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Much of Society's Unrest Caused by Barrage of Negative Stereotypes in Films

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Much of Society's Unrest Caused by Barrage of Negative Stereotypes in Films

By Anthony Major
UCF Forum columnist
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Everybody has a perception about what the image of art should say – or not say – but few have an informed opinion. The power of the communicative arts transcends the mere power to inform. That power is used in film, television, newspapers, radio, art, magazines, music, theatre and the new social media network as a means of influencing and shaping attitudes by providing images and opinions.

This power of film is universal as it transcends place, race and gender. It has the power to set or change behavior.

A former mentor of mine, Rheet Taylor, once explained to me there are only two types of opinions: informed and uninformed. Which one should we all desire to have? It becomes increasingly difficult, however, to become informed when only one group is calling the shots as to what that image of a particular culture is seen through the arts, especially film – which has a larger-than-life image and gets exported throughout the world. As the Andre Agassi commercial for Canon cameras years ago said: “Image is everything.”

It is my opinion that negative images of African-Americans perpetrated by some of the media is the cause of a lot of the unrest happening across our nation and around the world today. The constant barrage of images of African-Americans as troublemakers, as threatening or as menacing, are so embedded in our psyche that when incidents happen – such as we saw in Ferguson, Mo., Staten Island, N.Y., or Ohio, where a 12-year-old was shot within seconds of police arriving at the scene – many feel they are justified.

As an audience, we all bring our own personal perception and bias, but these large visual and sound images in film affect us all and alter our perception and bias to the message projected for us to see. The size of the image has a lot to do with the power of the

experience. We empathize with an image that is larger than us, in an experience that we cannot control. Good or bad, we've experienced an adventure on film and we leave with the negative images of African-Americans portrayed on the screen.

These bigger-than-life images are how the rest of the world perceives us, and that perception – good or bad – becomes the reality.

Leaving the production of the images in the hands of the few who control the economics, who themselves were influenced by negative images, brings predictable results. For example *The Color Purple*, *Colored Girls* and *Training Day*, which are all good films, all portray the black man in a negative way. We get a steady dose of Tyler Perry films, where the main character is a male dressed as a female, which many black comedians did to become successful, and a ton of negative reality-television shows.

To have more positive outcomes, we need to have a balance of positive images. We all say we want positive images, but what is positive, to whom and for what purpose?

Why do we keep having incidents like the recent leaked emails between Amy Pascal, co-chair of Sony Pictures, and producer Scott Rudin about what President Obama's favorite films would be, and the comments of an unnamed producer in a *New York Post* article who said "Denzel Washington (who is a two-time Academy Award winner) shouldn't star in blockbuster movies because he is black...the international market is too racist."

Yet films like *Shaft*, *Superfly*, *Trouble Man* and a bevy of other African-American films boosted Hollywood during the 70s. And the international markets have been duplicating African-American arts, jazz, Michael Jackson's dances, even black dress and gestures for centuries.

When African-Americans live in a pluralistic society and try to preserve their culture and its meaning, it becomes difficult in a capitalist society, where to some, increasing the bottom line at all costs is imperative.

Where does this leave the artists? The artists, who are trying to balance out the bigger-than-life power called film, need to be supported. In Hollywood studios, there has never been an African-American who can "green-light" a film. Support of African-Americans in the boardroom, with the power to green-light, may one day balance out the bigger-than-life images that are both entertaining and economically successful.

We need to do our due diligence, and research and listen to differing viewpoints of all cultures. We also need to try to understand differing opinions of how the local and foreign media view our culture. That way we can have an informed opinion about what our fellow citizens are complaining about, real or unreal.

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