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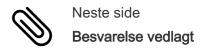*Laste opp dokumentet her. Maks én fil.*

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The Magical Negro

By Håvard Haugland Bamle

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Abstract:

This BA thesis explores the cinematic phenomenon known as the magical Negro. The essay considers the possible historical origins of the character, offering both literary predecessors and systemic explanations to how the character has originated. The essay also explores the function of the magical Negro in cinematic narratives, and attempts to uncover the relationship between race and the function of the character in these movies.

Table of Contents:

"The Magical Negro"

The Magical Negro

By Håvard Haugland Bamle

Introduction

Cinematic conventions function so that moviegoers are instantly familiar with the general build of a movie. Tropes are useful rhetorical devices, because they are pre-reflectively familiar to the viewers. In order to appeal to large crowds and generate maximal revenue, film techniques, including both story and characters, are recycled (Smith 2013:784). Over time this fact has created clichés, stereotypes and stock characters. In a 2012 *Key & Peele* sketch, a Black janitor (Jordan Peele) and a Black maintenance worker (Keegan-Michael Key) face off in an epic magical battle for the right to offer sage wisdom to a troubled White office worker (Joe Hartzler). This light-hearted parody provides evidence for just how prevalent the common cinematic trope known as *the magical Negro (MN)* is among a generic audience.

Many feature-length motion pictures revolve around protagonists dealing with disillusionment and frustration in the face of misfortune. The plot of such movies is usually concerned with the gradual resolution of a personal conflict, which is introduced in the beginning of the movie. When the frustration of the protagonist causes him to alienate his close friends and relatives, an unfamiliar character may be introduced to help bring about reconciliation. Very often, this character is a MN. The MN is a Black supporting character, who assists a White protagonist who is "down on his luck." The MN exhibits magical power, either explicitly, by performing miracles, or implicitly, by sharing mystical insight and folk wisdom. Movies don't waste time with unimportant things. Supporting characters are frequently endowed with any feature that is deemed necessary to aid plot development. The MN's main function is to facilitate a plot transformation. Therefore, he is detached from society, and besides serving this function he adds little or nothing else to the narrative (Glenn & Cunningham 2009:145). He appears in the story suddenly and without explanation, and promptly disappears when the conflict is resolved. He is severely limited outside his role as a sage.

2

"The Magical Negro"

The MN is somehow unaffected by the stresses of modern society, and is usually content with his own situation. He does not attempt to use his magical powers to help himself achieve material success. In fact, he often appears in marginalized social positions. This leads me to question whether a character needs to be Black in order to facilitate a plot transformation in the way the MN does. Could a character of any marginalized group serve the same function as a MN? The wiki website *Tvtropes.org* has an article on a character called *The almighty janitor*, who appears in movies such as *The Karate Kid* (1984), *The Hudsucker Proxy* (1994), and *Bruce Almighty (2003)*. The almighty janitor assumes a service role, but in terms of power he outranks his social superiors. The almighty janitor resembles the MN, but he is not necessarily Black. However, it is hard to believe that the existence and continued usage of MNs in movies is purely coincidental. Rather, it may be important to the function of the character that he is Black.

There are several expectations and features of the MN that are inseparably connected with blackness. Black characters are seen as having a closer connection to nature, or the supernatural, than other characters. This closeness to nature or the supernatural is expressed by the African American sociolect, and the folk wisdom that the MN exhibits. Simplicity in conduct and vulgarity in language creates a mystical aura around a character from any marginalized group, but this seems especially true if the character is Black. Commercial success also follows public approval. It seems necessary that Hollywood today must try to maintain diversity without marginalizing the sensibilities of any social group. In the name of diversity, a movie is expected to employ ethnic minority actors, and for the sake of inclusion their characters should be endowed with positive qualities. This essay argues that it is not mere coincidence that Black actors are cast to play supporting characters to White main characters in movies like *The Hitch-Hiker´s Guide To The Galaxy (2005)*, or *The Shawshank Redemption (1994).* These are so-called *MN-movies*.

The American public has been conditioned to accept and love the MN for many years. Many people do not recognize the MN as a negative stereotype, partly because of its redemptive qualities, and partly because its characteristics correspond with people's expectations of Black characters. There is a tension between the positive characteristics of the MN and racist undertones beneath its very existence. Hughey (2009) and Glenn & Cunningham (2009) among others emphasize how MN-movies perpetuate the

3

"The Magical Negro"

subordination of Black people in America, by making them appear in the service of White main characters. Hughey makes clear that: "Even though MNs are the films' protagonists and 'stars', their broken white 'clients' are at the center of each story" (2009:570). Hughey has also made a significant effort to map the frequency of MN occurrences in movies from the late 1990s and early 2000s. From his study he backs up Hunt's proposal that the recent spur in MN-movies is caused by a public outcry for more positive portrayals of colored people (549). Thus, the MN can also be seen as an attempt to reconcile race relations in America. However, this is done, perhaps inadvertently, by reaffirming the status quo, in which Black people are still subordinate to white people.

Nelson (in Adell 1994:570) proposes that the racial narrative in the United States has been strategized in the past and has been fashioned into the American psyche by tradition. Abstractions of ethnic characters (racial stereotypes) were invented in the context of colonial ideology, and have been perpetuated by systemic racism. The MN is the literary successor of several older stereotypes. Glenn & Cunningham (2009) show that African American characters fall into one of three categories: the "Mammy" (the faithful, asexual woman), the "Jezebel" (the hypersexual being), and the "Uncle Tom" (the obedient slave). Similarly, Brown (in Dates & Mascaro 2005:51) finds four commonly reoccurring Black stereotypes in fiction: the contented slave, the wretched freedman, the tragic mulatto and the comic Negro. Dates & Mascaro (2005:51) argue that mass media is responsible for legitimating racial inequality and maintaining White hegemony by encouraging racial subordination. "When [racial images in the mass media] become familiar and accepted, they help fuel misconceptions and facilitate misunderstandings among racial or cultural groups" (Dates & Mascaro 2005:52). Even though these are strong accusations about systemic racism, they may be central in order to understand the MN phenomenon.

Hall and Jefferson (in Dates & Mascaro 2005:52) theorize that people mentally rank racial and cultural groups in terms of "domination and subordination". Interestingly this mental process applies equally to the White majority and to ethnic minorities. Even African Americans can become familiar with racial images in mass media and gradually come to accept them. Spillers (in Adell 1994:570) speaks of an African-American hyphenated identity, which divides the identity of African Americans between their historical African genealogical heritage and their American cultural ancestry of the more recent past. W. E. B. Du Bois famously described the African

4

"The Magical Negro"

American identity as "twoness". An African American is conflicted between his identity as an American and his identity as a Negro (Baym 2013:1715). Du Bois' notion of "double consciousness" is a consequence of African Americans having internalized their oppression.

Though many claim that the MN trope deliberately enforces inequality, another view suggests that the MN only inadvertently does so. The MN could just be an extreme case of tokenism. The TV-Show *South Park* has a character called "Token Black". The idea behind the Token Black character is that every movie or TV-show needs a minority character in order to maintain an acceptable standard of diversity. In this view, The MN fills a quota of positive Black characters in movies, which was highly requested after increasing racial polarization in the United States in the early 1990s (as shown by Hughey 2009:459). If the MN is a token stock character it may be seen as a case of attempted political correctness gone wrong.

Even though the character was meant to satisfy a public outcry for positive Black characters to combat racial polarization, the nature of the MN in fact serves to "marginalize Black agency" and "empower White hegemony" in society (Hughes 2009:543). By portraying MNs as happy-go-lucky people who are satisfied in their servile situation (obedient slaves), racist ideology is camouflaged and gradually accepted in mainstream American culture. Black actors may not only appear in movies for the sake of diversity, but the MN is particularly well suited to promote the inclusion of Black people in a White privilege ideal of society, at least for one ideal of Black characters. The MN is a functional *exceptional exception*, a solitary Black character in a predominately White society, and he appears on cinema screens rather frequently.

5

"The Magical Negro"

Chapter 1

The origins and development of the magical Negro

Moviegoers have apparently accepted the MN. When media images become familiar, they are gradually accepted. When the media repeatedly confirms our expectations, our expectations solidify. It is "the unusual ability of film to 'validate reality'," Monaco writes (2009:298). Films utilize the immediate sensory connection between viewers and image representations on screen (176-178). Little imagination is required when watching a movie compared to when reading literature. Thus, cinematic images are especially effective conductors of culture. Viewers expect social conditions in movies to reflect social conditions in real life. If this assumption is correct then we must expect that racist images in media are reflective of an intrinsically racist society. Not only that, but the very same image projections reinforce racist preconceptions in society. Smith calls the film industry "a battleground (…) for (…) racial representations" (2013:780). Racism is one of the greatest challenges in the history of America. Before I discuss whether the MN is a product and perpetuator of systemic racism, I will look historically at how the American public has come to accept certain racial images, ultimately leading up to the MN.

We can trace the MN's roots back to racial stereotypes from the colonial era. As we saw in the introduction, the MN is somehow unaffected by the stresses of modern society. The MN thus strikingly resembles the *noble savage*, a literary figure from the 17th Century. The noble savage is an idealized indigenous person, whose innate goodness has not yet been corrupted by civilization (Encyclopedia Britannica 2014). Outside the influence of culture, man and nature are more closely connected. In the colonial mind, the absence of culture warrants the subjection of savages. (The "colonial mind" follows a Eurocentric interpretation of the dominion mandate in Genesis 1:26-28). In *Robinson Crusoe* (Defoe 1719), Friday is a savage companion who is happy to be in the service of a White main character. Though he is referred to as companion, Friday may just be one of the first obedient slaves in literature, preceding *Uncle Tom* by more than a century.

Glenn & Cunningham argue that the MN is a reinvention of traditional Black stereotypes (2009:137). They examine three. If the MN is a woman she embodies either

6

"The Magical Negro"

the *mammy* or the *jezebel* (150). The mammy is the bandana-wearing, faithful, obedient, domestic servant, an asexual Black woman with nothing but love and kindliness for the White family whom she serves (Foster 1979:71, Glenn & Cunningham 2009:139). Collins writes that the mammy has become an ideal for Black women in relationships to White people in society (Glenn & Cunningham 2009:139). In contrast, the jezebel is an aggressively hyper-sexualized woman, who will do anything to satisfy her sexual appetite (139). She is a flirtatious temptress of White men. The character Tia Dalma (Naomie Harris) arguably combines traits of the jezebel with another female Black stereotype, the *hoodoo* (a woman who practices voodoo) in *Pirates of the Caribbean: Dead Man's Chest* (2006). Dalma exemplifies the connection between these traditional female Black stereotypes and the MN.

If the MN is a man his personality is a reinvention of the *Uncle Tom*. Uncle Tom, from Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852) is kindly, subservient and selflessly loyal. The Uncle Tom also shows a strong commitment to his religious beliefs (Glenn & Cunningham p. 139). Though not all MNs are explicitly Christian, spirituality to a certain degree is a defining characteristic of the MN. Uncle Tom became Uncle Remus (James Baskett) in Disney's *Song of the South* (1946). Uncle Remus is arguably the very prototype of the MN character. He is a friendly figure who inspires the main character Johnny (Bobby Driscoll), by singing happy songs and telling stories about his cunning animal friend Br'er Rabbit (Johnny Lee). Johnny is able to utilize Br'er Rabbit's strategies in his own life. Another MN, Dick Hallorann ("Scatman" Crothers) in *The Shining* (1980), is servile and loyal until the very end, as he dies while attempting to rescue the Torrence family.

Sterling A. Brown, in his book *The Negro in American Fiction* (1937), identified Black stereotypes in American literature of the antebellum period. In addition to the noble savage and the mammy, he described the *loyal servant (*the *contented slave),* the *buffoon,* the *clown (*The *comic Negro),* the *tragic Mulatto (octoroon),* and the *wretched freedman* (Dates & Mascaro 2005:51, Foster 1979:71). This is not an exhaustive list of Black stereotypes, but merely some of the most familiar predecessors of the MN. Several of the stereotypes provide images of undesirable alternatives to the ideal Black personality, the loyal servant or contented slave, who is epitomized by Uncle Tom. The wretched freedman longs for a return to his old ways, while Uncle Tom, the loyal slave, never left (Morgan 2007:58).

7

"The Magical Negro"

In the 1950s and 60s Sidney Poitier was the most prominent actor in a trend Hughey calls the *ebony saint* (545). These characters were often wise, good-natured and "served as the moral conscience of White characters" (Kempley in Glenn & Cunningham 2009:137). The trend of the 50s and 60s followed demands for more "positive" Black characters, very similar to the outcry of the 90s. Positive Black characters were generally equated with Uncle Tom-characters, and Uncle Remus was already a beloved character. In movies like *Lilies of the* Field (1963) and *Driving Miss Daisy* (1989) the ebony saints (Poitier and Morgan Freeman respectively) reaffirmed the Uncle Tom as the acceptable norm for Black characters in film (Freedman 2003, Ehrenstein 2007).

Until the civil rights movement of the 1960s, racist images in film were normal. Because films reflect the shared sensibilities of the producers and audiences, older films convey certain attitudes towards race, which seem out of place in modern society. The movie *Birth of a Nation* (1915) is considered a classic, despite blatant racism (Monaco 2009:299-300). The movie did not even employ Black actors, but rather Black-faced painted White actors, borrowing a convention from the theatrical stage. Only in the late 1960s did some film directors break stereotypes by casting Black actors in non-stereotyped roles. However, films that presented a critical discourse on race were only targeted toward a marginal ethnic audience and thus belonged to a niche genre of Black cinema (Smith 2013:794). Up until the 90s it was rare to cast African-Americans in roles where race was not significant to the role, and specified in the script (Monaco 2009:298).

A confrontational response to the White ideal of the Negro as Uncle Tom was a line of movies popularly called "blaxploitation" films (e.g. Shaft, 1971) that portrayed what Hughey calls a more "bad-ass" image of African Americans (545). The success of these movies made many African Americans identify with a "cool" social face. In other words, being Black meant having "coolness". The 80s thus saw a significant conflation of the "bad-ass" Black characters in blaxploitation films and the laid back, kindly mannered ebony saints. The 1980s and 90s also spawned a generation of mainstream Black filmmakers (notably John Singleton and Spike Lee), who wanted to make realistic films about Black life in America. Many of these movies shed light on the conditions of Black neighborhoods in the inner city, depicting violence and crime as a central aspect of Black life. Freeman writes, "They reflect a certain aspect of African-American life. But they hardly reflect a complete picture (...) Problem is, people here and around the world

8

"The Magical Negro"

think that these films reflect the essence of Black life" (1993:20). It was this generation of Black representations that raised an outcry for more positive portrayals of African-Americans in film.

The fragmented impressions of Black life created by the above-mentioned type of movies were confirmed (however partial and inaccurate the images really were) by several news stories in the 1990s. Headline stories like the Los Angeles race riots in 1992, the O. J. Simpson trial in 1994 and the Nation of Islam's "Million Man March" were complimented by frequent stories about Black-on-Black crime and gang warfare to suggest a pathological pattern in Black communities (Hughey 2009:548-549). America became more racially polarized as media stimulated a widening of the color line. This led to what some call the "new racism," and what Fuller calls "The rediscovery of racism" in the 1990s (548). The increased awareness of racism in media inspired Hollywood to recognize their history of racist filmmaking (549). The solution was more films headlining positive characters of color (Hunt in Hughey 2009:549).

Arguably the MN is a reinvention of traditional stereotypes, particularly the contented slave in the form of a mammy or Uncle Tom character. On the other hand, the MN may be a brand new synthesis of cultural influences, responding to repeated outcries for more positive Black characters, by combining the ideals of the Black audience and the ideals of the White audience. The fact that White authors and Black authors have different ideas about Black characters in fiction, was noted by Sterling Brown in his 1937 book (Dates & Mascaro 2005:51). The characteristics of the MN as identified by Hughey (2009) are as follows: Economic extremity, cultural deficiency, folk wisdom, (dis)appearing acts, and primordial magic. These characteristics fall into a category he calls "Anti-Black Stereotypes" (555). Hughey also mentions that MNs exhibit a notable degree of spirituality and material detachment. Glenn & Cunningham (2009) identified the following characteristics of MNs: Using magical or spiritual gifts for the aid of a White character, assuming primarily service roles, exhibiting folk wisdom as opposed to intellectual cognition, possessing a limited role outside of magical/spiritual guide, and displaying an inability to use his or her powers to help himself or herself.

Using these previously identified characteristics, I have selected four, which together combine to create a MN: The MN is *A) socially and economically detached, B) magical, C) a supporting character,* and *D) Black.* In the next chapter I will examine the relationship between these characteristics and the function of the MN in a few clear-cut

9

"The Magical Negro"

examples of blockbuster (movies grossing over one hundred thousand US dollars in box office revenue) MN-movies, and two counterexamples, where the MN evades at least one of these characteristics.

10

"The Magical Negro"

Chapter 2

Characteristics and function of the magical Negro

Three films will be analyzed to further illustrate the key characteristics of the MN. In *Bruce Almighty (2003)*, Morgan Freeman plays a convincing Black God. When main character Bruce Nolan (Jim Carrey) is frustrated after a series of unfortunate events involving his girlfriend, his job, and his car, he turns to God in prayer and challenges him. When God appears he gives Nolan a part of his power and Nolan is able to turn his life around for the better. When we first see God, he is dressed like a janitor, mopping the floors of an empty building.

In *The Green Mile* (1999) Michael Clarke Duncan plays John Coffey, a simple-minded gentle giant, a good-natured prisoner, happy to be of service to the prison guards whom he refers to as "boss". Coffey is on death row for the rape and murder of two young girls, but he is revealed as innocent of this crime by the end of the movie. Coffey works a series of magical actions. He cures the main character Paul Edgecomb (Tom Hanks) of impotence, revives a mouse from the dead and cures the warden's wife of a fatal illness. Those who Coffey touches are granted a long life. Edgecomb lives to be 106 years old, and the mouse lives just as long. Coffey's final words before he is executed are "I'm sorry for what I am." John Coffey is a wretched MN. When he is offered his release from prison, he declines and says he is "dog tired". He yearns for a more permanent escape from his wretched condition.

In *The Legend of Bagger Vance* (2000) we meet World War I veteran, and former golf prodigy Rannulph Junuh (Matt Damon) who reluctantly agrees to play in a golf tournament against two of the highest ranked golfers in America. Suffering from psychological trauma after unfortunate experiences in World War I, Junuh has "lost his golf swing". To Junuh and the people of Savannah, the tournament seems utterly futile. Enter Will Smith as Bagger Vance, a golf caddy and life guru who helps Junuh rediscover his golf swing and consequently take control of his life outside the golf course. Vance shows a mysterious intuition about Junuh's problems. His golfing advice is phrased in such a way that they could easily be applied as metaphors about life in general. "Yeah, I always felt a man's grip on his club just like a man's grip on his world…" and "yeah, the rhythm of the game just like the rhythm of life" Vance says. Vance does not appear to be

11

"The Magical Negro"

educated, speaking in incomplete sentences and pausing many times. Nonetheless he seems wise. Vance's sudden appearance is unexplained and his backstory is not revealed. When Junuh has reclaimed his throne as local golf hero and won back his girlfriend, Vance leaves into the sunset, disappearing as inexplicably as he appeared in the first place.

A) *The MN is socially and economically detached*

The MN is isolated from lasting personal relationships, and unaffected by political, cultural and financial concerns. He stands outside society, obscured and alone. He is a social outsider. He appears and disappears suddenly from the narrative. Hughey writes that disappearing acts are required of the MN, because a prolonged stay would upset the social balance, which he has just served to restore (2009: 559-560). The MN is only present in order to serve a function. He is likable, but utterly lacks an interior life (Kempley in Hughey 2009:559). He does not exist for himself, so any attempt to realize him on the same terms as a main character would be futile. Bagger Vance appears in the night and is rapidly integrated in the life of Rannulph Junuh. When Junuh's problem is resolved, Vance is soon reduced to a waving silhouette in the sunset. In *The Green Mile* (1999), John Coffey has no social ties other than to the White people he helps. He has no history and no relatives.

In *Bruce Almighty* (2003), God first appears as a janitor, and later he is revealed as a homeless person. Since God is almighty, we can assume that the restraints on his powers are self-imposed. Bagger Vance seems satisfied with his meager payment of five dollars and a pair of worn out shoes. John Coffey on the other hand is tired of his situation, and seeks a permanent escape. "I'm tired of being on the road, lonely," Coffey says. There is an important distinction to be noted between these MNs. Imprisoned, Coffey is separated from nature. When he is taken out of prison to cure the warden's wife, he sees a "lady" in the stars, possibly referring to an unknown constellation, fills his hands with earth and grass, and smiles. The MN is simultaneously more spiritual and closer to nature than the White main character. Bruce Nolan solves his problems by becoming more spiritual. Junuh replaces destructive thinking with constructive intuition in order to turn his golf game around. The social detachment of the MN is only allowed when he is instead connected more closely to nature. The problem of the troubled White

12

"The Magical Negro"

main character is usually that he has been corrupted in society, far removed from nature.

B) The MN is Magical

The MN must help a White character by use of magic or folk wisdom. Through magic he guides the White main character to a more spiritual life, and through folk wisdom he helps him connect with his nature. Sometimes the MN uses his own wisdom, and other times he restores innate wisdom that already existed within the main character (Hughey 2009:556). The MN (almost) always prefers folk wisdom to intellectual discourse. Magic is what enables the MN to help people, and his magical powers are derived from nature. John Coffey for instance, magically feels the soul of those he touches, and is granted unique insight about Paul Edgecomb's problems. When Coffey has extracted something evil from someone, he releases it in the form of a swarm of bugs flying out of his mouth, reminiscent of biblical plagues. Commenting on his own intellectual abilities, Coffey says: "I don't know much about anything, I never have".

The MN teaches the White main character to embrace a more spiritual attitude toward the world (567). Bruce Nolan is instructed by God to stop asking for material things, and instead "be the miracle". Paradoxically, the restoration of the White main character usually involves a restoration of material success (560-561). Thanks to Vance, Junuh wins a trophy in the golf tournament. He does not only restore his own material success, but he also restores pride and optimism in the economically depressed town of Savannah, Georgia. Edgecomb, Bruce Nolan and Junuh are all restored in some sexual or romantic sense, rejuvenating their formerly troubled relationships. The fact that the MNs are themselves materially detached makes their spirituality feel more natural. Their connection to nature by occupying socially marginal positions makes their advice, and by extent their magical powers, seem more authentic.

C) The MN is a supporting character

The MN does not undergo personal development. Fictional characters are usually either dynamic or static, consistently, throughout a narrative. Authors most often intend their main characters to go through some sort of personal development, while they are less inclined to pursue development of supporting characters. Stock characters are used in order to easily fill certain necessary narrative functions. These characters are used primarily to facilitate a change in more central parts of the plot. The MN does not

13

"The Magical Negro"

undergo a personal development. Rather, he is there to help the main character develop. His own character is unshakable by the events in the narrative. His significance is limited to his actions in a larger context, i.e. the main plot, which revolves around the (White) main character (Hawthorn 2005:106). MNs primarily assume service roles (Glenn & Cunningham 2009:143). This is why God is dressed as a janitor and an electrician in *Bruce Almighty*. Arguably, this is also the reason why Coffey calls his prison guards "boss" in *The Green Mile*, but there are several examples of movies where White prison inmates also address their guards as "boss". (One example is *The Shawshank Redemption*, 1994, also based on a novel by Stephen King.)

The MN dutifully assists the main character and expects little in return (149). He dedicates himself entirely to his task, and is only satisfied when he fulfills his function. His own being is secondary to the main character. Glenn & Cunningham write that MNs "lack purpose when they do not eagerly come to the assistance of White characters" (2009:149). Hughey writes that the MN depends on the racist idea that Black people essentially are unsophisticated people who "desire an uncomplicated life of servitude" (2009:556). However, this racist idea is camouflaged by the redeeming characteristics of the MN. In order to counteract underlying racism, MNs are assigned with "saint-like goodness" (Hicks in Hughey 2009:561). Selflessness and servility are in the nature of MNs. God, in *Bruce Almighty* explains that true miracles do not lie in manipulating the laws of nature, but are generated by the admirable and kind acts of people. In *The Green Mile*, Edgecomb calls Coffey "One of God's true miracles".

D) *The MN is Black.*

The MN is both ethnically and culturally Black. This is significant because of cultural expectations that are tied to Black people. Gabbard writes that because Black people (historically and in contemporary society) have endured greater hardships than the typical White person, Black people are expected to be "more effective at coping with misfortune" (Hughey 2009:559). This empowers Black people to dispense "soul-healing advice" (559). This presumption combines with the stereotype of Black people as laidback and "cool". Being cool means being calm and detached, but also an object of imitation (Morgan 2009:285). Coolness enables the MN to teach the main character about style and sexuality, traits that seem to come more naturally to Black people than to White people (Hughey 2009:565).

14

"The Magical Negro"

Race does not always play a part in screenplays, but when a Black actor is cast it becomes a significant choice. Casting becomes essential in order to portray certain characters. Coolness may be part of an actor's image. Will Smith is an example of such an actor. Ellis describes how images of stars are circulated in subsidiary media (in television, periodicals, magazines and on the internet) for some time, before the characters they play complete the image (1992:91). Movie stars can be said to function as precursor texts. Due to the star factor, we expect certain actors to behave in certain ways. The practice of casting an actor in roles similar to those he has played before is called *typecasting*. According to the creators of "Bruce Almighty," the choice to cast Morgan Freeman as God was more based on Morgan Freeman's star image, rather than on a racial or theological argument (Freedman 2003:10). Race did not figure in the screenplay.

[In film] Character is established by action or voice. Dialogue is a particularly good way of revealing character (Hawthorne 2005:110). Through simplistic dialogue MNs communicate their uneducated and unsophisticated nature. Will Smith emphasizes the southern drawl in *The Legend of Bagger Vance*. He introduces his comments with interjections like "yeah," and often speaks in incomplete sentences, leaving out either the subject or the verbal. The African American sociolect communicates a phenomenon known as *soul*. Soul is connected with the stereotype of Black people as especially spiritual. Soul is also connected to the image of Black people as cool, contributing to the happy-calm and laidback attitude of cool characters.

The Green Mile, The Legend of Bagger Vance, and *Bruce Almighty* all depict unequal race relations, where a Black supporting character benefits a White main character. A seemingly reciprocal relationship does occur in *Jerry Maguire* (1996). Rod Tidwell (Cuba Gooding Jr.) and Jerry Maguire (Tom Cruise) interact in a mutually beneficial interracial relationship. When no one else wanted to work with either character, each is dependent on the other for his career. They are interlocked in a partnership where both will succeed or both will fail. Their success or failure is not restricted to their professional life, but seeps into their personal lives. Tidwell is attached to both social and material relationships, making him an atypical MN.

From a bird's eye view, the MN may have been created in order to maintain a politically correct standard of diversity. One reaction to this tokenism can be found in

15

"The Magical Negro"

Hancock (2008). Hancock (Will Smith) is a reluctant MN. He is a superhero, but he is unwilling to be reduced to merely someone who answers to the expectations of his White clients. Instead he indulges in laziness, throws temper-tantrums, and is more destructive than helpful. Hancock is a reaction to the exceptional exception that is the MN. He challenges the acceptable, one-dimensional portrayal Black characters. This movie speaks about the self-esteem and very identity of Black people. Though he seems almost villainously reckless, he may be the cinematic anti-hero that Black people need in order to be honestly represented in Hollywood. Nevertheless, even though some movies go against the grain of typical representations of Black characters, the MN is still a popular movie trope.

16

Chapter 3
The magical Negro as a sign of systemic racism

In his HBO special "*Chris Rock: Bring the* Pain" (1996), comedian Chris Rock pointed out indirect racism in a compliment paid to African-American presidential candidate Colin Powell. The compliment being that Powell "speaks so *well*." Implicit in such a statement is that Powell "speaks so well" *for an African-American*. "How the fuck did you *expect* him to sound?" Rock yelled from stage. In 2007, Joe Biden was heavily criticized for paying a similar compliment to then presidential candidate Barack Obama, calling him "articulate," a trait expected to go without saying for a highly educated White man. The frequent and largely unnoticed use of such backhanded compliments is a sign of a bigger problem. Our expectations of Black people and White people seem to be different. Obviously there is something wrong with our expectations of Black people, and our expectations are in large measure caused by the portrayal of Black characters in movies. Black characters in movies are often inarticulate and sometimes they even have magical powers.

Racism is usually treated as an attitude on the individual level. Systemic racism must be considered differently. It should be regarded as an ideology, concealed within a social group. It is this nature of racism on a group-level that is known as "new racism" (Hughey 2009:550). Racism on this level is not explicitly taught, but rather is "picked up" unconsciously from social interaction and media images. Racial representations in media are particularly important in the United States, where media has an expansive, wide reach, and where social interaction between people of different racial or ethnic groups is still low. Hughey writes: "in the absence of lived experience, films are often understood as 'authentic' reflections of 'real life'" (547). Films shape popular opinion, and may enforce common (mis)conceptions. In a new racist context the MN was created as the image of a positive Black person, but one who is still subjected to the terms of White privilege ideology (550). Such a case could only have occurred when a group was collectively unable to notice the underlying racism. The MN occurred in the context of a society which has deemed itself to be past racial issues and debate (550).

Racial images on screen represent racial conceptions in society at a given moment (Smith 2013:780). If Hollywood has progressed to depict more realistic and

17

"The Magical Negro"

positive images of Black characters, it seems that society itself has progressed. The election of President Obama in 2008 does reflect some progress in society. However, it is misguided to take these developments as signs of a "post-racial America". The idea of a "post-racial" setting opens the door to what Smith calls "colorblind racism" (781-782). Colorblind racism is the "hear no evil, see no evil, speak no evil" of our time. It is a problem that is not acknowledged as being a problem at all. "Colorblind racism [...] allows and justifies the persistence of racial inequality," Smith writes (781). Similarly, Hughey has coined the term "cinethetic racism," talking about intrinsic racism in film (Hughey 2009). The MN is the epitome of cinethetic racism.

Racism has taken on a systemic form gradually, through a series of compromises. The MN was developed alongside this evolution. To White people there is a distinction between the image of what Black people *are* - pathologic criminals or non-magical negroes as depicted in Spike Lee joints, and the image of what Black people *should be,* namely magically empowered Uncle Tom figures. Since the MN is an apparently positive character, he has become accepted as an ideal, and has been allowed to more firmly take root in American culture. His redeeming qualities make the world turn a blind eye to the already concealed racism that produced him.

One way in which the MN is redeemed is in his relation to his White friend. Smith calls it the "interracial buddy formula," a feature, which uses fictional friendships to conceal systemic racism (2013:785). Accordingly, Farley writes about two "new" stock characters in Hollywood: "The Magical African-American Friend" and the "Bigot with a Heart of Gold" (Farley 2000:14). The first refers to the MN. The second is an attempt to vindicate White people of the overt racism in American social history. We find these characters in movies that specifically address race issues like *American History X* (1998) or *Remember the Titans* (2000) as well as MN-movies like *The Green Mile*. The interracial buddy formula stipulates only one Black friend and one White friend, making their relationship more focused on the individuals involved than a group mentality (Smith 2013:787). Movies that utilize the interracial buddy formula therefore make race and racism into individual issues, camouflaging the systemic racism that lies beneath. Individualizing the race issue is a strategy of colorblind racism: an implicit assertion of racial dominance without being explicit about racial inequality (785).

According to Ehrenstein, the purpose of the MN is to assuage white guilt (2007). The disquieting memory of historical race relationships in America somehow

18

"The Magical Negro"

seems reconciled by the friendship between Black and White characters in film. More narrowly viewed, the MN may be seen as an attempt to combat racist film history, not to reconcile race in American history as a whole. But whether there are ideological or economic motives writers question how progressive the MN truly is. Freedman questions whether the MN truly compromises the White privilege ideology at all: "The use of a Black God [in Bruce Almighty] reflects how much White Americans can relax with the idea of racial inclusiveness, provided it doesn't challenge their power" (Freedman 2003). Because race relations today seem good, no one expects mainstream movies to challenge the status quo. MN-movies are not confrontational. Rather, they play into popular expectations of Black characters, and as Professor Early said: "[White] audiences [...] like their Black folk nonthreatening and supportive" (Freedman 2003).

Unequal power relations in Hollywood lead to the portrayal of Black characters in minor roles as stereotypes (Smith 2013:783). Hughey notes the peculiarity that different production houses produce Black characters with nearly identical features (Hughey 2009:549). The explanation is that the Hollywood milieu is not very ethnically diverse at all. Most Hollywood producers are White males, with no more idea of what Black people are really like than the predominately White audience (Hughey 2009:549, Smith 2013:780). Producers belong to a monoculture, a segregated social high end. Their own ideas about Black people come from movies, creating a circle of self-enforcing misconceptions (Farley in Glenn & Cunningham 2009:137). The apparently harmless portrayal of "friendly Blacks," are in fact overlooked signs of the deep-seated racism in the film industry that Hughey calls cinethetic racism (2009).

The MN always leaves the status quo preserved rather than challenged (Hughey 2009:564). In MN-movies the MN is rarely, if ever, the main character. In *The Legend of Bagger Vance*, Bagger Vance is the titular character, but the main character is Rannulph Junuh, and in *The Shawshank Redemption*, Red (Morgan Freeman) is the narrator, but Andy Dufresne (Tim Robbins) is the main character. From the fact that the White character is always the center of each story we can infer that when he is down on his luck it is only temporary. It is always expected that the White main character will champion his situation in the end. This is what Hughey calls "hegemonic whiteness" (2009). According to Hughey, Whites have a certain degree of social mobility, while the MN has none (2009:562). In fact, not only is the MN unable to utilize his powers on himself, but also he never uses his powers on other Blacks, only on Whites (Glenn &

19

"The Magical Negro"

Cunningham 2009:142-143, Hughey 2009:563). Hegemony requires maintenance, and the MN is a strategy to maintain White cultural dominance (Dates & Mascaro 2005:51). The MN does this by contentedly remaining a secondary, supporting character.

The MN is segregated from other African Americans (Hughey 2009:563). He is an *exceptional exception* (Smith 2013:789). The exceptional exception is a strategy that allows a Black character to exist in a White community, but only if he exhumes the suitable characteristics (790). The exceptional exception strategy is similar to the concept of tokenism. Both strategies work to camouflage hegemonic whiteness by enforcing colorblindness (789). When at least one other Black character is present in the narrative, the audience will not notice the peculiar one-sidedness of the setting. Consequently, if the audience is used to seeing exceptional exceptions, they will not notice the exceptional nature of the MN.

Research on the MN reveals racial inequality in sociopolitical power structures. Although White privilege in film goes largely unnoticed, it is nonetheless present. At least two aspects of MN-movies reveal White privilege and inequality in power structures. First, the MN seems unable to use rational discourse; he prefers to use folk wisdom (Glenn & Cunningham 2009:142, 144). Using folk wisdom means using intuition, and sometimes proverbs, to solve a problem. Smith found that White characters always seemed more methodical and rational in their thinking, while Black characters seemed to rely almost exclusively on folk wisdom (2013:791). According to Hughey the folk wisdom of the MN is connected to a long-held stereotype, which states that Black people are highly spiritual (2009:559). The spirituality of Black people is combined with a laid-back attitude to create a magical aura, in which intuition and feeling replaces logical reason.

Smith also found that Black characters are unable to utilize conventional power structures in society (2013:791-793). In addition to being tied to a certain mode of discourse, Black and White characters represent different kinds of authority. White characters usually occupied power positions by conventional means: economical or political, while Black characters in power positions often depended on supernatural abilities (793). Black characters that occupied power positions by conventional means were still unable to utilize rational discourse to the extent of their White counterparts (793). Smith researched blockbuster movies from 1989 and 2009, and could only identify one movie in which the "feeling Black" and "thinking White" roles were reversed

20

"The Magical Negro"

(784, 792). However, even though he is a strikingly rational character Hitch (Will Smith), in *Hitch* (2005), offers his services entrepreneurially, and lacks access to conventional power structures in society (793).

MN-movies provide a superficial empowerment of Black people. The MN is nevertheless a fiction. Concealed by seemingly progressive interracial relationships, White privilege is secretly reinforced. This is the practice that Hughey (2009) calls "White normativity". Unassuming White Hollywood producers convey the idea that White people are the main characters of society, reducing Black people to supporting roles. Dates & Mascaro write "if minority groups in general, and African Americans in particular, cannot gain access to the seats of media decision-making, systemic racism will be perpetuated, by showing insensitive caricatures" (2005:52). Films are representations of the societies in which they are made, but they also shape people's view of current social conditions, creating a circular effect where racist misconceptions are self-perpetuating. The MN has sprung out of systemic racism and works to cement Black stereotypes in society.

21

"The Magical Negro"

Conclusion

Certain features of supporting characters are advantageous in order to restore a troubled protagonist to happiness and success. Blackness is a significant characteristic of the MN, 1) because of the social and literary context in which he originated, and 2) because popular expectations about Black people lends him both authenticity and amiability, allowing him to serve his function more efficiently, and promptly leave the narrative when his function is served. However, the MN is both a product and reinforcing element of systemic racism. The social context that formed the MN is one where ethnic groups are separate enough to maintain different expectations of what a certain ethnic character should be. Black people are expected to be less eloquent than their White counterparts, and spirituality is the norm for Black people, who are (presumably) more easily corrupted by materialism, the pursuit of which leads to poverty and gang violence. The detached nature of the MN allows him to enter and leave a world that he does not inhabit permanently. Latching on to a White character is the way in which the MN gives purpose to his own existence.

Racist stereotypes were preserved for centuries, but since the civil rights era, overt racism has been gradually replaced by a more indirectly racist mentality: one that accepts inequality by maintaining a blind eye to race issues. Colorblind, cinethetic racism is the contemporary context in which the frequency of MN-movies rose in the 1990s (Hughey 2009 and Smith 2013). The MN is a false indicator of a post-racial society. He is disguised as progressive, but in fact he reinforces White privilege and simultaneously alleviates White people of their guilt. This form of racism is difficult to combat, because it seeps to the very core of our society's institutions. Regardless of whether this form of racism should be unacceptable in our society, the problem lies in part with the expectations of the audience, and not completely in the design of Hollywood producers. Audiences and producers alike must be made conscious of hidden racism in movies. The connection between producers and audience in a market economy may perpetuate systemic racism. This would be an interesting topic of further research.

22

"The Magical Negro"

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23

"The Magical Negro"

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24

"The Magical Negro"

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25