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An Examination of Culture and The Academy Awards
Using Critical Discourse Analysis and a Foucauldian Framework

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Abstract

This paper explores film study, using the Academy Awards as a sampling tool to implement a Foucauldian theoretical approach. The researcher uses Critical Discourse Analysis to discuss issues of gender, race, and sexuality as presented in the roles winning Academy Awards for Best Leading Actor and Best Leading Actress. The study then discusses the demographic content analysis of these roles in comparison to cultural reality in order to examine the ideological attitudes inherent in the convergence of film production, consumption, and representations.

An Examination of Culture and the Academy Awards

Using Critical Discourse Analysis and a Foucauldian Framework

From the emergence of film at the turn of the 20th century to the present climate of global industries, humanities scholars have applied critical approaches to the examination of these visual artifacts. A body of scholarship examines the manifestations or reifications of hegemony and oppressive ideology in film. Within this research emerges interrogations of systemic racism and sexism, homophobia and transphobia, and the ways these systems appear covertly and overtly in our media. In looking at this literature, film seems to be a most prudent place for such examinations, as they are both consumed by society on a large scale, but also appear to be a reflection of cultural ideology while simultaneously completely misrepresenting actual cultural statistics and demographics. The space in this meeting of societal consumption, reflection, and misrepresentation provides a prime discourse in film as artifact for analysis. Thus, films as artifacts are both productions of and consumed by a given culture, paradigm, or Foucauldian discourse—or the complex set of practices and social interactions, realities, or processes that make up a given system (Dirks 2006). Foucault also discusses the notion of discursive formations, which are a type of regularity that occurs and links like pieces of discourse independent of human authority (Foucault 1972, p. 22). He discussed these notions and theoretical concepts largely using a study of psychological facilities and prison systems, as institutional representations of the respective fields of work in society. In the same way that medical fields and the social justice system have their own discursive formations, the arena of film analysis most certainly sheds light on a similar emergence of discursive patterns and regularities.

Therefore, just as Michel Foucault used institutional structures to examine ideological issues and our relationships to and within these institutions, it may be possible to setup a similar investigation using an aspect of the film industry as a specific institution (SAGE CRIT SUM 4 2009).

As such, the Academy Awards system can be used as an institutional representation for the practices of film discourse. In doing this, however, we must also acknowledge the issues of representation (or lack of) within this celebrated institution. Rather than these shortcomings making the Academy Awards and films associated with them an imprudent methodological choice, I believe, using the right theoretical framework, it is almost imperative to interrogate this institution because of its widely-accepted authority despite similarly-understood underrepresentation.

Thus, one possible way to examine the absence of represented groups in such a context is to use intersectional theory and Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) to expose key elements and forces involved in those representations. One of the tenets of CDA is that researchers must examine the artifact itself to find elements for interrogations, That is to say, one would not go into a film looking for manifestations of racist ideology. Rather, the idea would be to study a film as a rhetorical artifact and report all findings, only to analyze cultural or theoretical implications later, should they arise in a discussion of results. Given previous studies and the justifications for this study, the researcher here cannot use Critical Discourse Analysis to start from within an artifact outside of the methodology. Certain implications of discourse within films are assumed in the methodology and justification of the study. Therefore, intersectional theory can supplement the demographic findings of this study in a discussion of power dynamics and marginalization. CDA offers the proper lens, while intersectional theory allows the

researcher to use it. Further, the inclusion of Foucauldian discourse theories helps to ground such an examination by justifying the assumptions in the use of the Academy Awards (which pulls the study in such a way) as a concrete institution of the film industry. The researcher is presuming that discursive formations exist, and that film in particular has its own to be studied, and the Academy Awards as an institution already reflects pieces of these patterns to be studied in the reflections and misrepresentations already discussed.

The Academy Awards

Many researchers have discussed the Academy Awards as an institution worthy of examination. Gehrlein and Kher (2004), for example, looked at the technical aspect of the preparatory system for Oscars, in describing the decision and voting guidelines for the Academy Award nominations and winners. Still, others insist that because these procedures are all carried out by humans, who are by nature subjective creatures, the decision procedures remain inherently biased by mass popularity and cultural norms and influences (Collins & Hand, 2006; Rossman, Esparza, & Bonacich, 2010). Regardless, all of the studies suggest that while the Academy Awards have an influence on status, salaries, box office and video revenues, audience identifications with celebrities, advertising and consumption, and future filmmaking (Addis & Holbrook, 2010; Collins & Hand, 2006; Gehrlein & Kher, 2004; Rossman et al., 2010), the films and artists both nominated and winning awards are also reflections of societal values infused into the voting processes and decisions by cultural communication interactions. That is, scholars argue both that the cultural climate influences the process of the Academy Awards, and the process and outcomes of the Academy Awards over time in turn influence and reify the cultural climate, or the discursive formation. In fact, some scholars have examined the Academy Awards from various, more external, perspectives. For example, Goff analyzed a number of individual

Academy Awards ceremonies in entirety (Goff 2007; Goff 2008; Goff 2010). Each of Goff's qualitative evaluations of individual shows offers surface observations about elements of popular culture, film and television history, political climates and influence, race relations and ideology, and gender roles and relationships, among other general observations about the nature and aspects of the televised Academy Awards events. So, all of this research shows how the Academy Awards functions with systems and processes, human behaviors and interactions, and inherent ideologies; and all of these factors offer a prime institution and vessel of discursive formation for interrogation.

Film Analysis and Critical Theory

Feminist Critical Theory has been instrumental in the examination of film, especially within the latter half of the 20th century and shaping our understandings of hegemony in visual narrative forms. A number of studies have found misrepresentations of women in film in terms of demographic, historical, and career disparities, as well as those finding the reinforcement of oppressive gender ideologies in both children and adult films (Smith, Pieper, Granados, & Choueiti, 2010; England, Descartes, & Collier-Meek, 2011; Lauzen and Dozier, 2005; Welsh, 2010; Furia & Bielby, 2009). All of these studies interrogate ideological notions of power and gender in popular culture with an emphasis on the representational differences between men and women that serve to contrast reality and reify stereotypical and oppressive systems of hegemony and ideology in our media expressions.

Similarly, scholars employ Critical Race Theory to investigate institutionalization racism and oppression, white supremacy, white privilege, and a great many other facets of racial ideology within narrative forms. For example, in an investigation into both the Academy Awards and representations of race in film, Murch (2003) analyzed the roles for which Best Leading

Actor and Actress Oscars were awarded in the Seventy-Fourth Annual Academy Awards and used these analyses to argue that they represent oppressive stereotypical portraits of African Americans, and that these awards illustrate, not an advancement in the struggle to overcome racism, but a confirmation and reinforcement of the “status quo” racial stereotypes for black men and women (Murch, 2003, p. 29).

And certainly gaining traction in recent decades is the emergence and use of Queer Theory in film studies. While a lot of Queer Theorists may have risen from feminist studies, this area of research focuses more primarily on sex as action and identity than gender, if choosing to focus on gender at all, as some scholars would even like to detach sexual body from gendered body in certain Queer studies (Butler 1990). In a film analysis of “Secretary,” Cossman (2004) goes so far as to argue that feminism is now associated with “anti-sex” and Queer Theory has become the alternative mechanism for inquiry of post-feminist discourse (p. 49). But in terms of visual rhetorical critique, much of Queer Theory in film study still combines facets of feminist or race theory in its examinations (Cossman 2004; Harris & Mushtaq 2013). This shows us the importance of using Intersectional Theory in addition to critical theory lenses.

While intersectionality as a theoretical framework has gained traction in recent years, much of the literature examines specific and often esoteric areas of inquiry (Harris, K. L., 2016; Cho, Crenshaw & McCall, 2013; Collins, P. H., 1998; Baez, J. M., 2007; Sloop, J. M., 2005). In the way that intersectionality seeks to examine both difference and sameness, I believe it is a way to understand the unrepresented through the represented, but also that it is the most powerful way to illustrate the importance of critical examinations of power and oppression in a revitalized conceptualization of these axes in our cultural productions. We can then use this conceptualization to explore how white, heteronormative cultural narratives represented in this

study then comment or shed light on the oppression of other underrepresented groups in our actual cultural dialogue.

Because of the number of critical theories invested in the analysis of films as artifacts, it would be most prudent to rely on Critical Discourse Analysis, which combines a number of social theories in its examination methodologies. However, as Dirks (2006) argues, one of the challenges of Critical Discourse Analysis is the problem of linking “micro- and macro-theoretical perspectives that take into account the agent as well as the situation-bound, historically grown structures s/he has to cope with when performing her/his practices” (p. 2). That is to say, the artifact (in this case, film) is at once something to be studied in itself but also a product of the paradigm or set of structures within a culture that creates the manifestations within that artifact that will be analyzed. In a way, how does one examine an artifact from within, in singularity, without taking into account the processes that helped form it? By using films as artifacts, a study would examine the reflection of formative structures from analyzing the film itself, but it would also examine the surrounding situation or discourse in looking at the consumption, reflection, misrepresentation space discussed earlier.

This problem also has implications for the researcher herself, as she is not immune to the formative structures in an attempt to analyze them. Thus, Critical Discourse Analysis with the Foucauldian perspective of discourse formations in this study allows the researcher to examine the artifacts in and of themselves, as part of an institution and larger culture, and because of the specific inclusion of discursive formations, the researcher remains self-reflexive in allowing for the entity of hegemony to be in itself, as opposed to a result of a societal body or structuring force. If the manifestations exist not because of a group putting them forth into the films, for example, they may be studied as phenomena, as discursive formations, and not as an agenda,

which would create the very problems of influence studies like this aim to deconstruct. This theoretical approach in accordance with Intersectional Theory then offers the means to examine both macro- and micro-theoretical aspects of the observed material here, respectively.

Rationale

The present study used the Academy Awards as a sampling organizer, due to its cultural significance as institution. To that discursive sample was applied a critical examination of gender and power ideologies formed by a study of Critical Discourse Analysis and Intersectional Theory grounded by Foucauldian Discourse Theory.

To conduct such an examination of gender ideology through cinematic representations, we will implement a content analysis overview of the roles that have won the Best Actress in a Leading Role and Best Actor in a Leading role Oscars from 1936 to 2013. The Academy Awards span from 1927 to present, however, the categories and decision procedures as they exist today were not concretely formed until the 1936 awards year (Rossman et al., 2010). Therefore, my sample begins with this date, amounting to 154 total awards. Many of the reviewed studies use the website of the International Movie Database (IMDb) to organize and manage research, so it seems a fair choice to use here (Addis & Holbrook, 2010; Collins & Hand, 2006; Furia & Bielby, 2009; Rossman et al., 2010; Welsh, 2010). Using the official website of the Academy Awards, a list of all winners from 1936 to 2013 in the two lead acting categories will be compiled. Each role will then be researched using IMDb as a primary resource for information on each winning actor or actress, as well as a thorough description of the film narrative and character role, with additional summary support from outside sources as needed to create an overview of each character role. Each set of biographical information and character description will then be coded for specific variables laid out in a coding handbook, such as age of actor or actress at the time of

the film's release, genre of film, and various trait and action possibilities present or absent within or from the character. All of this data will then be entered into SPSS in order to run statistical analyses to chart effects, changes, and relationships among these variables in gender role performances consecrated by the awarding of Oscars over time.

Based on prior research and the current theoretical propositions, I would pose the following research questions:

RQ1: How does a demographic content analysis of these films compare to actual demographic statistics about US society?

Methodology

I first used data from previously reviewed Race and Feminist Theory studies of film to create a list of general variables for measurement, like the portrayal of violence, sexuality, and the symbols of power status that might appear in the film. For each variable, I created specific guidelines for coding each and compiled our handbook for content analysis. After this, I opted for a modified consensus sampling and used The Official Academy Awards Database (awardsdatabase.oscars.org) to compile a list of all Academy Award winners in the categories of Best Actress in a Leading Role and Best Actor in a Leading role from 1937 through 2012. This compilation yielded 151, as some years had ties for winning roles. Due to time and researcher restraints, this consensus list was shortened for the study to only include the last 25 years of winning roles, for a total of 50 roles chosen for analysis.

Once my measurement tools were in place and samples chosen, I gathered biographical and film production information for each film consisting of a winner using the International Movie Database (IMDb). In place of watching each film individually to code variables, I used the third party information provided by IMDb, which does reveal one of the major limitations in

this study. Once all variables for each of the 50 films and characters were completed, I entered the data for post-hoc statistical analyses.

Results

Of the 48 films in the sample (some actors won both Best Actress and Best Actor from the same film), women wrote only ten percent. Six percent (N=3) of the films were written jointly by male and female writers together, but 84% of the films sampled were written by men. Similarly, only 8% (N=4) were directed by women, the other 92% solely directed by men. Also, in all 50 winners, male and female, only four winners were African American, the only other minority race represented amongst the other 92% Caucasian winners. Only 1 of these four winners was a Black woman. Characters' religion was generally not specified, but was most often Christian when it was presented in the films.

In terms of traits and actions of the leading characters in these films, the death rate amongst both men and women was exactly even, as was the occurrence of men and women being perpetrators of physical violence. Approximately half of the films showed characters engaging in sexual action, with 48% of all female winners engaging in sexual activity and 40% of men doing so in their respective films. Men were also more likely to engage in substance abuse on screen, be the cause of emotional or psychological violence, suffer physical disabilities, serve in the military, and appear in leadership roles. Interestingly, exactly 20% of male characters and 20% of female characters appeared in positions of civil authority or government.

The majority of characters also represented heteronormative practices and portrayals of sexuality in the films (70%), with 18% of all characters in some way identifying with LGBTQ groups and the other 12% remaining ambiguous. Of these results in portrayals of sexuality, 16% of female leading roles depicted ambiguous or unspecified representations of sexuality, as

opposed to 8% of men presented in ambiguous portrayals. Twenty-four percent of winning male roles was characters identifying with an LGBTQ group, while only twelve percent of female roles coded as such a portrayal.

Discussion, Limitations, and Further Studies

The interpretation of the results in this study requires first taking a stance on the function and goal of acting in films and the basis of judgment for excellence in such a task. Generally, we are presented with two options for consideration. The first is that the function of acting in cinema is to present the most accurate and believable account of society or the intended society presented on screen to its audience. This view, however, focuses on the film itself as an inseparable entity under scrutiny, rather than singling out the task of the actors themselves as removable pieces within a film project. Because our structuring principle for this examination is the winning of Academy Awards, it would seem prudent to look at acting not as a tool but as a talent. In this way, then, we may view excellence in acting, not as a means to achieving an accurate narrative portrait, but as an ability of a person to become, personally, believable and accurate as something that is both a representation of the created world and an embodiment of foreign selfhood. This duality would help explain a number of perhaps conflicting results gathered.

Firstly, a number of results indicate a reinforcement of results from other studies of gender representation in films. For instance, men were more likely to be in roles featuring leadership and military service, while women are equally employed in civil authority and government positions. These things we know to be present in society, but they are external forces, and help in the creation of a viable *external* world within the film narrative. However, a number of other variables represent depictions of *internal* worlds of each character presented in

these films. Instances of psychological violence and stability, sexual conduct and orientation, and the personal suffering and understanding of physical and mental disabilities are all aspects of internal characterizations performed by the actors nominated for excellence.

From this perspective, we can interpret these internal factors awarded for excellence as those that were the most difficult for the actors to embody, those requiring the greatest pushes out of comfort and challenging of normative feeling and behavior for the actors. By such a standard these manifestations could be those furthest from socially accepted norms. Men are awarded for playing roles portraying sexual minorities, while women portray sexual ambiguity. These results suggest interesting social attitudes regarding male and female sexual ideologies. First, this result for male characters might suggest that gay men have a more difficult time being represented in society. The fact that a man is able to perform the life of a gay figure shows, for film critics, a strong control of acting and warrants the highest award for excellence. And similarly, the portrayal of a woman as a sexually ambiguous character proves a great feat, perhaps because women are so routinely sexualized as a social and cultural norm.

As discussed, what is interesting to note in such a demographic analysis here is the comparison to cultural statistics. One glaring inconsistency is the lack of racial representation in any of the films and thus either external or internal characterizations. If the Academy Awards is institutional representation of discursive formations, we see an almost complete nonexistence of people of color. In this way, such an institution showcases an inherent ideological attitude of public spaces as “white spaces” and allows for a discussion of white privilege. When the institutional norm is nonexistence, we must vehemently interrogate the discursive formations within our artifacts.

Further, roughly 70% of all roles portrayed were heteronormative, while studies (Gates 2011) show that less than 12% of people identify anywhere on the LGBT spectrum. This representation is interesting given the nature of film and performance discussed here. Does this representation signify an ideological presumption that such an identification is a well-represented norm or a great achievement in performative feat? Results seem to indicate the latter, with nearly double the representation of sexuality on screen of actual cultural representation. Actors win for such a performance in film because of an attitude that it is so far from the norm. This, of course, makes a leap not supported by enough data in the present study but offers a justification for further research into this particular area of representation and consumption.

The results of this study remain quantitatively inconclusive, as the limitations of small sample size and lack of in-depth variable coding and coefficients yielded only demographic data, without firm statistical significance. However, this study also acts as a justification for further research into this area of media critiques using hybrid theoretical approaches. Given the initial suggestions at which our results hint, further research should be done expanding the breadth of material under analysis. The ideologies and intersections of gender, race, sexuality, and violence in Academy Award winning roles should be examined, eliminating the limitations presented in this study. With the correction of limitations in a larger and more inclusive sample size and the reformulation of stronger and more sophisticated content variables in addition to more accurate and valid coding procedures, more thorough statistical analyses including regression models could be applied to find relationships amidst these ideological intersections represented in the most highly critically acclaimed films. Alternately, these interrogations should reach the scope of top grossing films, perhaps in order to compare the results in a meta-analysis of both to see if

popular film representations differ from critically acclaimed or institutional film representations for a more thorough critique of media and society through film analysis.

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Appendix A

Tables for independent samples t-test and chi-square frequencies

Table 1

Means and Standard Deviations for Age at Time of Award by Gender

Gender	Age at Time of Award
Best Actor in a Leading Role (<i>n</i> = 25)	<u>44</u> (8.6)
Best Actress in a Leading Role (<i>n</i> = 25)	<u>37</u> (13.7)

Note. *p* = .159 (*p* > .05).

Table 2

Cross tabulation of Gender and Portrayal of Sexuality

Portrayal of Sexuality	Male	Female
Heteronormative	<u>17</u> (68%)	<u>18</u> (72%)
LGBTQ Identification	<u>6</u> (24%)	<u>3</u> (12%)
Not Specified	<u>2</u> (8%)	<u>4</u> (16%)

Note. *p* = .428 (*p* > .05).

Appendix B – Coding Sheet

Name of Actor/Actress:

Title of Film: Combined Rating Score: Year of Release:

Winner of Academy Award: Yes No Nominated: Yes No

Gender of Actor/Actress: Male Female

Gender of Writer(s): Male Female Both

Gender of Director(s): Male Female Both

Age of Actor/Actress at time of release: Race of Actor/Actress:

Religious Affiliation of the Character: Jewish Christian Muslim Eastern Atheist N/S

Sexual Orientation: Heterosexual LGBTQ

Does the character die in the film? Yes No

Victim of physical violence? Yes No

Victim of emotional/psychological violence? Yes No

Perpetrator of physical violence? Yes No

Perpetrator of emotional/psychological violence? Yes No

Engage in implicit or explicit sexual activity on screen? Yes No

Suffer from physical disability? Yes No

Suffer from cognitive disability? Yes No

Suffer from psychological disorder? Yes No

Suffer from addiction/substance abuse? Yes No

Service in the military? Yes No

Leadership position? Yes No

Civil authority or government official? Yes No