

Assignment 1: Hidden Figures

Hidden Figures, one of the most successful studio dramas of the past decade, is a movie set in 1961 and released in 2016. It follows the journey of 3 African American women in NASA: Dorothy Vaughn, Mary Jackson, and Katherine Johnson, and their unrecognised contribution to society and the space race. The screenplay was written by Allison Schroeder and directed by Theodore Melfi, both of whom are white and was based on the non-fiction book written by Margot Lee Shetterly (Burg, 2017). In the article 'See what she becomes' it is stated by the author that "the differing racial and gender standpoints held by Shetterly, Melfi, and Schroeder coupled with the relationship between these standpoints reveal social locations that are not equivalent" (Thompson, 2020). Melfi stated he "wanted the film to explore the part of the story which is not documented at all" (Heathman, 2017). This review will focus on the discrimination that these women faced during their time at NASA, both due to sexism and racism, and will look at understanding the decisions made by the director and the realism of the story.

At NASA, our main characters are "computers" whose sole purpose is to solve mathematical equations all day, and they are quite literally treated as computers rather than as people. This dehumanising outlook on people of colour reflects the way that they were viewed during their life and their struggles of co-existing in a modern world with the mistreatment due to segregation. The film pertinently depicts the segregation of white and black people throughout, presenting us with the many struggles and injustices that this system inflicts on the three main characters. We see them battle with this treatment right from the beginning as Dorothy is acting as a supervisor and getting none of the respect, pay or the title that would usually come with such a role. Whenever these roles are challenged in the movie, to those in higher authority in the workplace or to regular people outside of it, we are often met with the phrase that this is just 'the way things are'. We can see how pertinent the issue of racism and segregation was, with little effort by white people to change the status quo. This separation is seen throughout the whole film, extending to sexism too as in the movie (Melfi, Schroeder, 2017) we see Katherine struggle to be allowed into a meeting which she needs to be in for her work, but she is not permitted to for a large portion of the film since she 'is a woman'. We can see the accuracy of this from Donna Shirley in the extract 'Giant Leaps and Forgotten Steps...' where she states: there were 'a lot of strikes against me, mainly being female' (Sage, 2009).

So how accurate is Hidden Figures' portrayal of the 1960s? And how accurate is the storyline of the three main protagonists and the other characters depicted? Katherine Johnson is shown running across the NASA campus for 40 minutes each day so that she is able to use a bathroom specifically designated for black members of staff. There was in fact this segregation occurring throughout America until 1964, however, NASA had 'gradually and quietly' (Trenholm, 2017) desegregated the bathrooms by 1958, before the time of the space race. The real Katherine Johnson has confirmed that she chose to ignore segregation and used the bathrooms that were most convenient to her regardless of its racial 'designation' (VICE News, 2017). This is an important, self-motivated act of defiance by a black woman. However, the movie depicts this racial barrier being broken by Al Harrison – a white man – after Katherine gives an impassioned speech in front of her colleagues (Melfi, Schroeder, 2017). It is an interesting decision for Melfi to have included this regardless of

the fact that Al Harrison was a fictional white man in power, and is a much less inspirational story than Katherine fighting and achieving that change herself. In an interview with Melfi, he states that he sees a big issue with the idea of a 'white saviour complex' and that white and black people can do the right thing and it shouldn't matter 'as long as the right thing is done' (VICE News, 2017). We can understand in general the storytelling of black women going through this experience of not being able to have bathrooms accessible to them. The reality of black women at the time is that they were seen to be the bottom tier of society and little thought was given to their most basic needs by society; Melfi's generalisation is an incredibly important and factual occurrence representative of the real-life struggles that these women faced. One can therefore understand Melfi's wish to represent this on the silver screen, despite the factual inaccuracy about what was happening at NASA. However, in making this choice, Melfi diminished the importance of Katherine Johnson's strength of character and determination in breaking this segregation herself; in some ways she was her own Rosa Parks. In my view, Melfi's choice to include generalised segregation is an incredibly damaging narrative since it ironically reflects the 'hidden' element of the film. The characters of these women are the very reason for their contribution to the space race, science, and the multicultural modern world we know live in; the influence that they had should be celebrated.

Was anything included in the film actually true to fact? Luckily in this apparently true story, there is still a large amount of the content that reflects what did occur. We see Katherine work in computing Glenn's trajectory through the film, and although it seems dramatized, it's true. In fact, it was confirmed that John Glenn requested Katherine specifically to check the numbers. There's an element of dramatization in that in the movie this took a few hours to complete whilst in real life it took Katherine one and a half days (Melfi, Schroeder, 2017). The importance of this cannot be underestimated. As Margot Lee Shetterly said, "So the astronaut who became a hero, looked to this black woman in the still-segregated South at the time as one of the key parts of making sure his mission would be a success." (Sher, n.d.). Similar achievements represented the beginning of the end of the mistreatment of black women, who instead began to be met with trust and respect. Equally, this is also a reflection of the way in which society trust scientists.

To conclude, I think that the choices made by the director have a large reflection on the society we live in today. I think that 'Hidden figures' is an incredibly important movie and was a massive step in terms of telling untold stories and bringing light to these women. However, the decision to use Al Harrison as a white saviour, and furthermore the inability of Melfi to understand the negative influence of a white saviour, is disappointing. It is reflective of an inability to fully understand the true impact of segregation and inequality. To some degree these issues continue to be relevant to people of colour and women today, just to a lesser degree. Studies find that '69 percent of African American women would have had to switch occupations to achieve zero segregation in 1940, this percentage fell to around 33 percent in 2000, remaining almost unaltered since then.' (Alonso-Villar, del Rio, 2017). Issues such as the gender pay gap, unconscious bias, and placing people in stereotypes remain present now, and are important indicators of how we are a long way from equality. It is interesting and ironic that in a story with a focal point about empowering black women, there's an undoubtable underlying bias to white men.

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