

The Pitfalls of Tokenism

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Introduction

This course is to support us to become the better more thoughtful programmers regardless of your field, this workshop is to inspire you to broaden your programming horizons by give you the tools to achieve this.

Thoughts on the job of a programmer

‘Film Programming is one of those jobs that at one end of the spectrum, everyone feels that they can do, and at the other end, often seems like an elitist, slightly precious vocation with an air of mystery around what it actually means. Done well however, it can transform the cultural tastes of a community and change people’s lives, offering them a window on a much wider world than their own and giving them a visual and emotional experience that is quite different to any other art form.’

- *Catherine Des Forges Independent cinema Office.*

Definition of tokenism in Film

Tokenism occurs when a minority character appears in a film for the sake of having a Black or POC character, usually to support a white character and acts as a representative for an entire race. Their singular appearance in a film causes the Black or POC character to carry ‘The burden of representation’ unlike white characters who can be diverse and varied within any given story.

The awareness in Hollywoods of the lack of diversity started the Oscar So White hashtag, and the boycotting of some celebrities of the 2015 event. WHAT IS YOUR DEFINITION? LETS DISCUSS

Tips on how to avoid tokenism - the basics

1. Include films in your programme have several minority characters.

- One of the surest signs you've got tokenisation going on is when you have a cast full of non-minorities except for one or two people representing minorities. If you have a cast with a bunch of white people with one black guy or a cast with a bunch of men and one woman, you probably have tokenisation going on. It is very easy for this to happen because we become invested in a great story - take the film 'Clueless' where the film's tokenism almost hides in plain sight.





This is my best friend Dionne, we're friends because we both know what its like for people to be jealous of us.

TIPS TO AVOID PROGRAMMING FILMS WITH TOKEN CHARACTERS

2. Make sure that minority characters have important roles in the overall story.

If your minority characters are limited to sidekicks, secondary characters, one-shot characters, and/or plot devices, you're doing it wrong. Make sure at least some of your minority characters play important and key roles in the story and do more than simply help a non-minority reach their ultimate goals and/or glory. Let them play vital and key roles in the overall story.

3. Your minority character' identities and interests should not revolve around their minority-ness.

Their minority statuses should be a *part* of their identities, but their identities should not completely revolve around it. They should have plenty of hobbies, interests, life experiences, ambitions, and goals that any other person could share.

In a lot of films black characters are there simply to give the white character a element of 'cool' for example in the film 'She's all that' 1999 'Lil Kim has very few lines and Gabriel Union is cast to support the main character Laine Boggs played by Rachel Leigh Cook, vice reported. Other stereotypes include the magical Asian, the spicey Latina, the Gypsy Woman or 'Hot Roma'

<https://youtu.be/3WJHD2Wr9yk>

4. Pass your Bechdel Tests.

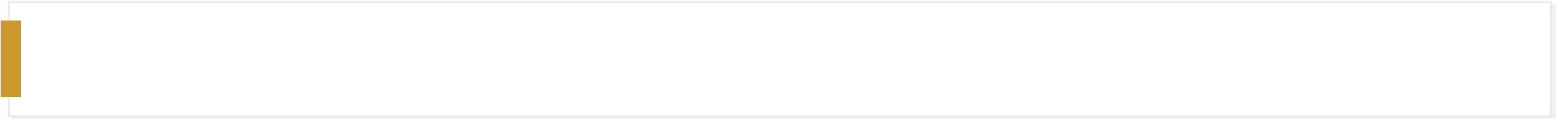
The original Bechdel Test runs as follows: does a film contain at least two female characters who talk to each other about something besides a man? Similarly, does your story contain at least two non-white characters who talk about something that isn't racial issues or a white person? If you can answer "yes" to these or any minority group represented in your story, then you're probably a fair step away from tokenism.

- Photo from 'Rocks' Dir Sarah Gavron 2020



So, what is a Black Film?

**The Genuine, the Compromised,
and the Token**



Andre Seewood offers three categories of Black Film

a) **The Compromised Black Film** (e.g. White Savior trope and/or Black characters do not survive the circumstances within the story)

b) **The Genuine Black Film** (e.g. Black characters exercise full dramatic agency and survive the circumstances within the story)

c) **The Pseudo-Inclusive White Film** (e.g. **Black Tokenism** within White Films)

The Compromised Black Film

- Black filmmaker Steve McQueen's **12 YEARS A SLAVE** (2013) is a Compromised Black Film because the film, adapted from a 19th century memoir, highlights a White Savior character, the Canadian carpenter named Bass (Brad Pitt), who exercises an unseen dramatic agency which ultimately leads to the return to freedom for Solomon Northup (Chiwetel Ejiofor) the kidnapped Black freedman upon whose memoir the film was based.



Sometimes a compromised Black Film tells us something important about the status quo.

George Romero's NIGHT OF THE LIVING DEAD (1968) would be considered a Compromised Black Film since the principal Black character does not survive the circumstances of the story. But the grand thematic metaphor within the original NOTLD film, that of the zombification of White America and its representation of a microcosm of fear and racial turmoil within America in 1968 as a house divided within itself, reveals to us that a Compromised Black Film can often times be equal, if not more, critical of the status quo than a Genuine Black Film.

How would you compare these two films as light of the BLM movement? How would you programme them?

Tokenism as Hyper - Tokenism - what is Hyper-tokenism?

- Hyper-tokenism in a White film can be defined as the marked increase in screen time, dramatic involvement and promotional images of a Black character while simultaneously reserving full dramatic agency as the providence of white characters by the end of the film.



- **Hyper -Tokenism continued**

In the context of the “Star Wars” franchise, full dramatic agency (the ability to influence, change, control and survive the dramatic circumstances within the story) is defined ultimately by a “selected” character’s ability to wield “the force” by intuition or training - the decision to not give Finn this final defining characteristic forces (no pun intended) this character into a supporting role for the Whites who are wielding this power. But when we add the fact that **Finn is rendered unconscious for the final act of the film (not even able to applaud the efforts of his White cohorts)** it can be said that we were not really following the heroic exploits of the Finn character so much as we were being led “by the nose” as it were, to a point where dramatic agency is ultimately still the providence of the White characters in the film, that is **Adam Driver (Kylo Ren) and Daisy Ridley (Rey Skywalker)**

The need to “Make America Great Again” as Trump’s campaign slogan tells his White male supporters is really a discrete code to “Make America White Again” by returning the Hyper-Token Black male in the form of Barak Obama back to his subordinate place in the domestic and global racial hierarchy. That “Star Wars: The Force Awakens” ends with a powerful White female returning a legendary light saber to an aged and seasoned Luke Skywalker, fulfills the both the slogan and the code in the minds of those spectators of a return to greatness as a return to Whiteness.

The Guardian: Star Wars Actor John Boyega Says Non-White Roles are Pushed to the Side in Franchise

- “They gave all the nuance to Adam Driver, all the nuance to Daisy Ridley. Let’s be honest. Daisy knows this. Adam knows this. Everybody knows. I’m not exposing anything,” Boyega said.
- He said [Star Wars](#) didn’t know what to do with characters of colour.

Quotes - John Boyega



How does it effect the Black gaze?



- Unlike a compromised film like the NOLD Hyper-tokenism has a latent affect upon the consciousness of the Black spectator in that it allows the Black spectator to hope, imagine or believe that the Black character will be given more dramatic agency in the subsequent films of the franchise, and therefore secures Black viewer loyalty and Black money to fill the coffers of the White controlled studio with its massive profits gained from the reboot of beloved film franchises, like “Star Wars.”
- So how do we programme Star Wars now?

So let's look at definitions of THE BLACK FILM

By film writer Andre Seewood

1. Black film can be expressed as: a Black film is a film with a majority Black cast that situates Whites, if any, in peripheral or non-influential roles where the narrative resolves itself by giving more dramatic attention to the emotions and circumstances of the Black character(s).
2. Black film is a consequence of point 1 in that the concept of dramatic agency (the ability of the character(s) to directly influence and change the circumstances within a story and survive the outcome of those circumstances) is explicitly exercised by the Black characters who are integral to the film's plot and theme.

What does a Genuine Black Film look like

Nigerian British Filmmaker Shola Amoo's Film 'The Last Tree' (2000) qualifies as a successful Genuine Black Film (e.g. Black characters exercise full dramatic agency and survive the circumstances within the story) These character's are complex, the main protagonist's has a two Mum's, white a foster Mother and his Nigerian real Mother. Throughout this coming of age film the relationship with the Femi and his two mothers, his friends and his culture we come to appreciate complexity of growing up in the city, life in general and Parenthood. The film develops with a stark realism that doesn't need to collapse into stereotyping to drive the narrative.



We can all make and programme Black Films

- If there is anything that should be taken away from this essay it is that it is important for White or Black filmmakers to make Genuine Black Films and White programmers can programme Black films because such works of give us another valid perspective on History, contemporary events or fictional events in such a way that the dominant perspective is not the last and final point of view of the world.



Wounded is directed by white South African filmmaker John Trengove

Tokenisms in Film Programming

- There is always a temptation to show minority films at certain times of the year, for example Black History give us a chance to screen black films, The Hindu celebration Diwali in November for Asian films and so on.
- The other problem is to programme one token minority film in a programme of white films.
- Don't token POC by only inviting them to intro films or sit as the only person of colour on panels. It carries a 'burden of representation' and can be understood as a token jester or gesture.
- Invite Black POC and minority people to join your board, recruit them as ambassadors, curators outreach workers, writers, social networkers, influencers,

Exercise

- we mentioned several films in this discussion
- Night of the living dead
- Star Wars
- Clueless
- 12 years a slave
- Rocks (photograph)
- The last tree
- Wounded (photograph)

Using any of the above, adding some ideas of your own choose some titles you would use for a weekly film BAME club running for 4 weeks.

Programming suggestions

- Night of the living dead paired with - Get Out
- Instead of 12 years a slave - replace with Harriott
- Star Wars - Replace with Black Panther
- Clueless replace with Rocks or fast girls