
Application of the 'Tom Story' narrative to the Academy Award winners of contemporary cinema

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From the signing of the Civil Rights Act in 1960 to the passing of the Voting Rights Act in 1965 and the Fair Housing Act in 1969, the sixties were the bona fide tipping point for both, the Civil Rights Movement and the birth of New Hollywood in the United States of America. Both the motion pictures, *Green Book* (2018) and *Detroit* (2017) are a contemporary stance on the unembellished, savage reality of the black and white status quo at the time. As Linda Williams asserts: *Green Book* and *Detroit*, despite being a social commentary by the so-called unprejudiced Hollywood of today, slip right into the lap of "the Tom narrative" in their respective ways.

Green Book, a reverse approach on *Driving Miss Daisy* scenario and an Academy Award winner for Best Picture, Best Original Screenplay and Best Actor in a Supporting Role, seemed to take a generic road trip into the 1960's era like every other American film. Drawing from 'The Negro Motorist *Green Book- For Vacation without Aggravation*'; the film starring Mahershala Ali as Dr. Don Shirley and Viggo Mortensen as Frank Vallelonga (aka Tony Lip), appears to narrate the 'white savior' trope. Tony Lip, a stereotypical Italian American whose middle name could have easily been Soprano, who folds and gobbles a giant pizza slice single handedly and can hog on 26 hot dogs in one go, subtly presents himself as a racist. Quite early on in the film, he distastefully picks up the two glasses of water between his thumb and forefinger to dispose them off into the dustbin only because they have touched the lips of two black workers. Yet, throughout the film Tony Lip is seen coaching Don Shirley, a classically educated, suave and sophisticated African American pianist on his dietary and pop music preferences, only to fit him into Lip's preconceived notions about Shirley's identity as a black man. The film portrays Lip's character as the clichéd white outcast whose lifelong racist attitude and approach seem to change overnight merely due to his encounter with a prodigious African American man, thereby hinting towards the notion that racism in the sixties was an 'interpersonal choice' than an institutionalized one. During moments when Tony Lip, whose character is etched in a complete broad stroke as compared to Dr. Shirley, is seen running to rescue him (whether in an all-white bar or at a southern police station), the film markets itself by 'playing it safe' and showcasing the conventional white guy heroism whilst being user friendly.

An approach similar to *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner?* (1967), the one dimensional screenplay of *Green Book* caters to the apologetic white audiences by enhancing their self-esteem. The perfect paradigm is the hypocritical switch in Tony Lip's character, from being a macho, working class racist who falsifies tales about having "colored men over for drinks" to justifying the principle of 'I am not racist because I have got a black friend,' by the finale of the screenplay. *Green Book* mobilizes "the Tom story" in more complacent ways than one: whether it is a short snippet about Dr. Shirley being assaulted by the men in blue for his homoerotic preferences merely to procure the audience's sympathy about the lack of acceptance in the 60's or the plain vanilla character of Don Shirley who faces multiple encounters with Jim Crow racism, yet always preserves his grace and dignity and rarely comes off as vulnerable. Much of the glib and formulaic plot of the film seems utterly dedicated towards Tony Lip's character development- his wife Dolores, his kids and his big Italian

family. As for Dr. Shirley, the viewers are offered nothing but a brief mention about his past- his long estranged brother and his divorce, resulting in a monotone Dr. Shirley. Overall, the director Peter Farrelly plays “the Tom narrative” only in a feel good, lightweight treatise manner with occasional references to racism, thereby rendering *Green Book* as yet another ‘tone deaf’ entry into the hallowed halls of Hollywood.

In comparison to the above, Katherine Bigelow’s *Detroit* (2017) is antithetical to her previous works as she shoots “war at the Homefront” rather than “war in the Middle East.” A failed attempt to capture the actuality of the Detroit riots of 1967, the focal point of the film is the Algiers Motel, thus lagging in its delivery of the fuller picture. Nevertheless, Bigelow by and large deploys “the Tom story” concept during *Detroit’s* 143 minutes running time. Will Krauss, the diabolical white male protagonist is seen acknowledging the same, especially when he remarks: “you know we need to stop failing these people,” to his co-worker at the time of the riots. Two third of the film’s screenplay is devoted towards the blatant, unadulterated and racially motivated police brutality that sickens the audiences to their stomach. Bigelow tries using “the Tom narrative” tactfully, yet her execution falls short due to the substandard character development. The visceral and dramatic scenes between the law enforcement officers and the African Americans at the Algiers Motel attempt to evoke emotions through violence, however the repetitiveness makes the viewers claustrophobic. The abysmal plot never transitions from the ‘Tom like’ killings of ‘faceless and nameless’ African Americans and the pedestrian script by Mark Boal mostly disappoints. A journalistic docudrama - *Detroit* fails to answer the five W’s for the audiences. As a viewer, one gets the answers to Who, What, When and Where but not the Why.

Detroit during its brief overview of the sixties riots carelessly portrays the blacks largely as hooligans, looters and rapists without providing a proper context about the events that drove the African Americans to the edge, thereby falling right into the Anti-Tom trap. It appears that Bigelow herself struggles with the balanced representation of the African American protagonists between a Tom and an Anti -Tom version. This is particularly observed for John Boyega, who plays the role of Melvin- a black security guard. Melvin for the bulk of the screenplay is shown as an awkward spectator to the happenings in the Algiers Motel rendering his character as ‘Tom like’ during moments when he is overpowered by the white officials, and is portrayed as ‘Anti-Tom like’ when he is nothing but a mere bystander to the atrocious racial violence. The makers of *Detroit* also try to emphasize the larger role-play of direct violence rather than structural violence, especially when most of the white characters including Krauss are shown possessing a conflicted opinion with respect to their treatment of the African Americans. Additionally, the misrepresentation of facts, like the sidelining of the African American women during the riots, counteracts with the films efforts to portray the absolute truth to its audience.

Although both the films rely on ‘the Tom story’ during the representations of their respective black characters, as a viewer, one comparatively feels a greater affixation with Dr. Don Shirley from *Green Book* than the African American characters of Algee Smith and John Boyega in *Detroit*. Even though the former lacks in providing sufficient background to the fastidious character of Dr. Shirley, the film is a wholesome pie in itself. The plot does seem simplistic, predictable and sentimental but these attributes are precisely what ring a sympathetic bell amongst the audiences leading them to miraculously enjoy the ride through the South in the sixties. On the other hand, *Detroit* attempts to encourage the audiences to connect with its characters, yet it does not fully know how to give them the required compelling character arc. Through its focus on the investigation, the trial and the verdict; *Detroit’s* plot feels like a loose commentary on the institutional loopholes, police corruption and law

enforcement, more so because the viewers are neither familiarized to the reasons behind the riots nor to its aftermath.

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