

Types and Stripes

Taping Together Turbulent Topics on Film

It has long been commonplace that many people regard movies as fantasy, distinct from reality. Oftentimes when moviegoers depart the theatre, we hear comments like, “That would never happen in real life.” This notion that films do not correlate to the human experience is fundamentally untrue, regardless of genre. Every hero’s journey—be it William Miller’s of the comedy-drama film *Almost Famous*,¹ or Jake Epping of the science fiction thriller miniseries *11.22.63*²—is relative to the viewer’s own life experiences. Even in regard to real national issues, the latter miniseries is a prime example of contextualizing an American historical tragedy to the big screen. The JFK assassination, the drug epidemic, racially-fueled hate crimes, the murder rate in Chicago—these are all morbid tragedies that are woven into the stripes of our American flag.

However, when stories become personalized and are repurposed on film, an individual viewer is forced into the conversation of these issues. Audiences internalize emotions, behaviors, and sentiments, which can hopefully blossom into a pluralistic, inclusive worldview. Some feel that the aforementioned subject matters ought to be roped off, only to be consumed through historical and political texts, and never to be adapted to the visual medium. Challenging this theory, do filmmakers ever go too far when adapting real life tragedies, and if so, what is inappropriate to adapt to film?

If one were to formulate a list of filmmakers who garner political controversy—deservedly or undeservedly so—Spike Lee would certainly be included on that list. Lee’s canon of work addresses issues that most filmmakers are too fearful to touch, and when he addresses those issues, it is without secret. Lee’s 2015 film, *Chi-Raq*,³ highlights this overt presentation of political and social issues that include feminism and gun control. As a loose adaptation of the

¹ Crowe, Cameron. *Almost Famous*. DreamWorks Pictures. Film. 2000.

² Abrams, J.J. *11.22.63*. Hulu. Film. 2016.

³ Lee, Spike. *Chi-Raq*. Amazon Studios. Film. 2015.

Greek comedy *Lysistrata*,⁴ women use their sexuality to prevent the production of violence. Instead of the Peloponnesian War, these women fight to end gun violence in Chicago, which has accrued record high statistics of deaths resulting from guns.

Although *Chi-Raq* was received with brilliant acclaim by some critics, others feel that Lee's finished product mishandled social issues. For instance, one review of the film by Ijeoma Oluo quite blatantly refers to *Chi-Raq* as "a fucking horrible film."⁵ Oluo feels that women were overall diminished to a sole function of being sex objects for men. Oluo states that, in the film, "women are reduced to walking vaginas." Concurrently, Oluo argues that Lee oversimplified the complexity of gun violence, especially by combatting the issue with a feminine refusal of sex.

From a feminist perspective, it is undeniably difficult to talk about the issues of female oppression and gun violence, let alone combining them, through a visual story. However, Oluo fails to identify the level of detail and care by which Lee rendered the film. The idea of a gun being a phallus of violence that is poetically combatted by female power is a bold statement that thrusts attentiveness toward advocacies for women's rights and gun control. By combining landmark names of Chicago and Iraq, Lee exposes the internal war of gun violence in the United States in a bold, thought-worthy title. Even the casting of Jennifer Hudson playing the mother of a victim is a compelling choice, considering Hudson's personal attachment to having lost her mother and brother to gun violence in her hometown of Chicago.⁶

Death is difficult to portray on film, and death related to ongoing sociocultural discussion is even more difficult. Lee's forthright approach in consistent overtness—padlocks on vaginas, passionate protests, a pile of guns—is unarguably effective in producing discussion. Revitalizing *Lysistrata* as an adaptation does not trivialize gun violence or the oppression of women. Rather, the play reinforces a timeless story that serves as a mode of transportation in delivering Lee's message. *Lysistrata* becomes the framework of packaging the primary message that lawmakers ought to work toward solving gun violence.

⁴ Aristophanes. *Lysistrata*. Print. 6th ed. 2003.

⁵ Oluo, Ijeoma. "Fuck You, Spike Lee: *Chi-Raq* is an Insult to *Do the Right Thing*, to Black Women, and to Malcolm X." *The Stranger*. 2 Dec. 2015. Web.

⁶ Gorner, Jeremy. "Jennifer Hudson Relative Slain, Child Missing." *Chicago Tribune*. 24 Oct. 2008. Print.

In regards to the image of women in *Chi-Raq*: yes, most female characters are sexualized. But then again, that is the point of *Lysistrata* and strengthens the audacity of women in the story. The titular character still speaks, thinks, converses, and dreams; it is made clear throughout the active narrative that Lysistrata herself is more than her sexual being. This debate of appropriateness in depicting female characters resurfaces an issue that was faced in still photography during the 1970's. Art critic Tal Dekel records controversies in her book *Gendered: Art and Feminist Theory*,⁷ when feminists disagreed whether or not photographs of nude women were empowering or insulting. This same debate can be applied to *Chi-Raq*, with Dekel's rational arguing for Lee's use of female depiction, considering that the use serves a purpose and is not presenting sexuality for the audience's arousal or pornographic sake.

Much of Lee's work also emphasizes race relations, which is heavily implied in *Chi-Raq*. Racial tension was incorporated into this film through casting, as the majority of the cast includes people of color. Additionally, with incidents in the United States involving police officers killing people of color—many including racial bias—being shifted into national spotlight, race is another social issue that reaches the forefront of what is and is not an appropriate depiction. In other words, filmmakers need to consider whether characters are archetypes or stereotypes, as archetypes can provide fruitful discussion and stereotypes can amount to disrespect. Thus, Lee's recreation of Chicago in *Chi-Raq* is successfully driven, being that these are real people with real ambition in wanting to end gun violence.

Similarly, race in narratives can brew controversy when actors are cast, as some people feel that it is in effect racist to cast people of color solely based on the color of one's skin. Although *Chi-Raq* did not receive this criticism, many other productions have, including the Broadway hit *Hamilton: An American Musical*.⁸ Even though Lin-Manuel Miranda's *Hamilton* is not a film, when a casting call requested "non-white" actors, a debate ensued about whether or not this request was ethical, or even racist.⁹ Some lobbed the conjecture that the casting call was an

⁷ Dekel, Tal. *Gendered: Art and Feminist Theory*. Cambridge Scholars Publishing. 1977. Print.

⁸ Miranda, Lin-Manuel. *Hamilton: An American Musical*. Musical. 2016.

⁹ Blay, Zeba. "No, the *Hamilton* Casting Call for 'Non-White' Actors is Not Reverse Racist." *Huffington Post*. 31 Mar 2016. Web.

example of reverse racism, honing back to the question regarding appropriateness of social issues in stories.

Undoubtedly, the conjecture made that the *Hamilton* casting call was reverse racism is narrow-minded and ignorant. As of now, the world is a melting pot of all colors and kinds of people. These accusations summon this backwards idea: “These our Founding Fathers, how dare they change who we are.” It is ignorant to label this casting call as racist, especially when Miranda’s intent is to champion diversity and acknowledge how far we have come as a nation. Through Miranda’s adaptation and diverse cast, viewers see similarities of the human being rather than differences. Accordingly, there was no outcry—and should be no outcry—that King George III was portrayed by Jonathan Groff, who identifies as a gay man.¹⁰ King George III was assumedly straight and played by a gay man, so why can’t *Hamilton* and the other Founding Fathers be played by people of different races? Because race is more visible in appearance in contrast to sexuality, it appears that the denouncers of the casting call garnered an ignorant outcry, and in itself showcased racism as an issue that ought to be represented in stories.

Racial representation and racism has existed in the filmic realm for years, being most clearly depicted in historical dramas. It has been stated many times that history repeats itself, hearkening back to the importance of adapting stories, such as *Lysistrata*, to work toward solving our current political climate. Events in history, specifically tragic events, frequently amount to dialogue concerning appropriateness of depiction. For instance, the assassination of President John F. Kennedy is a popular topic in the exploration of historical dramas. More interestingly is Stephen King’s novel *11/22/63*¹¹ and its framing of a distinct science fiction narrative. The JFK assassination is a centerfold element to King’s story; however, the primary focus is on schoolteacher Jake Epping and his time traveling mission to prevent an event from occurring.

In adaptation to film, it is interesting that over the years there has not been as much disappointment regarding on-screen adaptations like the miniseries *11.22.63* and its depiction of the JFK assassination. When thinking about American tragedies being adapted to film, the most

¹⁰ Wong, Curtis M. “Jonathan Groff on Being Gay in Hollywood.” *The Huffington Post*. 8 Jul. 2015. Web.

¹¹ King, Stephen. *11/22/63*. Scribner. 8 Nov. 2011. Print.

glaring occurrence would probably be the September 11th attacks. Many films—documentaries and historical dramas—have been made about 9/11. The two national American tragedies beg the question: why does it appear more acceptable to produce films about the JFK assassination than films about 9/11? Both concern egregious events that happened in our country, so why does one cause more denouncement than the other?

For starters, television and film itself appeared to have sensationalized 9/11, so delivering a movie through that same mode is personally triggering to watch. In ways, the JFK assassination was sensationalized through the Zapruder film and news coverage, yet the September 11th attacks were filmed for hours on television and depicted mass destruction in a beloved city. The location of the 9/11 attacks should be noted too, considering that the United States and specifically New York City became a cultural hub of celebrating cinema. Perhaps most crucially as to why 9/11 films should not be produced is due to the event's unprecedented nature. Presidents have been assassinated before, yet the intentional flying of planes into buildings as a targeted attack was an unprecedented act in our nation. Thus, as far as appropriateness of topics, 9/11 is one historical example that should not be touched by film, whereas the JFK assassination can produce a compelling story if executed respectfully.

Aside from historical events, a less severe—yet still complex—topic regards the depiction of archetypes in film. When adapting a story to film, the source material most likely contains some sort of archetype, which is essentially a character who has distinct, identifiable hallmarks in behavior. The controversy ignites when some viewers feel that the archetype is portrayed more so as a stereotype, which oversimplifies a character's makeup. For instance, some critics like Oluo have argued that Lee has depicted characters in a stereotypical fashion, believing that his characters embody racist stereotypes. Some stereotypes are apart from race or even sociocultural implications, creating characters that are simply one-dimensional, with little substance.

For instance, Penny Lane in *Almost Famous* sometimes receives criticism that she is portrayed as ditsy with a mist of mysteriousness. This image has been labeled as the “Manic Pixie Dream Girl,”¹² and it is frequently debated as to whether or not this embodiment is a

¹² Welker, Holly. “Forever Your Girl.” 12 Feb. 2010. Web.

stereotype or an archetype. Feminist writer Holly Welker asserts that the Manic Pixie Dream Girl's function is to "teach broodingly soulful young men to embrace life and its infinite mysteries and adventures." This description fits more so into a stereotype, because little attention is paid to the content of the character and shifts focus to an ignorant perspective as to what is and is not conventional behavior for women.

Although Welker's observation may remain true in other films, it is unfair to label Penny Lane as a Manic Pixie Dream Girl, since Penny is more than her fur coat and signature round sunglasses. Much of the responsibility is left up to the auteur, and in this case, Cameron Crowe entrusted Kate Hudson with the task of transcending the stereotype of a Manic Pixie Dream Girl. Perhaps why some critics feel Penny is a stereotype is because they fail to recognize her humanity that is revealed through glimpses of scenes, like the mystical waving of her hands in front of William's face during the "Tiny Dancer" bus sequence. Accompanying this gesture is Penny's response to William's remark that he needs to go home by declaring, "You are home." Some may see Penny masked in 70's decor, yet her real self is revealed in brief, subtle moments.

When William finally erupts a statement to Penny about how she was sold for "fifty bucks and a case of beer," Penny responds with the question, "What kind of beer?" This moment showcases how Penny is still concerned with brand and image, even in something as trivial as beer. This moment, packaged with Penny's subtle tears of emotion, is absolutely complex and proves the Manic Pixie Dream Girl argument wrong. Penny upholds her character without the sole purpose of wooing "broodingly soulful young men" and is distinct from any other character on film. Yes, she can be compared to archetypes in other films; however, Hudson's delivery separates Penny Lane from any stereotypes. Penny's function is even questioned as to whether or not she is an enemy or an ally. Although viewers are never supplied with a definitive answer as to whether or not she helped William along his journey, this questioning highlights how she has been understood through multiple viewpoints, strengthening her character as a complex being.

Whether dealing with the rendering of archetypes instead of stereotypes or handling sociopolitical issues in a respectful and functional manner, the discussion of appropriateness should be fostered prior to production. If an issue is controversial, a conversation should be

facilitated by the following question: are filmmakers dealing with source material roped off by red tape or caution tape? Red tape metaphorically argues that there are a lot of difficulties in rendering a successful film embodying a controversial issue, so filmmakers should not even bother with the subject. They feel that there is too much intensity in the processing of issues and conclude an unlikelihood of these issues being solved. They are like some politicians who get caught up in red tape, removing their involvement due to the overwhelming complexities of solving the issues.

Caution tape supplies a much different outlook. This metaphor recognizes that depicting controversial events or characters are not “popcorn movies” that are solely rooted in the objective of entertainment. The caution tape outlook clarifies that auteurs need to be careful in handling source materials. The outlook recognizes that some form of change is needed and can thereby ignite change through film. If the material is too controversial and devastating, such as the September 11th attacks, filmmakers should acknowledge the subject matter, but respectfully reserve it as something not meant for film. This mode of thinking is different than not even facilitating a conversation in the first place.

For viewers, the fact of the matter is that many people *do* read up on current events and invest in learning about global problems. Instead of sanctioning red tape, these invested readers engage in caution tape, reserving subjects that are too morbid or glaring behind a stream of caution tape. As far as appropriateness, these subjects belong to a branch of films that embody scholarship and pragmatism, rather than relaxation or entertainment. Not every film has to contain a politically packed punch, but when they do, the issue should be handled with tremendous care. Hopefully, caution tape prevails in the art of filmmaking, considering the red tape’s ignoring and silence of atrocities that occur here, on Earth, in our real world.

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