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“What Popular Movies Do and Don’t Do”

What is the nature of popular movies, especially Black movies? We view popular movies as entertainment with the hope that they will be pleasurable and/or include informational content that proves to be useful in the future. What we should never forget, however, is that movies also have the subtle capacity to contribute to the shaping of our perceptions, thinking, and actions.

How do popular “Black” movies compare with “nonBlack” movies in this regard?

To answer these questions, we conducted cursory research to uncover answers.

First, we collected all popular Black movies that were released during the most recent generation, 2000-2020. By “popular Black movies” we mean those Oscar nominated/winning movies that featured a Black person as Best Actor or Actress, Best Supporting Actor or Actress, Best Director, or a movie that was nominated/won as Best Picture, which was produced by a Black person. There were 44 such movies.

Second, we collected all Oscar nominated/winning movies for 2000-2020 in the Best Picture category. There were 151 such movies. A list of “popular NonBlack movies” was developed as unduplicated Best Picture nominees/winners that were not “popular Black movies.” There were 131 such movies.

Third, we reviewed the “Introductions” and “Plots” of Wikipedia accounts of the 175 popular Black and nonBlack movies to identify their predominant period setting. If the predominant period setting was pre-1990, then we labeled the movie as **retrospective**. If the predominant period setting was from 1990-2020, then we labeled the movie as **contemporary**. Finally, movies that reflected a predominant post-2020 period setting were labeled **futuristic**. Our tabulated results appear in Table 1 (page 2).

Before discussing the results presented in the Table 1, it is important to note that, given the evolution of movie production, one might generally expect that a significant proportion of popular movies would be of the retrospective and contemporary varieties. Also, given our current 21st century science and technology setting, it might be expected that a significant proportion of popular movies would be futuristic in nature.

From a hopeful Black American perspective, one might expect that a healthy mix of retrospective and contemporary popular Black movies would have been produced during the period that provide new and useful information that help envision a favorable future. In addition, one might hope for a good mix of futuristic movies that present Black Americans in positive future roles. What Black Americans certainly would not hope for is a preponderance of retrospective movies that provide little new information and that reinforce old racial stereotypes.

Table 1.—Predominant Period Settings of Popular Black and NonBlack Oscar Nominated Movies, 2000-2020
(Percentages)

No.	Period Settings	(A) Popular Black Movies	(B) Popular NonBlack Movies	(C) Difference (A – B)
1	Retrospective	56.8%	49.6%	7.2%
2	Contemporary	43.2%	44.3%	-1.1%
3	Futuristic	0.0%	6.1%	-6.1%
4	Totals	100.0%	100.0%	

Sources: Wikipedia with BlackEconomics.org interpretations and tabulations¹

Table 1 shows that a majority of popular Black movies produced during the last generation were retrospective in nature, and that none of the movies reflects a futuristic period setting. NonBlack popular movies were somewhat more balanced and included a small but significant proportion of futuristic movies.

To summarize what popular Black movies do and don't do, we conclude that Black movies focus too much on the past and not enough on the future. By doing so, they may trap Black and nonBlack Americans in the past and reinforce the status quo. They certainly do not aid us in projecting a favorable future.

Black Americans—particularly, cinematic producers and performers—should not be overly enamored with Hollywood's cash, flash, and bling when the movies that are produced are not very beneficial. Rather, given the billions that we spend on cinema, we should demand the production of movies that provide Black Americans and broader audiences with new, favorable, and rich information about Black Americans that will assist us in forging a favorable future.

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05/28/21

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¹ Tabulations are available upon request from BlackEconomics.org (BlackEconomics@BlackEconomics.org).