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Scriptwriters: The Foundation of the Future

Movies play a significant role in the lives of people living in American society. Every year, a new film grabs the media's attention and leaves a lasting impact on its viewers. Movies have developed from silent films with live orchestras to extravagant fictional universes that millions of people invest their time, energy, and money into. But there is a problem. Today, there are countless movies with noticeably similar plots, and viewers are beginning to notice. Film executives and audiences question how we can achieve new ideas and more representation in films. The answer lies in the script. Behind the glory of cinema lies a single script formed after countless hours of planning, hard work, and dedication. While script writing may seem to have been around for a long time, George Melies' 1902 film, *A Trip to the Moon*, was the first building block to today's modern scripts (Donnelly). The impact a film holds on its viewers is determined by the script, and we need diverse writers who have unheard stories to aid in the film industry's growth. Diversity is the solution.

I am an African American female that has been an avid writer all my life. I continued to come up with idea after idea throughout my life and thought *I should turn this into a show or turn this into a movie*. So I sat down, did some research on scriptwriting, and then attempted to create multiple scripts. I wanted to write a script that included representation of characters from backgrounds not typically seen on screen. I was lucky to have a script from a TV show that I won in a contest, to study, but I soon realized that it is harder than it appears to write. You need

to understand how to write dialogue, develop characters, and have an overall idea of where you want your story to go. In the end, I stopped the writing process with multiple projects in their beginning stages.

If you think about stories in the media today, you will notice there is no BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, and people of color) representation (Raypole). How does the lack of BIPOC representation, due to the few BIPOC writers, relate to TV and movie audiences today?

Today, children begin to watch TV at younger ages and for significant amounts of time. According to a report from Northwestern University, Black and Hispanic youth are watching about an hour more of TV each day compared to White and Asian children (Rideout 2). This difference highlights that children of color are a primary audience for TV shows and that the shows they watch should be reflections of themselves.

I watched many TV shows as I was growing up. I was lucky to be brought into this world where I have access to media that can bring so much joy to my life. But something never felt quite right. It was rare for me to see someone on screen who looked like me. When I was little, I never thought about the importance of representation in the media. It was not until middle school, when I began to self-criticize and change who I was to fit in, that I noticed that there were not many characters whom I could look up to.

But I was lucky to have watched two TV shows with one main character being an African American girl. One of the shows was A.N.T Farm on Disney Channel. This TV show was written by Dan Singer, a white male (Horan). The main character, China, a black girl, had straight hair, was incredibly smart, had a quirky personality, and had to act as the perfect person all the time. This image was harmful to me because this image of a character seemed like the

only answer to my problem of not fitting in at school. China never faced significant challenges that young black girls would have to deal with, such as racism or identity issues.

Dan Singer created a black character from a white person's perspective, and it shows through the superficial challenges that were solved by the end of each episode. Why did Dan Singer write a show about a young black girl when he has not experienced the difficulties of being a person of color? Viewing a black girl's life through a white perspective took away the harsh reality people face as a person of color.

Despite achieving the representation that young girls need growing up, the show was also harmful. This show taught young black girls that they can be successful but hide away the race-related challenges they would face to achieve their goals. This is why we need BIPOC writers. Only BIPOC writers can share their stories with the world and create well-developed BIPOC characters that face real challenges in life as others do in reality.

To continue to make the film industry diverse, I believe we need to start with the scriptwriters. Film companies need to hire scriptwriters of diverse backgrounds. The lack of diversity can be a reason for the lack of new and inspiring stories. Without hiring these new diverse writers striving to test the boundaries and create change, we get stuck in a loop of poorly written movies that are merely a reflection of the exclusive film industry of the 1900s. We also need more films that tell the story of people of color, by people of color, to truly represent the reality of living in America as a person of color (Miller). We need to teach younger viewers that there are countless possibilities of what they can become in life and that they are more than a character who stereotypes their race. We need more movies where the villain is not a person of color. We need shows and films that tell the story of a person of color that does not have a drug problem, lives without a father, is not successful, or plays a sport that is their ticket to freedom

from their oppression. White actors cannot play people of color in films anymore. We are in a world where characters need to reflect people in life who have well-rounded backgrounds full of depth.

It is the people behind the scenes that lay the foundation for a great story. Can you recall a top scriptwriter that is a person of color? A person of color that was a writer for the last groundbreaking movie you watched? I imagine it would be a challenge. According to the UCLA *Hollywood Diversity Report*, “Only 1.4 out of 10 film writers are people of color” (Hunt and Ramón 21). This may seem low, but in 2011 the numbers of writers were even lower. Writers of theatrical films who are people of color have increased to 13.9 percent as of 2019, after remaining around 9.6 percent in 2011 (21). These statistics are based on the credited writers in the top Hollywood films within the past decade. Many argue that we do not need new stories with BIPOC leads because people of color are not the primary audiences that create a demand for new movies. For years, films have been catered to white audiences because executives believe this audience generates the most profit. Contrary to that opinion, Latinx and Asian moviegoers attended movies the most in 2018, and White moviegoers remained underrepresented in attendance (7). People of color have been shown to attend movies more than the audience many film companies are catering to. If movies are catered to people of color, the audience outlook would be even higher.

While the Hollywood film industry has slowly increased its diversity, there is still a significant need for improvement. Luckily, the Oscars, a prestigious academy awards ceremony highlighting top-performing films in the creative aspect, has recently made a change to encourage diversity in their awards. In mid-2020, the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences announced new requirements for films eligible to be nominated for the Best Picture

category. Many believe this change is due to negative feedback of the 2019-2020 awards ceremony lacking female and minority winners. These new requirements are designed “to encourage equitable representation on and off-screen in order to better reflect the diversity of the movie-going audience” (“Academy Establishes Representation...”). The new requirements are centered around the inclusion of underrepresented groups in on-screen representation, behind-the-scenes/the project team, other opportunities such as internships and apprenticeships for said underrepresented groups, and audience development (“Academy Establishes Representation...”). I think this is a great way to promote greater diversity and inclusion in the film industry. The requirement for at least two leadership positions or other key roles, including writers, to be held by underrepresented groups are exceptionally important.

With our fast-paced and ever-changing world, we should be striving for diversity and progression. Keeping the scriptwriting business exclusive will stall the possibility of growth. The Oscars changing their Best Picture requirements is a significant first step, and I believe other film award ceremonies will follow suit to promote further growth in the film industry. Bringing in new BIPOC scriptwriters will aid in the need for diversity, aid in children’s self-image in underrepresented groups, test the industry’s boundaries, and reflect the need for our nation to be inclusive of others.

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