect society's manners and feelings. Kraucer

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asserts that Hollywood is both a leader and follower of mass opinion: by portraying certain characters, the industry mirrors what the popular attitudes of the age are towards the character portrayed, but in a more implicit way it also turns this often vague point of view into concrete images (53-72). These subjective features are common to all kinds of texts, but as far as we are concerned, when it comes to analysing a film, the portrayal of characters becomes one of the most important points in the analysis and the factors to be taken into account are their social class, attitudes and job; how they act, what they say and how they say it. We can observe how imagology has identified some cultural stereotypes which refer to African-Americans by means, in this case, of the analysis of Hollywood movies. For many years, the information we have received about African-American culture in America has referred to a series of characteristics which we have assumed to be true, even though they are not. In this dissertation, I will focus my attention on the stereotypes of black people that Hollywood has been presenting to film-goers.

As has already been mentioned, there was political interest in what the audience should understand about this culture. African-Americans were represented as the slave model, created to look after white people and their lands, always presented as inferiors for the sole purpose of serving white people. When the black community showed their total opposition to the discriminatory treatment received over the years, little by little people started to understand how demeaning the treatment received by black people actually was. As the African-American population grew within the USA, opinions started to change and so also did the image of African-American culture in films and television. This transformation of people's mind has been a long process, although it is not complete owing to the fact that both in films and in real life we can realise that racism, which sometimes goes unnoticed, still remains. In the following chapters of this dissertation, I shall analyse the three films mentioned previously in order to clarify whether the image portrayed by Hollywood of African-American culture has evolved, and if that is the case how it has done so over the last years.

4. Film Analysis.

Once the historical framework and origins of racism in the USA as well as the imagology and stereotypes about African-American culture have been analysed in previous chapters, this section aims to analyse the way in which Hollywood movies portray African-American culture through three movies from different time periods selected due to their impact on the world of cinema or due to their success. As Nigra asserts, the USA cinema industry is one of the most powerful political-ideological tools on the planet and, owing to this fact, cinema can 'create' an event which will be transformed into real history (53). As Sanello points out, many people know about their history more thanks to cinema than to books; in fact he highlights that John Harlow and Nicholas Hellen wrote for Londoner newspaper *The Times* that films are the only means by which young people learn about history nowadays. He further supports this statement pointing out that a survey carried out by Gallup showed that shortly before the release of the movie *Schindler's list,* 80% of young Americans had not heard anything about Auschwitz (xi).

The analysis that I am going to carry out will be focused on those aspects and scenes of the movies in which African-American characters appear, the clothing that the characters wear, the expressions they use and the overall roles they portray. Of special mention is the use of music that accompanies these scenes, which as Nigra notes, helps or complements the story-telling, creating a framework difficult to disassemble; music in films aims to provide the spectator with subjective information about the state of the narration (129-130).

4.1. *The Birth of a Nation:*

Based on the novel *The Clansman* (1905) by Thomas Dixon and directed by D.W. Griffith, a Kentuckian by birth, and son of a former Confederate colonel, *The Birth of a Nation* is considered one of the most important and racist films in cinema history. With a running time of three hours, the film splits in two halves. The first half, which finishes with Lincoln's assassination, is set at the outbreak of the Civil War and it follows two families, the Northern Stonemans and the Southern Camerons, friends divided by the Civil War. The second half of the film focuses on the reconstruction of the South after

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the war and the origins of the heroes of the movie, the Ku Klux Klan and its aim to restore white supremacy after hordes of lustful, vicious and ignorant blacks, as they are portrayed throughout the film, had been placed in positions of power. On the one hand, white characters hold a privileged position in the film, except for those 'sympathetic' to blacks such it is the case of Austin Stoneman, a Northern abolitionist depicted as a corrupt politician full of avarice and lust for a mulatto housekeeper. On the other hand, African-American characters are stereotyped as the root of all evil, aggressive, ill-mannered, bestial, misguided, disrespectful and unworthy of freedom. Even though this is a stereotype of black people that we see throughout the entire movie, there is no better illustration of this than the scene in which blacks take their places in South's Carolina new legislature drinking whisky, barefoot, with their feet on the table and eating meat with their hands.

Under the tutelage of Austin Stoneman, Silas Lynch, a mulatto carpetbagger becomes a powerful politician in Camerons' town in South Carolina. Griffith depicts Lynch and his black entourage as horrible brutes, villains and violent rapists lusting after white women. For instance, Flora, member of the Cameron family being chased by a black man named Gus jumps from a cliff to her death to avoid being pursued by him who is looking to rape her and force her into marriage. Additionally, Lynch tries to force Stoneman's daughter Elsie into marriage. For this reason, Ben Cameron creates the Ku Klux Klan, heroes of this story who save Elsie and avenge Flora's death, restoring white rule in the US. The racist message present throughout the film, can be seen from the very beginning of the picture owing to the fact that the first part starts with a card that reads: "The bringing of slaves to America planted the first seeds of disunion." While other silent films use titles to point out key lines of dialogue to help the spectator understand the story, Griffith uses language in this film as a device for setting a quasi-historical discourse and, as Gallagher points out: "these linguistic admixtures, then, turn what otherwise would be an exciting racist photo-drama into an ideological project whose aim is no less than the reformulation of a major segment of American history" (73). Whereas the first half of the film propagates the stereotype of the 'happy slave' amongst other evils, it is the second part of the film that is filled with the most nefarious lies: W. E. B. DuBois stated that the "whole second half of the play ought to be suppressed" since, as Barret points out, "the plot, scenes, music and subtitles were so

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interwoven as to leave the viewer with a total impression" (Barrett 237). *The Birth of a Nation*'s racism transcends its content and message owing to the fact that real blacks have a negligible role in this film; the major black roles as Lynch, Gus or even Stoneman's mulatto mistress, were stereotypically played by white actors in blackface. Of special mention is the role that music performs in this film used, without any doubt, as an imagological and symbolical element. Music in this film is extremely important owing to the fact that we find ourselves facing a silent movie in which musical accompaniment is a fundamental tool when it comes to telling a story, complementing the action-content and emotional mood of the different scenes. The music that accompanies those scenes in which we can see black characters is a tribal music; drums and woodwinds that evoke primitive sounds reinforcing the image of black people as uncivilised savages. The spectator is also able to recognise a well-known piece of music as it is the national anthem of the US, only played when white character are on screen reinforcing their patriotism and separating them from the black characters who are not perceived as American citizens.

The supremacist, propagandistic nature of the film is reflected explicitly at the end of the movie when an army of white-dressed Klansman 'rescue' a town attacked by evil blacks. *The Birth of a Nation* distorts the history of the Civil War and its consequences; consequently, the behaviour of the Ku Klux Klan is portrayed as romantic and heroic while African-Americans are nefariously defamed. Unfortunately, *The Birth of a Nation* had a strong historical effect by helping to bring about the resurgence of the Ku Klux Klan, the most vicious terrorist organisation in the history of the US. As National Board Member Joseph Madison pointed out:

> "For me it set off a silent rage over the blatant misuse of the cinematic arts. For others I fear, [those] who might not have the knowledge of post-Civil War history that I had been fortunate enough to acquire, this film being hailed as a history of that period could be shattering for both their psyche and self-esteem" (Pitcher 50-55).

A great wave of protest arose when the film was released, and this caused Hollywood to avoid themes related too closely with blacks for some years, owing to the fact that *The Birth of a Nation* made the black population too controversial a subject and economically unfeasible. "However, when black actors and black themes did begin to

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re-enter American films, they typically did so in terms of the crude psychologism of black excessiveness so strongly engrafted on the American cinema by *The Birth of a Nation*" (Gallagher 76).

4.2. *Mississippi Burning*

Directed by Alan Parker and written by Chris Gerolmo, this film is based on the real murders of three civil right workers perpetrated by the Ku Klux Klan in Mississippi during 1964 and shows the effort involved in the FBI's fight against the racism in Mississippi and how they succeed in finding and calling to account those who are guilty of the act. Presented as a film that advocates African-Americans rights and set in a period of time in which the Civil Rights Movement was at its zenith, the movie sends a contradictory racial message owing to the fact that there exists a notable imbalance in its treatment of racial issues, especially because of its insufficient or almost total lack of emphasis given to the African-Americans' role in the Civil Rights Movement. Considering Eva Navarro's statement, if when dealing with representations of others, the subjective image that films project, recreate unquestioned images of national characters that are already anchored in the collective imagination (4), we can be sure that the portrayal of African-Americans in this film is based on Hollywood's supremacist nature. Many scenes from the film show how the Ku Klux Klan burns churches and houses before the impassive gaze of African-Americans, whose only alternative is to pray. The film portrays black characters as passive, docile and silent in the face of the extreme injustice they suffer, an image which is markedly different from the efforts of black people in the 1960s fighting for their rights. This stereotype of silent victim-objects, unable to act, which the film uses to portray African-Americans, eventually reinforces the basic principle Parker tried to condemn: the hierarchy of race. As has been stated in previous chapters, the period of time this movie covers was marked by segregation between blacks and whites in public facilities, something that the viewer can see from the introductory scene of the movie in which a white adult man drinks from a fountain marked 'White' followed by a black boy who drinks from the fountain marked 'Coloured'. This scene cannot go unheeded owing to the fact that even though we can assume that Parker's aim was to oppose racism, eventually his movie,

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and specifically this scene, reinforces it by the infantilisation of black people, a stereotyped image of African-Americans that will be present throughout the entire film; a scene which makes us think of the common historical habit of calling black males 'boy', irrespective of their age.

In spite of everything that has been said, the main stereotype of black people this film reinforces had already been used by pro-slavery advocates almost two centuries before this movie was released; the view of the Civil Rights Movement and the oppression of black people this movie offers is based on the paternalistic role of whites towards blacks. According to Madison: "circulating paternalistic white supremacist discourses through which to remember key historical moments in the struggles against white supremacist" contributes to the infantilisation of the black community and restrains the success of the Civil Rights Movement (399-416). Even though overt racism in a film, as is the case of *The Birth of a Nation*, would be unacceptable nowadays, there still exists a softer and veiled tendency to portray African-Americans as a community who always need the help of whites in order to achieve whatever they need, including their own rights. Even though this film was nominated for several Oscars, equally significant were the critics against it who focused their condemnation especially on the scene in which the three civil rights activists are murdered. As Toplin asserts, the movie shows Michael Schwerner driving the car in which the three activists are travelling, while James Chaney, the black man, sits silently in the back seat. In fact, Chaney was the one driving the car the night the three of them lost their life, said the critics (34-35). Additionally critics also complain about the portrayal of Chaney the movie offers: he was a dedicated civil right worker and not a passive young black who waited for whites to give him direction in the fight for justice, as the movie shows. By placing the black character in the back seat, the director creates a symbolic message about the role of African-Americans taking a back seat to the whites, ignoring Chaney's role as the driver of the car, the film minimises his importance and role, and therefore that of African - Americans in the Civil Rights Movement. This fictional depiction of African-Americans' passivism leads the spectator to believe that black people choose to accept the infamous racist ways they lived under instead of trying to change them. In my opinion this is particularly evident in one of the scenes of the film in which the FBI agents leave a KKK member on his own in the midst of an African-American area;

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impassive African-Americans keep showing the submissive behaviour which characterizes them throughout the film, supporting the fictional idea that African-Americans were too afraid to speak up and defend themselves, needing the invaluable help of the good, white FBI fellows.

On the other hand, the director casts two white characters, agent Ward and Anderson, as the leads and heroes of the movie which takes agency away from African-Americans. As Toplin points out: "making the FBI agents the heroes of the story *Mississippi Burning* badly distorts history. Clever police work had nothing to do with the victory against the Klan […] The main characters in the Mississippi story were not the whites but the African-Americans from the South" (35-36).

The audience is erroneously driven to believe that FBI agents were the ones starting the Civil Right Movement in contrast to African-Americans who are depicted as a group of helpless individuals waiting for someone else to fight for them. It is at this point that we can see that *Mississippi Burning,* as Marc Ferro asserted speaking about historical movies: "is nothing else than the filmic transcription of the historic point of view of certain groups" (193). It is curious that in a movie about the overcoming of racial discrimination, the black characters, for the first hundred minutes of the film at least, do not pronounce more than a few words and after the film ends, we realise that black characters' names have not even been mentioned.

Despite the fact that in *Mississippi Burning* the Klansmen are the villains of the story, the heroes of the film, the ones who 'rescue' the town at the end are white people, exactly as happened in *The Birth of a Nation*.

Even though Parker admirably recreates the atmosphere of terror created by the Ku Klux Klan and offers a faithful depiction of the South of the 1960s in terms of racial inequality, the film fails in the portrayal of African-Americans and the courage and determination they showed while fighting for their rights; black characters are relegated to the background in their own story. If we bear in mind what has been established in previous chapters about how cinematic imagery mirrors the popular culture that produced those images, we can assert that African-Americans in this film have been represented according to the image that the group has within Hollywood, an image that is a far cry from reality. The African-Americans this film portrays clearly are not the same African-Americans Claude McKay depicted in his poem *If We Must Die.*

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4.3. *The Help*

Directed by Tate Taylor and adapted from Kathryn Stockett's eponymous novel (2009), the story deals with racial and social inequalities existing in Jackson, Mississippi in the early 1960s and tells the story of Skeeter, a southern society girl who returns from college determined to become a writer. With the firm wish of getting a job in a prestigious New Yorker publisher, she decides to write a book about a story never told before: the African-American maids' point of view on how the white families for which they work treat them, and the obstacles they face on a daily basis. Despite the early denials of the maids to participate in this project given fear of the consequences, the abuse and debasement to which they are subjected prompt them to share their stories with the young journalist. In this way we meet the two maids who take the initiative: Aibileen Clark and Minny Jackson, and subsequently the rest of the maids who decide to tell their story.

During the years this movie covers, as it has been stated in previous chapters, legal segregation and economic inequalities limited black people and especially women's employment opportunities. The great majority of working black women in the South operated as domestic servants in white homes. Presenting itself as the story of how African-American maids in the South perceived their employers during Jim Crow days, as the movie progresses, this scenario seems to be a secondary story in a movie whose real plot is how black maids empower a young white woman to write a best-selling book about them, and how that book transforms the author's mother's point of view of her daughter. A story of redemption for the white protagonist of the movie who, at the end of the narration achieves her main goal to become a real journalist in New York thanks to the book she has written.

From everything that had been established above, I consider that, despite the attempts to commercialize the movie as an achievement over racial injustice, to some extent, the experiences of black domestic workers are ignored, trivialised and distorted. This fact did not go unnoticed by the *Association of Black Women Historians (ABHW),* who shortly after the movie was released, published a statement showing how unhappy they were with the way the movie portrayed African-American domestic workers, denouncing the widespread stereotyping presented in the film. In that statement, the

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ABWK also condemned the misinterpretation of African-American speech and culture in the movie, asserting that: "for centuries, black women and men have drawn strength from their community institutions. The black family in particular provided support and the validation of personhood necessary to stand against adversity". They refuse to recognise the black community the film describes: "where most of the black male characters are depicted as drunkards, abusive, or absent" as it is the case of Minny's husband who beat her on a regular basis.

One cannot ignore the way in which this movie is silent about the history of black Civil Rights activists in Mississippi; the only reference to what truly was happening in Mississippi in the 1960s

that gets some attention is Medgar Evers' death, an active member of NAACP, assassinated by the Ku Klux Klan. However, Evers' murder causes chaos and confusion in Jackson's black community

that we see frantically scurrying into the streets: "a far cry from the courage demonstrated by the black men and women who continued his fight" ("An open statement to the fans of the Help"). As the spectator sees these images, he can hear Roy Wilkins' voice condemning the assassination on the radio, saying: "we view this as a cold, brutal, deliberate killing in a savage, uncivilised state. There is no state with a record that approaches that of Mississippi in inhumanity, murder and brutality and racial hatred". I consider the film ignores this statement just as the regime of terror perpetuated by the Ku Klux Klan and other racist organisations of the time, limiting racial injustice to individual acts of pettiness from white society women, portrayed as the most dangerous racists in 1960s Mississippi. Furthermore, many black domestic workers often suffered sexual harassment as well as physical and verbal abuse in the homes where they worked. For instance, not long ago a six-page handwritten account by Civil Rights activist Rosa Parks was discovered in which she exposes the threat and sometimes reality of sexual assault under which she lived while being a domestic worker (Norris). The film, on the other hand, overlook the fears and vulnerabilities of domestic workers turning them into moments of comic relief as we can see in some scenes in which Aibileen Clark and Minny Jackson laugh at the abusive and racist behaviour to which they are subjected by their white employers. Furthermore, the most famous and apparently innocent quote of the movie, which we hear on several occasions

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during the film, embodies a misinterpretation of African-American speech and culture. Aibileen, trying to reinforce the self-confidence of the little white girl in her care, always tells her "you is smart, you is kind, you is important" which according to *ABWH* does not represent the appropriate regional Southern accent but "a child-like, over-exaggerated 'black' dialect" instead ('An open statement to the fans of the Help').

Before reaching the conclusion of this analysis, there is another aspect that seems to me to be of great importance such as the fact that Minny, who suffers violence at the hands of her abusive husband, finds the courage to leave him and flee with her children thanks to the encouragement of the white woman she works for. This fact is full of meaning owing to the fact that if we take a look at the deleted scenes from the movie, there is one emotive scene in which we can see Minny with her face bruised calling her friend Aibileen for help, and the latter is the one who encourages Minny to leave her husband by saying: "just keep walking, you don't have to get beat no more (…), just keep on walking, keep on walking, Minny. You hear me? Tell me you hear me". By erasing this scene, once again, Hollywood depicts the white person as the hero of someone else's story.

In the light of what has been examined, I can state that from my point of view *The Help* is not a story about the hard-working black women who laboured under awful conditions in white homes. Rather, it seems to me that this movie tells the story of a white protagonist who uses the lives of black domestic workers to make sense of her own. As the film ends, the viewers feel happy for the young journalist who has achieved all her goals; nevertheless, the end of the movie does not pay much attention to the fact that Aibileen, Minny and the rest of the maids who collaborated in the book remain in Jackson, Mississippi where Ross Barnett is still governor.

To conclude the analysis of this movie, I agree with the view stated by Ana S. Q. Liberato and John D. Foster in their analysis of *The Long Walk Home (1989)* and *Driving Miss Daisy (1989)* and I consider one can say that *The Help (2011)* also "downplays black agency, deploys the white heroin character, privileges sentimental aspects over historical references, limits the historical scope of the movement, and uses a language of intimacy and optimism about race relations" (Liberato and Foster 367-384).

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5. Conclusion

After over three centuries of struggle against probably the most cruel and oppressive slavery system the world has ever seen, it was the slaves' resistance to this cruel system what forced the nation to realise that African-Americans were not able to enjoy the freedoms and democracy contained in the US constitution and the Declaration of Independence, but it was not until the end of Civil War when slavery was abolished. African-American's fight for freedom was central in the struggle for progress and democracy. African-American culture has been forged in the strong fights against the horrors of slavery and almost 80 years of Jim Crow.

Throughout this dissertation, African-Americans' biggest struggles and achievements have been presented and discussed in order to be able to analyse its representation in Hollywood. The three selected films, *The Birth of a Nation* (1915)*, Mississippi Burning* (1988) and *The Help* (2011) have been analysed following the same criteria in order to be able to compare the perception of African-Americans in Hollywood.

Given all that has been examined in this dissertation, one can conclude that while it is true that at the present time Hollywood is undergoing a transformation in the ways it portrays African-American culture, one cannot ignore the fact that on many occasions there remains a veiled tendency to portray black people as if they cannot stand on their own two feet and who always need the aid of selfless white characters who risk everything they have in order to help the black community. Taking into account the fact that *The Birth of a Nation* (1915) is an overt racist movie, the veiled tendency to portray white characters as the saviours of blacks can be proven in the other two movies I have analysed: *Mississippi Burning* (1988) and *The Help* (2011), both of them intended as equality advocates but with the underlying and negative imprint of white supremacy. However, those are just two examples of the large number of movies that follow the same pattern. As has been mentioned in previous sections of this dissertation, Hollywood represents one of the most powerful political-ideological tools on the planet which has the power to 'create' an event that will be transformed into real history.

No matter how African-American a film is in its content or argument, Hollywood always manages to make us believe that white characters are the best vehicles to narrate the story; black characters are relegated to the background in their own stories and

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African-Americans' struggles become the backdrop for heroic white actors. And even though many of these movies are based on real events, they often either oversimplify race issues as it is the case in *The Help* or distort reality in an excessive way as it is the case of *The Birth of a Nation* and *Mississippi Burning*. As it happens, the 2019 Best Picture Winner, *Green Book* (also based on true events) could also be included in this category of movies in which the story belongs to a black character but in which the protagonist is white. The film quickly became controversial owing to the fact that living relatives of the African-American main character said that the story portrayed in the movie was, once again, highly misleading. These movies also reinforce the idea that racism is largely gone today, the way in which these movies portray the past and make the cinema-goer say: "Thank God we do not live like this anymore!" when in fact, to some extent, we continue to do so. The issue of racial oppression and segregation can still be observed nowadays.

As we have seen throughout this dissertation, the overt racism and support of white supremacy that comes out of *The Birth of a Nation* has been replaced by a new kind of white supremacy practically imperceptible to the spectator. Hence, we can conclude that Hollywood movies do not just portray stereotypical images of African-Americans in films but they may also be creating a new stereotype of this culture by portraying black people as a community which has not been able to stand up for itself but must always rely on the help of white people. As I have stated in previous chapters, we understand cinema and especially Hollywood as an institution able to produce an active discourse, which means that those films created in Hollywood do not only have commercial purposes but they may also transmit a message with a strong ideological imprint. A message that may be interpreted as true facts by the viewers.

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