THESIS ABSTRACT

Stereotypical Depictions of African Americans on American Film

As far as the history of American “moving images” reaches, there have always been African American characters on screen. However, it was already in one of the earliest movies, D.W. Griffith's *The Birth of a Nation*, that they were portrayed as stereotypical types. Mostly played by white actors with their faces painted black, they were absolutely one-sided and evoking laughter, mockery and even disgust. It is, indeed, Griffith who is until today seen as the originator of stereotypical types on film. All the “basic” stereotypes appeared in his film: the “Mammy”, the “Coon”, or the “Tragic Mulatta” and marked the beginning of such portrayals of African Americans in movies.

In the history of Hollywood studios production, the stereotypes were used over and over, some were reinvented and even new ones emerged. This proved to be an impulse to African American filmmakers who reacted by producing their own film projects, striving to create heroes of their own, heroes that they could look up to in movie theaters. Blaxploitation was the genre that introduced such characters. The wave of African American-produced films continued in the early 1990s. After the enormous box office success of John Singleton's *Boyz N the Hood*, moviegoers craved stories from American “ghettos” and therefore an entire new genre of “ghettocentric” films appeared, focusing on picturing gang violence in urban areas. For some, the films were too violent and were responsible for provoking riots at screenings; for others, they provided an insider look into a territory that was not accessible to a regular audience member. Nevertheless, both Blaxploitation and “ghetto” narratives – despite being made by African Americans – started discussions about the accuracy of representation. While African Americans were dissatisfied with their image in “white Hollywood-made” movies, they stood behind films that showed them, in a simplified way, as gangsters and drug dealers.

When analyzing the stereotypical depictions of African Americans on American film, numerous factors have to be evaluated. Most of the films prove to be tightly connected to the historical period
in which they were made. Also, reading of characters as stereotypical varies immensely. As in Precious, a 2009 film by Lee Daniels: to some, stealing a bucket of fried chicken can be seen as “typical” for African Americans and yet to others, it is only a creative vehicle that helps to draw a full image of the character, regardless of her race. Stereotypes are an inseparable part of our consciousness and therefore they easily infiltrate any creative work. Nevertheless, the African American character types are some of the most overused ones in all forms of art, and even in marketing and other business-related fields. The reading, the acceptance and the struggle against such stereotypes are the main foci of this thesis. Analyzing both Hollywood and African American-made films, film reviews, professional and scholarly articles and public opinions serves as the vehicle for the research.