
The Representation of African Americans in *I am Legend* and *World War Z*

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Abstract

This study examined the representation of African-American characters in two post-apocalyptic films *I am Legend* and *World War Z*, which aimed at revealing whether or not the practice of stereotyping against African American still exists since both films attribute positive characteristics to the African American characters. Accordingly, this study applied qualitative method utilizing Stuart Hall's Representation as the main theory. In the analysis, this study investigated the experience of African-American characters in both films, and also examined the main character from *World War Z*, which is a white American, in order to reveal the representation beyond the appearance by exploring selected non-narrative aspects, such as shot, angle and lighting. Based on the analysis, this study reveals that there is a certain meaning hidden behind the representation of African-American characters as the main or protagonist characters that cannot be the same as that of White Americans. It shows that discriminatory practices in America has not totally disappeared as it just goes "underground", which means that racial inequality still becomes a major and pressing problem in America until today.

Keywords: african-american, racial discrimination, representation, inequality, stereotype

Introduction

Racism has been a controversial issue in terms of politics and social economics throughout history. In America, racism is also considered as a "spoken" word, which means that people who belong to non-white race will always be blamed by the white American society. In March 1968, the US Commission on Civil Rights published "Report of the National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders" emphasizing the significance of racism in American life. According to this report, the white society has never fully understood that white society is deeply implicated in *ghetto* (which means a group of society whose members are minorities due to social, legal, and economic pressure). This implies that the central paradox and the first standard in America is race. Consequently, in the surface Americans seem to have already accepted the existence of African Americans, yet implicitly African Americans can still feel some kind of denial to their existence. From the beginning, America's politics is based on the principals of white supremacy (Wynter 3). White supremacy is the belief that the whites are more superior than any other races and they dominate the non-whites politically, economically and socially.

Since 1753, the acceptance of African American descendant as an American citizen has become a debatable case because it is againsts white superiority (Jorgensen 233). White superiority has long believed against the existence of any other races except for the white Americans until now. Current news in *workers.org* shows that black workers have been held at bay with the least pay; whether urban North or rural South, black workers are still exploited to the highest degree. Even though black people have already made an effort to be racially equal with the white and all other people in the world, they would have to wait and survive up to five decades from 1950s to 2000s to reach their real equality (Bracey 41-43). However, the problem of racial discrimination has to be faced and solved.

Black people in America are called African Americans because they inherited the African blood from their ancestors, so they are genetically African but they are living in American land, which is not their homeland (Tyndall 57-61). Meanwhile, the Office of Management and Budget (OMB) in the United States Bureau 2010 defined African American as a person who has the origins in any of the Black racial groups of Africa. It includes respondents who are reported entries such as African American; Sub Saharan African entries, such as Kenyan and Nigerian; and Afro- Caribbean entries, such as Haitian and Jamaican

(2). Therefore, it can be concluded that African Americans refer to the people of African descent who live in America and hold American citizenship.

Nowadays, in America, there has been a large number of African Americans in the middle class society. Based on the data from the United States Census Bureau 2010, the number of African Americans living in United States reached 12.6 percents of the total population. It has grown about 12.3 percents, which results in African American being the biggest “other race” in the United States of America. As a part of American population, African Americans have given a substantial contribution to the American culture, especially in arts and literature. The evidence of their contribution is the existence of African American artists, actors, singers, and authors that include Will Smith, Ruby Dee, Paul Winfield, Rihanna, Bruno Mars, Toni Morrison and many more. Nevertheless, public recognition toward these African American figures does not mean that racism has totally vanished in America. In fact, it just goes “underground” since racial inequality in America still becomes a major and pressing problem (Tyson 359-367).

There are many African Americans who succeeded in the world of entertainment or even politics, yet it is not that easy to be African Americans because they are not accepted easily in American society although they have the same way of acting, speaking, and thinking like other Americans. According to Chima and Wharton, for decades, African Americans have been excluded from participating in most of desirable jobs and institution. The major problem which African Americans face includes employment process biases, channeling into “minority” positions, lack of access to network and mentors, and etc. (1).

Not only in the living practices, the discriminatory practices towards African Americans also occur in the works of art and literature, such as novel, drama, and film. In many Hollywood films, the villains were mostly given to African American actors, for example in *Bad Boys* and *Blood Diamond*. African American characters were often the ones who act against the white protagonist characters. However, in some other films we may see African American actors starring as protagonists, such as *Men in Black* and *I am Legend*. Hence, there are various ways in which American films represent African American characters. In the past, African American actors mostly played only in black films and acted as the antagonists, but now we can also see many African Americans become the protagonists in major Hollywood films. Therefore, the variety in the depiction of African Americans in films becomes an interesting subject to analyze in this study that will reveal the representation of African Americans in Hollywood films.

Taking into account a recent issue on the end of the world hovering over the society, this study selected two apocalyptic films for analysis, namely *I am Legend* and *World War Z*. Starring a major African American actor, Will Smith, *I am Legend* was produced in 2007 by Warner Bros. Entertainment Inc. and directed by Francis Lawrence. Set in 2012, the film reflects how the issue of the end of the world in film as predicted by the Mayan has inspired the filmmaking. This film portrays a very smart scientist named Robert Neville (an African American), who cannot be contaminated by an unstoppable and incurable man-made virus. Neville is the last human survivor in what is left of New York City and maybe around the world. He is just accompanied by his dog, Samantha. Neville can be the only survivor because he cannot be affected by the virus. He is desperate to find any other survivor who might be out there until there is a woman named Anna and her son, Ethan, who heard Neville on the radio and suggests him to follow them to the safe colony. After the *infected* found Neville’s house and destroy it, Neville brings Anna the blood of the cured *infected* and ask her to bring it to the colony without anyone knowing how he struggles to find the vaccine.

Unlike the previous film, *World War Z*, another apocalyptic film starring Brad Pitt, was produced in 2013 by Paramount Pictures—a production company established by Brad Pitt in 2002, and directed by Marc Forster. The film is about a former UN investigator in Philadelphia, Gerry Lane and his wife, Karin with their two daughters, Rachel and Cony, who are trapped in the attack of a mass of zombies. This circumstance forces Gerry to travel to several countries in order to find the vaccine.

In this study, the different portrayals of African American characters become the main focus of analysis. In *I am Legend*, African American is the main character, while in *World War Z* African Americans are only as supporting characters. Since in *World War Z* the main character is white American,

it becomes interesting for this study to compare the main characters of both films to help revealing the way African American characters are represented through these films.

Theoretical Framework

In conducting the analysis, Representation theory proposed by Stuart Hall is applied as the tool to conduct the analysis. Stuart Hall defines the word representation as the using of language to say something meaningful about, or to represent, the world meaningfully to other people (1). It indicates that representation is a process of production and changing meaning between members of culture. Hall claims that it is not that simple. He further explains how we recognize all the things around us, how we give meaning of things through languages, and communicate them in ways people are capable to understand.

Within the process of representation there are subjects that represent something which is called as the representative. The representative has the power to present the represented so that it can be assumed that the representative is powerful. On the other hand, the represented is considered powerless since they are not able to present themselves. The inequalities of power between the representative and the represented create stereotyping in which the powerful representative makes the images of the represented based on their idea.

Nowadays we can see many positive images of African-American in film characters, such as captain, police, scientist, and many other, whereas the director of the films is white. Accordingly, it is interesting to analyze *I am Legend* and *World War Z* films, which have the two important points of the theory of representation, namely they are the representative and the represented. The representatives could be social actors who use the conceptual system of their culture and other representational system to construct meaning. The representatives for these two films are the people behind the scene, including the director and producer, who have the power to create the represented. Meanwhile, the represented itself are the characters inside the films that are not able to represent themselves. The African-American and the white American are represented through different stereotypes and construct their own meaning. The meaning itself is a construction. The meaning is constructed through the representational systems (Hall 25).

Hall involved two *system of representation*. The first is there is a “system” by which all sort of objects, people and events are correlated with a set of concepts or *mental representation* that we carry around in our heads. The system stated becomes the important thing to give a meaning to the world because in giving meaning, it is based on the system of concepts and images formed in people’s thoughts, which can stand for the representation of the world. Language becomes the second system of representation because it involves in the overall process of constructing meaning. People are only able to represent meaning when people have access to a shared language (17-19).

There is a term of *sign I* which means the general term for words, images, or sounds that carry meaning. Signs are organized to language and it is actually a common language which enable us to translate what are in our brain into words, sound or images, and to operate this as language, to express meanings and communicate thought to other people.

Hall proposes three theories of representation, namely reflective approach, intentional approach and constructionist approach. For the purpose of analysis, the study only applies the constructionist theory as the researcher can also involve in creating the meaning of African American representation in the films. Moreover, it has to be related to the contemporary condition of African American in the society and the theory applied. In constructionist approach, the researcher may construct meaning by using the representational system called concepts and signs. Constructivists do not deny the existence of material world, where things and people exist, and the symbolic practice and processes through which representation, meaning and language operate. However, it is the language system used that creates meaning, not the material world. The meaning depends on its symbolic function not the material quality. Representational system captured in the film consists of the image we are looking at through the camera.

Beside Stuart Hall’s Representation theory, this study also employs Louis Giannetti’s theory of non-narrative aspects in film to reveal the message conveyed in films that are not told in the narrative aspects.

Research Method

This study is a qualitative research, which explores and understands the meaning of individuals or groups based on the social or human problem. The process of research involves appearing questions and procedures, data analysis inductively building from particulars to general themes, and the researcher making interpretation from the meaning of the data (Creswell 4).

The objects of the analysis as well as the the primary data are *I am Legend* and *World War Z*. The Representation theory by Stuart Hall as selected as the primary theory. Secondary sources needed for this study include books, internet sources, magazines, journal articles and many more related to the main issue of the study and used to strengthen the analysis.

To obtain data from the films, certain scenes and dialogues were selected and sorted through in accordance with the main focus of the analysis. Only selected scenes and dialogues were used to answer the research problem regarding the representation of African American in *I am Legend* and *World War Z* films. Data analysis also involves collecting open-ended data, based on arranging general question and developing and analysis from the information of the sources (Creswell, 183-184). Since the objects of analysis in this study are films, it will be very important to analyze the data by applying the narrative and non-narrative aspects.

Findings and Discussion

Representation against Stereotype

For centuries, African Americans have always been stereotyped negatively. However, it is interesting that some of the stereotypes of African Americans have changed as seen through the following analysis of the films.

An Army Colonel and a Doctor

By the late twentieth century, black cast and and black theme-oriented shows have already appeared in the United States (Gray 78). The role of African American leader can be seen in *I am Legend* film, in which the main character is an African American named dr. Robert Neville who is a Lieutenant Colonel and he is also a doctor. As a colonel overseeing many soldiers under his command, Robert as well as his family are protected and become the important family to be prioritized in a time of crisis as shown in the following part of dialogue in the film and captured in Figure 1.

Mike : Keep the colonel and his family between us and don't let anyone stop you (00:39:38)



Figure 1. Robert carries up Marley to be evacuated (00:39:46)

As Stuart Hall suggests, representation is the production of meaning of the concept from people's mind through language (3). In a film, any element can serve as the language, whether it is the sound, the picture, or the dialogue, and all of those languages carry meanings. In this study, the language of representation is obtained from the pictures and the dialogues of the film. From the angle of Figure 1, it is apparent that Robert and his daughter are taken from the low angle. Robert's representation is supported by Gianneti's non-narrative theory, which states that picture is taken from the low angle to heighten the

importance of the captured subject (15). This scene shows that as a Colonel, Robert is powerful and the soldiers respect him and his family. Therefore, it asserts the representation of Robert Neville as an honorable colonel.

Another dialogue shows Robert Neville has the power to order the soldiers who are Americans, as follows:

Robert : Get your hand off of my wife. Get your hands off.
Marley : Mommy !
Mike : Stand down. Lieutenant ~
Robert : Scan her again. Get your hand off of her.
Mike : Stand down.
Robert : Scan her again. Stand down. Stand down, soldier, stand down ! I am Lieutenant Colonel
Robert Neville. I am ordering you to scan her again. Scan her again.
Soldier : Alright, scan her again. (00:41:25)

This dialogue undoubtedly portrays how an African American can hold power in United States. His order is obeyed by his soldiers, although at first they questioned it. However, they finally follow the order from Robert Neville, who is an African American but also their superior. From this scene, African American is represented as a good leader, which clearly goes against Odum's stereotype that Negro in general was not capable of taking great responsibility or of assuming leadership (18). It also proves that Odum's point about America as a white man's country, in which the white man would dominate in about whatever way he chose and that laws and resolutions only made matters worse, is not true in this case. The one who dominate in this film is the African American although he is in a white man's country. African Americans prove themselves to be able to have a higher rank than the Whites. Furthermore, the white soldiers have to obey their African American Colonel because based on the military rank, the African American is higher in rank.

In *I am Legend*, Robert Neville is not only a colonel in the United States Army, but he is also a doctor. As a doctor, Robert has his own way to find the cure for Krippin Virus, portrayed in the film as endangering human existence. For most culture, being a doctor as well as a colonel imply a prestigious status. This further confirms the positive depiction of African Americans in the film as they can also adopt a profession in fields commonly identical with whites, such as science. Therefore, this representation of African Americans can prove that they are not always the same as the stereotypes attached to them.

A United Nations Officer

While in *I am Legend*, the major character is Robert Neville who is an African American, in *World War Z*, the major character is Gerry Lane who is white. However, there is an African American as minor character in *World War Z* named Thierry Umotoni, a Deputy-Secretary General of the United Nations. Figure 2 illustrates the scene captured when Thierry is talking to Gerry Lane. The shot taken is a medium shot from the low angle which clearly signifies that Thierry is more powerful than Gerry as suggested by Giannetti that low angle heightens the importance of the object (15). As the camera shoots Gerry from the back facing Thierry who stands in front of him during their conversation, this scene depicts Thierry as being more powerful than Gerry because Gerry has to obey Thierry's order to find a safe place for his family.



Figure 2. Thierry is talking to Gerry aboard the ship (00:29:51)

By applying the constructionist approach of representation theory, the study discovers a reflection of reality constructed in this film, namely to recall the viewers' mind that African Americans are able to secure a very high position in the United Nations, the most prestigious and highly respected organization in the world.

Army Soldiers

There are also some other African American characters appear in *World War Z* as minor characters beside Thierry. In this film, some African American actors are given role as army soldiers. Figure 3 is a depiction of African American soldiers who work as in South Korea. The role of African American characters as army soldiers shows that now African American can have equal opportunity to serve in the army and have the same rank as the whites. They are in the same military order, and stationed in the same place. Statistically, since 2010, there has already been 2.4 million African American military veterans in the United States (United States Census Bureau). It shows that African American has started to enjoy racial equality as they are allowed to have the same occupation.



Figure 3. Two African Americans serving in the US Army (00:41:55)

Meanwhile, Entman and Rojecki state that African Americans were more likely to be shown in street or jail clothing than Whites (54 percent versus 31 percent) (83). This kind of depiction signifies that African Americans are more threatening than whites. However, the roles of African Americans depicted in both films have shown the total opposite. African Americans have positive representation as they can have good jobs, prestigious profession, and high position in the society. They become colonel, doctor, policeman, army soldier, and also the United Nations officer, which are generally not associated with African Americans and very much against their stereotypes.

The Meaning Behind the Representation

Close to Nature

According to Jackie Hogan, African American tends to be close to nature, including animal and other living things. They are specialized by virtue of their mystical powers and their primordial ties to Nature. They can communicate both telepathically and through song with animals and with each other (68). We can observe from Figure 4 the close relation between Robert Neville and his dog, Samantha since visual

signs and images as well as the picture captured carry meaning and thus have to be interpreted (Hall 5). The meaning constructed can be obtained by analyzing the non-narrative aspect of the scene. The scene shows that there is not much lighting as Robert and Samantha are put in the middle of darkness, and the only source of light is coming from the window. Light and dark have symbolic connotation. The lighting in figure 4, thus, reflects the condition of Robert's life. As Robert is the only one who is lighted, while his surrounding is in the dark, it signifies that in the film Robert is the only one who survives as surrounded by the *Darkseekers*.



Figure 4. Robert gives Shower and Breakfast to his dog (00:09:06 and 00:10:38)

Having No Friends

The dominant society may point out that African Americans have characteristics that separate them from other groups. Therefore, African Americans experiences may be due to the degree to which society perceives them as strange. African Americans are, essentially, a group of strangers. A stranger is usually perceived as an individual who is an intruder, foreigner, or a resident alien (Turner 1). When African Americans are considered as strangers, they will be excluded and have no friends from other groups. In *I am Legend*, Robert Neville is described as the only African American man survive in New York City.

Robert : My name is Robert Neville. I am a survivor living in New York City. I am broadcasting on All AM frequencies. I will be at the South Street Seaport everyday at midday, when the sun is highest in the sky. If you are out there.... If anyone is out there, I can provide food, I can provide shelter, I can provide security. If there is anybody out there.... Anybody. Please. You are not alone. (00:24:08 and 00:45:02)

The portrayal of Robert Neville as the only human survivor making him a stranger among the *darkseekers* dominating the society. Consequently, this portrayal serves as representation of African American in American society as strange and alienated .

Powerless and Inferior

African Americans are frequently portrayed of having personality traits that are stereotypically negative. The U.S. Commission on Civil Rights reveals that African American television portrayals typically depict the following stereotypic personality characteristics: inferior and stupid (Carter 242). These stereotypes still prevail and can be seen in *I am Legend* film.



Figure 5. Robert is sleeping in the bathtub with Samantha (00:12:37)

Figure 5 captures the scene of Robert sleeping in the bathtub with his dog, Samatha. According to *Oxford Advance Learner's Dictionary*, bathtub means a large long container that we can put water in and then get into to wash our whole body (115). Hence, bathtub is not supposed to be a place for sleeping. In this scene, the screen shot is taken from the high angle, which reduces the importance of the subject. The subject seems harmless and insignificant when it is photographed from above (Giannetti 14). Accordingly, it implies that Robert is not powerful as he is portrayed as African American who is afraid of threat. When he is threatened, he is afraid and looks inferior. In order to keep himself safe, he is carrying gun so that he can defense himself from imminent danger.

Villain

White American is ambivalent toward African American, sometimes feeling racist, other times feeling quite friendly, and sometimes holding contradictory sentiments all at once. Moreover, many whites tend to disguise their true feelings, knowing the social undesirability of appearing to be racist (Entman and Rojecki 46-47). Therefore, it is very common then if the characterization of African American is depicted in a binary opposition at once.



Figure 6. An African American policeman loots some goods at the supermarket (00:16:20)

The scene in Figure 6 implies that even if African Americans dress and speak in a conventionally acceptable manner, employ a restrained verbal style, they cannot totally surmount the barrier posed by white' automatic generalizations from physical traits to moral, behavioral, and intellectual qualities and achievements (Entman and Rojecki 52). From this scene, the film clearly intends to present the binary opposition of African Americans representation. Even though the African American portrayed in this scene is a policeman, his act cannot be presented as same as the white since he wears the police uniform yet he commits a crime of stealing goods during the riot. It signifies that when African Americans are given power, for example as a police officer, they tend to corrupt and are not fully responsible with the uniform they are wearing.

African American as Zombie



Figure 7. The zombie in the WHO research (1:32:05)

The context and the zombie character in the film can be analyzed as the representation of the African American character based on constructionist approach. In Figure 7, the zombie is arrested and kept inside a locked glass box. Apparently, with this scene the filmmaker would like to show how the African American is dangerous toward the society. The visual appearance of the film is one of the languages of representation, which, according to Hall, involves in the overall process of constructing meaning (4). Monaco also suggests that the filmmaker has made specific choices of the object which is being captured (162). Consequently, the zombie in this scene is captured with such expression to show that she is in anger, and also very aggressive. Her aggressiveness makes her locked inside the box in order not to harm the society. From the expression, the zombie looks very threatening. Based on the constructionist point of view, the meaning constructed from this scene is that African American is threatening for the society. Accordingly, another negative stereotype of African American is reflected well through the zombie character.

The Ideology Constructed in the Films

Blacks have already made efforts to be racially equal with the white and any races in the world. They would have to wait and survive up to five decades from 1950s to 2000s to reach their real equality (Bracey 41-43). How African Americans struggle to reach their racial equality can be seen in *I am Legend* film that portrays an African American as the main character, and also the important role assigned to the African American characters in *World War Z*. In an attempt to reveal the representation of African Americans in the films, the study identified the sign arranged into language that is used to communicate the concept of African American representation. *I am Legend*, particularly, shows the picture of butterfly more than once. The constructed meaning behind the concept of butterfly going through stages of metamorphosis can be correlated with the concept of African American life experiences regarding their struggle for racial equality in the United States. The present condition of African American might be compared to the stage of being caterpillar in the process of metamorphosis. This is due to the fact that African Americans in the contemporary American society still have to face discriminatory practices in real life.

Accordingly, it implies the ideology constructed in the films that however hard African Americans struggle for racial equality and they will not be accepted by the society. The ending of *I am Legend* shows that even though African American becomes a legend, people do not recognize their struggle. The same also happens in *World War Z* film, in which the hero who finds the cure for the virus is a white American. From both films, it can be inferred that African Americans still cannot be a total hero in a white dominating society.

Conclusion

The representation of African American through any media is actually not always as good as it appears to be. When African American is represented as a protagonist, there might still be a bad stereotype behind it. Sometimes the director does not explicitly present the stereotypes of African American in the reality. They tend to cover the stereotypes by showing the good representation to the society. There is nothing in reality that compels the representation of African Americans that the media offer. What is seen and not seen reflect a combination of forces that, with alteration, may result in different representations that are no less defensible. However, racism is not totally disappeared as it just goes “underground”, and racial inequality in America still becomes a major and pressing problem.

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