

TV, Film and Video

Media

Assessment Two

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How Is 'Race' Represented in Luke Cage?

Cheo Hodari and Akela Cooper's television show, *Luke Cage* (2016) lays down the foundations of several arguments about race and racism. The show is set in modern day society, in western civilisation and this can be seen by the hip-hop music that is used to create mood, and also conveys how black people are stereotypically represented in films and television shows - for instance, the message that black and drug culture are constantly intertwined. In her essay, 'The Oppositional Gaze: Black Female Spectatorship', bell hooks states that "identification can only be made through recognition" (1999, 464) and by having an all-black cast for *Luke Cage*, Netflix are opposing dominant ideology and conveying black culture. Throughout this essay, I will be looking at how the representation of black people is portrayed throughout the television series and I will come to a conclusion about whether the representation is positive or negative.

Luke Cage's portrayal of race and racial stereotypes can be looked at with many theoretical ideas that include representation, dominant ideology, and dominant discourse. The representation of black people within films and television shows reflect the social views of race. Theorists such as Stuart Hall and John Storey have researched this topic and their texts have helped me with my own research.

One of the main texts that was influential in my research for this topic was *Representing 'Race': Ideology, Identity and the Media* by Robert Ferguson. Throughout his introduction, Ferguson discusses how the "representations of issues relating to 'race' are now intertwined with issues of individual, group, national and ethnic identity" (1998, 4) and this can be viewed within *Luke Cage* because by the creators setting the show in Harlem - which is a black community in New York - and setting it in an all-black area conveys the sense of group

representations. However, Harlem also comes with connotations of violence which is also portrayed throughout the show through the medium of gang related violence with guns and street fights. Ferguson goes on to state that "racial categories are not 'natural' but constructs which have developed historically and sometimes changed" (1998, 75). Here, Ferguson is saying how society's different categories for 'race' are not innate, they are constructed over time by white supremacy ideologies that believe groups of people with different skin colours to white are classed as 'the other'. These comments by Ferguson also link with another reading that was useful to me in my research, which is John Storey's book, *Cultural Theory and Popular Culture* where Storey states that there is "only one human race and [...] human biology does not divide people into different 'races'; it is racism." (Storey 2009, 351)

Another book that was crucial to my research was 'New(s) Racism: A Discourse Analytical Approach' which is an essay by Teun Van Dijk. This essay was interesting to study because of its information about 'new racism' and how it is prevalent in today's society. Van Dijk describes 'new racism' as "different from the old racism of slavery, segregation" because it "wants to be democratic and respectable, and hence first off denies that it is racism." (Van Dijk 2000, 34) As I will later discuss in my analysis section of my paper, *Luke Cage* has its moments where it can be classed as 'new racism' as it is reinforcing society's stereotypes of black people being 'gangsta' or being involved in the drug community. For Van Dijk, reinforcing these stereotypes through the different mediums of "movies and TV programmes [...] among hundreds of other genres." (Van Dijk 2000, 34) conveys how the dominant discourse that the 'other' is different, and that black people are 'dangerous' or that black people are always involved within gang and drug culture. By showing these stereotypes, Van Dijk states that media conglomerates are "[influencing] people's knowledge, attitudes and ideologies" (Van Dijk 2000, 36) through their texts. New Racism is essential when looking at *Luke Cage* because of the stereotypes that the show fulfils. The eponymous character is a

stereotypical muscly, black man who can be violent; there is a drug ring taking place in the middle of Harlem and nearly all of the cast in the show are 'gangstas'. These stereotypes are the epitome of 'new racism'. Even though that an all-black cast is being portrayed on the screen, it could be argued that the portrayal is still not true to that of 'real' black culture.

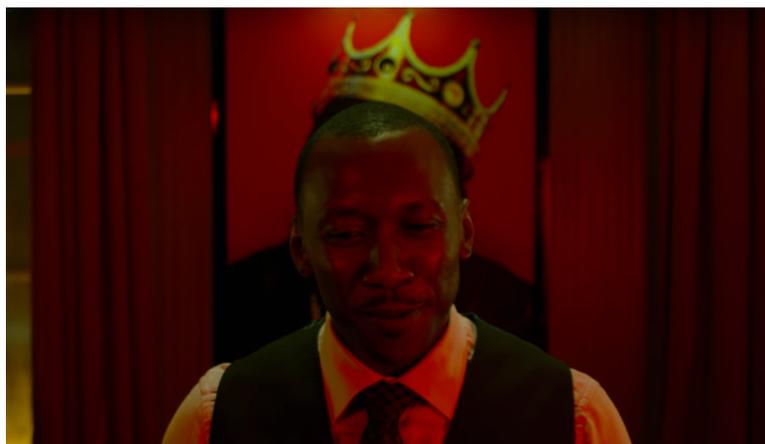
One of the key theories that I will be exploring in my analysis are the ideas of hegemony and hegemonic views. Hegemony is important to consider when looking at black representation, because dominant ideology is made up of white, patriarchal beliefs. Because big businesses are mainly made up of white males, their ideologies are the only ones that are conveyed through their mediums. Italian theorist, Antonio Gramsci coined the term hegemony in 1995 when he was writing *Further Selections from the Prison Notebooks*. In this text, Gramsci stated that the ruling class (bourgeoisie) imposed values, beliefs and ideas into society in order to control the masses (proletariat). French philosopher Louis Althusser, then worked with Gramsci's theory of hegemony and created the theory of 'false consciousness' where Althusser states that mass society are unaware of the imposing beliefs that the bourgeoisie are making them think.

When analysing *Luke Cage* in relation to my question, the form of analysis I have chosen is a textual analysis. Ferguson states that it is down to "the power of the film director to represent selectively national or international hero [...] figures." (1998, 5) and to see what the director of *Luke Cage* wanted to convey through the television show, I think it best to use a textual analysis to look at representation of race. Textual analysis is a research method that looks at the content of a text and the messages that the text conveys to the audience. A textual analysis is the best way to get a full view of what the film and creators of it are trying to portray to the audience. A good example of this would be the textual analysis of *The L Word* that was undertaken by academic, Faye Davies. In her analysis, she looks at the messages that

are portrayed through *The L Word* and how these discourses are both reinforcing dominant ideology and challenging it. I think that a textual analysis the best methodology to use when looking at *Luke Cage* because I'm looking at racial representation within the television show and a textual analysis will be more effective in my research when looking at stereotype as I can analyse certain scenes and dialogue.

However, one limitation of doing a textual analysis is that one does not get an idea of the impact that the television series had on the audience or the reception that it received. The audience reception is also key to the textual analysis as it shows the racist ideology that is filtered down through the media and we believe the dominant discourses that we have been told all of our lives.

When analysing *Luke Cage*, one has to look at the significance of power and money and how the two go hand-in-hand. Because of Luke Cage living in Harlem, he could be seen as being part of the proletariat and the characters of Cottonmouth and Black Mariah - who are involved in the drugs/guns business and politics - are seen as the bourgeoisie. hooks states that power "is a system of domination which control everything and which leaves no room for freedom" (1999, 463) and this can be seen within the show because the upper-class characters are seen as the 'villains' who are corrupting the rest of Harlem and this depicts the way that power is sustained within the society. However, the power within *Luke Cage* is not held by white characters and is instead, held by black characters which conveys the sense of a hierarchy within the black community.



This hierarchy can be seen in the first episode. There is a close-up shot of Cottonmouth standing in front of a Biggie Smalls painting where Biggie has a crown on his head. The shot is positioned so that it looks as if Cottonmouth

has the crown on his own head. The Biggie Smalls painting conveys black and gang culture as Biggie Smalls was known as "one of the most popular and well-known artists in the hip hop industry." (IMDB, 2014) but he was also involved in gang culture where he had a rivalry with his fellow hip-hop artist, Tupac Shakur. The painting is symbolic of power and as Cottonmouth states as he stands in front of the painting "everybody wants to be the king" (S1E1, Luke Cage) The crown is also a symbol of Cottonmouth being a part of the bourgeoisie and the angle of the shot conveys him standing over someone. Towering over a person would also convey his power as people would have to look up to him. Cottonmouth also proves his point that "it's easy to underestimate a nigga, especially when you don't see him coming" (S1E1, Luke Cage) when he kills the man that he is standing over.

He is later seen standing to the side of the Biggie Smalls painting covered in his victim's blood. The positioning in this shot could infer that Biggie Smalls was never convicted for



the murder of Tupac Shakur because there was not enough evidence. (IMDB, 2014)

However, Cottonmouth is unlike Smalls in this instance because we have just witnessed him kill someone - hence the shot to the side of the painting and not in front. This kind of stereotype - that all black people are violent or dangerous - can be seen in modern day society with the Black Lives Matter movement and the protests against police in the United States shooting unarmed black men. In the first episode, Black Mariah states that "for black lives to matter, black history and black ownership must also matter." (S1E2, Luke Cage). This statement is peaceful yet strong at the same time. She is saying that for black people to matter in the world, they need to embrace their history, they must recognise that they are in charge of their own representation and identity and they must not bow down to white supremacy. However, this dialogue contradicts the show's portrayal of black culture. As bell hooks states in her book *Black Looks: Race and Representation*, when one "[opens] a magazine or book, turning on the television set, watching a film, or looking at photographs in public spaces, we are most likely to see images of black people that reinforce and reinscribe white supremacy" (1992, 1) and this is what the creators of *Luke Cage* are doing; they are reinforcing white supremacy with their portrayal that black people are forever involved in illegal business.



Another key aspect of the television show is the moment where Luke Cage and Cottonmouth meet for the first time. The difference

in their appearance is stark; with Luke Cage in jeans, t-shirt, a pullover and a jacket, whereas Cottonmouth is wearing a business suit. This shot portrays the class difference between the

two characters but it also infers that for a black man to be successful in life, they have to become involved in illegal business - like Cottonmouth. Although both agonists are presented as powerful, the representations that they depict differ somewhat. Through the use of attire, connotations of capitalist power are exhibited in the character. One could argue that the character of Luke Cage is not innocent of being stereotyped. Even though he is the 'superhero'/'good guy', he is still violent which is one of the stereotypes that black people are repressed by. In his journal article, 'The Representation of the Black Male in Film', Chris Miller discusses how "Hollywood gives black audiences images of black men positioned [as] extremes: criminals and drug dealers" (1998, 20) and this representation starts a self-fulfilling prophecy where young black children start to believe that violence and illegal activity is all that they are capable of within their society. Miller goes on to state this kind of representation "[provides] inappropriate role models for young black males" (1998, 19) and when watching *Luke Cage*, the only 'role models' that they have is the kingpin of Harlem - Cottonmouth - and a man who is seen as caring and loving but is violent and a vigilante who gets involved stopping the illegal activities in 'his town' by injuring and killing. There are no good role models within this show and this is dominant ideology "[exploiting] and [developing] a mixture of false and true ideas, [drawing] from a variety of social and cultural resources, and [merging] them into a cohesive reality" (2007, 104) which is how C. Rojek describes the process of dominant ideology in his book, *Cultural Studies: Short Introductions*. This process of conveying the dominant discourses of the bourgeoisie is part of 'new racism' that Teun Van Dijk discusses in his essay 'New(s) Racism: A Discourse Analytical Approach' and in this he states that new racism "consists of everyday discriminatory practices, on the micro-level of analysis, and organizations, institutions" (Van Dijk 2000, 35) which, in this instance would be Netflix, as Netflix are the company that are in charge of what message they are putting out to their audience. Van Dijk continues to state that "we learn racism (or anti-

racism) largely through text"(2000, 36) and because "the media elites are ultimately responsible for the prevailing discourses of the media they control" they influence "people's knowledge, attitudes and ideologies" (Van Dijk 2000, 36) Through Antonio Gramsci's theory of hegemony, the media can control what they want their viewers to see and can influence their beliefs about different groups of people. In today's society, people of colour or people that are not Christian are considered 'the other' because they do not conform to societal norms and expectations.

Analysing how black people are represented within the media - and more specifically, *Luke Cage* is important because - as Amir Saeed states in his essay, 'Musical Jihad' - "images of black youth as gang members fulfil white stereotypes of what black youth is" (2009, 400) and thus creating the self-fulfilling prophecy. Looking at films in 2016, the media is starting to move in the right direction with films such as *Moonlight* (2016), *Fences* (2016) and *Hidden Figures* (2016) portraying black men and women fighting for what they believe in and also fights dominant ideology that black people are suppressed to working lower-class jobs.

One of the strengths of my research is that I have looked at *Luke Cage* more deeply instead of just taking it at face-value and labelling it just as 'entertainment'. It is there for enjoyment, but when taking it upon myself to study the show, I have found that *Luke Cage* presents the same negative tropes that are attached to the black community as they have done for many years. However, I also found that doing a textual analysis limited my research and in the future, I think that it would be helpful to do an audience study of the television show as from my personal experience of social media, I know that there was a mixed reception about the show, so it would be interesting to look at this at even more depth.

Whilst doing my research, I realised that the topic of black representation within the media is still a significant issue as there are negative tropes within most media texts. I feel like my

academic study adds something to a lacking research topic but also adds another perspective of how people of colour are represented in modern television shows.

Overall, my study could lead to further research into this area of looking at representation of culture by undertaking a virtual ethnography to perceive how social media and different forums are conversing about black representative television shows and I would also extend my research to films.

ENDS

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