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MASTER THESIS

Unveiling the Dual Effects of the Black Movie Remakes: Afrocentricity in *The Wiz* 1978

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Dedications

I dedicate this work to:

To my parents Houria and Smail, whose boundless love and prayers have been my guiding lights; in moments of despair, I ran to you, finding solace and healing in your embrace.

To my siblings, Samira, Alima, Hamida, Tahar and Necereddine whose support and love have been the crux of my confidence.

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To all those adrift in this world, feeling like they are missing a vital piece, akin to Dorothy, and I, I have a message: do not wander far seeking what is missing. Look within, for that is where the true treasure lies.

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Abstract

This thesis examines the dual impact of the movie remake *The Wiz* 1978 after analyzing it from an Afrocentric perspective, highlighting its positive influence in challenging stereotypes and opposing Eurocentric ideals, while also acknowledging its potential negative effects, such as promoting reverse racism and potentially tarnishing cherished classics. The nature of this study is mainly qualitative based on descriptive and analytical methods. The study adopts the theory of Afrocentricity which allows the researcher to unravel the intricacies of *The Wiz* 1978. Additionally, methodological theories such as Cultivation Theory, and Interpretive Strategy were applied to analyze the movie and explore its potential effects. Finally, the main conclusion drawn from this research is that the centralization and emphasis of African American culture, cause, and identity in this film remake have significant effects. Positively, it challenges stereotypes and reshapes perceptions, while negatively; it promotes reverse racism and tarnishes beloved classics.

Key words: African Americans, Afrocentricism , Eurocentrism, film remake, reverse racism, stereotypes.

ملخص

يدرس هذا البحث التأثير المزدوج للفيلم "الساحر" بعد تحليله من منظور أفريقي، مسلطاً الضوء على تأثيره الإيجابي في تحدي الصور النمطية ومعارضة المثل الأوروبية المركزية، مع الاعتراف أيضاً بأثاره السلبية المحتملة، مثل الترويج للعنصرية العكسية وتشويه الكلاسيكيات العزيزة. تعتمد هذه الدراسة بشكل أساسي على الأساليب البحثية النوعية، مثل الوصفية والتحليلية. كما تعتمد الدراسة على نظرية المركزية الأفريقية التي تمكن الباحث من فهم تفاصيل فيلم "الساحر" من عام 1978. بالإضافة إلى ذلك، تم تطبيق النظريات المنهجية، مثل نظرية الغرس الثقافي واستراتيجيه التفسير، لتحليل هذا الفيلم واستكشاف تأثيراته المحتملة. أخيراً، الاستنتاج الرئيسي المستخلص من هذا البحث هو أن تركيز وتسلط الضوء على الثقافة والهوية الأمريكية الأفريقية في هذا الإصدار الجديد له آثار كبيرة. بشكل إيجابي، يتحدى الصور النمطية ويعيد تشكيل التصورات، بينما يروج سلبيًا للعنصرية العكسية ويشوه الكلاسيكيات المحبوبة

الكلمات الرئيسية: الصور النمطية، الإصدار الجديد، المركزية الإفريقية، المركزية الأوروبية، العنصرية العكسية.

Résumé

Ce mémoire examine le double impact du remake *The Wiz* (1978) après l'avoir analysé dans une perspective Afrocentrique. Ce mémoire souligne l'influence du film *The Wiz* (1978) comme remake qui remet en cause des stéréotypes et produit une alternative à l'idéologie eurocentrique qui prédominait dans le cinéma américain, tout en reconnaissant ses effets négatifs potentiels, comme la promotion du racisme inversé et la possible altération des classiques du cinéma américain. La nature de cette étude est principalement qualitative, basée sur des méthodes descriptives et analytiques. L'étude adopte la théorie de l'afrocentricité, permettant au chercheur de démêler les subtilités de *The Wiz* (1978). En outre, des théories méthodologiques telles que la théorie de la culture et la stratégie d'interprétation ont été appliquées pour analyser ce film et explorer ses effets potentiels. Enfin, la principale conclusion tirée de cette recherche est que la centralisation et l'accent mis sur la culture, les causes et l'identité afro-américaines dans ce remake cinématographique ont des effets significatifs. Positivement, il remet en question les stéréotypes et remodèle les perceptions, tandis que négativement, il pourrait promouvoir le racisme inversé et altérer les classiques américains.

Mots clés : Afrocentricité, Eurocentrique, le racisme inverse , remake, stéréotype, .

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General Introduction

In the early decades of the Hollywood film industry, racial segregation and discrimination were deeply ingrained in American society. These racist practices were not only mirrored but also perpetuated by the film industry. The latter, throughout much of the American history, was predominated by whites, with the power to place each individual in a particular place much like the chess game. Filmmakers aiming to glorify a particular community often position it as the king's piece, prioritizing its protection and making the whole game centered around it. On the other hand, they place those who deemed unimportant as pawns, having little mobility and being sacrificial by nature, losing one pawn or two will not lead to defeat. These pawns, in the history of American cinematic industry, were African Americans. They were given little to no importance as if they were not worthy of being. That exclusion led to perpetuate harmful stereotypes that did not only distort black identity but also shape people's perception of this community, promoting false ideas about African Americans. For instance, black characters in American films were often presented in a more negative, stereotypical portrayal, as in Griffith's *The Birth of a Nation* 1915. They were relegated to roles that show primitiveness, subservience and inferiority, casted in roles designated for comic relief, relying on exaggerated mannerisms and dialects that played into racist caricatures. This comedic representation reinforced prejudices. The depiction of African Americans in American films has been a subject of ongoing scrutiny, often entangled with historical stereotypes that perpetuate racial biases. However, a noteworthy phenomenon has emerged in the late twentieth century which is the proliferation of movie remakes featuring exclusively black casts. This phenomenon has marked a shift in the traditional representation of African Americans. It has offered a more positive representation of this community. Black people, through such remakes, feel seen and heard. *The Wiz* 1978 is an example of such

phenomenon. Since the late seventies, African Americans have eagerly tuned in to watch this remake on television, excitedly anticipating the unique experience of an all-Black cast in the remodeled version of *The Wizard of Oz* 1939. With its all black cast and magnificent black soundtrack, African Americans identity and culture were recentered, showcasing the true beauty of their culture. *The Wiz* 1978 attempts to respond to the longstanding underrepresentation and misrepresentation of African Americans in mainstream cinema. By retelling familiar stories with diverse casts, the audience is able to vision the story from a fresh perspective, providing authentic representation of black experience. However, this centralization of African American culture and experience has sparked a debate surrounding its effects, both positive and negative. The investigation of these effects is the essence of this thesis.

Statement of the Problem

The immediate call for authentic and just representation of African Americans in films is universally recognized, given the prevalent history of stereotypical and distorted representations. However, divergent viewpoints emerge regarding the over centralization of black experience in the remaking of classics that were initially performed by whites, such as *The Wiz* 1978. Proponents contend that this Afrocentric representation serves as a catalyst for opposing traditional stereotypical Eurocentric ideas, promoting a more diverse equitable portrayal of blacks. Conversely, detractors claim that such film remakes may promote reverse racism, compromising the integrity of the originals. This study centres its focus on the mentioned debate, while also highlighting the ways in which *The Wiz* promotes an Afrocentric stance.

In the light of the above-mentioned research contextualization, the research probes the following primary research question:

- How does the film remake *The Wiz* (1978) contribute to the promotion of Afrocentric representation and cultural identity, and what enduring effects has it had on the representation and perception of African Americans in the cinematic industry?

The primary question shall be answered through the following sub-questions:

- How have African Americans been portrayed in American films throughout history?
- How does the film remake *The Wiz* (1978) embody principles of Afrocentricity in its storytelling, aesthetics, and cultural representation?
- Does this remake contribute to a more inclusive and diverse landscape in the film industry, or does it face challenges in gaining acceptance from the audience who see them as tarnishing classics?

Research Aims

The study seeks to examine the extent to which the black movie remake *The Wiz* 1978 reflects an Afrocentric ideology. This involves a thorough analysis of its narrative, casts, costumes, soundtrack and the underlying messages of the story through the lens of Afrocentrism, emphasizing the ways they intersect with African cultural perspectives. Additionally, The study endeavours to analyze how *The Wiz* with its exclusively black casts contributes either to diversifying cinematic portrayals, dismantling stereotypes, and fostering a more inclusive and positive representation of African Americans in the film industry, or contributes only to tarnishing classics and promoting a new form of racism.

Significance of the Research

Films wield immense power through their ability to reach large audiences, moulding their thoughts and controlling their emotions on a particular cause or community. Each film has a motive and a goal that aspires to reach individuals' minds and souls, as no work of art is destined for entertainment, as many claim, only. It then goes without saying that an in depth

examination of a film is a legitimate avenue to reveal layers of deep meaning that are often cloaked beneath its entertaining facade. As films continue to shape people's perception of themselves and others with their power to carve their image and craft their history, a thorough analysis of *The Wiz* 1978 and its effects is neither unneeded nor pointless.

Research Methodology

This study is based on a number of approaches in which Afrocentricity is centrally applied to highlight the extent to which the black movie remake *The Wiz* 1978 speaks African through its cast, soundtrack and themes. However, investigating this remake featuring black casts and its impact on challenging traditional stereotypes of African Americans in American films needs to employ methodological theories such as the Cultivation theory and an interpretive strategy. They are utilized to delve into the qualitative aspects of this cinematic production, capturing the diverse perspectives of both creators and audiences. This allows for a comprehensive exploration of how this remake contributes to reshaping and challenging conventional representations of African Americans, as well as; its potential influence in promoting racism. The research also investigates relevant books, papers, and articles relevant to the inquiry proposed; in addition to looking for the available studies made by film historians, scholars and theorists on this subject in relation to the new perspective in which we will attempt to highlight.

Structure of the Research

The thesis is divided into three chapters. The first chapter offers a subtle understanding of media and its power. It also delves into the misrepresentation of African Americans in American films throughout much of history, highlighting the prevalent stereotypes that black individuals have been categorized into. However, the exploration of this representation may be of less significance without shedding light on the significant effects of these stereotypes.

Furthermore, this chapter provides an insight on the emergence of the theory of Afrocentricity as a response to the longstanding damaging representation of African Americans, underscoring its intricate principles for a thorough analysis of the selected work of art.

The second chapter provides an invaluable analysis of the black movie remake *The Wiz* 1978 from an Afrocentric lens. Through a critical analysis of its characters, songs and themes, the ways in which black identity is celebrated and centralized are apparent. This analysis paves the way to unveil the dual effects of such cinematic production which is thoroughly explored in the third and last chapter.

The third and last chapter relies on the two preceding chapters to undertake a holistic exploration of the effects of the black movie remake *The Wiz* 1978, stressing its positive effects in challenging traditional stereotypes while also unveiling its potential negative influences in promoting reverse racism.

Chapter One

The Traditional Representation of African Americans in American films

Introduction

The representation of African Americans in American films has been characterized with stereotypes, which not only distort the true identity of that community but also entirely marginalize it. After understanding media and its power, this chapter delves into the five categories of stereotypes that African Americans have been ensnared in throughout much of history. At the heart of this exploration lies the recognition of the effects of these stereotypes on shaping people's perceptions of themselves and others, reinforcing systemic inequalities. These effects are scrutinized through the lens of the Cultivation theory. Lastly, this chapter sheds light on the emergence of Afrocentricity as a counter-narrative and response to these damaging depictions, providing valuable insights into its definition, goals, and main principles for a thorough analysis of the selected film within this thesis.

1.1. The Power of the Media

The word “media” derives from Latin “medium,” which means the middle (Paul and Rai 1) or intermediate. This latter denotes that media can act as an intermediary between the source of information and the targeted audience. It is through media that ideas, values and information are transmitted from one entity to another. Media is the network of technologies that is used not only for entertainment and communication but also for the distribution of information, providing a platform for expressing opinions and views (Paul and Rai 2). Additionally, media, far from being mere conduits of information, exerts also a profound influence on the fabric of society. It has “become one of the essential amenities of life, they function as custodians of the constitution of a nation” (Paul and Rai 7). People often use media as a guardian or caretaker, entrusting it with responsibilities of transmitting truth and reality.

As a result, media becomes the instructor of the reality, as people believe the information as it is reported (Paul and Rai 7).

In his book *Understanding Media* (1964), Marshall McLuhan, a media theorist from the University of Toronto, introduces the concept of “the medium is the message”. He asserts that the way the information is transmitted is more important and significant than the information itself. McLuhan claims that the medium through which the content is conveyed plays greater role throughout history in influencing and shaping people's perception of everything (7-8).

Media has evolved throughout history, shaping the way information was transmitted to the audience. It begins primitively as cave paintings and Egyptian hieroglyphs. At that level, the transmission of the message was through visuals and symbols. The change to oral traditions helped transmitting knowledge easier through songs. However, it was Johannes Gutenberg's fifteenth century invention, that print media was made possible. Later, with the emergence of newspapers, the transmission of information became easier, and those new print media were able to reach larger audiences (*Understanding Media and Culture* 11).

In the early decades of the twentieth century, the access of news and information was facilitated with the invention of the radio which possessed the unprecedented ability of reporting events to all people simultaneously (*Understanding Media and Culture* 12). However, the drastic change of information transmission did not stop there. Television further strengthened media consumption, bringing live events into people's home (*Understanding Media and Culture* 13). This invention happens to hold great influence on how people perceive each other and themselves. Using films, for instance, Television is able to immerse the culture of others.

Films hold great impact with their ability to create stories with their interesting casts, captivating soundtrack and heartfelt messages. However, amidst the excitement, people may overlook the extent to which a particular community is misrepresented. The potency of the Hollywood film industry, for example, extends beyond merely depicting characters. It also controls perception of minor communities as African Americans. It is therefore preferable to view films critically.

Considering that many westerners rely on mass media, particularly movies, as their primary source of knowledge about other cultures, Hollywood's portrayal of these people has become pivotal. Films serve as windows into unfamiliar worlds, shaping how viewers perceive and understand diverse societies and identities. Films have the power “to shape and reshape the culture” (Entman and Rojecki 3).

Films act as a mirror to society, reflecting existing cultural values, trends, and ideas. But they are not just a passive mirror. They amplify certain aspects and downplay others. By focusing on specific stories, characters, and narratives, media can shape how people perceive the world and their place within it. It can also change this perception by altering the plot and the roles of particular actors. This idea was further explained by Ford who claims that “Television portrayals of African- Americans [...] have been shown to influence whites’ perceptions of those groups” (266). By saying this, he stresses the significance of television depiction of African Americans on shaping white audience’s perception of this community. The constant exposure to certain ideas on this community can either strengthen stereotypes or challenge them.

1.2. From Servants to Outlaws: Stereotypical Representation of African Americans in American Films

Films serve as a lens through which society's beliefs and values are magnified and examined. However, from the beginning of its emergence, the film industry looked down on the importance of diversification. This led to the creation of harmful stereotypical portrayals of minority groups such as the African Americans. Throughout the cinematic history, there has been a lack of accurate representation of different groups and communities. Due to this misrepresentation, systemic and institutionalized racism has plagued the industry (Messaoudi 101).

The following discussion, between former President Bill Clinton and a citizen, mirrors this idea:

MR. MORGAN: Yes, I do honestly think that there is still discrimination in this country to a point. There are a lot of prejudiced people out there that still remain...

MR. MORGAN: I have my own prejudices... if I'm walking downtown on a street and I see a Black man walking towards me that's not dressed as well, I may be a little bit scared. So, I mean... I have those prejudices.

THE PRESIDENT: Do you think that's because of television... or because of your personal experience?

MR. MORGAN: It would have nothing to do with my personal experience. Just from the media, television shows. (THE WHITE HOUSE OFFICE of the Press Secretary)

This discussion between a citizen and the president Bill Clinton, which occurred on December, 3, 1997 in Akron, Ohio, during the first town meeting of the President's Initiative on Race (THE WHITE HOUSE OFFICE of the Press Secretary), can be viewed as a salient

acknowledgement of the influence of the media and films in constructing the image of the African Americans in the white's consciousness.

The process of moulding societal views of African Americans has not been easy or fast. The structural representation of this community in films over many years has been deliberately inaccurate relying on exaggerated and comic stereotypes that heavily diminish the authentic portrayal of blacks in America. These stereotypes work to simplify complicated qualities of a small portion of a demographic and apply them to the whole community, excluding individual variations. As Merskin points out, stereotypes allow us to display different individuals who belong to one group as being all the same (160). This simplification of “a handful of characteristics and applying them to a whole people without exceptions” (Hall 258), can lead to unfair generalizations and misunderstandings. Some experts voice their concerns surrounding the reliance over stereotype. This latter can turn identities into commodities (Hall 258), which is the case of African Americans.

In his comprehensive analysis *Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies and Bucks: An Interpretative History of Blacks in Films* (2001), film historian David Bogle meticulously examines the portrayal of African Americans in cinema. Bogle identifies and elaborates on five primary stereotypical roles that have persisted throughout cinematic history: the tom, the coon, the tragic mulatto, the mammy, and the brutal black buck. Each of these archetypes, according to Bogle, serves the singular purpose of entertaining audiences by perpetuating and reinforcing notions of Negro inferiority, since “Fun was poked at the American Negro by presenting him as either a nitwit or a childlike lackey” (Bogle 4).

1.2.1. Uncle Tom: a Tale of Subservience

Uncle Tom is a character from Harriet Beecher Stowe's novel *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, published in 1852. The character, Uncle Tom, is an enslaved African American known for his

loyalty and obedience to his white masters. Stowe depicts Tom as a gentle, humble Christian enslaved person whose faith is pure and unwavering. Through Tom's character, she illustrates the inherent gentleness and capacity for forgiveness she believes existed within all black individuals.

The book follows the life of Uncle Tom, a slave portrayed as virtuous and unwavering in his principles. His compassion leads him to rescue Little Eva, a kind hearted girl who makes her father buy him. After the death of Eva, her father honors her wish and emancipates all his slaves including Uncle Tom. However, the father's death leads to Tom falling into the hands of Simon Legree, a cruel and greedy man. Legree subjects his captives to various forms of abuse, manipulating them for his own gain. Throughout the story, Uncle Tom experiences all forms of torture. However, Tom's unwavering faith and forgiveness shine through even in the face of brutal treatment (*Britannica*, "Uncle Tom").

Over time, the term Uncle Tom has been used derogatorily to describe a black person perceived as submissive or servile to white authority, often at the expense of their own community's interests. Despite Stowe's intentions, the portrayal of the main black character in her antislavery novel *Uncle Tom's Cabin* is similar to Bogle's description of the Tom characters in movies who are:

always chased, harassed, hounded, flogged, enslaved, and insulted, they keep the faith, n'er turn against their white massas, and remain hearty, submissive, stoic, generous, selfless, and oh-so-very kind. Thus they endear themselves to white audiences and emerge as heroes of sorts. (Bogle 5-6)

The pattern of traits, exhibited by the original Uncle Tom were found in other characters in other films such as *Confederate Spy* (circa 1910) and *For Massa's Sake* (1911). In the short silent drama film produced by Kalem Company and directed by Sidney Olcott

Confederate Spy (1910) Uncle Daniel, portrayed as a loyal African American spy for the South, meets his demise at the hands of a Northern firing squad (Pilgrim, “The Tom Caricature” sec.2). Despite his tragic fate, Uncle Daniel finds happiness and peace in his last moments, expressing his pride of serving his masters (Pilgrim, “The Tom Caricature” sec.2). This portrayal emphasizes the stereotypical image of blacks as being self sacrificing servants who are happy to offer their lives for the sake and interests of their white masters, perpetuating stereotypes of subservience and loyalty to white masters. Similarly, *For Massa's Sake* (1911) tells the story of a former slave who sells himself back into slavery to help his masters pay off his debts (Bogle 6). This storyline reinforced the notion of white superiority and black inferiority, highlighting the satisfaction of both on their position of the world hierarchy.

1.2.2. *The Chicken Coon*

The depiction of the coon is considered as one of the most harmful portrayals of black individuals. The term ‘coon,’ derives from ‘raccoon,’ and it inherently dehumanizes its subjects. The coon is portrayed as inactive, shiftless and seen as “buffoon for the entertainment of the whites” (Boyd-Perry 8). The pure coon character made its debut on screen in *Wooing and Wedding of a Coon* (1905). This short film depicts a honeymooning black couple as stumbling and stuttering idiots, perpetuating negative stereotypes. This depiction overlooks the essence of black people as individuals who are worthy, courageous, and kind, just like any other human being. By reducing them to caricatures defined by laziness, unreliability, and incompetence, these stereotypes confine them to a narrow and dehumanizing box of unworthiness. Such portrayals fail to acknowledge the diversity, complexity, and humanity of black individuals.

Pure coons are portrayed as good for nothing more than minor tasks like stealing chickens or eating watermelons. This portrayal was seen in films like *How Rastus Got His*

Turkey (1910), where the character Rastus attempts to steal a turkey for Thanksgiving (Bogle 8). This further perpetuates harmful stereotypes about black men. These portrayals have been accepted and appreciated throughout history at the expense of the feelings and self respect of black individuals.

1.2.3. The Tragic Mulatto

The term refers to a character stereotype in literature and film that portrays individuals having mixed origins, typically of black and white heritage, as tragic figures. These characters often struggle with the issue of identity. They are deprived from the sense of belonging and fight to win societal acceptance due to their racial ambiguity. They are depicted as individuals torn between two worlds, unable to fully belong to either, and often facing discrimination and rejection from both worlds, resulting in a sense of hybridity (Mafe 15).

Its early appearance can be traced back to *The Debt* (1912), a two-reel film set in the Old South. In the story, a white man has children with both his white wife and his black mistress simultaneously. As they grow up together, the white son and mulatto daughter develop romantic feelings for each other and decide to marry. However, their plans are shattered when they discover the truth of their kinship at a critical moment. Their lives are devastated not only because they are revealed to be siblings but also because society deems the girl unfit due to her mixed-race heritage, despite having only a trace of black ancestry (Bogle 9). This narrative portrays black ancestry as a stain on the purity of white blood, equating it with a plague or incurable disease. This depiction reinforces the racist notion that having even a drop of black blood is considered an unforgivable sin and renders an individual inherently tainted and inferior. It reflects the deeply ingrained prejudices and discriminatory attitudes towards people of mixed-race heritage.

In films like *Humanity's Cause*, *In Slavery Days*, and *The Octoroon*, produced around 1913, the focus was on the challenges faced by fair-skinned mulatto individuals attempting to pass for white. Despite their efforts to conceal their true racial identity, the characters are often portrayed as likable and even sympathetic, particularly due to their perceived proximity to whiteness (Alvarado 3). The audience is led to believe that the character's life could have been fulfilling and joyful if they had not been burdened by their “divided racial inheritance” (Bogle 8). This narrative highlights the struggles and limitations imposed by racial boundaries and the societal pressure to conform to rigid racial categories. Such portrayals shed the light on the prevailing assumption during that time that even a small amount of white ancestry conferred superiority and elevated status in the racial hierarchy. The characters' perceived proximity to whiteness is often depicted as a desirable trait, associated with greater opportunities, acceptance, and social standing.

1.2.4. The Submissive Mammy

It historically refers to a stereotype of a black woman who is devoted and submissive. It is mostly portrayed as overweight, dark-skinned, and unfeminine. She is typically seen as a woman who is fiercely loyal to her white masters, at the expense of her own family. This image was used to justify the act of slavery that was a historical reality of that time. By depicting black women content to serve, it helped to normalize the exploitation of black people and hide the harsh realities of slavery. By depicting a woman who is willing to give up her family and fight for the wellbeing of her masters, filmmakers mask the reality of Slavery by showing it as a benevolent system that treats people justly (Wallace-Sanders 4).

By showing black women as unattractive and hideous, these images act as a mask to cover the real mistreatment of black women who were sexually assaulted by their white masters. These portrayals belittle black women, depriving them from their real beauty and

charm. Catherine Clinton, a historian, argued that real antebellum mammies were rare, suggesting that the stereotypical portrayal of mammies in literature and media might not accurately reflect historical reality. Black women, in fact, did not begin running white households or filling the roles attributed to them in folklore and literature until after Emancipation (Clinton 201). According to Patricia Turner (1994), before the Civil War, only wealthy white individuals were able to use “(black) women as house servants rather than as field hands” (44). Turner further asserts that these house servants were typically of mixed race, skinny and young. Therefore, all these roles attributed to them are far from reality and are not historically relevant.

The depiction of the Mammy as inferior and protective of her white masters, at the expense of her own children and family has been prevalent throughout cinematic history. The *Birth of a Nation* (1915), directed by W. Griffith and adapted from Thomas Dixon's novel *The Clansman* (1905), is a salient example of such portrayal. In this film, the Mammy character is presented as a woman who is defending her white Master's home against black union soldiers. This depiction helps in conveying a message that black women prioritize loyalty over freedom. Similarly, in the renowned 1939 film *Gone with the wind*, the black mammy character also confronts black soldiers, whom she perceives as a danger to the white mistress of the house (Pilgrim, “The Mammy Caricature” sec.2).

1.2.5. *The Brutal Black Buck*

Another stereotypical portrayal of African Americans in media is the brutes or the brutal black buck. This latter is depicted as black man who is inherently savage, animalistic, and criminal, and who is worthy of nothing but severe punishment and oppression. Black brutes are depicted “as hideous, terrifying predators who target helpless victims, especially white women” (Pilgrim, “The Brute Caricature” par.1). Many people see the angry black men

as the worst creatures alive. Charles H. Smith (1893), writing in the 1890s, claimed that “A bad negro is the most horrible creature upon the earth, the most brutal and merciless” (181 qtd. in Pilgrim, “The Brute Caricature” par.2). Similarly, George T. Winston, a writer from 1901, described a scenario where a white woman feels intense fear when she hears a knock at her door because she believes a black man is lurking outside:

When a knock is heard at the door, [a white woman] shudders with nameless horror. The black brute is lurking in the dark, a monstrous beast, crazed with lust. His ferocity is almost demoniacal. A mad bull or tiger could scarcely be more brutal. A whole community is frenzied with horror, with the blind and furious rage for vengeance. (Winston 108-109)

This depiction serves to distort the overall image of African Americans, portraying them in the most negative light possible by likening them to animals. It seeks to emphasize their perceived inherent savagery and violent nature, creating harmful stereotypes that dehumanize and marginalize them in society. Furthermore, the crime that is mostly attributed to black brutes is rape mostly of white women. However, black rapists with white victims were uncommon; most white rape victims were assaulted by white men. The brutish stereotype is a diversion, a falsehood employed to rationalize lynching, serving as a tool of social coercion to intimidate black communities (Pilgrim, “The Brute Caricature” par.4).

The character of black brute was first introduced on screen in 1915 in D.W. Griffith’s *Birth of a Nation*, through the character of Gus, a former slave who attempts to rape Flora Cameron, a white woman.

The Birth of a Nation (Griffiths, 1915) was the first major American movie to portray all the major anti-black caricatures. It is notorious for depicting African American in stereotypical manners, which help in promoting discriminatory attitudes towards this

community (Žáčková 5). The first was categorizing blacks as faithful in a Mammy and an Uncle Tom whose loyalty is highlighted throughout the film. Through these characters, Griffith stresses the myth of slaves' satisfaction with their inferior positions (Žáčková 6). Griffith's second type of black characters is portrayed as brutal and aggressive. These characters, known as black bucks or black brutes, are depicted as barbaric and out of control, often resorting to violence (Bogle 13). Lydia, presenting the mullato archetype, is the third stereotypical image, worthy only of being a mistress of Senator Stoneman, a white abolitionist carpetbagger (Žáčková 9). This movie is considered as a significant part in the American film history, highlighting the influence of media in shaping perceptions and affecting societal attitudes.

1.3. Celluloid Shackles: Exploring the Effects of Stereotypical Portrayals of African Americans in American Films

The Cultivation theory, introduced by George Gerbner in the 1960s, is one of the fundamental theories that studies media effects. It "is a sociocultural theory" that emphasizes the role of media, precisely long-term exposure to media, in shaping audiences' beliefs, attitudes, and values (Shrum 1). This theory claims that people, who are constantly exposed to certain messages from television, are more likely to consider these messages as true and real. These people's perception of the world is highly influenced by the content, delivered by the television. This latter is, therefore, considered to shape the way people perceive social reality (Shrum 2). In other words, Cultivation theory presumes that long term exposure to media determines how media consumers view the world and themselves. These consumers are unconsciously "cultivating" attitudes that seem to believe that the world portrayed in television mirrors accurately the real world. However, this theory argues that the image of the

world, presented in media does not reflect reality. It is mostly an exaggeration or fantasy of the reality (*Understanding Media and Culture* 71).

Media offers its audience a set of ideas and conceptions on society and culture. Through the constant exposure to these ideas, people end up viewing the real world in a distorted way and perceive actuality through a television perspective (Shrum 2). The way media portrays African Americans, for instance, influence the attitudes and beliefs of society about this community

The constant exposure to certain ideas results in making these ideas sacred realities which people refuse to give up on. The ideas that are distorted and have no basis of truth can have profound effects on individuals and society as a whole. They shape how people perceive themselves and others. The stereotypical representations of African Americans in media can be a great example of this idea. The image of the black in the mind of the people around the world is constructed by the filmmakers, who depicted blacks as inferiors, invaluable and unworthy of attention. These stereotypical portrayals affected how people view them and how they view themselves.

African Americans have been treated unjustly and made to feel less worthy throughout history, from slavery, where they were considered someone's property, not an individual entity, to assimilating them to animals in popular media. When people are constantly treated badly, they get used to such treatment and accept it and believe it is appropriate for them. This is what comes to be known as internalized oppression. African Americans appear to have less self confidence and have begun to believe the misinformation created and promoted by the whites. Unconsciously, they feel in some way that they are inherently not as worthy, beautiful, good and noble as whites. They internalize the mistreatment and the oppression, resulting in identity conflict and psychological anguish. For instance, the doll study conducted by Clark

and Clark in 1939, prove this idea. In that study, children were shown a black and a white doll and asked a series of questions about these dolls. Children, both whites and blacks, favoured the white doll and said mean things about the black one. The latter was described as ugly, bad and dumb, mirroring the stereotypical images of the black people. The Clarks concluded that prejudice, discrimination, and segregation result in creating a sense of inferiority among African-American children and destroyed their self-esteem (Clark and Clark 1939). The doll studies have been reenacted several times through history having similar results. This emphasizes the effects of stereotypes on the minds of the people because unfair portrayals can lead to people believing bad things about themselves, which can impact their whole life.

Furthermore, negative stereotypes harm Black Americans at every turn, not only by making them believe inaccurate things about themselves but also by making others believe that about them. The whites believe that African Americans are incompetent, innately hypersexual and predatory, finding a justification to their mistreatment. The Black pain was normalized and the suffering of Black people became seen as normal in American society. The stereotypical ideas, ingrained by the filmmakers through their films, contributed to making the black pain “a normalized part of American culture, establishing the struggle faced by African Americans as not only natural but deserved as well” (Noble 25). In addition, due to these stereotypes, African Americans struggle to have a job to secure a living. In a study, conducted by Pager in 2003, where she compared job applications of black and white men. With identical resumes, differing only in race, black applicants were less likely to be called for interviews unlike their white counterparts. These biases, resulted from stereotypical images reinforced by whites throughout history, contribute in creating hurdles, hard to be overcome by African Americans, in the job market (Pager 957).

1.4. From Margins to Center: the Theory of Afrocentricity

African Americans have faced mistreatment across various aspects of life, enduring physical oppression and emotional marginalization due to the perpetuation of negative stereotypes. As Stephen Howe asserts, “for sheer weight, intensity, persistence of negative prejudice, maybe no human group has been so burdened by others’ attitudes as have Africans” (23 qtd. in Wright 45). In response to such mistreatment and prejudice, movements like Afrocentrism emerged to challenge and dismantle racial stereotypes about Africa and its people. These movements aimed to reclaim and celebrate African identity, culture, and history, fostering pride and unity among people of African descent worldwide (Wright 45).

1.4.1. Thinking about Afrocentricity

Afrocentricity is a perspective or approach that emphasizes the centrality of African culture, history, and experiences. While the concept predates its formal coining, credit for popularizing the term is often given to Molefi Kete Asante. In his 1980 book *Afrocentricity: The Theory of Social Change*, Asante stresses the importance of African history, culture, and values as a foundation for understanding the contemporary experiences of African descendant peoples throughout the world. As stated in Asante's article (2009), Afrocentricity “is a paradigm based on the idea that African people should re-assert a sense of agency in order to achieve sanity” (qtd. in D.Smith 4). Agency refers to the capacity of individuals to act independently and make choices that influence their lives and the world around them. Therefore, this capacity is essential for Africans to affirm their worthiness and recenter their identity and culture. This concept predates Molefi Asante, as evidenced by the beliefs of Garvey, DuBois, Fanon, Nkrumah, Muhammad, Malcolm, and Karenga (Asante, *Afrocentricity* 7). They all advocate for the centrality of Africans in post-modern history, which is the essence of Afrocentricity.

Asante developed this concept into a theoretical framework to facilitate a “revolutionary shift in thinking,” offering a “constructural adjustment to black disorientation, decenteredness, and lack of agency” (qtd. in D.Smith 4-5). This theory attempts to centralize African American experience by spotlighting its language, achievement, appearance and identity, enabling them to assert their rightful place in society. Essentially, Afrocentrism seeks to overturn the dominant narratives and perspectives imposed by Eurocentric norms in academia and media. Eurocentrism basically is a worldview that centers European, or White, ways of knowing as sole, central, or superior to all others (Vaidyanathan 2). This perspective denies African culture. Thus, Afrocentricity opposes this notion by promoting the belief that African people can not achieve self realization until they fully fathom and adopt Afrocentricity (Vaidyanathan 3).

As outlined by Asante, Afrocentricity includes several overarching goals, notably: resisting and challenging white racial dominance over African Americans; guiding African American toward their cultural centre and affirmation of their cultural roots; instilling a sense of pride of their roots, values, spirituality, and rituals within the African American community; and critically analyzing various academic disciplines, including literature, history, linguistics, politics, science, religion, and economics, through an Afrocentric lens (qtd. in Vaidyanathan 5).

1.4.2. Asante's Guidelines for Identifying Afrocentric Representations

In his book *The Afrocentric Idea* (1987), Asante provides guidelines for identifying Afrocentric discourse. This thesis applies his theory and guidelines to analyse Afrocentric representations in casts, costumes, soundtrack and themes, rather than focusing solely on textual discourse. The guidelines are summarized below (168-172):

1. Afrocentric representation emphasizes the celebration and preservation of African heritage and cultural styles, affirming the importance of African identity.
2. Afrocentric representation aims to foster balance, harmony, along with reconciliation.
3. Afrocentric representation stresses the intellectual contributions of African civilizations to world history, highlighting Africa's significance as a distinct and viable component of global narratives.
4. Afrocentric representation prioritizes community building while celebrating diversity. It has respect for pluralism and opposition to imperialism.
5. Afrocentric representation embodies traditional stylistic features of Black culture.

In short, Afrocentric representation revolves around centering African culture and experience, prioritizing African perspectives, and challenging Eurocentrism. It aims at empowering people with African descent and promoting resilience. Additionally, it works to restore African identity and celebrate its essence (Asante, *The Afrocentric Idea* 168-172). These principles collectively offer a logical framework for evaluating cultural artifacts and examine the extent to which they reflect an Afrocentric orientation. Thus, this thesis will analyze the film remake *The Wiz* 1978 based on these characteristics observed within its casts, costumes, songs and themes.

Conclusion

Media, functioning both as a means for transmitting knowledge and a shield for hiding the truth, plays a significant role in shaping perceptions of African Americans. This community has been put in a cage against their will, attributing to them false traits and distancing them from their real identity by creating stereotypes that diminish their existence, oppress their thoughts, and suppress their emotions. This chapter offered a subtle understanding of media power. It also delves into the representation of African Americans in

American films, shedding light on the prevalent stereotypes of this community and providing examples from cinematic history. Furthermore, these stereotypes have profound effects on people's perceptions of the African American community, as thoroughly examined in this chapter through the lens of Cultivation theory principles. Additionally, such misrepresentation cannot go unaddressed without a powerful reaction that opposes these stereotypes and reasserts their true identity. Therefore, the theory of Afrocentrism has been defined, outlining its goals and guidelines that characterize any Afrocentric representation. Understanding these principles is essential for analyzing the 1978 movie remake *The Wiz* and its effects.

Chapter Two

The Wiz 1978: An Afrocentric Screen Production

Introduction

As discussed in the previous chapter, Films wield significant influence in shaping people's perceptions and conveying deeper messages. When films with new stories have the ability to enter audiences' homes and alter their views of both people and themselves, it becomes evident that remakes of beloved classics possess even greater power. From classic tales retold with modern spices to cultural icons reimagined through different lenses, remakes of movies offer both a tribute and reinterpretation. This chapter provides some understanding on this phenomenon from different scholars' views and perspectives. Additionally, through the lens of Afrocentrism, this chapter seeks to examine *The Wiz* 1978. The latter is a remake of the 1939 *Wizard of Oz*. It transports audience to a fantastical world where the familiar narrative is interwoven with African American culture and aesthetics. By analyzing its characters, costumes, songs, and themes, the ways in which Black identity is celebrated and centralized are unveiled. From its interesting casting choices to its musical masterpieces, *The Wiz* offers a new lens through which audience views their favourite classic characters in a different hue.

2.1. Understanding Movie Remakes

Remakes of movies are defined by various scholars; each has his own interpretation of this phenomenon. From viewing them as films “based on an earlier screenplay” (Mazdon 2), to considering them as “new version of existing films” (Grindstaff 134). This type of films is considered as productions that to a certain extent showcase that they embrace one or more previous cinematic productions (Horton and McDougal 3). While there is a general consensus on the basic understanding of film remakes, particularly those with familiar titles and

narratives, film remaking can refer to “the infinite and open-ended possibilities generated by all the discursive practices of a [film] culture” (Stam 202). This idea mostly denotes that generating new ideas and interpretations to the same story or concept is endless and limitless, as people can view a certain idea differently, making each remake a different story. David Wills further explains this by pointing out that the remake is different from other genres, not only due to the fact of its repetitive nature but due to the fact of its representation of a structure way of repetition, “the citationality or iterability, that exists in and for every film” (148). The citationality refers to how remakes reference or cite the original film. When a film is remade, it deliberately echoes or references the original, acknowledging its existence and influence. While the iterability basically denotes that remaking a movie is not only repeating the story or the scenes; it is reiterating or re-presenting them in a new context or with new interpretations. These two concepts stresses the idea that remakes are not just copies; they are a specific way of reinterpreting existing cinematic productions (Wills 149).

Constantine Verevis argues that remakes “do not consist simply of bodies of films but, like genres, are located too in “expectations and audience knowledge” and in “the institutions that govern and support specific reading strategies”” (23). He basically claims that remakes are not just about the films themselves but also about audience expectations, knowledge, and the institutions determining how they are perceived. So remakes can be seen as "a mental contract" between producers and consumers, and the broader context in which they are viewed (Cuelenaere 6).

Additionally, scholars have long been engaged in defining and categorizing film remakes, aiming to differentiate them from other types of adaptations like sequels and prequels. Therefore, it is highly recommended to fathom the difference. The remake is limited to films that draw their plot from other films. Whereas, the sequel is a continuation film which

stresses the story of one or more protagonists. However, the prequel creates the back-story for well-known characters (Bahruddin 939). Mostly, the film remake is restricted to those films that are reworks of other films. Yet, any simple classification of the remake is destined for failure for many factors (Verevis 22), like those film remakes that are uncredited, based on a common source text such as readaptations, or the fact that “originals are never pure singularities” (Verevis 22). Consequently, every film can be considered a remake since every film partially remakes other films.

Remakes can be more than just repeating a beloved and popular story; they can convey deeper meanings through familiar stories. The movie remake *The Wiz* 1978 fits into this category. By casting African Americans in leading roles, this remake’s producers aim to imbue a familiar story with a new packaging.

2.2. *The Wiz* (1978): the Movie Remake Synopsis

The wiz is a 1978 American musical fantasy adventure film directed by Sidney Lumet, adapted from the 1974 Broadway musical of the same name. It is a remake of *The 1939 wizard of Oz*. The film reimagines the classic 1900 children's novel *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* by L. Frank Baum, with an African-American cast.

The film opens at a Thanksgiving dinner, where a Black family is gathered around the table at a brownstone in Harlem, chatting and exchanging secrets and funny jokes. Dorothy, played by Diana Ross, gets miraculously transported into a fantasy land the Oz in her attempt to rescue her dog from a tornado. When she falls from the sky she lands upon and crashes through a neon sign, which kills Evermean, the Wicked Witch of the East who rules Munchkinland. The Munchkins, who had been transformed into graffiti by Evermean for painting the playground walls, are jubilant for finally being released from their prison, tasting freedom after a long time of imprisonment. Miss One then gifts Dorothy the silver slippers and

instructs her not to take them off, and she is told to take the Yellow Brick Road to find the wiz who can help her get back home. She ends up finding the scarecrow, the Tin Man and the Lion, each wants something, a brain, a heart and courage respectively. They all decide to stick together to defeat all odds. After meeting with the wiz, asking them to kill the Wicked Witch of the West, who lives in the sewers, they embark in a challenging journey filled with fun, growth, and countless adventures. As an attempt of the Witch of the West to kill Dorothy and her crew, she sends her flying monkeys after them, but nothing can stop them. With a strong sense of determination in their hearts and hope to find their quests, they will push themselves to overcome all hurdles. Together, working in harmony, they defeat the witch by finding that the sprinklers are the magic solution that melts and kills the Wicked Witch of the West. In their way to emerald city, they found out that the Wiz is but a failed Atlanta politician. Despite that, Dorothy sings a song to her partners that they have got what they wanted: a brain, a heart, and courage. At the end of the story, Dorothy is told by Glinda, the Good Witch, that clicking her heels three times, filled with a strong belief that this simple act will reunite her with home, is the answer of her quest. She does so, and then she finds herself home.

2.3. Afrocentricity in *The Wiz*

The Wiz (1978) blends themes of racial liberation and Afrofuturism by centralizing African tradition and presents it with elements of science and fantasy. The act of altering the rural Kansas in Baum's original story with contemporary Harlem makes the film relevant to the African American history. This film centralizes African American tradition through various means, the casting choices, costumes, songs and themes. These elements, deliberately selected, hold great significance, as the presentation of these elements shape audiences' perception and emotions. Every element, from casting African Americans in leading roles to choosing songs that resonate with the African American culture, controls the way in which

people can perceive this community. The presentation of these elements is not arbitrarily chosen but carefully selected to convey a message with a greater depth and meaning. As Gertrude Gipson, from the Los Angeles Sentinel, said, “Never have I seen such a colorful production... breathtaking photography, unbelievable make-up, eye-popping costumes, fantastic, creative dancers, and the soulful versatile, innovative music of Quincy Jones. The movie is one of the greatest musicals we have seen in many a year” (qtd. in Simon-Hartman sec.2).

2.3.1. The Cast of *The Wiz* as a Marker of Afrocentricity

The Wiz (1978) featured an interesting list of prominent figures of Black pop culture icons, including the likes of Michael Jackson, Diana Ross, Nipsey Russell, Ted Ross, and Richard Pryor, among others (see figure 1). This selection is to be thanked for to the director Lumet, the father of two children from an interracial marriage. He embraces a civil libertarian stance in politics, rather than an ideological one. As a member of the original fifty members of the Performing Arts Committee for Civil Liberties, which is an organization designed to combat threats to free expression (Boyer 23 qtd. in Williams 192), he prioritized personal freedom and his beliefs can be mirrored in his films. Apart from being a genius director, with his ability to bring out the best in his actors, Lumet's films are described as emotional yet not overly sentimental (Williams 192). While Lumet is politically left-leaning and his films often explore socially relevant topics, he claims “not [to] want to make political movies” in the first place (Boyer 41 qtd. in Williams 192.). Despite this, his approach to address political issues is clear in his productions. His adaptation of Baum's *The Wizard of Oz* with an all-black cast aligns with his willingness to address political issues, given the social implications and significance of such a casting choice (Williams 192).



Figure 1: *The Wiz* movie poster, starring African American cast. “The Wiz (Film).” *Oz Wiki*, [https://oz.fandom.com/wiki/The_Wiz_\(film\)](https://oz.fandom.com/wiki/The_Wiz_(film)).

The Choice of these African American movie stars has a paramount significance in promoting African American culture. The careful selection of actors plays a great role in the success of the films. Actors, by bringing fictional stories to life on screen, have the power to attract audiences, stimulate catharsis and provoke thought. Selecting actors who authentically mirrors the background of the audience they target contribute to the resonance of the film. Therefore, casting these African Americans to portray the characters of *The Wiz* is a necessity for the authentic transmission of the message. As well as an attempt to challenge the traditional stereotypes of African Americans, since a Black actor, as claimed by Bogle, was rarely given the opportunity to allow the film narrative to be told from her or his perspective (qtd. in Bass 16).

By casting Diana Ross as Dorothy, black women felt seen. Diana Ross, born in Detroit on March 26, 1944, lived in Brewster-Douglass, one of Detroit's low income housing districts

(Britannica, “Diana Ross”). Due to her upbringing, people, particularly women, of colour relate to this woman as they saw themselves in her. For years, African Americans have been marginalized in films, unable to connect with characters who do not speak, dance, or look like them. *The Wiz*, however, changed this narrative, with its African American cast. For instance, Michael Jackson's portrayal of the Scarecrow in *The Wiz* helped Black people feel a stronger sense of connection to the film. His performance offers a relatable representation of this previously excluded community. Just at 19 years old, Michael Jackson, in *The Wiz*, was able to connect with the hearts of black youth. Seeing someone who resembled them was a driving force for them to feel a sense of belonging in a world where black adolescents have no place of their own (Matthews-Hoffman par.2). Therefore, the significance of actors in filmmaking does not lie only in their ability to breathe life into stories, but also in their ability to build connections with their audience.

The deliberate selection of African Americans actors in this film is a pivotal tool for the centralization of this community within the white American society. It serves as a crucial platform for African Americans, to amplify their voices, drawing attention to their own unique identities and experiences. Furthermore, such representation instills a sense of pride and empowerment within the African American people.

2.3.2. Afrocentric Costumes

Costume, in films, is not an ordinary cloth that holds no meaning. It helps the audience understand more the character's personality and background. In cinematic productions, costumes play a significant role in ameliorating the characters' ability to display his or her mood, culture, religion, and ethnicity without saying a single word (Kwakye-Opong and Adinku 10). This exemplifies the Erasmusian saying that “clothes maketh the man”, which basically means that what people wear speaks much about his own identity and culture.

Costumes, in fact, are means through which people can transmit their culture and values. They “constitute one of the most formidable and versatile cultural agents for the transmission of knowledge and values across ethnic, national and international boundaries” (Kwakye-Opong and Adinku 10). Therefore, the costume designer, Tony Walton, in *The Wiz* speaks African culture through his designs and costumes. As Melissa Simon-Hartman, a specialist in custom hand-crafted fashion and costume pieces, said, “Aside from the contextual underpinnings of the plot, *The Wiz* stands out for its take and celebration of African dressing and hairstyles” (Simon-Hartman sec.2).

African culture is joyful, expressive and innately linked to colour “from rallying shades of liberation to evocative hues of optimism, color is embraced as an unspoken language” (Naidoo par.1). Colours have a deep meaning and importance in African culture. African traditions are often in vibrant and bold colours that give a sense of energy, aliveness and spirituality. Throughout the film, characters are often seen wearing costumes with vibrant colours, reminiscent of Kente cloth, a traditional Ghanaian fabric known for its vibrant colors and intricate geometric patterns. These vibrant colours are related to African textiles and reflect the vibrant spirit and energy of African American culture. For instance, The Munchkins wore a variety of colors in their costumes, including bright yellows, blues, greens, reds, purples, and oranges. These colours were used, not only to give a sense of childlike wonder and playfulness but also to draw parallels to African American culture. This latter happens to embrace vibrant colors and celebrates the richness of color. Moreover, in the opening scene, we are introduced to an African American family wearing traditional African attire, including the Kufi hat (see figure 2). The Kufi hat is a brimless, rounded cap worn by men in Africa and throughout the African diaspora. In addition, Mabel King's Evillene is a glamorous villainess.

She wears an extravagant orange costume, with dramatic crowns (see figure 3). Her outfits are bold and fierce. Her costume can mirror the boldness of African culture.



Figure 2: A Character from *The Wiz*, wearing the Kufi hat.



Figure 3: A Bold Costume Worn by Evillene in *The Wiz*. “Costume from “the Wiz” on Display at Academy Museum.” Pinterest, pin.it/boPpcrDdB.

2.3.3. *Afro Hairstyles*

Hair has always been a key factor in representing one's identity. From one generation to the next, Black hair in its natural state has always been viewed negatively for its difference (Randle 117). Throughout history, African identity has been closely interconnected with natural hairstyles, often characterized by short hair, which symbolized cultural pride and beauty. However, Colonialism introduced Eurocentric ideals of beauty, which denigrated traditional African hairstyles as primitive and uncivilized (Montle 111). Therefore, black people were forced to divorce their natural hair, seeing it as ugly and hideous. They were encouraged further distance themselves from their cultural roots, while forcing Blacks to abandon their African hair traditions (Randle 117). Black females, for instance, often deal with societal pressures to alter their natural curly hair due to the social pressure of adopting a more Eurocentric look, reflective of European descent such as long, straight hair (Bencosme 1). *The Wiz*, therefore, changed this view by portraying characters with their natural African hairstyle, reflecting African American culture. For example, Dorothy's natural afro hairstyle and the Lion's mane (see figure 4-5) promotes African Americans natural look and evoke pride in natural hair textures, centralizing true African identities. Moreover, Michael "wore a voluminous curly scarecrow wig atop very small braids" (Simon-Hartman sec.2), stressing the beauty of traditional African hairstyles (see figure 6). This deliberate choice highlights Jackson's will to promote African culture by drawing inspiration from African aesthetics in his performance.



Figure 4: Diana Ross (Dorothy) with Afro Hair from *The Wiz* 1978. “The Wiz (Film).” Oz Wiki, [oz.fandom.com/wiki/The_Wiz_\(film\)?file=The-wiz-6-1](https://oz.fandom.com/wiki/The_Wiz_(film)?file=The-wiz-6-1).



Figure 5: Ted Ross with its Afro-like Lion's mane. “Ted Ross Plays the Lion in a Scene from the Film “The Wiz”, 1978.” *Getty Images*, 30 June 2011, www.gettyimages.com/detail/news-photo/ted-ross-plays-the-lion-in-a-scene-from-the-film-the-wiz-news-photo/117980004



Figure 6: Michael Jackson, wearing an Afro like curly wig. “Clown Costume Inspiration | Michael Jackson Pics.” Pinterest, pin.it/QS3x4LYLl.

2.3.4. The Soundtrack: An Inextricable Afrocentric Perspective

Music is a form of cultural expression shaped and influenced by the culture and the environment of its people (Chukwuma 296). As a fundamental component of music, songs serve as powerful tools for conveying deeper messages, encapsulating real experiences within their lyrics and tunes. Through the skillful combination of words and music, singers can express complex themes such as social injustice, resilience and disillusionment, creating an intangible bond with the audiences on a deeply human level (Sanchez Gonzalez 414).

The Wiz offers a mosaic of songs that deeply resonate with African Americans. Historically, music has always been central to black life. Noted historian Barbara Omolade suggests that “Black people’s history is told in their music and their spoken words which become music when the story is being told. It’s not just entertainment, it is a statement” (Omolade 2). From its selection of soul, an African American music genre, to its lyrics that authentically capture the African American experience, this film remake contributes in centralizing the African American cause. Ken Harper, a black aspiring producer, who came up with the initial idea for *The Wiz*, expresses a consciously Afrocentric vision:

We're going to do a new version of *The Wizard of Oz* with a contemporary score and an all-black cast. It will be fun, and it will be spectacular, with the music expressing every phase of the various rhythms associated with black culture, including West Indian, Afro-Cuban, blues, jazz, rock and even gospel. (qtd. in Bunch 187)

Therefore, the song selection in this remake was purposefully chosen to spotlight and centralize the African American experience. Each song serves as a vessel to channel the true aspirations and feelings of African Americans. The deliberate choice of soul music in *The Wiz*, for instance, can be seen as an example centralizing the African American experience.

Soul music is blues, gospel, jazz, and rhythm and blues all merged together. It is the fullest aural artistic expression of blackness (Wicks 22). The genre of soul music is one of the most innovative and generative forms of music of the 1960s. It instills pride in African heritage among black Americans (Maultsby 51). This genre has not only reshaped urban black popular music but has also become a platform for promoting black pride and consciousness. Soul lyrics not only highlight the struggles of black communities but also offer solutions for improvement. Soul music, in the 1960s and 1970s, served as a medium for promoting self-awareness, protest and social change, as well as a catalyst for the evolution of American popular music (Maultsby 51). Soul singers, through their powerful voices and deep lyrics, waged a battle for the social equality of African Americans. They “voiced concern about social injustice, racial pride, black militancy, and forms of protest; their music was correspondingly harsher, more intense, and more explosive than rhythm 'n' blues, with more emphasis upon traditional black-music elements” (Southern 517 qtd. in Terai 28).

Through this genre, black people show to the world that they can do things their way. As Robin D. G. Kelley, a professor and historian, states:

As debates over the black aesthetic raged, the concept of soul was an assertion that there are black ways of doing things, even if those ways are contested and the boundaries around what is black are fluid. To have soul means you possess a specific cultural capital that is cultivated from a unique perspective and narrative and Black (Kelley 15).

In *The Wiz*, Dorothy and her friends sing a variety of songs such as “Ease on Down the Road,” “You Can’t Win” and, “Brand New Day” and, they all fall into this music genre.

“Ease on Down the Road”, written by Charlie Smalls, who composed the score and most of the songs from *The Wiz*, is a rhythm and blues soul song which was recorded as a duet between Diana Ross and Michael Jackson and released as the theme song of the 1978 film adaptation of *The Wiz*. As with the rest of the music in the film, the film version of “Ease on Down the Road” was produced by Quincy Jones (“*The Wiz* (soundtrack album)”).

In *The Wiz*, Dorothy and her traveling companions are motivated down the Yellow Brick Road to the beat of this song. “Ease on Down the Road” has elements that are commonly found in black music, with the notes of a blues scale with flatted thirds and sevenths (B flat and F natural in the key of G). The melody of the song mostly uses notes from a scale that's often used in black music, called the pentatonic scale (see figure 7). This latter is important in many types of black music, from old spiritual songs to modern R&B. Additionally; the singers might add extra notes to give the music more flavors, which is more common in black music (Bunch 186).



Figure 7: “Ease on Down the Road” from Universal’s *The Wiz*. Bunch, Ryan. ““Ease on down the Road.”” Oxford University Press EBooks, 20 Dec. 2018, pp. 183–204, <https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780190663179.003.0010>.

Additionally, this song connects to African Americans through the messages conveyed through its lyrics. The theme of the song revolves around perseverance, determination, and overcoming obstacles. “Ease on Down the Road” can be seen as a metaphor for the African American struggle for civil rights and equality. The road symbolizes the journey towards freedom and equality, mirroring the challenging path that African Americans have traveled throughout history (Matthews-Hoffman par.3).

The lyrics, “Don't you carry nothing that might be a load,” (Jackson 39:02) can be interpreted as a call to overcome the burdens of oppression and discrimination, motivating individuals to keep moving forward despite the weight of societal barriers. Furthermore, the lines, “There may be times when you wish you wasn't born, / And you wake one morning just to find that your courage's gone” (Ross and Jackson 58:15-31), mirror the heavy emotional weigh that African Americans had to carry due to the racism and injustice. But despite all odds, the lyrics suggest that one should keep pushing forward and eventually, he will reach his destination. They reassure that these doubts are temporary can be overcome with perseverance

and unity. The song mostly urges African Americans to keep fighting to reach their goal of social equality. As Diana Ross sings:

Don't you lose no ground
You just keep on keepin'
On the road that you choose
Don't you give up walkin'
Cause you gave up shoes (Ross and Jackson 39:50-56)

“You Can't Win” is another song from the movie that speaks African American in every note. It is an R&B, pop and soul song, written by Charlie Smalls and performed by American recording artist Michael Jackson.

The song's lyrics capture the sense of disillusionment and frustration felt by many African Americans who fought for equality and faced setbacks and resistance. The repeated refrain of “You can't win, you can't break even/ and you can't get out of the game” (Jackson 31:28-35) reflects the sentiment of being imprisoned in a system created to marginalize African Americans. Despite efforts to fight racism, harder societal barriers are created, resulting in a feeling of hopelessness and failure. Furthermore, the reference to spending “your little bit of money / while someone else rides for free” (Jackson 33:38-41) echoes the economic injustices faced by African Americans, including economic exploitation and limited upward mobility.

In essence, “You Can't Win” can be seen as commentary on the enduring pain to achieve racial equality and freedom experienced by African Americans, spotting the systematic obstacles and inequalities that impeded progress and development. African American people deeply resonate with this song because they hear echoes of their own

hardships in the lyrics and themes. Their feelings of powerlessness are clearly voiced in these lyrics:

You can't win, you can't break even

And you can't get out of the game

People keep sayin' things are gonna change

But they look just like, they're stayin' the same. (Jackson 31:28-43)

The song “Brand New Day” from *The Wiz*, written by the American R&B singer and songwriter Luther Vandross, is also known as “Everybody Rejoice”, sung by Diana Ross (Dorothy), celebrates the dawn of a new era filled with hope, freedom, and joy. Its themes resonate strongly with the African American experience, particularly during the civil rights movement and moments of progress towards equality. The lyrics transfer a sense of liberation and optimism, as the characters rejoice in newfound freedom and independence. Diana sings:

In harmony

Let's show the world that we've got liberty

It's such a change

For us to live so independently

Freedom, you see

Has got our hearts singing so joyfully just look about

You owe it to yourself to check it out. (Ross 1:45:45-58)

These words convey a sense of liberty that African people longed for and waited to enjoy for many years. It shows that African Americans' fight for liberty will be achieved one day, highlighting the power of solidarity and unity. The repeated refrain of “Can't you feel a brand new day?” reflects the collective excitement felt by those who have overcome oppression and are embracing a brighter future.

Overall, “Brand New Day” serves as an anthem of empowerment and resilience for African Americans, celebrating their triumphs and resilience in the face of injustices. It gives African Americans a hope for a brighter future filled with opportunity and success. However, Dorothy's singing of “A Brand New Day” is not only an acknowledgement of freedom, but also an announcement of “the transformative power that Blacks have in their power to act contrary to their circumstances” (Curry 76).

Songs are powerful tools to express one's thoughts. By incorporating elements of a particular culture and embellishing them with profound words, they can resonate with both the hearts and minds of listeners. They can be used as a weapon to defeat all the stereotypes and false beliefs, highlighting the true experiences of a particular community. The songs in the *Wiz* were able to fulfill this duty.

2.3.5. Vernacular Language

The language employed in *The Wiz* stands as a prime example of centralizing African American identity. Since language serves as the vehicle through which culture and community values are transmitted and preserved. Language and culture share a complex and intertwined relationship, evolving together through endless wars and conflicts throughout history. People cannot use one without reference to the other (Saghar 87). Since every language in the world represents its culture, the producers of this remake ensured the accurate representation of African American culture through the use of their vernacular AAVE. This latter is a form of vernacular language that gained prominence within the English vocabulary. AAVE referred to as “Black English, Ebonics, Negro dialects is associated to the African Americans” (Arifin and Dewi 1). This form of language is spoken by all the characters of the *Wiz*, mirroring accurately the African Americans.

At 38:31, the Scarecrow tells Dorothy, "... seems like we're gonna have to find our own yellow brick road". This demonstrates the use of 'gonna' instead of 'going to,' reflecting features of AAVE grammar. Other similar expressions such as, wanna and gotta are present in the language of the characters. Moreover, "Don't nobody bring me no bad news", this line sung by Evillene, the Wicked Witch of the West and the Winkies, features the double negative, which is a linguistic phenomenon where two negative elements are used in the same clause, resulting in intensification or reinforcement of negation. It is one of the characteristics of AAVE grammar (Arifin and Dewi 2). This double negation is extensively used by most characters in *The Wiz*.

Additionally, zero copula, a linguistic phenomenon where the copula (the verb to be) is omitted, categorizes the language of African Americans, as they tend to delete the verb to be in their speech pattern (Arifin and Dewi 1). To accurately reflect this linguistic feature, the crows in this film remake say "you just a stray paper dummy" (29:44) to Scarecrow, omitting the verb are. The dialogue in *The Wiz* authentically mirrors how African Americans speak, shedding light on their true language, which was historically marginalized.

2.3.6. Afrocentric Themes

A *New York Times*' article by African American columnist Bryant Rollins, entitled "Does The Wiz Say Something Extra to Blacks?" suggests that *The Wiz* musical, and by extension the movie that adopted the same plotline, is more than just a story for kids; It is the retelling of an imaginative tale, embroidering it with themes that reflect African Americans history. Rollins claims that the prevalent are slavery, emancipation, and the great black migration from rural south to urban north (77). Jack Kroll in *Newsweek*, concurs with Rollins regarding the themes of the film. He adds: "American blacks have been moving down a yellow brick road (badly in need of repair) for a long time, looking for Oz or the Emerald City

or some other dream deferred, so the idea of an all-black version of *The Wizard of Oz* makes perfect sense” (qtd. in Bunch 192).

In *The Wiz*, the theme of immigration is deeply interconnected with the African American experience. The change in story setting to an urban city New York and Dorothy's trip from Harlem to the Emerald City can be taken as a metaphor for the great migration, which is one of the greatest social and political phenomena where millions of southern blacks migrated to the north, searching for freedom, the promised land, opportunity and an end to oppression (Rollins 77). As events unfold, Dorothy encounters characters who reflect the struggles and aspirations of African Americans, such as the Scarecrow longing for knowledge, the Tin Man seeking compassion, and the Lion searching for courage. These all characters represent what African Americans aspired to achieve as they navigated the challenges of urban life. Moreover, the Wiz, who initially appears as trustworthy figure, ended up being flawed and deceitful man, symbolizing the disappointment that many African Americans experienced upon realizing that Northern utopia failed to exist. Their realization at the end of the story that the Wiz, whom they believed held the key to their wishes and hopes, turned out to be a delusional character mirrors the disillusionment they faced upon encountering the reality of the North. As a result, many blacks have returned to the south after experiencing the dangers, difficulties and frustration of northern cities (Rollins 77). This is also mirrored in the movie in Dorothy's desire to return to her home. Her wish corresponds to a strong feeling among blacks in New York and other northern cities to do the same (Rollins 77).

Moreover, in *The Wiz* (1978), the theme of slavery is depicted through the characters of the wicked witches, shedding some light on how the United States has been shattered by slavery, and contrary to its name, unity fails to ring true within the nation. Evillene, the Wicked Witch of the West enslaves the citizens of her land, forcing them to work in her

sweatshop and subjecting them to harsh treatment. This portrayal reflects the historical legacy of slavery in America. Evillene is depicted as cruel and power hungry character. Her greediness, wickedness and desire for control exemplify the institution of slavery where African Americans were tormented. She instils fear in her subjects by making it clear that disobedience will be met with severe consequences. Treating her workers as mere commodities and calling them ‘trash’ and ‘garbage’, Evilene's behaviours echoes the practices of slaveowners, who treated enslaved individuals as property rather than human beings, stripped of their dignity, rights, and autonomy. This is portrayed through scenes showing the Winkies labouring under her control in an oppressive environment. They are depicted as fearful, with their chains symbolizing their enslavement (*The Wiz* 1:31:46-59). Her sister, Evamean, the Wicked Witch of the East is another character that reflects the institution of slavery. In the story, she rules over the Munchkins with cruelty and oppression. She punished the Munchkins by cursing them to become graffiti and flattening them onto the walls (*The Wiz* 13:50).

Once the theme of slavery is established, it is not much of a leap to the sudden exhilaration of emancipation. When Dorothy liberates the slaves from the Wicked Witch, their jubilation is captured in the song “Everybody Rejoice”. The song and its accompanying dance resonate deeply with the black audience, who can relate the emotional experience of freedom (Rollins 77). Additionally, After Dorothy has defeated Evillene, her slaves known as the Winkies are able to break free from their shackles and live as they want. They sang the song “A Brand New Day”, which probably the most prominent pro-Black message. The song captures the essence of Black liberation and the celebration of freedom from enslavement, reflecting themes deeply ingrained in the history and struggles of Black Americans. Moreover, Tin Man, exclaims “free at last!” (1:45:45) echoing the breath of joy of

the African Americans who were finally able to secure their basic right to freedom. Overall the theme of freedom and liberation is clearly presented in this remake, highlighting the struggles of African Americans to achieve this right.

Conclusion

The power of films in molding people's thoughts and evoking their emotions, is undeniable. Films have proven to be powerful tools in influencing people's thoughts and emotions. *The Wiz* was able, through its compelling cast, intricate costumes, enjoyable songs, and profound themes, to offer a new lens to view a historically marginalized and oppressed community. This chapter provided a thoughtful examination of this remake from an Afrocentric perspective, highlighting the ways this remake intersect with African heritage, centralizing African identity and promoting pride of their origins. This will serve as a foundation to explore the dual effects of this film remake in the next chapter.

Chapter Three

Deciphering the Controversy: Delving into the Dual Effects of *The Wiz*

Introduction

The sudden shift in representation of African Americans in films, as in the remake of all black cast *The Wiz*, cannot go unnoticed, as people will react differently to it, each with their own motives and arguments. Black individuals celebrate such initiatives, finding pride in a remake that depicts them and their culture in a positive light, highlighting its positive effects on the representation of African Americans and the cinematic industry. However, others view such remakes as a form of ‘Blackwashing’ the cinematic industry and promoting reverse racism, unveiling its potential negative effects. Some even view it as pointless and redundant. These dual effects is thoroughly explored in this chapter, relying both on the film characterization; as well as, the audiences’ reviews, aiming to shed light on the multifaceted nature of this film remake.

3.1. Changing Narrative, Inspiring Minds: The Positive Effects of *The Wiz* Remake

3.1.1. Challenging Traditional Stereotypes: Unveiling Truths and Embracing Diversity

Challenging traditional images of black individuals is an aim that was fulfilled thanks to this remake. It depicts African Americans as heroes who are capable of being at the center of the plotline, not just side characters, portraying them as trustworthy, self reliant and kind hearted individuals. Through these portrayals, *The Wiz* 1978 offers a nuanced representation to this previously marginalized community, showcasing a different side of African Americans, one that was totally opposite to the traditional portrayal in the media.

The first challenge to traditional stereotype is the one of the character of Dorothy. The latter challenges the usual racist image of the Mammy. Dorothy is portrayed as a strong, independent and determined black woman. She is in charge of her own destiny. Her

perseverance to find her way back home, embarking in a dangerous journey, challenges the stereotypical portrayal of African women as obedient mammies who followed the orders of their masters and were unwilling to change their harsh circumstances. Despite enduring harsh circumstances, Dorothy stands against the mammy archetype, which typically presents black women as passive and compliant women. Dorothy remains strong willed to reach her quest, reflecting the authentic traits of black women, which have been distorted by traditional media portrayals. Dorothy's determination is clear in her confrontation to Evillene, the Wicked Witch of the West, in her sweatshop. Despite Evillene's threats and intimidating look and reputation, Dorothy stands still, refusing to give in to fear and showing her determination to confront evil.

Additionally, Dorothy is depicted as a trustworthy leader who is able to guide her group of companions, including the Scarecrow, Tin Man, and Lion to reach their quests. This characteristic serves as another significant example of how this portrayal subverts from the usual representation of a black woman. Historically, black women were not depicted as leaders who could guide both men and women. Instead, they were often portrayed as dependent on their masters and lacking agency. However, in this remake, Dorothy is seen as “a redeemer and savior” (Williams 197). She saves the Scarecrow who was tied to a post in a cornfield by crows. She helps the Tin Man feel his heart, and then aids the Cowardly Lion in finding his lost courage simply by being there for them, helping them see what they had not been able to see for a long time. This idea can be seen through this scene:

Scarecrow: Now I'll never get my brain!

Tin Man: Nor my heart.

Lion: Or my courage

Dorothy: But you don't need them now because you've had them all along. Scarecrow, you're the one who figured out how to find the yellow brick road and how to destroy

Evillene, and every smart move we've made, didn't you? Lion, you wouldn't even give up when Evillene strung you up by your tail. And, Tin Man, you have more heart than anyone I've ever known. (*The Wiz* 1:56:51-57:46)

Moreover, Dorothy's physical appearance in *The Wiz* is another prominent example of challenging stereotypical representations of African women. Dorothy is portrayed as slender, beautiful, and radiant, which contrasts with the typical depiction of mammy as an ugly, overweight woman. By depicting her with an afro hairstyle and a simple elegant dress, it shows people that the way black women have been portrayed in the media was a false representation. It emphasizes that black women are beautiful in their own skin.

Overall, Dorothy's portrayal in *The Wiz* offers an empowering depiction of a black female protagonist, countering the limitations and stereotypes associated with the mammy stereotype. She is an embodiment of independence, empathy and resilience, reshaping audiences' perception of black women.

The Tin Man character in *The Wiz* offers a stark contrast to the brutal black buck stereotype. This latter presents black men as inherently violent and aggressive. In contrast, the Tin Man is depicted as gentle and sympathetic. His quest to find a heart is a poignant proof of his appreciation of feelings. Feeling, "understood not as a neutral categorization of emotions affected to varying degrees by pleasure or pain, but as a way through which the world reveals itself to the one who feels" (Curry 72), is indispensable for the Tin Man. He embarks in a journey to find a heart to feel and share his feelings with the world. The Tin Man tells us about feelings in his song entitled "What Would I Do if I Could Feel?", What would I do if I could reach inside of me/ And to know how it feels to say I like what I see? / Then I'd be more than glad to share all that I have inside of here (Russell 45:19-45). So through the song's lyrics, the Tin Man conveys his longing to experience emotions and share them with the world. This

sympathetic sentimental perspective is not often attributed to black men. Tin Man's desire for emotional connection and empathy challenges the notion of black men as inherently violent or aggressive. In the course of events, the Tin Man reveals vulnerability, further challenging the stereotype of emotionally stoic black men.

In addition, the Tin Man virtue seems so natural and innate, showcasing the genuine nature of black men in contrast to the distorted image often portrayed in traditional movies. His virtuous nature seems so natural that it is as if it was always there, waiting to be recognized, rather than being explicitly highlighted or revealed through deliberate characterization (Curry 72). Moreover, his presence is non-threatening unlike the menacing portrayal of black men in the brutal black buck stereotype. He does not pose a hazard and instead he is friendly, loyal and supportive of his friends. Even without a flesh-and-blood heart, he shows care and affection for his friends by saving them on occasions like when his tears manage to awaken Dorothy, Toto and the Lion when they are caught in the Poppy Girls trap. Therefore, this portrayal implies that the Tin-Man's virtue, and by extension African Americans', of feeling and embracing others is not something he needs to discover or cultivate but rather something he inherently possesses.

The scarecrow is another challenging character found in *The Wiz*. It questions the old image of the black man as a coon. If a black man is not portrayed as violent and brutal, he would be considered a coon, dim witted or foolish. However, the scarecrow character deviate from this typical portrayal by depicting an African American as intelligent, witty and capable of engaging in meaningful conversations. Despite being trapped on a pole in a cornfield in the middle of a torn by crows, his thirst of knowledge is strong. The crows insist on keeping him up, claiming it is for his safety. "The crow's message is just as clear as it is disturbing: because of what you are, there are cer-tain things you cannot do, and instead of trying and failing,

you're better off accepting things as they are” (Curry 70). This mindset is imposed on the scarecrow by forcing him to recite the crow commandment, which read: “Thou shalt honor all crows, (2) Thou shalt stop reading all bits of paper and literature, (3) Thou shalt never get down from this here pole” (30:56-31:11). This mirrors how African Americans were compelled to disregard their intellectual abilities, making them believe they are foolish and stupid by nature. However, the scarecrow ability to break free from this mindset, following a dangerous path to achieve knowledge, challenges the coon stereotype, which reduces black men to nothing more than watermelon thieves.

Moreover, the coon stereotype frequently portrays African American characters as lacking independence, relying on others for guidance or direction. However, the Scarecrow demonstrates autonomy throughout the story, participating in decision-making and providing valuable guidance to his friends. Through his journey with Dorothy, he proved to be a reliable companion. For instance, he warned the Tin Man of the deadly Poppies and subtly suggested to Dorothy to pull the fire alarm, activating the sprinklers. As a result, Evillene, being allergic to water, melted and died. Also, what highlights his innate intelligence is the fact that he was the one who discovered the Yellow Brick Road, not Dorothy (Curry 71). Overall, the Scarecrow's character serves as proof of black men's intelligence and their worthiness of education and knowledge.

Another no less important challenge of common racist stereotype is the one of how the African American family is portrayed. Structural stereotypes in US movies and media often present the African American families as torn apart families with no love and affection among its members. This representation, which has been promoted throughout much of history, is detrimental to the true establishment of black family. Family, for African Americans, holds great significance as it is hereditary to be faithful to one's own family. However, due to

multiple cinematic representations, this image was distorted, perpetuating harmful stereotype. *The Wiz* 1978 defies these stereotypes by depicting a black family where love, harmony and affection are displayed. Its opening scene challenges these stereotypes. Instead of showcasing a dysfunctional or impoverished family, the scene exudes warmth and support, highlighting parents who deeply care for their children. It portrays an authentic family where members genuinely care for and support one another, promoting positive representation.

At the outset of the remake, viewers are surprised by a bold positive black image: “world where Black women are married, Black men live to be grandfathers, Black people with children are actually called par- ents, and three generations of a Black family are present in one room the youngest of which are rocking dashikis and Afros” (Curry 65). This scene is powerful as it defies all expectations. Indeed, Black families can exude love, joy, and unity. This film remake shows a very different reality to the audience. Instead of reinforcing stereotypes of Black poverty and suffering, which were prevalent in the Blaxploitation era, *The Wiz* presents a distinct reality, one where “kinship nourished among multiple generations of a well to do Black family” (Curry 65). This black ambiance is accompanied with a song that underscores the harmony and affection within a Black family: “The Feeling that We Have.” This song, sung and performed by Theresa Merritt (Auntie Em), vocalizes the pure emotions of an African American parent. Its lyrics emphasize the pure affection and serious commitment between family members, voicing strength and spontaneity often found in black families. The lines “Put your arms around me child/.../ Then you'll know I love you now /As I loved you then” (Merritt 4:39-58) reassure the profound love black parents have for their children, contradicting the stereotypical portrayal of neglectful, violent Black parents. Furthermore, the overall ambiance of the scene implies a sense of unity, affection, and contentment felt by all members across different generations.

3.1.2. Expanding Horizons: Advancing Diversity in the Film Industry

Since the early days of the film industry, black individuals with acting talent have struggled to find a place in this predominantly white domain. They are often relegated to offensive roles, perpetuating harmful stereotypes, or excluded altogether and sometimes replaced by blackface. This practice describes white performers using burnt cork or shoe polish to darken their faces in order to portray black characters in films. These performers used to assume the identities of others, imitating their appearance, accents, and gestures. Not only did this perpetuate racist stereotypes, but it also denied black individuals the opportunity to showcase their talent and affirm their existence. For instance, *The Birth of a Nation* is described as “the product of minstrelsy” (A. Smith 37). Most black characters in the film are portrayed by white actors in blackface. However, it would be more accurate to cast black actors, considering the events and historical period depicted in the film.

The Wiz 1978 can be seen as a step towards diversifying the film industry by highlighting the talents of black actors who can replace white actors and preserve the beauty of a work. Therefore, by “casting more Black actors, Hollywood assumes that they are balancing the inequality they created” (A. Smith 3). So it is preferable to give African Americans the opportunity to be at the center of the film industry. Changing a character from white to black contributes to diversifying the cast of films and offers a nuanced representation for black individuals on screen (A. Smith 3). By incorporating more People of Color into casts, this practice helps create characters that Black individuals can empathize with (A. Smith 3). So, by casting African Americans, *The Wiz* aimed to give black individuals more acting opportunities in an industry that “formerly excluded them completely” (A. Smith 3).

The inclusion of black actors in films should not be perceived as racist or threatening. Rather, it should be viewed as their fundamental right as Americans to participate in any

domain they choose. Encouraging diversity in the film industry mirrors society, as it encompasses not only white individuals but also African Americans, who constitute a significant proportion of it. Additionally, diversity enriches storytelling by providing various perspectives and experiences. For instance, *The Wiz* (1978), with its African American aesthetic in songs and costumes, offers a fresh take on the classic.

3.1.3. Challenging Eurocentric Paradigms: A Call to Challenge Traditional Views

Throughout history, many Americans, both white and black, have accepted European norms and ideals of life as unquestionable realities. The concepts of goodness, superiority, and inferiority have often been accepted as unquestionable truths without room for debate or challenge. Despite its evident bias against people of African descent, it was promoted as the ultimate truth, claiming to accurately assign each individual to their rightful position based on their perceived worthiness. African Americans, for instance, have been burdened by these notions, internalizing the belief that they have no history worth teaching and no civilization to take pride in. As Hugh Trevor Roper claims, “there is no [black history] or very little: there is only the history of the Europeans in Africa. The rest is largely darkness... And darkness is not a subject for history” (qtd. in Chukwuokolo 29). This quote starkly illustrates the prevailing attitude towards black people and their history, denying even the acknowledgment of their historical existence. This denial has left two significant legacies on Africa: the denial of African identity and the imposition of Western thought and cultural perspectives on Africans (Chukwuokolo 29). This stance was adopted by so many people, perceiving blacks as inferior and unable to achieve without relying on white influence. David Hume encapsulated the prevailing Eurocentric attitude of much of history by describing Negroes in a demeaning manner: “I am apt to suspect the Negroes to be naturally inferior to the whites. There scarcely ever was a civilized nation of that complexion, nor even any individual eminent... no arts”

(qtd.in Chukwuokolo 29-30). However, this notion needed to be challenged, as black people are intelligent, worthy, and capable of independence. They have demonstrated their ability to create remarkable works on their own, proving their self-sufficiency. This was exemplified by the production of *The Wiz* 1978, featuring an entire black cast of remarkable actors who showcased their talent, demonstrating to people of all backgrounds that they can create masterpieces on their own terms, promote their unique culture, and exhibit strong talent. By creating a successful adaptation of *The Wizard of Oz* with black actors in all the lead roles, *The Wiz* asserts the capability of black performers, opposing the Eurocentric ideas and recentering their blackness in a film industry and in the world. From the music that celebrates African Americans to the dances that symbolize their joy, and even to the depth of the characters in the film, *The Wiz* serves as a powerful tool to oppose Eurocentric ideas. With its mosaic of black talents, this film remake proved that African Americans can infuse originality into any work, thus contradicting the belief that in Africa, originality can never exist (Rangers qtd.in Chukwuokolo 31).

Furthermore, *The Wiz* not only showcases the originality and capability of black people but also challenges Eurocentric standards of beauty. This latter is the belief that the ideal standard of feminine beauty should conform to European traits, including skin colour, facials, hair textures, eye colour and physique. As a result, women with fair skin, long blond hair, Nordic facial features are perceived as the “model of what is beautiful for all groups” (Jackson-Lowman 156). These imposed parameters reinforce the perception of ‘white’ as good, beautiful, and attractive, while labeling ‘black’ as evil and hideous (Jackson-Lowman 158). However, *The Wiz* (1978) boldly confronted these notions by casting Diana Ross as Dorothy, portraying a black woman whose beauty shines through her dark eyes, afro hair, and black skin. Her graceful dance movements and expressive facial features exude femininity and

elegance, challenging the notion that beauty is confined to a specific skin color. This portrayal emphasizes that beauty transcends racial boundaries, affirming that black individuals are beautiful in their own skin.

3.1.4. Reshaping perception: Shifting Perspectives for Inclusive Futures

The Wiz 1978 attempts to reshape people's perception of African Americans, by depicting them as empathetic, intelligent, independent, and perseverant. The Tin Man exemplifies empathy, the Scarecrow intelligence, and Dorothy independence and perseverance. These traits were seldom attributed to black individuals, who were often portrayed as unempathetic, foolish, and subservient. Interestingly, the characters initially believe these stereotypes about themselves. For instance, the Scarecrow believes he lacks intelligence, but his decisions prove otherwise. Similarly, the Tin Man believes he lacks a heart, despite demonstrating profound empathy and care. Initially seen as powerless and unable to be independent, Dorothy's journey showcases her perseverance and leadership, contradicting these assumptions. The characters' epiphany of their true inherent potentials can be seen as an attempt to reshape perception and provide authentic representation of this community. And it proves to have some impact on how African individuals saw themselves as finally they found some pride in blackness. This review proves this idea:

I watched it for the first time when I was 12, and then countless times after that until present day. I remember how cool I felt when I would bond with other Black kids about a movie it seemed all of our parents made us watch. How enamored I was by the star-studded cast of Black entertainment greats like Michael Jackson, Diana Ross, Richard Pryor and Lena Horne. How important it was to see people like me in what I affectionately called “The Black Wizard of Oz”. (“The Wiz Turns 40”)

This review can be perceived as a proof to the impact of this remake on people's perception of themselves, which is possible according to Cultivation theory that stresses the heavy influence of movies, watched regularly, on the way people view themselves. In this review the words "countless times" proves the repetitiveness of watching the movie. This led the viewer to have some sense of pride in their own identity. Thus, *The Wiz* can be seen as a step towards changing how Black people perceive themselves. It focuses on offering an alternative lens to view African Americans as authentically as possible. Additionally, Amber Ruffin, an African American writer, comedian, and actress, says that during her upbringing, she did not find role models who looked like her. She states that she had never seen Black female performances that were not a stereotype. Fortunately, there were two movies on regular rotation in her home, one of which was "The Wiz" (Ruffin qtd. in Riley par.1). Ruffin finds solace and pride in this remake, as she was finally able to find a role model that resembled her. Regarding the film, Ruffin says, "[it was] just so specific and weird that it was like an invitation to be yourself. So I had to squeeze all of the belonging out of this movie and [it] lasted me well beyond childhood." She admits that *The Wiz* had a significant influence in shaping who she is as a comedian (Ruffin qtd. in Riley par.2). Analogously, actor, producer, and director Schele Williams was a young girl when she saw *The Wiz*. She says that it was her introduction to the industry. As a Black person, she finds strength in seeing great shows with "Black folks" (Williams qtd. in Tangcay par.2). She adds, "It opened up a world of possibility. I listened to that cast album and soundtrack so many times, I watched the movie, and it was part of the culture for me" (Williams qtd. in Tangcay par.2). Thus, this film remake instills pride in black youths for generations to come. It has "created and recreated generations of children reared on the promises of triumph, the Soulz of Motown, and the belief in the messages of Black actors that we will emerge within "A Brand New Day"" (Curry 64). The evidence of this influence

is that even years later, people still discuss it, and no school year is complete without a performance of *The Wiz*, featuring Black students in leading roles.

3.2. Contention Unveiled: the Critique against *The Wiz*

3.2.1. The Wiz and the Racism Promotion Claim

The idea of creating films with a central focus on African culture, also known as Afrocentrism in films, to celebrate its achievements has sparked polarizing debates. Some detractors view this kind of Afrocentric produced movies as displaying racism and extremism. While intentions to honor African heritage may be noble, critics believe it to be racist, resulting in marginalizing other cultures. When Afrocentrists prioritize a specific ethnicity over the others in their theories, they reinforce racial hierarchies, contradicting their goal to ensure equality of African cultures (Schmitz 44). *The Wiz*, for instance, can be seen as a means to empower African heritage. However, the overemphasis on African American ethnicity perpetuates the very biases Africentrists aim to combat. Individuals who focus solely on centralizing Black identity and culture while excluding whites' may inadvertently perpetuate racism in some form. This contradicts the idea that Black people, who have historically faced oppression and racism, cannot themselves be racists. Schmitz asserts that he does not accept "the premise that blacks cannot be racists because they have not enough power to oppress other groups" (43). This essentially implies that Black individuals can promote racism, and producing films exclusively featuring Black casts, utilizing Black vernacular, designing costumes with Black aesthetics, and singing soul music could indeed be considered racist. Additionally, Schmitz argued that Afrocentrists' emphasis on race as a determinant of individual identity aligns with The Racist Romantic ideology (44). He admits the importance of memory in shaping one's identity but relying solely on the shared history of a certain race in

the formation of individuals' personal identity is “a figment of Romantic ideology” (Schmitz 44). He adds:

Do only blacks have the right to be proud of the achievements of other blacks; can Germans and only Germans understand and appreciate Beethoven's music; may only Dubliners read Ulysses? These tenets strike me as ludicrous and, yes, racist, yet they seem to underlie Afrocentrist ideas. When we accept the theory that our group defines our identity and our truth, there is hardly a way of avoiding a new tribalism in which every dialogue between members of different groups is impossible. (Schmitz 44)

Additionally, critics argue that the excessive promotion of Africanness in films does not benefit African Americans. Redefining cultural identity may aid in breaking away from Eurocentrism, but merely wearing African attire, jewelry, or adopting African names does not equate to true emancipation. These superficial cultural expressions lack a direct connection to genuine liberation (Graham par.2). Moreover, critics of Afrocentrism argue that while its main aim was to counter Eurocentrism by recentering African history, previously excluded by Eurocentrists, it often mirrors Eurocentric approaches. Therefore, in their attempts to combat Eurocentrism, Afrocentric theorists replicate some of the biases inherent in Eurocentrism (“Afrocentricity- Afrocentricity and its critics” par.5). For instance, in the 1978 film *The Wiz*, there was a significant emphasis on African heritage while neglecting and excluding other heritages. This exclusion, in fact, resembles that found in Eurocentric theories. Thus, some scholars contend that Afrocentricity merely seeks to replace “one geopolitical hegemonic centre, Europe, with another hegemonic one, Africa” (“Afrocentricity- Afrocentricity and its critics” par.5). Therefore, the Afrocentrists' attempt to centralize African American culture in films, as exemplified in *The Wiz* (1978), can be viewed as a form of reverse Eurocentrism, essentially implying racism in reverse. By replicating the same beloved story with popular

characters, the makers of *The Wiz* thought they could leverage this existing fame to promote their African-centered thoughts and beliefs. However, this proved challenging as audiences struggled to accept their favorite characters being presented differently, with the remake proving to be a commercial failure.

3.2.2. *Black Washing the Cinematic Industry*

Black washing, the practice of replacing white actors with black ones, is sometimes seen as just as discriminatory as white washing (A. Smith 58). If casting white actors in black characters in films contributes to the dehumanization of black people, then doing the opposite will have the same effect. Remaking a story with characters that are renowned for being portrayed by white people and replacing them entirely with black people serves as black washing the film industry. The excuse of expanding the film industry's diversity by providing individuals of color with greater opportunities is inapplicable to *The Wiz* 1978 version, as the cast was exclusively comprised of black people. Why is there not a single white actor if their goal is to diversify? They together comprise American society. Thus, by excluding White actors, *The Wiz* is an example of promoting Black washing. This will result in one race being given preference over another, a practice that will come to be known as black privilege. Since any advantages and privileges that people acquire just because of their racial background are referred to as racial privilege. Diana Ross exemplifies this privilege; she was 34 years old when she was cast as Dorothy. Dorothy is a 13-year-old little girl in both the novel and the original motion picture. It was altered on purpose to somewhat accommodate Diana Ross. Not only Diana Ross enjoyed this privilege, other characters did too. Additionally, black privilege is further demonstrated by the music, not just by the film with an all-black cast. Every song in the film was written and performed by black musicians. If it is discriminatory for white people to celebrate their whiteness and take pride in their light skin, colored eyes, and attractive

physique, why *The Wiz* promoting African beauty and culture is not perceived the same? This highlights the double standards of black individuals, who are using history as an excuse to justify reverse racism (Domalick qtd. in Blake sec.1).

Moreover, this remake can be perceived as an attempt to ‘woke’ people in what becomes to be known as wokeism in films. In the film industry, it describes a narrativeist's deliberate effort to address and draw attention to social and political issues (Lumiscrite sec.1). Woke is slang from some variants of African American Vernacular English (AAVE). Awake is often rendered as woke, as in, “I was sleeping, but now I'm woke” (Merriam Webster). While most people believe wokeness to be beneficial to the film industry promoting diversity and authentic representation, critics argue that it is not out of negative aspects that should be addressed. *The Wiz* 1978 serves as evidence that woke films did not originate in 2014 as often promoted; rather, they can be traced back to the 1970s. The film clearly reflects a woke perspective, seeking to educate audiences, especially African Americans. However, it also absorbed the negative aspects of this genre; such as forced representation, which is one of the negative aspects of this phenomenon (Lumiscrite sec.3). The excessive efforts to push diversity and inclusivity, as seen in the all-black cast of *The Wiz*, may be negatively perceived, as it detracts from the work's entertaining core. *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* 1900 “was written solely to pleasure children of today,” Baum said, quoting from the introduction to the book. This push to add wokeness to the film greatly threatened its integrity. Solomon, an American writer, demonstrates discontent, “It's the total opposite. It's not ‘woke.’ It's ‘sleeping.’” he adds, “The stories that the woke people want to tell are for only one point of view and one perspective... [They] don't want our virtues. They don't want our vision of what's right and wrong” (qtd. in Toto 4). Additionally, critics argue that the motive of writing should be about crafting a great story, as Konzelma, an American writer and producer, states, “The

goal should be to tell a good story or great story. You can't put other restrictions on that. You can't start with a theme of diversity and create great work,” (qtd. in Toto 5).

3.2.3. Tarnishing Classics

The industry's overreliance on remakes stifles innovation and stunts the growth of original storytelling. Some argue that filmmakers ought to put more effort into creating original concepts instead of depending just on nostalgic productions (Murphy sec.1). Furthermore, remakes are proved to be worse in quality and do worse in terms of box office (Ginsburgh et.al 6). *The Wiz* 1978 considered to be of lesser quality compared to the original 1939 film adaptation, *The Wizard of Oz*. Additionally, *The Wiz* faced challenges at the box office. Consequently, *The Wiz* proved to be a commercial failure, with the \$24 million production only earning \$13.6 million at the box office (Blex Media). The core reason for the failure of the remake compared to the original *Wizard of Oz* lies in Sidney Lumet's significant alterations to the source material. By casting an all-black ensemble and shifting the storyline from a young girl's journey to that of a 24-year-old kindergarten teacher, Lumet deviated too far from the familiar narrative, causing it to become unrecognizable to audiences faithful to the original. Flemish scriptwriter Lories comments on this: “At a certain moment, the remake can evolve or differ so much from the original that you start asking yourself: “Why did I ever acquire the expensive remake rights to the original if the original creators would not even recognize it as a remake of their film?”” (qtd.in Cuelenaere 9). This will eventually result in tarnishing classics. Although the experts did not really advocate for the remake to stay faithful to the original because of ‘admiration’ or ‘respect’ for it, many of them contended that the fundamental idea of the original should be kept since a script's baseline assures the project's commercial viability (Cuelenaere 9). By failing to do this, *The Wiz* 1978 dilutes the original charm of the original work of art, disappointing audience's expectations.

Moreover, critics argue that remakes of movies are a shortcut to own money. Instead of crafting new story, with a fear that this story might not resonate or be embraced by the audience, they favour remaking a beloved story with its existing audience. Remakes are more likely to be made because of economical intentions as they are likely to appear as profit-oriented copies of some valuable original productions (Kelleter and Look 127). *The Wiz* makers attempt to use the original fame of the 1935 *The Wizard of Oz* to promote their beliefs. However, this attempt destined for failure as the original film audience could not accept their loved classic to be distorted by the remake. Casting a 34-year-old woman, Diana Ross, to portray the role of a little girl failed to capture the essence of the original, since the latter was centered around innocence. New York Times critic Vincent Canby writes: “The Wiz is a mess due to the misguided efforts to turn the energetic, likeably dopey stage musical into what might pass for a ghetto fairy tale,” he adds: “Dorothy’s unawakened sexual impulses (which is what I take the film to be about) have nothing at all to do with what happens in the movie” (Canby 13). Not only canny found difficulties digesting this alteration, *The Time’s* critic John Skow shows an analogous perspective, “This is awkward, because if the fantasy is to succeed, Dorothy must be childlike enough to be terrified of witches and wizards, and to talk trustingly with a scarecrow, a lion and a tin man” (qtd.in Rothman par.4). Additionally, mainstream critics believed *The Wiz* to be a failed attempt to produce a valuable production, proving its inferiority intrusion on the original film (qtd.in Harris sec.2). This review stresses the idea that adaptations, therefore *The Wiz*, can never be as original as source texts (Leitch 162). This view was also shared by the experts: Impens, for example, describes the film remake as “legal theft”, while Dutch director Beumer typifies it as “creatively poor”. Words like ‘unfortunate’, ‘weird’, ‘superfluous’, and ‘sad’ were also used to describe it (qtd.in Cuelenaere 10). *The Wiz* falls into this category, stressing the belief that remakes are inherently redundant or pointless (Edwards-

Behi 200). This description is attributed to remakes because, as many claim, they add no value to cinematic history (Edwards-Behi 201).

Conclusion

While in its efforts to empower one community, a film remake may inadvertently create discrimination in other form. This chapter provided an in depth examination of the dual effects of the film remake *The Wiz* 1978, highlighting its positive effects in challenging traditional stereotypes while also exploring its potential negative influences in promoting reverse racism.

General Conclusion

Films can be seen as a mirror of society, reflecting social, cultural, and political values. They capture the prevailing issues of their time, offering a reliable source for understanding the dynamics of that period. However, films can also be weaponized to control public thought, centering certain communities while ostracizing others. In the American film industry, for instance, it is indisputable that African Americans have been unfairly portrayed. Their culture, identity, and image have often been distorted to serve certain agendas. From depicting them as inferior beings to reducing them to animal-like caricatures, filmmakers have historically suppressed the black identity and talent. These portrayals often lack depth and authenticity, reducing complex individuals to one-dimensional characters defined by their race rather than their humanity. Such representations have been rightly criticized for reinforcing systemic racism and maintaining harmful stereotypes rather than accurately reflecting the diversity and richness of African American experiences. As a reaction, black creatives have worked diligently to reclaim and recenter their culture and true identity by producing films that authentically reflect their experiences. *The Wiz* 1978, for example, stands as a testament to this effort.

The Wiz, a 1978 film remake of the classic tale *The Wizard of Oz*, offers a vibrant and soulful reimagining of the story, set in the setting of an urban, fantastical New York City. Directed by Sidney Lumet and featuring an all-African American cast, including Diana Ross as Dorothy and Michael Jackson as the Scarecrow, the film combines dazzling visuals, innovative dance numbers, and a memorable soundtrack. All together contribute in the centralization of African Americans' identity

The Wiz 1978 has proved to reflect an Afrocentric ideology. With its all-black cast, African-inspired costumes, and soulful music, this remake offers a fresh representation of

African Americans, placing their culture at the forefront and fostering African pride. It demonstrates that films are more than arbitrary works of art; they are artistic palettes where filmmakers blend real experiences to create unique plotlines that can touch people's hearts and souls. Despite being pure fiction, this remake exhibits a strong connection to reality, mirroring real-life experiences. Hence, it is essential to approach such films with a critical eye, delving into their layers of meaning to uncover the purpose behind their creation.

Inevitably, the film has soon become the center of many debates among scholars and critics. It was approached from a myriad of perspectives depending on the nature of arguments each part is advancing. Some believe that *The Wiz* (1978) has proved to have a tremendous impact on challenging stereotypical portrayals of black people. Through this remake, black individuals were depicted in a more authentic manner, showcasing beauty, independence, intelligence, and empathy. This contributes to reshaping people's perceptions of this community by opposing traditional Eurocentric ideas. However, not everyone agrees, as some strongly believe that such remakes do more harm than good. From promoting a new form of racism to tarnishing beloved classics, this remake reveals a new facet of such productions.

In conclusion, it is imperative to underscore the necessity of acknowledging *The Wiz* contributions in paving the way for more radical remakes. For example, *The Little Mermaid* (2023) no longer features a sea creature with a ginger face and red hair; instead, she is portrayed as black. This trend becomes even more extreme with adaptations like *Snow White*, which is scheduled to be released in 2025. In this remake, the character is reimagined as a black woman while retaining the original title. These transformations not only alter the essence of beloved classics but also diminish the significance of color distinctions, as black no longer solely represents a color, and neither does white. A surprising example is Juliet, the renowned character, portrayed as black, featuring Francesca Amewudah-Rivers in the

upcoming stage adaptation of the famous *Romeo and Juliet*. Thus, this research can be viewed as an introduction to a deeper exploration of the contrasting dynamics of Afrocentric remakes of cherished classics.

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