

Diversifying the Space of Podcasting

Access, Identity, and Reflective Practices

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Chapter 16

Reflections of Diversity

Promoting Dialogue About Difference in the Movies as Mirrors Podcast

Benjamin Thevenin

In 2019, a former student of mine named Max Johnson and I developed a podcast called *Movies as Mirrors*, in which we invited guests to discuss a film that they felt reflected their experience as part of a marginalized community. The purpose of the podcast was to engage our guests in a dialogue about issues of representation in cinema (including race, class, gender, ethnicity, sexuality, ability, etc.) and to inspire our listeners to seek out, see, and celebrate movies that thoughtfully depict the experiences of communities that, historically, have not been adequately represented on screen. As two educated, cis-gendered, heterosexual, white men, Max and I also had a personal interest in creating the show: to listen to and learn from our guests who (unlike our own experiences) have had to actively search for stories, characters, and perspectives that mirror their own experiences.

We published 30 episodes of the podcast before the COVID-19 pandemic complicated production and forced us to step away from the project. During that relatively short span, the podcast hosted guests from a range of racial, ethnic, and cultural backgrounds (including Black, Latinx, Native American, Asian American, Pacific Islander, Middle Eastern, and guests of mixed racial heritage), gender and sexual identities (gay, lesbian, queer, and transgender), as well as other underrepresented groups including, but not limited to, immigrants, veterans, survivors of sexual violence, people with chronic illnesses, people who live with mental illness, and children. And as the series progressed, past guests would often return as “friends of the show” to co-host episodes and help me interview new guests with whom they shared some common experience or perspective.

Prior to each recording, the guest would select the movie for us to view and discuss. Among these selections were celebrated Hollywood movies

like *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner* (1967) and *Wonder Woman* (2017), smaller, independent films like *Smoke Signals* (1998) and *The Miseducation of Cameron Post* (2018), and even international cinema like *Once Were Warriors* (1994) and *A Fantastic Woman* (2017). Our conversational approach to discussing films took inspiration from other podcasts, including conversation-based, movie-focused podcasts like *The Big Picture* and *The Next Picture Show*, in which a few hosts examine specific films at length in relation to things like box office, genre, history, celebrity, awards, and so on. But even more significantly, *Movies as Mirrors* was inspired by other, less-pop-culture-obsessed podcasts, like *2 Dope Queens* and *Conversations with People Who Hate Me*, both of which aimed to use the format of audio-recorded conversations to bridge gaps in understanding and representation.

DISCUSSIONS OF DIFFERENCE

As the *Movies as Mirrors* podcast emerged from conversations in my undergraduate media arts classes, the objectives of the series were directly informed by the learning that my students and I were engaged in and the ideas we were exploring. Perhaps most notable is Grossberg's discussion of the ways in which media "matter" to audiences. Grossberg (1992) describes what he calls "mattering maps"—ways media audiences organize the things (including media, art, and culture) that they care about and are invested in. While other scholars might deride the attention that Grossberg gives to the affective investment of audiences in their favorite media, he finds that caring about popular culture can be potentially empowering, especially given the challenges facing contemporary society.

Such empowerment is increasingly important in a world in which pessimism has become common sense, in which people increasingly feel incapable of making a difference, and in which differences increasingly seem not to matter, not to make any difference themselves. Fandom is, at least potentially, the site of the optimism, invigoration and passion which are necessary conditions for any struggle to change the conditions of one's life. (p. 65)

The creation of *Movies as Mirrors* was inspired by Grossberg's argument that our appreciation and celebration of media can inspire and motivate us to make positive social change. Something as simple as conversations about movies among friends might be a means of effectively engaging with some of the challenges facing our world.

The podcast's premise—of guests discussing films that they feel represent their experience as part of a marginalized community—focuses specifically

on the potentially productive role that conversations about pop culture can have in navigating issues of difference. These conversations (and the rest of this chapter) are informed by traditions of feminist, postcolonial, and queer cultural theory that examine issues of representation in media. For example, the podcast's interest in identifying and discussing movies that depict marginalized communities is due to the fact that mainstream media has historically ignored these communities. "Representation in the fictional world signifies social existence; absence means symbolic annihilation," write Gerbner and Gross (1976, p. 182). This representation certainly includes the actors who appear on camera, but also the creators who are responsible for crafting these cinematic stories. It comes as no surprise that many of the films selected by our guests are written, directed, produced, or otherwise created by women, people of color, Indigenous and/or queer people, and our conversations about these films focus not just on the importance of seeing historically marginalized people on screen, but also behind the camera.

While the episodes often focused on films that featured positive representations, it was not uncommon for our conversations to acknowledge how these empowering stories contrasted with mainstream media's reliance on stereotypes. Dyer's (1984) discussion of stereotyping stresses that repeated, overgeneralized, static characterizations of a particular group of people are damaging not simply because of their inaccuracy, but because they function to perpetuate hierarchies within society. He writes:

in stereotyping, the dominant groups apply their norms to subordinated groups, find the latter wanting, hence inadequate, inferior, sick or grotesque and hence reinforcing the dominant groups' own sense of the legitimacy of their domination. (p. 356)

Thus, when guests of the podcast reflect on the negative impact of stereotypes in movies, they are not simply referring to the psychological effects of seeing oneself misrepresented on screen, but also to the ways in which these depictions justify the continued mistreatment (or outright oppression) of their community.

But rather than simply criticize the damaging representations that are all too common in mainstream media, the podcast attempts to shift the focus to the possibilities of finding meaning in stories that do something different. The program's attention to our guests' unique and diverse range of interpretations of their favorite movies is informed by cultural studies' acknowledgment of the "active audience." In Hall's (1973) discussion of the meaning-making process as one that includes the "encoding" and "decoding" of media messages, he argues that it is not uncommon for audiences' interpretations of media texts to vary from—and even run counter to—the creators' intentions.

The exchange of interpretations between hosts and guests on the podcast demonstrates the possibility of audiences deriving meanings from a media text that deviate from the “dominant-hegemonic position,” to resist dominant representations, and to celebrate cinema that represents their communities in accurate and empowering ways (p. 16). The “resistant spectatorship” exhibited by the podcast’s guests also recalls Diawara’s (1988) discussion of the work engaged in by Black spectators to resist racist depictions in cinema.

Diawara’s insistence upon the development of a Black independent cinema as an alternative to mainstream movies, in a way, mirrors the intentions behind our podcast. He writes that the objective of alternative media—whether it be an independent film or, for our purposes, a podcast—“must be to increase spectator awareness of the impossibility of an uncritical acceptance of Hollywood products” (p. 76). The *Movies as Mirrors* podcast questions the representations of historically marginalized communities in cinema, opening the door to discussing how best to navigate issues of diversity in our contemporary media landscape.

REFLECTIONS OF DIVERSITY

One of our guests explains:

I think representation in the media is so important. I remember growing up and getting excited because there was a gay character on a show that ended up being the butt of a joke, but at least there was a gay character in the show. And now, not only are we seeing queer people becoming characters, but we’re seeing queer people of color be main characters. (Harkey et al., 2019)

As Teilani articulates during the episode in which we discuss *Moonlight* (2016), examining and evaluating issues of representation in media—whether it be movies, podcasts, or other forms of expression—is vital to creating an inclusive culture. *Movies as Mirrors* attempts, in its own small way, to contribute to this effort by creating a dialogue between alternative and mainstream media, facilitating conversations in which people from different experiences and backgrounds can come together and learn from each other, and envisioning a media culture in which diversity is truly celebrated.

A Dialogue Between Mainstream and Alternative Media

A significant characteristic of the *Movies as Mirrors* podcast is that it operates as a dialogue between mainstream and alternative media. Mainstream media—including content created by movie studios, streaming platforms, and so on—still constitute a large portion of contemporary popular culture, but social media, podcasts, and other examples of more decentralized,

independent, and/or user-generated content play an increasingly central role in the media landscape. Because it is an independently produced podcast, featuring guests from communities who have historically been underrepresented in mainstream media (but who are responding to Hollywood movies), *Movies as Mirrors* is positioned at the intersection between the alternative and the mainstream. In our conversations, the show's hosts and guests respond to the dominant discourse, identifying both the affordances and limitations of mainstream media's representations of marginalized communities.

For example, while the podcast emphasizes movies that mirror the guests' experiences, oftentimes our conversations start out by acknowledging the difficulty of finding stories on screen with which marginalized communities can identify. For example, Camlyn, who identifies as a Black woman, shares how it wasn't until she was in college that she realized just how stark the lack of representation of African American experiences was in mainstream movies. "And so I eventually asked my parents. Because I'm not being presented these things in class . . . I'm not being presented them in the mainstream. I have to seek them out." (Giddins et al., 2019). *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner*, which Camlyn discusses in her episode, was among those recommendations provided by her parents. And while she finds value in the characters and representations in that film, she also acknowledges that it functions as an exception to the dominant representations of race in Hollywood, which have historically privileged whiteness.

Some guests note that while they *have* found some movies that attempt to reflect their experiences on screen, these representations are often inauthentic or even damaging. For example, Lane, who identifies as a queer, trans person, notes how representations of LGBTQ+ characters heavily emphasize, and even sometimes exploit, queer sex. "So many films that depict queer women are so oversexualized, and often from the perspective of a man. And it's just not anything that feels real or accurate at all" (Bender et al., 2019). Lane comments that the strengths of films like *The Miseducation of Cameron Post* are in their efforts to counter these dominant, and often detrimental, representations of queer sexuality.

Other guests point out that even when movies about marginalized communities do not necessarily include inaccurate or stereotypical representations, they can still be limiting. In her discussion of *A Little Princess* (1995), Sarah, who is a female scholar studying gender representation in media and popular culture, suggests that while princess stories are a common representation of girls and women, they typically emphasize a narrow definition of femininity—one that focuses on beauty, privilege, and individuality. Many of these stories of princesses are problematic representations of women, but even when the female characters are depicted as having autonomy and exercising agency, they fail to recognize the incredible diversity among women. The

lack of stories about the incredible diversity and collective strength of the community of women is limiting, because, in Sarah's words:

We're all in this together. We need to support each other if we're going to make it through. And that's where Disney falls short. Typically, in Disney, you have a princess, or maybe two, right? It's *Frozen*, and they're sisters or something like that. But what about this idea that "everyone is a princess"? And how can we use that knowledge to band together to make the world a better place? (Coyne et al., 2020)

In her discussion of *A Little Princess*' theme that "everyone is a princess," Sarah acknowledges that representation is not just an end in itself. Instead, she advocates for inclusive depictions that strengthen communities, address inequities, and lead to positive social change.

But as a number of guests acknowledge, evaluating movies according to their impact—positive or negative—can be complicated. These analyses require more nuance than the typical metrics of thumbs, stars, and tomatoes allow for. In one episode, Madison discusses movies that represent mental illness, and eating disorders specifically, noting that certain depictions, while compelling and even authentic, may ultimately be counterproductive.

So the creators, they sit down, and they're like, "I want people to understand what depression feels like. I want people to understand the experience of having an eating disorder." But with eating disorders, specifically, it is very damaging. It is very triggering to people who have had eating disorders in the past, who are trying to recover, who are trying to keep themselves out of that brain space. The minute you see somebody struggling with it, it brings everything back. (Madison et al., 2019)

In this regard, movies may accurately reflect certain experiences of marginalized communities, but do so in a way that may perpetuate problems rather than lead to solutions. (For this reason, Madison chose to discuss the comedy *Swiss Army Man* (2016), explaining that the film's use of hyperbole and humor to metaphorically depict issues of mind and body spoke to her experiences without being triggering.)

While *Movies as Mirrors* addresses some of the limitations of mainstream culture in representing marginalized communities, guests on the podcast also identify examples of what they see as authentic, empowering cinematic storytelling. In one episode, Ayah, who is from Lebanon, discusses *Girl, Interrupted* (1999). Based on the autobiography of Susanna Kaysen, the film follows Susanna as she copes with mental illness within an American psychiatric hospital in the 1960s. Despite the differences in time period, place, and culture, the characters and experiences in the film resonate with Ayah's own experiences:

Mental illness is something considered taboo in my country, and people don't really talk about it because it's considered to be shameful. Although, there are a lot of people suffering with mental illnesses in Lebanon. And I feel like this movie kind of relates to the stories that my friends tell me and the experiences that I went through with them. And it shows that people who are mentally ill aren't these "crazy head-banging people." They're suffering in silence, and they're just misunderstood. (Safi & Thevenin, 2019)

The understanding and validation experienced by the guests when watching these depictions on screen speak to the powerful, cathartic experiences that films can provide. Interestingly, a number of guests comment that these strong emotions are often triggered by small, sometimes seemingly inconsequential, moments within the movies. Because they have longed for mainstream media to acknowledge their experience in some way, the guests often describe how tremendously impacted they were by small elements within the film—a simple action or single line of dialogue.

For example, Em, who lives with multiple chronic illnesses, connects with the film *Cake* (2014), which follows a woman struggling with debilitating chronic back pain after surviving a terrible automobile accident. Throughout the film, the woman, played by Jennifer Aniston, struggles to cope with her condition, even refusing to sit up as she rides in the car. Her perpetually reclined posture—illustrating throughout the film not just her back pain but also her difficulty re-engaging with the world—is only improved in the last few moments before the credits roll when she finally has the courage to sit up. Em discusses the personal significance of this final scene, saying:

I liked how it was a simple ending—just her pulling like her seat up a few inches. Because that's really representative of my experience with chronic pain. Just taking a few steps out of your house and into the world and trying to do something that's so simple for everybody else, but that's so overwhelming for you. It's really empowering. And it's representative of my experience. One of the gifts I feel like I've gotten from having chronic illness is that you do feel like you've been, kind of, reclined in this sad fog. And then all of a sudden, you realize that when you do get out of the house or do something simple like sit up in the car or make a cake, it's so much more exciting than it ever was before you got sick. And you're just so grateful. And you think it's amazing. And just the simplest things make you so happy. (Thevenin et al., 2019)

In talking with guests about their responses to these depictions, it became evident how desperate so many people from marginalized communities feel to have their experiences mirrored back to them and how fulfilling it is to be a part of conversations in which others are eager to hear about these simple but significant moments of recognition.

Engaging in Conversations About Difference

Movies as Mirrors not only functions as a dialogue between alternative and mainstream media, in which hosts and guests are able to point out both the successes and failures of cinematic representations of marginalized communities, but it is also formatted as a conversation in which people of different backgrounds, cultures, perspectives, and experiences use their shared interests in film and identity to come together and learn from each other. The 30 episodes are filled with examples of guests and hosts swapping varying interpretations of the movies and engaging in critical self-reflection.

For example, when Roni Jo visits the podcast to discuss *Smoke Signals*, she acknowledges that while the film depicts the Indigenous people of Coeur d'Alene and she is from the Yurok tribe, she still finds significant similarities between the characters in the film and her own Native community. However, in Colten's discussion of *Hostiles* (2017), he argues that one of the challenges of finding films that reflect his experience as a Native American (Colten identifies as half-Navajo, half-white) is that Indigenous people are often lumped into a single group, despite having incredibly different languages, histories, and cultures.

It's funny being Navajo because John Ford made his westerns. And then because he made his westerns, a lot of others went to Monument Valley, which is the Navajos' neck of the woods. So we've had experience being everyone. We've been Apaches in *Stagecoach*. We were Comanches. We've been Cheyenne. We've been so many people. But rarely has it been that we've gotten to play ourselves. So that definitely affects me personally, because I get to see people that look like me and share my culture, not be themselves. (Ashley et al., 2019)

So, while Roni Jo articulates her appreciation for Indigenous representation that approximates her experience (despite the differences in tribal affiliation), Colten identifies the limitations of these representations. Most significantly, he points out that while the history of the western genre includes a number of films in which his fellow Diné appear on screen, they rarely have had the opportunity to play themselves.

Another fascinating finding to emerge from these dialogues is that—even when the guests come from different backgrounds, identify with different communities, and choose to discuss different films—there exists specific similarities among their interpretations of the films. In one episode, Jesse chooses to discuss *It Follows* (2014) in relation to his experience growing up in poverty. The indie horror film depicts a shapeshifting monster that slowly, persistently follows its target wherever they go until it finally gets close enough to deliver its terrifying death blow, and Jesse found particular correlations between that premise and the experience of living in poverty.

It's a bunch of kids in Detroit, who have this thing coming towards them. Just this looming threat, always coming towards them. And there's nothing they can do about it. It just persistently comes towards them until—I mean, *spoilers*—at the end, it's ambiguous as to whether or not they actually solved the problem. Yeah, that is what poverty is like. That's how I view it. It's just this looming threat that's constantly coming towards you. And there's no clear solution as to how to fix it. (Baird et al., 2019)

Jesse notes that the lack of a clear conclusion to the narrative is appropriate, not simply because it is unnerving, but because it suggests that the issue of economic scarcity and inequality is ongoing. The story doesn't end neatly, and the characters are uncertain whether they have truly escaped the threat because the threat is understood to represent a problem that, sadly, is persistent.

Interestingly, while Natalie chooses to discuss a vastly different movie, she identifies similar narrative characteristics in the film as Jesse. *A Fantastic Woman* is an Argentinian drama that follows a trans woman as she attempts to cope with the sudden death of her lover. Even though the two movies differ in genre, nationality, language, and themes, both end somewhat ambiguously, leaving the audience to wonder about the fate of the film's protagonist. And like Jesse, Natalie interprets this ambiguity as commenting on the fact that the issues addressed in the story remain unresolved.

Because my waking reality does have an uncertainty to it, you know? And I don't know what my ending will look like. But what this movie does that gives me strength is it assures me that whatever comes about, I can move towards it with dignity and grace and confidence. (King et al., 2019)

It is compelling that even though *A Fantastic Woman*'s lack of narrative resolution alludes to the uncertainty experienced by transgender people, Natalie is empowered by the film to navigate her uncertain future with assurance.

Envisioning the Future of Media Representation

Given that many of the guests of the podcast are film students, graduates, scholars, or professionals, it perhaps comes as no surprise that their interests in movies go beyond casual viewing and extend into their efforts to tell their own stories on screen. For many guests, their motivation for examining issues of representation in cinema and reflecting on how these stories mirror their communities is to help determine what positive portrayals they might contribute to mainstream media. For example, Luis, an emerging writer and director as well as a Mexican immigrant to the United States, sees powerful possibilities ahead of him, saying:

I think, in general, we are very interested in lots of different stories. And as a filmmaker, these are the kinds of stories that I want to tell—you know, just stories that are much more about my experiences, about my perspective as an immigrant. But there is a fear that someone at some long table with a lot of money is eventually going to say, “No one’s gonna want to hear that story.” Because they’re not you. (Puentes & Thevenin, 2019)

Luis recognizes the opportunity for greater diversity of films and filmmakers and aspires to be among those who tell stories that address subjects and engage communities that mainstream media haven’t traditionally. But at the same time, he also acknowledges the obstacles facing him in this pursuit of improved representations.

Emphasizing the progress that *has* been made in terms of cinematic representation throughout the history of film, some guests express enthusiasm about the path forward and their potential role in carving this path. For example, film producer Roni Jo comments on how *Smoke Signals* is a refreshing step forward in terms of representing Indigenous people because of how it focuses more on their humor than simply their pain.

I remember when I was growing up, my grandma would say, “I don’t know why there aren’t more Natives on television. We are funny.” And we would say, “We sure are Grandma.” And I felt like this film captured the humor of Natives that often isn’t captured when non-Natives tell stories about Native Americans. When non-Natives tell the stories, we’re sad or drunk. We’re oppressed. . . . But I think in this story, you saw reservation life as having life and having joy, and having beautiful family relationships. . . . And it felt so real. It felt so familiar. (Draper et al., 2019)

Inspired by films like *Smoke Signals*—in which Native filmmakers tell stories featuring Native characters and depict not just struggles but also the successes of Native peoples—Roni Jo is engaged in furthering this project with her own creative work, within her own community.

And despite the significant obstacles that face emerging filmmakers from marginalized backgrounds and the incredible effort that it requires to move the needle even just a little bit in an industry like Hollywood, many of the podcast’s guests express optimism about the possibilities ahead. Kelyn, a Japanese-American documentary filmmaker, is hopeful about the growing number of filmmakers from marginalized communities who, now more than ever, are able to tell their stories on screen.

Obviously, what I would like to see is a world in which everybody gets to be making movies that they want to be making, and they’re able to tell their stories. So, while there’s still a lack of minority voices being heard in the film industry

currently, I'm hoping that in the near future more and more of those voices will come out. (Ikegami et al., 2019)

And in his discussion of the film *Boy, Erased* (2018), Sam—an aspiring film scholar, educator, and media-maker—expresses confidence that the future of LGBTQ+ representation on screen will extend beyond the necessary but often challenging portrayals of abuse, conversion therapy, and so on to include an exciting range of stories.

I want to see the space epic that's about a gay character. And I want to see the spy movie that's about a gay character. And the animated children's movie, and the superhero movie, you know? I want to see these stories, too. I hope there's a place for them in our media culture today. . . . I hope that, as a culture, we can get to a point where everybody wants to see movies about everybody. (Burton & Thevenin, 2019)

Some guests even provide advice for listeners who may have similar aspirations to celebrate diversity in their creative work but who may not know the best way forward. A scholar who researches Asian American media, Kimball extends the invitation to anyone who has the desire to improve cinematic representations to find a way forward, saying:

So, if you want to make a story about someone that's not you, please go collaborate with that community. I don't think there's anything wrong with having a sincere desire to make a story . . . that's telling the story of another group of people, as long as you're actively collaborating with that community. (Ikegami et al., 2019)

Kimball is careful to emphasize that our efforts to represent marginalized communities must include the active involvement of those being depicted, but that through sincere efforts to understand one another and genuine intercultural collaboration, everyone—regardless of their particular background or experience—can be involved in this important work.

CONCLUSION

While the audience and impact of *Movies as Mirrors* are relatively limited, the podcast functions as one example of using alternative media to critically engage with the mainstream, to engage in conversations in which we learn from each other's experiences, and to hope and work for a media culture that is more inclusive, equitable, and diverse. This determined, optimistic perspective is best expressed by Natalie during her episode, who says:

Watching this film gives me so much hope that I can be strong in the face of people misgendering me. I don't have to exhaust myself fighting with people. I can keep my dignity. And I can take this assurance and the power that comes with it and own my identity as a woman. (King et al., 2019)

Hopefully, the podcast's efforts to highlight movies that are authentic, empowering portrayals of marginalized people and to amplify the voices of communities who have been historically underrepresented can serve as an inspiration for us all to engage in meaningful conversations, seek out and celebrate diverse stories, and improve both media culture and our world.

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