

## **CHAPTER I**

### **INTRODUCTION**

#### **1.1 Background of the Study**

According to a recent survey held by Monmouth University in 2020, the data suggests that 65 percent of the public affirms how racial and ethnic discrimination is a significant concern in the United States (Scott 2020). This claim also reflects the 45th President of the United States' taken measures, Donald Trump, during his racist remarks regarding the Coronavirus outbreak towards Asian Americans and his poor handling of Black Lives Matter (BLM) movements (Ibid.). These circumstances have led many racial and ethnic minority groups to be unsatisfied and have caused significant protests worldwide. The recurring of BLM movements is marked by the death of an African American man, George Floyd, under the hand of Minneapolis' white police officer on May 25, 2020, and subsequently transformed to the largest protests in the United States and world history (Buchanan, Bui and Patel 2020). Such fact signals how racial oppression and discrimination worldwide must be promptly addressed and how society should amend the attitudes toward racial subdivision. BLM movements initially emerged in 2013, and its primary objective is to fight against systemic racism and structural violence frequently encountered by African Americans (Thomas and Zuckerman 2018).

The perpetual violence and oppression faced daily by African Americans raise numerous questions about its actual origin. As Plant and Peruche (2005) claimed, police officers regularly suspect black males as the potential culprit of crimes due to African American's general negative depictions in the media (Chaney and Robertson 2013). Therefore, media portrayals of African Americans can be inferred as the primary cornerstone for many people to come to know African American's cultures and identities without having to recognize the reality of truth (Bell and Harris 2017). Since white audiences who barely experience genuine intercultural friendships with African American community members rely heavily on media portrayals (Jackson and Balaji 2015). These one-dimensional racial representations have resulted in many African Americans likely being placed in a harmful spot, at which point they receive destructive acts of violence.

The representations of African Americans, in general, have been shaped from the white viewpoints within all these past years. Black history reveals how white people reckon their privilege and superiority over people of color for having a whiter and clearer skin (Orbe and Harris 2015). Given this standpoint, the white maintains their dominance by employing such negatives and inferior portrayals of African Americans on-screen. These depictions further develop too many African American stereotypes, which have been remarkably detrimental to how African American communities operate, particularly among the existing crucial African Americans' issues in the U.S.

However, the negative images surrounding African American's representation in the media slowly fade after Blaxploitation films' emergence in the early 70s. *Blaxploitation* offers the existing Black model alternatives, which usually shifts the central film's theme to Black people's perspectives on American culture than its white counterparts, while also being directed, starred, and targeted to Black people (Diawara 1993). This circumstance allowed numerous representations of Black people as the central focus up to this day. Unfortunately, *Blaxploitation* is still very influential yet short-lived and succeeds in attracting major Hollywood studios. Following Tommy L. Lott's argument in *A No-Theory Theory of Contemporary Black Cinema*, he claims that *Blaxploitation* fails to properly represent Black aesthetics due to the Hollywood formulaic role reversal and Black stereotypes (Lott 1991). This happened due to the rising number of Black audience to see their racial representation on-screen, which is used by Hollywood industry to raise the profits during financial crises (Lott 1991).

This circumstance leads Tommy L. Lott to propose a new concept of contemporary Black cinema, which he called *A No-theory Theory of Contemporary Black Cinema* (Lott 1991). In his article, he mentions the emergence of plurality in the aesthetics of Black cinema. This emergence refers to the rising number of Black cinemas produced by non-Blacks. Even though he is skeptical of the damaging portrayals of Black in *Blaxploitation* films that are mostly produced by the Hollywood industry, he celebrates the rising variety of Black aesthetics from various backgrounds. Therefore, inspired by the concept of *Third Cinema*, Lott suggests a new notion of Black cinema called *A no-theory Theory* that is far from

Black cinema biological criteria. He offers his contemporary Black cinema theory that emphasizes the film's political orientation within a hegemonic structure consistent with Black people's struggle to obtain racial equality.

*Project Power* (2020) is one of Netflix's original superhero films. The film is directed by Ariel Schulman and Henry Joost and is released on August 14, 2020 (Internet Movie Database (IMDb) 2020). *Project Power* (2020) is also starred by several acclaimed names such as Jamie Foxx (Art), Joseph Gordon-Levitt (Frank), and Dominique Fishback (Robin). According to IMDb, this film is rated 6/10 from 73.895 audience scores and won two awards in the Visual Effects Society Awards (2021) (Ibid.). The film spotlights the conflicts between an African American family, Art and his daughter (Tracy), with one group of scientists in the United States named Teleios or predominantly white Americans. The plot revolves around Art's journey, whose daughter has been taken away by Teleios unlawfully. Teleios is intrigued by the superpowers inhabited in Tracy's body. Thus, without the government's knowledge, they create and distribute millions of superpower pills across the U.S., which powers are taken from Tracy's. The film *Project Power* (2020) is worth to be discussed due to the film's embedded racial discourse. The film acts as a counter-narrative against the common negative portrayals of African Americans in the media since the film's primary focus is on African American struggle from the surface level. Interestingly, the representation of 'blackness' in *Project Power* (2020) is constructed through the lens of white men, namely the directors (Henry Joost and Ariel Schulman) and the writer (Mattson Tomlin).

As time passes, the representation of Black has slowly begun to shift into a more positive light. As a subscription-based online streaming service, Netflix is one of the popular pioneers to depict more of the underrepresented Black stories and experiences into the mainstream audience. In June 2020, Netflix also curated a list of movie titles belongs to the 'Black Lives Matter' Collections, such films and series as *When They See Us* (2019), *13th* (2016), *Luke Cage* (2016), and *Dear White People* (2017). This circumstance positions Netflix to be in tune with the current racial issue in the United States and attempt to change the general portrayals of Black. In February 2021, Netflix also releases a diversity and inclusion study of their productions. It is found that there is a significant growth between 2018 and 2019 about the underrepresented leads (Smith, et al. 2021).

The researcher has also found several studies with a similar issue of African American representation in film. One of them is conducted by a former student of the Faculty of Humanities, Moh. Arief Raditya Putra, with his undergraduate thesis entitled '*Blaxploitation in Peter Berg's Hancock (2008): An African American Criticism*' (Putra and Susetiyo 2014). This related study explores the leading Black character's dual portrayals that signal *Hancock's* harmony with Lott's *Third Cinema Blaxploitation attributes*. The negative representation of *Hancock* is elaborated further using Stuart Hall's *Grammar of Race*. The second related study is written by Ferdhi Anusa Heryanto entitled '*The Blaxploitation of 'Darius Kincaid' in "The Hitman's Bodyguard" (2017) Film*' (Heryanto 2020). Again, this related study covers the dual representation of the central Black character

contributing to *Third Cinema Blaxploitation*. However, this related study uses Greimas' narrative structure to discuss the film's theme in depth.

Based on several related studies above, the writer discovers that both of those studies above contribute to the definition of *A no-theory Theory of Black Cinema* proposed by Lott. The writer thus attempts to look further at the current portrayals of African Americans in Netflix's film *Project Power* (2020), following the general perspective of Tommy L. Lott's theory regarding the plurality of the contemporary Black Cinema. Furthermore, this study attempts to dissect the political orientation present in the film as shown in the dual portrayals of the lead Black hero character. In conducting this study, the researcher uses the qualitative method since the writer focuses more on the interpretive analysis of the film *Project Power* (2020). The researcher also uses narrative and non-narrative analysis. A. J. Greimas' narrative structure assists the breakdown of narrative structure from the film. In contrast, the non-narrative study is helped by the concept of *A no-theory Theory* by Tommy L. Lott (1991) and Stuart Hall's *Grammar of Race* (1995).

## **1.2 Statement of the Problems**

From the issue described above, the researcher formulated several problems that will be discussed in this research. The primary topics of this study are as follows:

1. How is the Blaxploitation narrated in *Project Power* (2020)?
2. What is the significance of African American representation in *Project Power* (2020) to the current African American issue in the United States?

### 1.3 Objectives of the Study

Based on the research questions above, the researcher identified several objectives of this study as follows:

1. To reveal the narration of Blaxploitation in *Project Power* (2020).
2. To reveal the significance of African American representation in *Project Power* (2020) to the current African American issue in the United States.

### 1.4 Significance of the Study

As this study is being conducted, the researcher expects this research to contribute to Racial and Ethnic studies, especially in African American studies and Film studies, since this research will be concentrated on the representation of African Americans in film. Moreover, the researcher also expects that this study will be helpful for those interested in researching African American issues and the representation of African Americans' image in the film. The researcher's primary purpose for this study is to offer a deeper insight into the dual portrayals of African American representation in film.

### 1.5 Scope and Limitation

The scope and limitation of this research are to examine the representation of African American main character, Art (Jamie Foxx), in *Project Power* (2020). Art representation in *Project Power* comprises the doubleness between the positive and negative images of African Americans. Therefore, this study revolves around

the portrayal of Art as the main Black hero in *Project Power* (2020) and several white characters.

### 1.6 Definition of Key Terms

This study will often use some terms in this study, and these key terms are as follows:

A No-theory Theory : Lott mentions his theory as *a no-theory theory* of Black cinema which concern about the aesthetic strategy to be used to challenge the Hollywood's master narrative and consistent with the fate of Black people to obtain racial equality (Lott 1991).

Blaxploitation : Blaxploitation is any Black-centered film that is directed and starred by Black people, which offers alternative Black images and aesthetics on the screen, constructing new narrative forms derived from Black literature and folklore and denouncing racism, sexism, and homophobia in American culture (Diawara 1993).

Narrative Structure : The narrative structure intends to introduce *recurrent* characteristics from a distinguishable



text and leads to the construction of narrative grammar (Greimas 1971).

Representation : Representations connect links between ideas and the language in our heads, and they refer to real objects, people, and events (Hall 1997).

Stereotypes : Stereotyping reduces people to superficial, essential characteristics, represented as fixed by Nature (Hall 1997).