

Finn: a Black 'Jedi' and Colorblind Racism in Disney's *Star Wars*

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Summary

In 2015 the first film of the new Disney sequel trilogy, *Star Wars- The Force Awakens* reached the cinemas. Together with a continuing story of the Resistance and their evil nemesis, this time named 'The First Order', fans were greeted with a new, more diverse cast. Casting John Boyega for this role seems to be commendable as in recent years the Hollywood industry has faced a backlash from society, due to the lack of representation of racial minorities in popular media. Nevertheless, eventually, Boyega's character appeared to be pushed aside as the main hero of the trilogy, a matter, that even the actor himself spoke out about. The change raises the question of whether the casting decision was made as a marketing strategy? Moreover, does the portrayal of Finn in the sequel trilogy serve as a counterargument for the hegemonic Hollywood industry or does it emphasize white dominance? The decision to cast and market a black character as a leading role, therefore, seems questionable. And thus, this paper aims to analyze to what extent the casting of the black character Finn in the *Star Wars* sequels can be seen as an example of colorblind racism?

To answer these questions several methods are used. Firstly, the analysis focuses on the promotional material of each *Star Wars* sequel trilogy film. By conveying a visual analysis of the posters, the created promise of the role of the Finn becomes evident. This reveals the commitment that Disney is made with the marketing material of the black character as one of the leading roles. Further, the textual analysis of the interactions between Finn and other characters, especially the protagonist Rey, reveals how Boyega's character is presented in the trilogy films. The analysis focuses on how Finn is presented stereotypically and as a binary opposition or the 'other' in the saga. The paper compares the two parts of the analysis of the promised image and the actual representation of Finn in the sequel trilogy. Eventually, it becomes evident, that the promised image of Finn is misleading and does not fit the reality, as the character is used as a supporting role for the female protagonist Rey.

Introduction

The epic science fiction saga of *Star Wars* is one of the most famous franchises in the history of cinema. Since the start in 1977 when the first film *Episode IV: A New Hope* appeared in cinemas, it has been widely recognized as a cultural phenomenon. In 2012, the saga entered a new era when the Walt Disney Company purchased the Lucasfilm studios alongside the rights to the franchise. This event marked not only the beginning of a new age in the 'galaxy far, far away' and a restart for the narrative but also brought changes for the story. In 2015, when *Star Wars: The Force Awakens* was released in cinemas, fans were introduced to a new cast of diverse characters, such as black and female actors in leading roles. The diversity was barely present before in the dominantly white franchise of *Star Wars*.

Before the restart in 2015 the saga only had two distinguished black characters: a black Jedi Mace Windu played by Samuel L. Jackson in the prequels and Lando Calrissian in the original trilogy. Nevertheless, both of these characters served as secondary roles, assisting white heroes Luke and Anakin Skywalkers in their quests. On the other hand, the promotional poster of the first film in the recent Disney sequel trilogy, *Star Wars: The Force Awakens* explicitly portrayed Finn wielding a lightsaber, promising the first Black Jedi in a lead role, comparable to the mentioned Skywalkers. Thus, it appears that with a Black actor John Boyega in one of the leading roles as former Stormtrooper Finn, *Star Wars* was addressing the recent backlash for the lack of diversity in Hollywood films.

Nevertheless, even though the decision to diversify the cast with actors of color should be celebrated, Disney's reputation as a moneymaking machine shines a questionable light towards this decision and its intended purpose. The casting of a black actor in the lead role represents the idea that actors of color have equal opportunities in the Hollywood industry. In reality, the problem expands further, as the black characters are often presented stereotypically or are used to support the lead white roles. In a recent interview with *GQ*, Boyega stated: "what I would say to Disney is do not bring out a black character, market them to be much more important in the franchise than they are and then have them pushed to the side."¹ This view suggests that the promotional material of the *Star Wars* sequel trilogy films, such as posters presenting Finn holding a lightsaber and equal to the female protagonist Rey creates a misleading representation of the black character. The discrepancy between the promotional posters and the sequel trilogy narrative creates a problem because the marketing material presents a promise to the audience. This commitment is the main cause that shapes the expectations of the filmgoers and the actors themselves towards the upcoming films. Therefore, the misleading promise for an Afro-American character created by the marketing material seems questionable.

¹John Boyega, "I'm the only cast member whose experience of *Star Wars* was based on their race," interview by Jimi Famurewa, *GQ*, September 2, 2020, <https://www.gq-magazine.co.uk/culture/article/john-boyega-interview-2020>.

Black people in the United States have been constantly fighting their way from the background of oppression since the end of slavery in 1865, to the present day. During the 20th century, the black community has risen to several civil rights movements like the 1960s "Black Revolution" led by Martin Luther King Jr., each time moving towards becoming a full-fledged part of American society. When in 2008 Barack Obama became the first Afro-American president in the history of the United States, it marked a historical event and portrayed American society as post-racial, meaning that race does not play a role in social status.² Nevertheless, the reality is different, and even after more than 150 years of struggle to become acknowledged as equal to the predominantly white society, the black community still faces institutional racism to this day.

The recent Black Lives Matter protests fighting against police brutality and systemic racism point out the issue that the black community in America is still not represented equally as the white dominant part of the society. But police brutality is not the only problem, as the Afro-American community is still highly underrepresented in popular media. Therefore, the Hollywood industry has been accused of racism with movements such as #Oscarssowhite pointing out the lack of representation of ethnic minorities.³ As explained by Ebony Elizabeth Thomas, the lack of representation of racial minorities in children's literature creates a problem of missing identification and a resulting imagination gap. As Thomas writes: "When youth grow up without seeing diverse images in the mirrors, windows, and doors of children's and young adult literature, they are confined to single stories about the world around them and, ultimately, the development of their imaginations is affected."⁴ Therefore, the same problem applies to the lack of racial minority representation in Hollywood films.

Nevertheless, simple solutions to complex systemic issues, such as casting an actor from the black community are not enough. The attempts to diversify the industry, made by media conglomerates such as The Walt Disney Company, often rather appear as a safety check and box-ticking, to meet the social standards of equal representation in cinema in the easiest way. Such casting decisions can be seen as an example of the phenomenon of colorblind racism, as the race of an actor is purposefully exploited to maximize profit.⁵ Therefore, the question arises to what extent the casting of the black character Finn in the *Star Wars* sequels can be seen as an example of colorblind racism? What are the differences between the image promised by the promotional posters and the role of John Boyega's character in the sequel trilogy compared to the actual trilogy narrative? How is the black character portrayed in relation to the

² Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor, "Introduction: Black Awakening in Obama's America," in *From #BlackLivesMatter to Black Liberation* (Chicago, UNITED STATES: Haymarket Books, 2016), 4-5.

³ Maryann Erigha, "Race, Gender, Hollywood: Representation in Cultural Production and Digital Media's Potential for Change," *Sociology Compass* 9, no. 1 (2015): 80-82.

⁴ Ebony Elizabeth Thomas, "Introduction," in *The Dark Fantastic: Race and the Imagination from Harry Potter to the Hunger Games*, vol. 13 (New York, UNITED STATES: New York University Press, 2019), 6.

⁵ Sarah E. Turner and Sarah Nilsen, "Introduction," in *The Myth of Colorblindness: Race and Ethnicity in American Cinema* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019), 1-13.; Kristen J. Warner, "In the Time of Plastic Representation," *Film Quarterly* 71, no. 2 (December 4, 2017): 32-37.

white protagonist Rey and the villain Kylo Ren? And what is the narrative importance of Finn and does it fulfill the promotional material's promise of an Afro-American hero in a leading role?

Theoretical Framework

To understand the problem of the promised role of Finn shaped by the promotional material and the lack of diversity in Hollywood films, I will use the concept of colorblind racism. Firstly, colorblind racism, as defined in *The Myth of Colorblindness: Race and Ethnicity in American Cinema*, is the belief that entitlement to equal opportunities and civil rights are no longer shaped by race.⁶ Hence, it distorts the true situation of representation and racial domination in modern American society, because racism has taken on different shapes as it has moved away from older forms of institutional racism.

The problem of colorblind racism in the Hollywood industry is further analyzed by Nancy Wang Yuen. Amongst other examples of exclusion and marginalization Yuen explains that non-white actors were never taken seriously for the leading roles. Yuen writes: "Asian-American actors have never been treated as full-time actors [...] That is, producers call us when they need us for only race-specific roles."⁷ This view can also be applied to Afro-American actors as they are often only chosen for race-specific black roles, excluding them from consideration for a race-neutral leading role. Furthermore, Yuen also argues, that frequently any decision of casting an actor of color creates a reverse-racist backlash from the society and that phew successful examples are taken as proof for equal opportunities.⁸ This creates an issue because it distorts the true situation of actors of color being cast for stereotyped and race-specific roles, excluding them from the discussion of race-neutral leading roles. The author adds that to oppose white dominance Hollywood should create more roles suited for actors of color that would portray them in "nonstereotyped roles that honor their racial identities."⁹

Nevertheless, in my analysis, these two ideas oppose each other. On one hand, the decision to cast John Boyega should be welcomed as an unconventional decision for such a blockbuster type saga as *Star Wars*. On the other hand, the lack of complexity and agency of Finn, and the questionable promised image created by the marketing materials do not seem to use the black actor as a counterargument for Hollywood's racism. On the contrary, my work analyses how the representation of Finn emphasizes the white supremacy of Hollywood. Therefore, the purpose of my analysis of the black character in the *Star Wars* sequel trilogy is to further expand the understanding of the examples of colorblind racism when black

⁶ Ashley Doane, "Colorblindness: The Lens That Distorts," in *The Myth of Colorblindness: Race and Ethnicity in American Cinema*, ed. Sarah E. Turner and Sarah Nilsen (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019), 15.

⁷ Nancy Wang Yuen, "Hollywood's Colorblind Racism," in *Reel Inequality: Hollywood Actors and Racism* (New Brunswick, UNITED STATES: Rutgers University Press, 2016), 55.

⁸ Yuen, "Hollywood's Colorblind Racism," 56.

⁹ Nancy Wang Yuen, "Diversifying Hollywood," in *Reel Inequality: Hollywood Actors and Racism* (New Brunswick, UNITED STATES: Rutgers University Press, 2016), 147.

actors are cast and marketed as leading roles.

To analyze the colorblind racist representation and emphasis of white supremacy in the *Star Wars* sequel films I will use the theories of representation and the 'other' by Stuart Hall. Hall argues that meaning is constructed through binary oppositions, by emphasizing differences.¹⁰ In other words, the characteristics of one object are emphasized by the opposite in the other, such as white is white because it is not black. Hall further adds that this opposition is often used to emphasize power and enhance hierarchy.¹¹ According to Hall, racial and ethnic minorities are often portrayed by their stereotypes and emphasizing their differences from the perspective of hegemonic white culture, thus forming the opposition of the 'other', which is portrayed as lower in status.¹² Thus, the concepts defined by Hall will allow me to understand the portrayed representation of the Afro-American character.

Moreover, the colorblind racist representation is also emphasized by the marketing strategies of Hollywood films. To understand why does the representation of Finn in the promotional material matter, I will use the theory of paratext, explained by Jonathan Gray. The scholar argues, that paratexts are the information and material that surrounds the text, it is the gateway between the text and the audience.¹³ According to Gray, most of the media the society consumes is the paratexts rather than texts, because paratexts provide information about the texts and help us to chose what to consume or not.¹⁴ Therefore, the paratexts help to shape our expectations and as Gray puts it: "create and manage our faith." These expectations can be shaped by various paratexts such as promotional film posters and cinematic trailers and even the gender of the author of a book, argues the scholar.¹⁵ Thus, the theory of paratexts helps to understand how the representation of Finn in promotional material of *the Star Wars* sequel trilogy shapes the audience's expectations towards the films.

Furthermore, to understand the motivation behind diversified casting different research perspectives, such as political economy is necessary. The strategies of the Walt Disney Company and Lucasfilm to maximize profits are linked to transmedia extensions. Transmedia franchises, according to media scholar Henry Jenkins, include not only the main source and other media examples, such as prequels, spin-offs, and video games, but also purchasable commodities, such as action figures.¹⁶ Therefore, According to Jonathan Hardy, transmedia extensions often aim to attract certain ethnic or racial audience members, thus, contributing to the maximization of profits.

¹⁰ Stuart Hall, ed., "The Spectacle of The 'Other,'" in *Representation : Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices* (London: Thousand Oaks, Calif. : Sage in association with the Open University, 1997), 234.

¹¹ Hall, "The Spectacle of The 'Other,'" 243.

¹² Hall, "The Spectacle of The 'Other,'" 225.

¹³ Jonathan Gray, "From Spoilers to Spinoffs A Theory of Paratexts," in *Show Sold Separately: Promos, Spoilers, and Other Media Paratexts* (New York: NYU Press, 2010), 24-5.

¹⁴ Gray, "From Spoilers to Spinoffs A Theory of Paratexts," 25-6.

¹⁵ Gray, "From Spoilers to Spinoffs A Theory of Paratexts," 25.

¹⁶ Dan Hassler-Forest and Sean Guynes, eds., "'I Have a Bad Feeling About This' A Conversation about Star Wars and the History of Transmedia," in *Star Wars and the History of Transmedia Storytelling* (Amsterdam University Press, 2017), 18-21.

The author argues that from a political economist's perspective, the use of diverse characters contributes to the media companies, as it creates a platform for minority groups among the audience to identify with the characters.¹⁷ The audience's identification with certain characters is important in my research because it explains one of the reasons behind diversifying the cast of the franchise, and the development of the franchise after the change of ownership from Lucasfilm to the Walt Disney Company.

Method

To analyze the representation of the Afro-American character Finn, I will use a method of critical comparative discourse analysis. This method aims to analyze how power is exercised through language. Thus, critical discourse analysis examines how communication shapes and reflects power structures and social beliefs. The method perceives any form of communication as language, therefore in my analysis, I will use two types of texts: Disney's *Star Wars* film poster visual images and the sequel films. I will carry out two separate sections of analysis, visual and narrative/textual respectively. In this way, I will be able to examine the representation of Finn in the marketing material and the sequel films. By comparing the two sections I will be able to deduct how the casting of John Boyega and the representation of the black character reflect and shape the social practices of colorblind racism in popular media.

Firstly, I will focus on the marketing material of the *Star Wars* sequel trilogy. I will analyze the official posters of *Star Wars* sequel films to investigate the marketed importance of the mentioned character Finn. To gain insight into the marketed image of John Boyega's character, I will use the theory of the meaning of composition described by Gunther Kress and Theo van Leeuwen to carry out a visual analysis.¹⁸ I will be looking at the compositional placement and image size of the Afro-American ex-stormtrooper Finn in relation to other cast members and the lead roles of Rey and Kylo Ren. It will allow me to form an understanding of how the image of Finn was marketed before the release of the films, creating a promise of the black character as a primary or secondary role in the trilogy.

Further, I will use the method of narrative/textual analysis of the *Star Wars* sequel trilogy films to examine the representation of Finn and his role as a primary or supporting role in the saga. For the analysis I will be using the work of Jens Eder to deduct the hierarchy in the character constellation.¹⁹ Thus, focus on the interactions between Finn and other characters, especially the protagonist Rey will reveal how Finn is presented as the primary role or the 'other' binary opposition enhancing the positive characteristics

¹⁷ Jonathan Hardy, "Mapping Commercial Intertextuality: HBO's True Blood," *Convergence* 17, no. 1 (February 1, 2011): 7–17.

¹⁸ Gunther R. Kress and Theo van Leeuwen, "The Meaning of Composition," in *Reading Images: The Grammar of Visual Design*, 2nd ed. (New York: Routledge, 2006), 175–215.

¹⁹ Jens Eder, "Understanding Characters," *Projections* 4, no. 1 (June 1, 2010): 16–40.

of other characters. I will be looking at the possible use of the stereotyped portrait of the black character as unreliable and lacking ambition to emphasize the superiority of the white protagonists.²⁰ This part of the analysis will allow me to understand the agency of the black character in the saga and reveal the purpose of Finn as an independent role or as a secondary character who exists primarily to support the lead roles.²¹ Therefore, the analysis of the racial representation of Finn in the sequel films will provide me with possible evidence for a colorblind racist depiction of the character.

Finally, after analyzing the role and representation of Finn in the *Star Wars* sequel trilogy and conveying a visual analysis of the trilogy's posters, I will compare the findings of the two research parts. By comparing the two sections, I will be able to determine whether the promised image of the character aligns with the representation of Finn in the films. Therefore, the comparison will allow concluding whether the casting decision and advertised role of John Boyega can be seen as an example of colorblind racism.

Finn: the promise and the reality

One of the strategies of marketing before the cinematic release is the additional materials that transmit information about the film. Jonathan Gray refers to the additional material as paratexts. According to Gray, paratexts convey certain information for the audience that helps to shape the expectations towards the film and decide on the material to consume. The author adds, that paratexts can be anything surrounding the main text, from visual marketing material to the race and gender of directors or actors.²² Therefore, marketing material not only raises the awareness of the yet-to-come projects but also gives the potential viewers an idea of what to expect from the film.

According to arts marketing scholar Finola Kerrigan: "The purpose of film marketing materials such as posters, trailers, and advertisements is to position the film in the minds of the target audience."²³ Nevertheless, alongside the presentation of the potential film experience, the posters provide the audience with a promise for certain aspects of the film. Promises shape the viewer's expectations, which eventually can manifest in disappointment or surprise and satisfaction if the expectations are met.

One of the most important aspects of a film poster in building viewer expectations is the presented film cast, as it provides one of the biggest promises by using certain actors as the main roles. Film posters present the hierarchy of roles and their importance for the movie as leading and secondary

²⁰ Stuart Hall, "Race, Culture, and Communications: Looking Backward and Forward at Cultural Studies," *Rethinking Marxism* 5, no. 1 (March 1, 1992): 16.

²¹ Roland Leander Williams Jr., Kim F. Hall, and Wayne Glasker, "Introduction," in *Black Male Frames: African Americans in a Century of Hollywood Cinema, 1903-2003*, 1st ed. (Syracuse, UNITED STATES: Syracuse University Press, 2015), xvi-xvii.

²² Gray, "From Spoilers to Spinoffs A Theory of Paratexts," 23-5.

²³ Kerrigan, "Film Marketing Materials," 129.

characters. This allows the audience to embrace the promise of the character's importance and impact on the narrative development before actually watching the film. Therefore, the depiction of the actors of color in movie posters contributes to the expectations of the certain advertised character's importance. Because paratexts shape our perception of the film industry it fosters the idea that casting John Boyega has nothing to do with his race when in reality race can be seen as a marketing tool. Thus, if the promise of a black character in paratexts does not meet the eventual expectations, it could be seen as an example of colorblind racism, masking the role of race in the casting decision.

With that being said, this section focuses on the analysis of the advertised depiction of Finn in all three of the Star Wars sequel films promotional posters. By analyzing the composition and positioning of John Boyega's character, I was able to deduce the promised character importance for the saga as a lead or secondary character in each film. I focus mostly on the analysis of the poster of the first sequel trilogy film *Star Wars: The Force Awakens* as it was the first film to introduce the new cast of characters, therefore, it created the promised character portrait and importance for the rest of the saga.

Representation of Finn in Disney's *Star Wars* promotional posters

To analyze the importance of Finn represented in the promotional posters I will be using the theories of Gunther Kress and Theo van Leeuwen, which explain the meaning carried out through the composition of the image. I will mostly focus on two aspects of the images: information value and salience. According to the authors, information value refers to the meaning carried out through the placement of elements in various zones of the images.²⁴ The authors argue that any image positioned in the center of the composition becomes the 'nucleus' of the information, or the most important figure, while the surrounding images are the margins that depend on the central subject.²⁵ Therefore, in my analysis, the positioning of a character in the center of an image emphasizes its superiority over the marginalized characters as well as their dependency on the central figure. Salience according to Kress and van Leeuwen, is the way elements are made to attract attention, realized by various characteristics such as size and placements in foreground or background.²⁶ Authors add that salience reflects the hierarchy between elements, therefore, the most visible figures due to their size and placement are the most important.²⁷

These theories indicate that the scale comparison of the image of Finn in promotional film posters reflects the difference of hierarchy between John Boyega's character, the lead character Rey and the antagonist Kylo Ren. In the poster of the first installment of the trilogy, *Star Wars: The Force Awakens* (fig. 1), the ensemble of the main film characters can be seen. Nevertheless, the three main roles

²⁴ Kress and Leeuwen, "The Meaning of Composition," 177.

²⁵ Kress and Leeuwen, "The Meaning of Composition," 196.

²⁶ Kress and Leeuwen, "The Meaning of Composition," 177.

²⁷ Kress and Leeuwen, "The Meaning of Composition," 201-202.

of Finn, Rey, and Kylo Ren can be seen separated from the rest of the cast by their depicted size and positioning. These three characters are depicted in the upper part of the image and take up roughly half of the poster, while the other 11 characters are positioned in the lower half. Therefore, the three mentioned roles immediately stand out. This positions the three main characters as leading roles, constructing a promise for the remaining saga as it is the poster for the first installment.



Figure 1. *Star Wars: The Force Awakens*, 2015, Film Poster.

Even though the mentioned characters stand out, the hierarchy between these roles can also be seen. The antagonist Kylo Ren is positioned on the left side of the picture, and as the main villain of the story, he is menacingly portrayed as the largest figure on the poster. Rey is centered in the middle of the picture, while the slightly smaller image of Finn is positioned on the right, below the female lead. It indicates the female character as the protagonist and Finn as an important, yet not a pivotal role of the movie. Thus, Rey is the central figure and other cast members are dependent on her, including the marginalized Finn on the right side of the image.

Moreover, the depiction of John Boyega's character in the *Star Wars: The Force Awakens* poster portrays Finn holding a lightsaber, the legendary weapon of the Jedi warriors. The promise made by the paratext indicates, that Finn, is only the second Afro-American Jedi seen in the saga, after Samuel L. Jackson's character Mace Windu, who appeared in the *Star Wars* prequel trilogy. Nonetheless, although Mace Windu is an important character in the prequel trilogy films, Samuel L. Jackson's portrayed Jedi was never a main role in the saga. Mace Windu appeared in two out of three prequel film posters (fig.2; fig.3), as a secondary character, overshadowed by other lead roles, such as the young Anakin

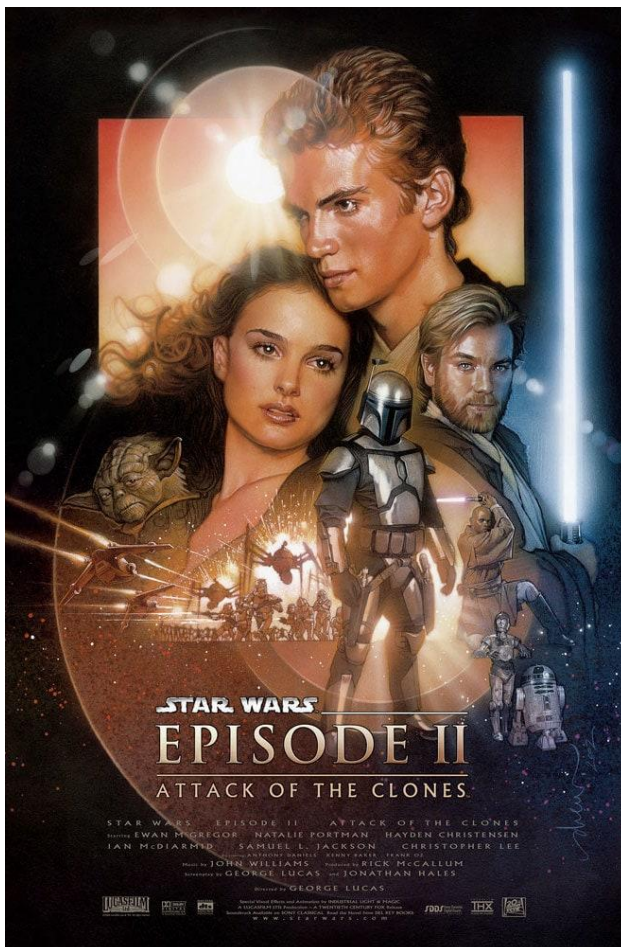


Figure 2. *Star Wars: Attack of the Clones*, 2002, Film Poster.



Figure 3. *Star Wars: Revenge of the Sith*, 2005, Film Poster.

Skywalker, Obi-Wan Kenobi, and Natalie Portman's character Queen Amidala. Therefore, the depiction of Finn holding a lightsaber in the poster of the first installment of the sequel trilogy (fig.1), promises viewers a black Jedi lead character, whose importance could be compared to Anakin Skywalker or Obi-Wan Kenobi in the prequel trilogy.

The posters of the two remaining installments in Disney's sequel trilogy, *Star Wars: The Last Jedi* (fig. 4), and *Star Wars: The Rise of Skywalker* (fig. 5) advertises a different role of John Boyega's character compared to the poster of the first film.



Figure 4. *Star Wars: The Last Jedi*, 2017, Film Poster.

First of all, in the poster of *Star Wars: The Last Jedi* (fig.4), Finn is no longer positioned among the most recognizable characters. The composition of the commercial artwork places Finn in the lower part of the image, while the main figures of the film are positioned in the upper half. Similar to the previously analyzed poster, the three main characters can be seen taking up almost half of the image, while the rest of the cast is compactly squeezed in a considerably small section of the poster. Nevertheless, what stands out is that compared to the poster of the first film of the sequel trilogy, the Afro-American character is no longer positioned among the 'big three' in the upper section. Therefore, while the first film advertised Finn as one of the lead characters, the paratext of the second installment seems to have pushed the black role aside, creating some room for other characters, such as the returning Luke Skywalker and Leia Organa. Although it is understandable to use the nostalgic characters of Luke and Leia, for marketing purposes, it also indicates that Finn is no longer as important to the saga as it was advertised at first.

When looking at the poster, the three characters of Luke, Rey, and Kylo Ren stand out immediately. Luke's image is the largest, taking up roughly one-fourth of the whole poster, while images of Kylo Ren and Rey are situated just below Luke. Their images are visibly larger, compared to the rest of the remaining cast, thus emphasizing the importance of the three as the lead roles. Below the three, Leia Organa is placed in the middle of the frame, gaining the attention of the audience due to the size of the image, which is a bit smaller than Rey and Kylo Ren, and the central position of the image.

Finally, below the image of Leia, even smaller images of John Boyega's character Finn, on the left side, and Poe Dameron, on the right side portrayed by Oscar Issac, can be seen. The images of Finn and Poe are equal in size and composition, emphasizing their equality in the films advertised hierarchy of importance. This indicates the shift in the importance of the black character for the narrative development of the sequel trilogy, from a lead role in the first film to a 'sidekick' or a secondary role.

A similar trend can be seen in the poster of the last installment of the sequel trilogy, *Star Wars: The Rise of Skywalker* (fig. 5). The composition once again situates the main roles in the upper part, portraying the images of the lead characters larger than the rest of the cast. In the case of the third film of the trilogy, Rey can be seen as a centerpiece of the promotional artwork, taking up the spotlight as the pivotal character of the trilogy. Kylo Ren can be seen in the background menacingly overlooking the rest of the cast. Nevertheless, similar to the poster of *Star Wars: The Last Jedi* (fig.4), the promotional artwork for the last film portrays Finn as downgraded from the lead roles in one of the main 'sidekicks'. Placed below the image of Poe Dameron, a secondary role character, the Afro-American 'Jedi' as marketed in the first installment, is marketed as a supporting role in the poster of the last film. Even though both images of Finn and Poe stand out from the rest of the cast members, these images are still separated from the protagonist and the antagonist placed above them.



Figure 5. *Star Wars: The Rise of Skywalker*, 2019, Film Poster.

To conclude the analysis of the *Star Wars* sequel trilogy promotional posters, it can be said, that the promised marketed image of the Finn changes between the marketing of the first film and the rest of the trilogy. The first film used John Boyega's character as an important role, presenting him amongst Rey and Kylo Ren, the real pivotal roles of the sequels. Therefore, the marketing strategy of the first installment *Star Wars: The Force Awakens* created a promise of an important Afro-American character in the *Star Wars* universe. Even so, the paratexts portrayed Finn as a black Jedi, thus comparing him with Luke or Anakin

Skywalkers, the main protagonists of the whole *Star Wars* franchise.

Therefore, the poster of the first film in the trilogy creates a promise for the success of a character of color, creating expectations for Finn as a leading role, arguably the first in one of the most famous franchises in Hollywood history. Nevertheless, the analysis of the promotional posters of the later installments in the sequel trilogy reveals, that this promise collapses as the saga progresses. The analysis indicates that the paratexts shape John Boyega's character as a faulty example of equality in Hollywood, as the promise created by the marketing material of the first film is not kept throughout the trilogy. Hence, the decision to emphasize the importance of Finn in the poster of the first film suggests that the character was promoted for his race. Therefore, the depiction of John Boyega in the films paratexts indicates colorblind racism in Disney's *Star Wars* as it emphasizes the race of Finn, while falsely promising the main character of the trilogy.

Finn in Disney's *Star Wars* sequel trilogy films

The *Star Wars* sequel trilogy narrative tells a story of the new generation resistance fighters against the next evil empire, this time called 'The First Order'. In the center of the fight a new cast of heroes from unusual settings, such as Rey, a scavenger girl with a mysterious history, and Finn, an ex-stormtrooper, takes the stage. Nevertheless, even though the promotional posters of the trilogy films portray these two characters as main roles, especially the poster of the first film *Star Wars: The Force Awakens*, in reality, Finn appears to be portrayed supporting the protagonist Rey, without having any goals of his own and agency to impact the story. Therefore, In this part of the analysis, I will be looking at how is John Boyega's character represented in the sequel trilogy films.

To analyze the presentation of the Afro-American character I used the theory of representation and the 'other' explained by Stuart Hall. According to Hall, the meaning is constructed through binary oppositions, by portraying one aspect in one character to emphasize the opposite in the other.²⁸ To put it differently, the good is only understood when compared to evil, the evil contradicts and, thus, reinforces the understanding of what is good. Moreover, Hall argues, that this contradiction is often used as a way to emphasize the cultural hegemony and by portraying the marginalized ethnic groups stereotypically, reinforce the superiority of the dominant groups. The presented stereotyped people are excluded and presented as the 'other', emphasizing their differences.²⁹

Furthermore, the article "Understanding Characters" from Jens Eder will form the theoretical basis for analyzing the represented specific character narrative functions and hierarchies in the character system, also called the character constellations. According to Eder, "The constellation positions the

²⁸ Hall, "The Spectacle of The 'Other,'" 234.

²⁹ Hall, "The Spectacle of The 'Other,'" 243, 225.

individual characters in a network of relations with other characters, a network of hierarchies, functions and values...³⁰ Moreover, Eder argues, that the protagonists of the narrative have a clear individual goal that drives the narrative and their importance is emphasized through comparison with other characters.³¹ These structures and dramaturgical functions of each character are presented through interactions between the roles. Hence, the main role has an individual goal and the supporting roles aim to assist them in their quest.

Thus, in this part, I analyzed the interactions between Finn and the other characters to understand the constructed meaning through emphasized otherness. I looked into the stereotyped representation of Finn as an unreliable character and the presented lack of ambition from the role.³² In this way, I was able to understand the purpose of Finn as a supporting role, rather than a pivotal character, as presented in the marketing material. Therefore, the inconsistencies in the representation of Finn as a leading role are pointing to colorblind racism in Disney's *Star Wars* sequel trilogy, as John Boyega can be seen as an example of a black protagonist, while in reality Finn is used to emphasizing the supremacy of the leading white role.

First of all, let us look at how Finn is introduced to the saga. At the beginning of the film, Finn is a stormtrooper, a soldier of the evil empire, thus, on a different side from all of the heroes in the *Star Wars* saga. Nevertheless, in the opening act of the film, John Boyega's character refuses to obey the orders of Kylo Ren, the main villain of the story, and becomes a deserter, helping the Resistance pilot Poe Dameron escape from confinement. Although throughout the first film Finn hides the fact that he is an ex-stormtrooper and after meeting Rey, pretends to be a rebellion fighter, he eventually decides to stay with the Republic and continues to fight against the evil 'First Order'.³³

Nonetheless, throughout the first installment of the trilogy and regularly in the remaining two films Finn is portrayed as an outsider of the rebellion. In the first film, Finn is pretending to be a part of the Republican rebels, yet in reality, his only goal is to escape the 'First Order'. In this way, Finn is presented without a place where he belongs. Moreover, even though the confusion is understandable for the ex-stormtrooper being accustomed to the ways of the 'First Order' from a young age, the lack of knowledge and confusion of Finn is overly emphasized by the film.

Finn is presented lacking confidence often encouraging himself and with questionable abilities emphasized by his own words such as "this is very complicated"³⁴. In several action scenes in the first installment, Finn has to be explained how the cannons work and when he figures it out it is

³⁰ Eder, "Understanding Characters," 30.

³¹ Eder, "Understanding Characters," 28-32.

³² Hall, "Race, Culture, and Communications," 16.

³³ *Star Wars: Episode VII - The Force Awakens*, directed by Jeffrey J. Abrams (San Francisco, CA: Lucasfilm, 2015), Blu-Ray, 1080p HD.

³⁴ "Jailbreak," *Star Wars: Episode VII - The Force Awakens*, directed by Jeffrey J. Abrams (San Francisco, CA: Lucasfilm, 2015), Blu-Ray, 1080p HD.

accompanied by the line: "I am getting pretty good at this", emphasizing his lack of skill.³⁵ In another scene, the black character is helping Rey to fix the starship, and after several failed attempts to hand a correct tool has to be physically pointed for the right one by Rey saying: "No, no, not that one, the one I'm pointing to."³⁶ Thus, this exclusion is further constructed³⁶ by the confusion and constant need for an explanation for the Afro-American character, presenting him as different or the 'other', constantly emphasizing his differences from other characters.

Moreover, the lack of knowledge and confusion of the black character is often used as an opposition to the superiority of other characters, especially the lead role Rey. Finn is portrayed as the one who always asks questions, for the sake of Rey to answer them and showcase her dominance as the real heroine of the trilogy. The black character asking "Which way out?" or "This was Ochi's?" and "So how did Ochi get out?", in the last film *Star Wars: The Rise of Skywalker*, is presented just for Rey to conveniently find answers to all of these questions and lead the team.³⁷ This opposition fits the theories of Stuart Hall because the supremacy of Rey as the protagonist is emphasized by the lack of knowledge and need for guidance of Finn. Therefore, when analyzing the interactions of Finn and Rey, it becomes clear that Finn is often used as a pathway for Rey to manifest herself as the heroine of the film, positioning the Afro-American character as a supporting role. This aspect points to colorblind racist representation as Finn is seen as equal to the white protagonist, but in reality, his actions only emphasize Rey's superiority.

This aspect is further emphasized and constructed by John Boyega's character's focus mainly on Rey, rather than his own goals or the fight between the evil empire and the Republic. Therefore, it presents Finn's lack of agency and dependency on Rey. Firstly, as I mentioned before, during the first film Finn is only pretending to be a part of the Resistance and only wants to escape the 'First Order'. Eventually, the black character stays with the Resistance when is given the old lightsaber of Luke Skywalker with the quest to "Find his friend", after Rey refuses to take it and runs away.³⁸ From there Finn's purpose during the sequel trilogy is to assist Rey.

During the trilogy, multiple scenes indicate that the Afro-American character ignores the fights of the Republic by focusing on helping the female protagonist. One of the most prominent scenes that support this is the first appearance of Finn in the second installment of the trilogy *Star Wars: The Last Jedi*. The first appearance of Finn in the second film appears when the character wakes up in a healing ward. Finn suddenly wakes up saying only one word "Rey", followed up with a conversation with Poe,

³⁵ "The Falcon Flies Again," *Star Wars: Episode VII - The Force Awakens*, directed by Jeffrey J. Abrams (San Francisco, CA: Lucasfilm, 2015), Blu-Ray, 1080p HD.

³⁶ "Fixing The Falcon," *Star Wars: Episode VII - The Force Awakens*, directed by Jeffrey J. Abrams (San Francisco, CA: Lucasfilm, 2015), Blu-Ray, 1080p HD.

³⁷ "Buried Secrets," *Star Wars: Episode IX - The Rise of Skywalker*, directed by Jeffrey J. Abrams (San Francisco, CA: Lucasfilm, 2019), Blu-Ray, 1080p HD.

³⁸ "First Order Invasion," *Star Wars: Episode VII - The Force Awakens*, directed by Jeffrey J. Abrams (San Francisco, CA: Lucasfilm, 2015), Blu-Ray, 1080p HD.

where Finn only asks one question "Where's Rey?"³⁹ Most of the second film focuses on the battle between the remaining fleet of the Resistance fighters and the 'First Order', which endangers the existence of the Republic. Nonetheless, Finn ignores the battle for the sake of finding Rey. He argues "This fleet is doomed and if my friend comes back to it, she'll be doomed too. I have to get this beacon far away from here, then she'll find me be safe."⁴⁰ Therefore, the scene points out that the mission of the Afro-American character is only focused on saving the main protagonist of the film, becoming a supporting role, as explained by Jans Eder.

Lastly, the representation of Finn as the example of binary opposition is emphasized by the stereotypical presentation of the character as unreliable. During the mentioned sequence where the ex-stormtrooper argues the need to save Rey from the doomed fleet, Finn is using it as an excuse for why he was trying to escape the ship.⁴¹ The sequence takes place right after the black character is caught trying to escape and is accused of desertion. Even though his goal to save Rey is selfless Finn is still abandoning the 'doomed' ship, running away from the fight. The loss of hope several times throughout the trilogy combined with the impersonation of a Resistance fighter to gain personal favor during the first film does not convey a trustworthy image of the character.

Moreover, during Finn's quest to save Rey, John Boyega's character heads to Canto Bight, the *Star Wars* universe equivalent of Las Vegas. After Arriving at the luxurious city Finn is quickly attracted by the gambling hall in one of the casinos, accompanied by the black character saying "Oh yes...this place is great!"⁴² This type of behavior portrayed by the film is another way of constructing a racially stereotypical character drawn by glamour and wealth. Therefore, the sequel contributes to the construction of colorblind racism because the trilogy often portrays Finn as unreliable, a recreant quickly drawn to personal interest and even wealth, further using it as a binary opposition for the right behavior.

To conclude the analysis of the representation of Finn in the *Star Wars* sequel trilogy films, it can be seen that the Afro-American character is portrayed in a racially stereotyped manner, often portraying him as unreliable and witless, in need of constant assistance and explanation. Such representation is used to create a binary opposition between Finn and the protagonist Rey, to emphasize the dominance of the female lead, as Finn's incomprehension allows Rey to showcase her abilities and knowledge. Moreover, Finn is portrayed as a character who is only focused to help the true main female lead, lacking any personal goals and agency. Therefore, even though the marketing material uses the image

³⁹"Finn Awakens," *Star Wars: Episode VIII - The Last Jedi*, directed by Rian Johnson (San Francisco, CA: Lucasfilm, 2017), Blu-Ray, 1080p HD.

⁴⁰"Finn Meets Rose," *Star Wars: Episode VIII - The Last Jedi*, directed by Rian Johnson (San Francisco, CA: Lucasfilm, 2017), Blu-Ray, 1080p HD.

⁴¹"Finn Meets Rose," *Star Wars: Episode VIII - The Last Jedi*, directed by Rian Johnson (San Francisco, CA: Lucasfilm, 2017), Blu-Ray, 1080p HD.

⁴²"Arrival At Canto Bight," *Star Wars: Episode VIII - The Last Jedi*, directed by Rian Johnson (San Francisco, CA: Lucasfilm, 2017), Blu-Ray, 1080p HD.

of the Afro-American character as one of the main roles in the film, creating a promise of a black leading character in the saga, the films contradict the promise.

The representation of Finn thus creates a faulty image of the character. Although John Boyega's character is one of the most prominent figures of the trilogy, he is mostly used to emphasize the superiority of Rey. This constructs the illusion for the audience, that a character of color is a successful part of a blockbuster saga. Combined with the promise of Finn as a leading black Jedi, the true role of the character distorts the reality of the representation of racial equality. Therefore, the representation of Finn in the sequel trilogy films contributes to the construction of colorblind racism in Hollywood.

Conclusion

The current situation of racial representation in Hollywood does not do justice for the racial minorities in the United States. As the Afro-American community is highly unrepresented by the popular media, the dominant image of white heroes continues to foster in our society, further constructing the discriminating image of racial minorities. The example of one of the most popular cinematic franchises of *Star Wars* casting John Boyega, a black British-Nigerian actor, as one of the main roles in the sequel trilogy is already a step forward to bring more diversity to the big screen. Nevertheless, does the casting of John Boyega in the *Star Wars* saga correctly reflect the representation of racial minorities in the Hollywood industry? As I have demonstrated in my analysis- not quite. On the contrary, the casting decision that has been emphasized by surrounding paratexts distorts the true situation, thus contributing to colorblind racism.

The representation of Finn in the promotional posters creates a promise of a black character in a leading role, even presenting him holding a lightsaber, constructing an image of an Afro-American Jedi. This promise shapes John Boyega's character as an example of a successful actor of color, fostering the idea that Hollywood is post-racial and racial minorities have equal opportunities to become leading roles. Nevertheless, the representation of Finn in the *Star Wars* sequel trilogy contradicts this promise. The role of the black character is portrayed stereotypically as unreliable and even selfish at times, drawn to wealth and abandoning the cause for own good. It is further used as a binary opposition for the heroine Rey to create moments for the female protagonist to showcase her abilities in contrast. Thus, the representation of Finn only serves as a support for the white female protagonist in the film, further emphasizing the dominance of the cultural hegemony.

Even though casting actors from marginalized social groups is necessary and should be supported, marketing the racially diverse cast members as important roles, later pushing them aside as secondary, does not seem to be a successful way to fight Hollywood's issue of racism. The diverse casting can rather be seen as a way to expand the diversity of the audience groups, creating characters that can be later sold in the shape of commodities, allowing the racial minorities to identify with the action figures.

Moreover, racial diversity also becomes a gateway to expand profit by the transmedial extensions such as spin-off films and television shows, that portray certain diverse characters. Therefore, the example of a diverse cast of *Star Wars* and a false marketing promise only support the cases of colorblind racism as the race of the diverse character is exploited for gaining profit.

Therefore, Disney uses the diverse cast presenting the idea, that race is not a boundary anymore and black actors can be cast for major roles in blockbuster movies. Nonetheless, after analyzing the created promise of a black lead role by the promotional material and comparing that to the representation of Finn in the sequel trilogy films, it appears, that the Afro-American character is used more as a marketing technique. Casting a black actor for his race to market the character as important creates the illusion that the industry has become post-racial when in reality it masks the true situation where white dominance is still fostered by Hollywood. Therefore, the use of the Finn as a black character contributes to the construction of colorblind racism, as the role is used for marketing and is portrayed stereotypically, to create a binary opposition for the heroine Rey.

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PLAGIARISM RULES AWARENESS STATEMENT

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Scientific integrity is the foundation of academic life. Utrecht University considers any form of scientific deception to be an extremely serious infraction. Utrecht University therefore expects every student to be aware of, and to abide by, the norms and values regarding scientific integrity.

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If fraud or plagiarism is detected, the study programme's Examination Committee may decide to impose sanctions. The most serious sanction that the committee can impose is to submit a request to the Executive Board of the University to expel the student from the study programme.

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The following issues will always be considered to be plagiarism:

- cutting and pasting text from digital sources, such as an encyclopaedia or digital periodicals, without quotation marks and footnotes;
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- paraphrasing (parts of) the texts listed above without proper references: paraphrasing must be marked as such, by expressly mentioning the original author in the text or in a footnote, so that you do not give the impression that it is your own idea;
- copying sound, video or test materials from others without references, and presenting it as one's own work;
- submitting work done previously by the student without reference to the original paper, and presenting it as original work done in the context of the course, without the express permission of the course lecturer;
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- when one of the authors of a group paper commits plagiarism, then the other co-authors are also complicit in plagiarism if they could or should have known that the person was committing plagiarism;
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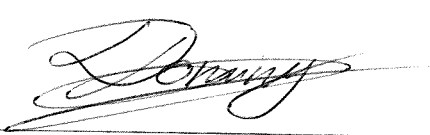
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