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Back to the Future (Zemeckis, 1985)

The film *Back to the Future*, displays how "whiteness" reinforced by cultural stereotypes, romanticizes the American Dream as the protagonist, Marty McFly views of life change from the current 1985 setting and past 1955, he travels thorough the film.

The term "American dream" was first attributed to the historian James Truslow Adams, who in 1931 wrote, "The Epic of America." In which he said, "The dream is not of motor cars and high wages merely, but a dream of social order in which every individual shall be able to attain the fullest stature of which they are capable and be recognized by others for what they are, regardless of the fortuitous circumstance of birth." (NYTIMES)

The American Dream seems lost to the McFly family at the beginning of film. We find Marty McFly, a mediocre student who is fearful of exposing himself to failure by showing his musical talents to others, having to share the family car for his big weekend getaway. As a protagonist Marty is very relatable. The McFly's home is run down with an out of date 1960's décor. When introduced to Marty's family, his brother is seen wearing a fast food uniform, showing he is on the bottom scale of corporate America and his poor sister cannot seem to get a date. In a breakfast scene we see Marty's mother as an overweight alcoholic serving cereal to her family, while Dad is zoned out in front of the television. All set to point out the family sitting on the opposite side of the American Dream spectrum.

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Hollywood transforms reality into understandable images that can reinforce an illusion of social norm. The audience doesn't see this transformation in Marty's return to the future, his home is now decorated in updated modern style, as opposed to his prior view of a rundown junked up interior stuck in a 1960 time warp. His overweight alcoholic mother is now trim, slim and active with this nerd of a father a stylized, successful science fiction writer. Marty's brother is dressed for work in a suit, signaling his changed employment status, and his sister now has too many boyfriends to keep track of. The icing on the perfect cake is Marty opening the garage door to find his dream truck parked there. This persuades us that how things are is how they ought to be reinforcing the social norm and its American Dream values.

The structure of classic Hollywood blockbuster encourages audiences to identify with the white protagonist regardless of their ethnic background. Each character, even in the smallest role, is designed as an integral part to the piece of this puzzle that the writer is presenting to the audience. African American's are stereotyped in this film as the 1955's band, playing for white high school crowd. The future Mayor Goldie is seen sweeping up the 1955 malt shop, telling his white boss he is going to be "someone" one day. He will overcome the presumed odds and becomes Mayor in the future, at the suggestion of the white protagonist of the film. The villain in the film is a racist bully, a different approach in film as our villain is a white male, whose greatest evil is his strong arm bullying. A cameo villain is the gun toting Libyan terrorist who shoots the sidekick Doc, a contrast against the rather tame white bully villain. Doc, the sidekick, is defined as the mad scientist, with wild hair and over exaggerated movements. Marty's father is a shy, underdeveloped nerd who is bullied by the villain for being an awkward individual in the 1955's scenes. (Back)

Stereotyping may seem humorous, but in fact can be harmful as many individuals start to define themselves by that stereotype. It seem natural the need to classify our encounters in order to figure out

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how to deal with a situation. The problem is that stereotypes are a distorted view of cultures or individuals. We see these stereotypes in every society as they are used to make up characters in film and television; they define a person without having to develop that character as an individual, thus reinforcing the stereotype.

Back to the Future can be classified as a truly white film that reinforces the cultural norm of Classic Hollywood of the 1980's, it reinforces the white dominant society's ideology. Whiteness seems to be linked primarily to the United States where a new field of whiteness studies developed in the 1980's. Some scholars believe the definition of race came about in the early colonial settlements, when identities of white, black and Native American formed due to the institution of slavery, land ownership and later evolved into immigration and industrial labor. European/Anglo-Americans became the social ruling class in early American plantation colonies, where a majority of our founding fathers were privilege land and slave owners. (wiki)

Whiteness is such a natural attribute used in film that we fail to realize the racism that is connected to it. Hollywood has been remarkably successful at imposing the whiteness as a cultural norm. Whiteness then becomes an ignored normalcy for white people and the power and privileges that they have over minorities without being questioned. White people will continue to cling to this to keep the upper hand in society. (Am.on Film)

Whiteness has been ingrained in American society since the colonial settlements and continued through literature, media, film and government. Although most scholars argue the white privileges are invisible to white people, only making them aware of this can we attain more equality in American society. (McIntosh)

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Mass communication allows audiences to become absorbed by permitting us to enjoy ourselves at the movie, while at the same time reinforcing a social control. This social control established in society through media and peer pressure, to encourage individuals to internalize cultures, their beliefs and values. Producers of film make the choices that affect the types of messages and values that are communicated to the audience. Film can either interfere with or reinforce our society values.

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