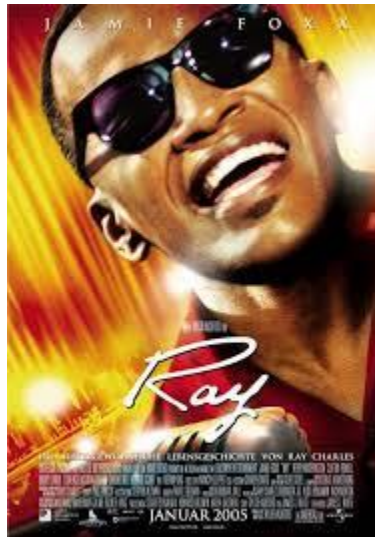


Rays in the Inner Eyes: A Close Analysis of American Film *Ray*

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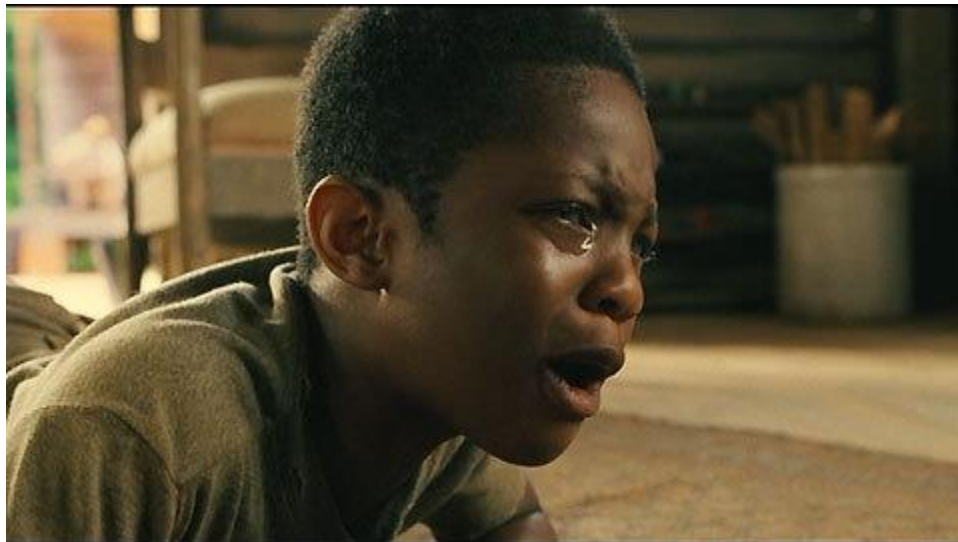
Abstract

Cinematic representation of disability is a new area of research and it can be used effectively, how the people with disability suffer in the society, and the visual media has a major role in building the real status of the disabled persons. The movie "Ray" is an outstanding movie because it provides a detailed description of the legendary singer Ray Charles. The movie stands different because it talks of the life and experience of Ray Charles, who is a singer and black in color and visually impaired. He is a gifted singer and his talents have been exploited by Denise Dowse, the club owner by demanding sexual favors and controlling his money and career. Ray is very courageous to overcome the disadvantages of his disability and racial prejudice treated upon him. Then, due to his fame, he fails to lead a disciplined life and he is addicted to heroin and women. As a black, he has to face a lot of discrimination and he is being excluded in many places, but he is very confident in his talent and believes that talents and career are greater than

any other things in the World. So he ignores every discouragement. He begins to develop vision problems soon afterward the tragic death of his brother. By age seven, he is completely blind, and his mother teaches him to be independent and makes him swear that he will never let the world vest for crippled ones. His mother is very energetic in moulding the personality of Ray in fighting against his inability and the way people takes it. Charles being inspired by his mother, found his calling and his talent behind a piano keyboard. He revolutionized his music with soulful performance and fought segregation in the very clubs that launched him and championed artists' rights within the corporate music business. The film portrays Charles' musical genius as he defeats and overcomes drug addiction while transforming into one of this country's most-beloved performers. Through this work I would like focus on the segregation faced by black disabled and on the way in which Ray Charles overcomes the challenges and struggles, and also the power of art that can transform a person and his identity.

Keywords: segregation, discrimination, exclusion, Ray, discouragement, exploitation and challenges.

Introduction



Courtesy: <http://www.wingclips.com/movie-clips/ray/i-need-help>

Visual representation is very significant since it has been emerged as a vehicle to disclose the hidden and the open realities of the issues and dilemmas related to the people belonging to various strata of the society. The challenges of people are thus focused, and it leads to debate and

discussion in the minds of the people. Undoubtedly, media representation acts in a powerful way so as to draw on the issues of subalterns and socially disadvantaged classes. The voice of the cry of the marginalized always gets silenced by the power structures and the so called system of the society. Films make a possible way to invite the audiences to recognize the representation from their own perspectives. In the film *Ray*, we see the hardships and struggles of a young talented singer, to maintain his identity, though he is blind and a Negro. The idea of disabled black is generalized through the life of Ray Charles. African Americans have the stories of slavery and oppression to tell. They underwent through a painful past that they will always encounters with. To erase the past memories and invent the self was very difficult for them. The Native Americans always established a white supremacy and the African Americans were treated as second class citizens. It is worth noticing the colonial exploitation of black Americans and how the political system has been influenced by the power structures. Terry Eagleton suggests that post colonialism is not only the product of multiculturalism and decolonization. He talks of the historic shift from revolutionary nationalism in the third World, which faltered in the 1970's, to a 'post-revolutionary' condition in which the power of transnational corporations seems unbreakable. (205)

Post-colonial Theory

In order to think of the range and variety of the term 'post colonialism,' one needs to understand it in two contexts. There was a historical experience of decolonization and the Universe had experienced with tremendous intellectual developments in 20th century. There was a shift from the study of 'commonwealth Literature' to 'post colonialism.' The term 'post-colonial' must not be perceived in the notion of 'post-independence' or 'after colonialism.' Instead, it begins from the first moment of colonial contact. Post colonialism talks of the effects of colonization on different cultures and societies. The meaning of 'post-colonialism' is discussed in the book entitled *Key Concepts in Postcolonial Studies* as follows:

Post-colonialism / postcolonialism is now used in wide and diverse ways to include the study and analysis of European territorial conquests, the various institutions of European colonialisms, the discursive operations of empire, the subtleties of subject construction in colonial discourse and the resistance of those subjects, and, most importantly perhaps, the

differing response to such incursions and their contemporary colonial legacies in both pre- and post-independence nations and communities. (187)

In fact, the British Empire captured a vast area of earth; including countries in the continents like Africa, Asia and Australia. The colonial powers were motivated by the desire to establish and control markets abroad for western goods and also to secure national resources and labor power of different lands and people at the lowest possible cost. To Elleke Boehmer,

‘Colonialism is the settlement of territory, the exploitation or development of resources, and the attempt to govern the indigenous inhabitants of occupied lands.’ (2)

The concept of ‘Other’ is a key term, which is deeply related to colonial and postcolonial studies. Edward Said says,

“The Orient is not only adjacent to Europe; it is also the place of Europe’s greatest, richest and oldest colonies, the source of its civilizations and languages...and one of its deepest and most recurrent images of the other... (Christopher O’ Reilly 107)

Three Into One

Sam Selvon, a Trinidadian writer, in his 1979 lecture, ‘Three Into One Can’t Go – East India, Trinidadian, West Indian’, he mentions about Sammy, an Indian fisherman, and with him a white servant. Selvon gets angry at Sammy, to possess a white assistant. The life, for young Selvon was established in a different way that his community respects and honors white men as masters and non-westerners as inferiors. Selvon asks, ‘where had it come from? I don’t consciously remember being brainwashed to hold the view either at home or at school.’ (John McLeod 17)

Language and Culture in Colonial Discourses

We witness the meeting of language and culture in colonial discourses. Ngugi Wa Thiong’o expresses, ‘Language carries culture, and culture carries particularly through orature

and literature, the entire body of values by which we come to perceive ourselves and our place in the World...' (Currey 16). Henry Louis Gates Jr. quotes Langston Hughes on signifying,

“And they asked me right a Christmas, If my blackness, would it rub off?” (49)

Hierarchy of Races

The most dangerous belief in the minds of European colonizers was that they encouraged hierarchy of races and made all possible things which would make them civilized and the Africans savage. John McLeod talks of the legacy of the negative sense of blackness,” ... think of how many expressions there are in which ‘black’ is used pejoratively (as in ‘black market’, ‘black ballad’ or ‘black Magic’).” (78) The substitutions in signifyin(g) seems to be humorous and Lacan calls these vertically suspended associations “ a whole articulation of relevant contexts” by which he intends that all of these association carried by a signifier from other contexts, must be deleted, ignored or censored “for this signifier to be lined up with a signified to produce a specific meaning.” (Henry Louis Gates Jr.58) Soyica Diggs Colbert says that blacks often signified directly and it is clear through the following lyrics;

“we raise the wheat, Dey gib us the corn; we bake the bread, Dey gib us de cruss;
We sif the meal, Dey gib us de huss; we peal the meat, Dey gib us de skin
And dat’s de way dey take us in. (74)

Film Theory

Film Theory is a set of scholarly approaches within the academic discipline of cinema studies that questions the essentialism of cinema and provides conceptual frameworks for understanding film’s relationship to reality. Early film theory arose in the silent era and was mostly concerned with defining the crucial elements of the medium. Emphasis was given to how films could be considered as a valid art form. But in the following years proceeding 2nd World War, theorist Andre Bazin reacted against this approach and he insists on the film’s power to mechanically reproduce reality. There is a great change happened in the 60’s and 70’s, film theory took up residence in academia importing concepts from established disciplines like

psychoanalysis, gender studies, anthropology, literary theory, semiotics and linguistics.
(Wikipedia. org.)

Realities

Films portray realities as it is connected to the painful life of the people. The society gets a clear picture of the realities of the working classes or the people who suffer in many ways. African Americans have the stories of oppression and slavery, they have been suffering from centuries about their identity. In American countries, people consider them as blacks or colonized though they have acquired an identity of their own. They are, now independent to run their own institutions and they can lead a life of self-reliance. Sergei Eisenstein and many other soviet film makers in the 1920's expressed Marxism through films and it was a beginning to see the things from Marxian point of view. Individual protagonists and social realities are given proper attention and there occurs a detailed journey through the social scenario where the events happen or the people being affected in many ways. (Wikipedia.org) Marx believed that the moving forces behind the history are class struggle and the conflict between opposing class interests. Then, a movement called constructivism emerged and its main principle was that, "artists should serve as a new type of engineer capable of using scientific techniques to construct "socially useful art objects- objects that would enhance everyday life."(*Art Into Life*, 169)

The film did not warrant any serious attention in the first half of 20th century and the earliest theorists compared this artistic form to the aesthetics of theatre. The official beginning of film theory was marked by the publication of two books and they are namely Vachel Lindsay's *The Art of Moving Picture* (1915) and Hugh Munsterberg's *The Photoplay: A Psychological Study*. Lindsay speaks of spiritual renewal as a part of a utopian vision of the future while Munsterberg gives emphasis on the prime purpose of art as it be autonomous in nature. He further elaborates:

"Film's central aesthetic value is directly opposed to the spirit of imitation. A work of art may and must start something which awakens in us the interests of reality and which contains traits of reality... but changes the World, and is, through this, truly creative..." (Kevin Mac Donald 18)

As we study all these arguments, we come to the conclusion that art is the matter of invention and it is culturally constructed. For the early theorists, studying film was, primarily an aesthetic practice.

A Truly Modern Art

Delluc, a French critic speaks about film as a truly modern art because it is unique in the form of an offspring of both technology and human ideals. (*French Film Theory and Criticism* 94) He further adds in the same work, “Cinema will make us all comprehend the things of this World as well as force us to recognize ourselves.” (139)

A new form of movement came into being in the form of Modernism, with the rise of Surrealism. We should notice Andre Breton, who played a major role played by assembling a group of artists and together they had published a series of works that explored unconventional topics ranging from occultism to madness. Later, Montage theory was developed in Soviet Russia and its aim was to create a new society. It embraced technology for the betterment of all. As we move on to Marx, we see his publication of *Communist Manifesto* with the co-authorship of Frederick Engels. They warned a specter that haunts Europe and it is of radical social change in which working class or proletariat rise up to demolish the existing hierarchy. It is worth noticed that Marx preferred to raise class consciousness by encouraging the proletariat to reclaim the labor that had been alienated from them systematically. He insists on the planned strategy over alienation and it was for maintaining a system of inequality and dehumanizing exploitation. He believes that there are two things in the society is problematic and they are the moving force behind the system. They remain, the class struggle and the conflict between opposing class interests.

Kuleshov gives emphasis on editing. He claims that the essence of cinematography is, undoubtedly the matter of editing. “What is important is not what is shot in the given place.” He further adds, “but how the pieces in a film succeed one another, how they are structures.” (Kevin Mc Donald 29)

Victor Shklovsky, one of the most prominent members of Russian Formalism claims the view, “As life becomes habitual and routine, we are no longer able to see things as they really are. Art provides the devices that are necessary for us to see these things anew.”(Kevin Mac

Donald 31) The notion of *attraction* was later developed by Eisenstein and as device, it meant to produce specific emotional shock in the spectator.

Analysis of the Film *Ray*

The film begins with the journey of Young Charles Robnson, the blind son of a sharecropper, to Seattle, Washington to get a job as a pianist and singer. He encounters a racist bus driver at a rest bus stop in northern Florida. The identities of black as a disabled is very vivid through the statements of the bus driver,

“Can I help you, Sir? Yes, Sir. Seattle? Who you riding with?

Boy, I can’t take responsibility for some blind nigger travelling miles alone.”

(*Ray*)

We see Ray was being exploited by Denise Dowse, the club’s owner, demanding sexual favors and controlling his money and career. So Ray leaves the band and he is very bold in taking decision. Marlene and Gossie are running game on him. Ray speaks powerfully against the exploitation he faced,

“You two have been gaming me since I got here... I might be blind, but I ain’t stupid!” (*Ray*)

Ray joins a white country band in 1950 and they make him wear sunglasses to hide his damaged eyes from the audiences. The band was not ready to reveal him as a blind,

“I’m gonna have to put some glasses

before scares somebody half to death.”

Ray belongs to a poor family and he suffers traumatic flashbacks relating to his childhood. Ray is raised by a fiercely independent single mother, Aretha Robinson. Ray finds solace in music. He develops a vision problem soon after the death of George, his brother. Ray feels happy and gets satisfied in the days of alienation and troubles. The power of music strengthens Ray always,

“Anytime you’re feeling lonely

Anytime you’re feeling blue

Anytime you feel down hearted
That will prove your love for me is true.” (Ray)

His mother teaches him to be courageous and makes him swear that he will never let the World that he is disable, “Always remember your promise to me, Never let nobody or nothing turn you into cripple.” Mother makes him independent even though his condition is worse as a blind with black identity. Leading a normal life in those days by a blind is impossible in those years, but Ray gets overcome all the struggles. People wonders of how he leads a normal life, “but how do you get around so good without a cane or a dog?”

In the system of inequality and exploitation, Ray was concerned about his dealings with people. He let not allow anyone to cheat him. As a musician, he becomes famous and his versatile performances made him unique. We see Ray demands to be paid in single dollar so no one can cheat him. As we go through the film, we discover the way Ray is being treated as a commodity and he is not given the proper attention, but he is bold enough to face each situation. Marlene as a manager tries to control Ray and his personal life. His freedom gets disturbed by her in many ways. Jack Lauderdale meets Ray and have a talk about making a record and Marlene stops him to make a deal with Ray, She asks whether she can help Jack, “Then you need to talk to me ‘cause I’m his manager.”

Ray was slowly introduced to heroin and was being arrested by the police while he was asleep in a hotel room. The police found him possessing heroin and he gets off on a legal technicality because the police had no search warrant. The life was very troublesome for Ray, but he fought it with courage and self-confidence. At last he kept his promises and he never touched heroin again. In 1979, the state of Georgia officially apologizes to Ray and announces “Georgia On My Mind” the official state song. Words of state official were heart touching and encouraging one. He emphasizes Ray’s way of fighting for equality,

“Some of us fought for equality through the political process, but Ray Charles changed American culture by touching people’s hearts.”

The movie ends with Ray, Della, and their three grown sons receiving applause after Ray performs the song before a live audience.

Conclusion

The film *Ray* is a revolution in the life of African Americans, since it witnesses the fight of a man who is both black and a blind. The film was structured systematically as Kuleshov's notion of editing. Undoubtedly, we can claim that art is the matter of invention and culturally constructed. The life a blind nigger is structured in the sociopolitical condition of Georgia and at last those who banned him, was ready to accept him. There is a conflict between two realities within Ray, one is the conflict over his identity as black and secondly, the fight to regain his fame as a singer. Marx talks of the struggle between different classes. Here, it is the fight within Ray to maintain and establish his identity. The film *Ray* conveys a clear message to America that disabled are the group of vulnerable people which needs proper attention and care. In the case of Ray, he is struggling in two ways, he has to erase the haunted memories of African Americans as a whole, the painful memories of slavery and oppression. Ray is blind and he is frequently being haunted with the memories in the home, the sad demise of his brother, and the struggling of his mother to take care of the family. In short, the film *Ray* depicts the socio, political and economic condition of African Americans and also of the twin disability.

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