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THE AFRICAN-AMERICAN WOMAN
CHARACTERS IN AMERICAN CINEMA

Bachelor Thesis

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Olomouc 2015

I declare that I worked independently on my Bachelor Thesis “The African-American Woman Characters in American Cinema” and that I included the complete list of used and cited literature, and other sources.

In Olomouc

Signature:

I would like to express my gratitude to the supervisor of my thesis, Mgr. Jiří Flajšar, Ph.D. for his help and guidance throughout the process of writing this work.

I would also like to thank Dave and Tacy Rowan for their friendship, moral support and endless patience as they provided me with the native speakers' opinion and frank criticism.

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1 Introduction

Well, when I was nine years old, Star Trek came on, I looked at it and I went screaming through the house, 'Come here, mum, everybody, come quick, come quick, there's a black lady on television and she ain't no maid!' I knew right then and there I could be anything I wanted to be.¹

Once having read these words, they immediately inspired me to the topic of my work. This famous quote by an American actress, Whoopi Goldberg, exactly expresses the aim of my thesis. I shall discover the rough journey of the African-American actors and actresses from the humiliating roles of slaves and servants to their today's possibilities of self-expression and more respectable characters.

Chapter one provides an excursion to the beginnings of the American cinematography and the stereotype characters that were established in order to set boundaries and therefore limit the roles of African-Americans. The white filmmakers wanted to control the amount of blacks in the film industry and these stereotypes allowed the African-Americans to play only characters of slaves, servants or nannies. The stereotypes are known as Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies and Bucks. Their detailed descriptions and typical features will be the subject of the following chapter.

Then, in chapter two, I will focus on certain pictures of the early cinema concerning the African-Americans, particularly *The Birth of a Nation* (1915) and *Gone with the Wind* (1939). *The Birth of a Nation* (1915) by D. W. Griffith is a significant piece of work not only in terms of cinematography in general, but also in terms of the image of African-Americans. *Gone with the Wind* (1939) is another key movie I would like to focus on within the chapter. This brilliant picture from the US South perfectly reflects the position of African-Americans, however, there is one character that deserves to be in the spotlight – Hattie McDaniel and her impressive performance as Mammy. For this role she was the very first African-American to win the Academy Award as the Best Actress in a Supporting Role. Besides these two movie milestones,

¹ Margot Magowan, "'There's a black lady on television and she ain't no maid!'" *Reel Girl*, September 13, 2014, <<http://reelgirl.com/2013/09/theres-a-black-lady-on-television-and-she-aint-no-maid/>>, Accessed January 20, 2015.

I will mention several actresses, such as Nina Mae McKinney, Fredi Washington and Louis Beavers who at least in some extent affected the interpretation of African-American women. Later on, I shall mention the golden age of the black-cast musicals during the years 1929 and 1943, namely *Hallelujah* (1929), *The Green Pastures* (1936) and *Cabin in the Sky* (1943), all of them closely connected to the issue of the Great Migration of the African-Americans to big cities. I will not forget to point out another two exceptional ladies, Lena Horne the famous musical star and Hazel Scott her biggest rival.

My main interest through the entire work should be the women of color and their courage to face all the difficulties and inequality of that time for it is them who are the “protagonists” of this thesis. And so I would like to dedicate the fourth and last chapter to several magnificent and admirable women who have managed to gain the same amount of respect which their white colleagues have always been given. In this chapter I will demonstrate how these African-American actresses have contributed to the process of breaking down the stereotypes established such a long time ago. I will describe the key movies up to these days that have changed the position of African-Americans in the film industry and people's view on them in general. However, the African-American movie heroines are the main theme of my work it is rather impossible to mention them all. For that reason, I have chosen actresses who starred in somehow progressive films or appeared in a modern role, for example Whoopi Goldberg, Dorothy Dandridge, Whitney Houston or Halle Berry. Most of these ladies gave life to many unforgettable characters and so they moved the ages-ago adopted opinion full of prejudice towards the African-Americans to a totally new and better light.

2 Set Stereotype Characters

The history of African-Americans with all the suffering and cruelty they had to face ever since they were brought to America, had unfortunately been apparently reflected in the early films. The racial intolerance of the white people towards the African-Americans could be found in the movies from the very start. The idea of inferiority of the black population was widely used by the white filmmakers ever since the first black character appeared on the screen. However, long time before the first true African-American was actually allowed to become a part of the world of cinema, there were so called blackfaces. As it was unthinkable to cast any African-American for a black role, the black characters were all portrayed by white actors with faces painted with black color. And that is how the first black protagonists, or rather antagonists, for blacks were seldom pictured in a good light, had entered the silver screen. The very first black character can be traced way back to 1903 and to a twelve-minute movie called *Uncle Tom's Cabin* shot by Edwin S. Porter. Ironically, but in those times not surprisingly at all, Tom was played by an unknown white actor, in blackface.² Later on, tom became a stereotyped character and more were added, known as coons, tragic mulattoes, mammies and bucks, although for some time they were all to be played by blackfaces. All these stereotype, mostly applied in the film industry, had been part of the American art a long time before the motion picture itself came to existence. Breaking from these set stereotyped characters has become the main effort of the African-American performers. In spite of how many decades they had to fight and prove that they could be as good, or sometimes even better actors than the always "superior" whites, nowadays it is clear they have reached the Hollywood summit.

2.1. The Tom

The name of the character tom comes from the anti-slavery novel *Uncle Tom's Cabin* written by Harriet Beecher Stowe in 1852.³ Donald Bogle defines toms as being

² Bogle, *Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies and Bucks: An Interpretative History of Blacks in American Films* (New York: Continuum, 2008), 3.

³ Tomáš Pospíšil, *Sambo tu již nebydlí?: Obraz Afroameričanů v americkém filmu 20.století* (Brno: Nadace

“always chased, harassed, hounded, flogged, enslaved, and insulted, they keep the faith, never turn against their white masses, and remain hearty, submissive, stoic, generous, selfless, and oh-so-very kind.”⁴ The very first tom from 1903 has already been mentioned, since then many white actors in blackface played the role of tom, for example pictures *Confederate Spy* in 1910 or *For Massa's Sake* from 1911. However, it was not until 1914 when director William Robert Daly brought the fourth adaptation of Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* but with one rather progressive difference – African-American actor Sam Lucas starred as the tom. This significant change was just the first step of the long journey of the African-Americans toward equality. Nevertheless, it is important to point out the performance of James B. Lowe, who very successfully portrayed tom in 1927, and again in *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, this time directed by Harry Pollard. Thanks to his convincing acting, Lowe became a celebrated figure and the first black actor publicized by the Universal Studios. He was even a representative of the studio in England in efforts to promote the picture. Nevertheless, no matter how ground breaking this event was, it was not in Lowe's power to change the interpretation of tom.

2.2. The Coon

Thanks to all tom's features and his being anything but selfish and disobedient, he was just the right candidate to be the most favorite black character. Then a group of so called coons appeared and immediately became toms' competitors as they were presented as a source of entertainment, clowns and fools. What they differed in was tom's concentrated attitude and strong will. Several types of coons could be distinguished, as the pure coon, the pickaninny and the uncle remus.

The pickaninny was the first of the group members to enter the world of film. This black child character is generally defined as “a harmless, little screwball creation whose eyes popped, whose hair stood on end with the least excitement, and whose antics were pleasant and diverting.”⁵ Thomas Alva Edison happened to be the

Universitas Masarykiana, 2003), 15.

⁴ Bogle, *Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies and Bucks*, 5-6.

⁵ Bogle, *Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies and Bucks*, 7.

“father” of this stereotype when he introduced *Ten Pickaninnies* (1904)⁶ in which he captured random African-American children playing and running around.

Nevertheless, the pickaninnies reached their biggest popularity in the 1920's and the 1930's when a number of child actors' performances touched the audience's heart. Sunshine Sammy, Stymie, Farina or Buckwheat, these are just a few names of those who noticeably contributed to shifting the pickaninnies to a new level. In 1922 the comedy series *Our Gang* was released mainly picturing the lives of children in a humorous way. Most of the above mentioned little actors became famous because of the *Our Gang* series. An interesting fact is that no matter how girlish their names may sound, Farina, Stymie, Sunshine Sammy were all boy actors.⁷ However, they were chosen for the film because their appearance allowed the filmmakers to cast them in both boy and girl roles. Therefore, very few girl actresses actually appeared on the screen. Still it is important to say that each of these child performers developed a unique and original style and acting technique. In the late 1920's, Farina was the best-known and loved little pickaninny for his characters' wit and courage as well as for his own.

The pure coon was introduced shortly after Edison's *Ten Pickaninnies*, in the picture *Wooing and Wedding of a Coon* in 1905 and later in *The Masher* in 1907. Bogle describes coons as

no-account niggers, those unreliable, crazy, lazy, subhuman creatures good for nothing more than eating watermelons, stealing chickens, shooting crap, or butchering the English language. The coon developed into the most blatantly degrading of all black stereotypes.⁸

Around 1910 a comedy series with a typical coon character called Rastus came out. Pictures such as *How Rastus Got His Turkey*, *Rastus on Zululand*, *Rastus and Chicken*, and *Chicken Thief* captured the coon with all his negatives, bad habits and imperfections.⁹

⁶ Thomas Alva Edison, dir., *Ten Pickaninnies* (USA: Edison Manufacturing Company, 1904).

⁷ Thomas Cripps, *Slow Fade to Black: The Negro in American Film, 1900-1942* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977), 136.

⁸ Bogle, *Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies and Bucks*, 8.

⁹ Cripps, *Slow Fade to Black*, 22.

The last of the coons, the uncle remus, “harmless and congenial”, known for his “quaint, naive and comic philosophizing”¹⁰ had not entered the screen until the 1930's and 1940's. Remus was a character similar to uncle tom, as they shared the contentment with their place within the society and in the world in general. Examples of movies with uncle remus are *The Green Pastures* (1936) or *Song of the South* (1946)

2.3. The Tragic Mulatto

The tragic mulatto may be considered as one of the most favorite, likable but also the most pitiful figures. The mulatto, in most cases is a female character, and is often sympathized with because she has at least a few drops of white blood in her veins. Still she was viewed as a tragic character, considering what a great and valuable life she could have lived if “she had not been a victim of divided racial inheritance.”¹¹ The typical storyline may be found in one of the earliest movies - *The Debt* from 1912¹², with the mulatto girl as a protagonist,. The film tells the story of two young people who grow up together, fall in love and hope to get married. The turning point comes when they find out they are brother and sister, for their father has the boy with his white wife and the girl is a daughter of the father's black mistress. The tragedy yet does not lie in the fact they are siblings, but that she is partly black.¹³ Other movies capturing a similar topic were made around 1913, for example *In Humanity's Cause*, *In Slavery Days*, and *The Octoroon*.

There is, however, one thing not so tragic about this character. Unlike mammies, the mulatto women were often provided some kind of sex appeal and beauty that could be appreciated and desired by the audience as they nearly approached the white ideal.

¹⁰ Bogle, *Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies and Bucks*, 8.

¹¹ Bogle, *Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies and Bucks*, 9.

¹² Jack Hopkins, dir., *The Debt* (USA: Rex Motion Picture Company, 1912).

¹³ Pospíšil, *Sambo tu již nebydlí?*, 19-20.

2.4. The Mammy

The mammy is another female stereotype often connected with the comic coons and she is usually placed on the same level and position. Her most typical and essential features, next to her strong personality and independence, are her corpulent body and very dark skin. She is also quite cantankerous and bossy, regardless her inferior position inside the white family. She is rather straightforward but always loyal and devoted to her duties. The beginnings of the mammy go back to 1914, in the blackface version of Aristophanes' *Lysistrata* and the comedy *Coon Town Suffragettes*. The golden age of this character was in the 1930's when "the mammy queen" Hattie McDaniel brought it to total perfection. This was in the movie hit *Gone with the Wind* (1939) that won her the Academy Award making her the very first African-American to receive this most prestigious prize of the film industry.¹⁴ The image of the overweight and unattractive mammy continued up to 1960's to actresses Claudia McNeil and Beah Richards and their movies *A Raising Sun* (1961) and *Hurry Sundown* (1967). Inside this stereotype, one subcategory may be added, the aunt jemina. She is described as joyful, good-natured, very kind and not as stubborn and direct as mammy.¹⁵

2.5. The Buck

Buck is the last of the stereotypes that were in use in the early era of the cinema and was inseparably connected to David W. Griffith's *The Birth of a Nation* (1915). For it was this picture that introduced the character. *The Birth of a Nation*, however, is not to be analyzed within this paragraph. But still it is important to say that it carries an infamous label as "the most slanderous anti-Negro movie ever released."¹⁶ This is so because of all the black stereotypes so powerfully portrayed with hatred.

The group of bucks can be also divided into two subcategories: the black brutes and the black bucks, although the differences are rather insignificant. The black brutes

¹⁴ Cripps, *Slow Fade to Black*, 364.

¹⁵ Pospíšil, *Sambo tu již nebydlí?*, 21.

¹⁶ Bogle, *Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies and Bucks*, 10.

are presented as animal-like wild barbarians enjoying chaos and disorder. His craving for physical violence has roots supposedly in repression of his sexuality.¹⁷ Later on this type of a buck served to portray, for example rebellious slaves, militants or revolutionaries in movies such as *So Red the Rose* (1935), *Uptight* (1969), *Putney Swope* (1969).

The black bucks “are always big, baadddd niggers, oversexed and savage, violent and frenzied as they lust for white flesh.”¹⁸ The most famous buck is therefore Griffith's Gus who can be labeled as the perfect archetype of this character. And because Griffith's presentation of the black stereotypes was so convincing and controversial, for a long time after, *The Birth of a Nation*, no such a buck appeared on screens. Not until 1971 and a picture *Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song* by Melvil Van Peebles who rediscovered this figure of a sexually dangerous black man.¹⁹

It was David W. Griffith who set the rules and established exact features of the black characters, through *The Birth of a Nation*. It is rather ridiculous to think that only one man, no matter how talented and progressive in his work, could influence millions of people's views of the African-American population. His movies were ground breaking not only in terms of racism, politics and social hierarchy. But also in terms of film editing and other film technologies, his influence is undeniable. He completely shook the concept of American film-making.

It is true, however, that during World War I several, but very few pictures appeared which acknowledged the participation and bravery of soldiers of African-American origin. *Our Hell Fighters*, *Our Colored Fighters* and even Griffith's *The Greatest Thing in Life* (1918) happened to be movies kindly celebrating the effort and sacrifice of the black troops. Sadly, this false gratitude and “burst” of sudden respect was nothing more than using such a powerful medium as the film was, as political propaganda. Many of these movies were supported and issued by the government, especially the Creel Committee (the Committee on Public Opinion) in order to manipulate people's minds and views. At the time of war, this seemed a great way

¹⁷ Pospíšil, *Sambo tu již nebydlí?*, 20-21.

¹⁸ Bogle, *Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies and Bucks*, 13-14.

¹⁹ Melvil van Peebles, dir., *Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song* (USA: Yeah, 1971).

to emphasize the importance of unity and brotherhood. Once the critical times were over, spreading the idea of tolerance quickly faded away.²⁰ The motion picture industry returned to capturing African-Americans as silly, uncivilized creatures. And so the era of jesters arrived, placing the black actors to the position of amusing objects. During the 1920's child actors and connected comic themes dominated the screens as already mention in Section 2.2. The adult characters ended up in an even worse situation than the cute and lovable pickaninnies. There were only few job opportunities available for the African-American performers and often rather degrading, since white actors in blackfaces took most of their roles. The breakthrough was yet to come with the creation of talking pictures in 1927.²¹

²⁰ Bogle, *Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies and Bucks*, 20.

²¹ Cripps, *Slow Fade to Black*, 219-220.

3. The African-Americans in the Early Cinema

The previous chapter introduced and described in detail all the stereotyped roles the African-American performers could be cast into. The possibility of getting any other part in a movie was absolutely unthinkable and yet to come true. However, at the beginnings of cinema, apart from the mentioned stereotypes, too many black characters were portrayed by blackfaces, which was a common practice ever since the discovery of film. The tradition can be traced even further to the times of slavery when groups of white minstrels (a troupe of comedians, usually white men made up as black performers, presenting songs, jokes, etc.)²² would darken themselves with burnt corks and have fun imitating the hard lives of the cotton plantation slaves. White people blackening their faces pretending to be black may have been viewed as understandable to white people, however insulting it was to the African-Americans. The biggest paradox occurred with the end of the Civil War. The freed slaves were finally allowed to organize their own troupes, even though one thing did not change – the blackfaces. Ironically, the black performers with naturally dark skin were still demanded to color themselves with the burnt cork. This method of capturing black characters was quickly adopted in the film industry. Griffith's *The Birth of a Nation*, which was the masterpiece and the scar on the face of the American cinematography, used blackfaces even for the key roles. Next to the fact that actors in blackfaces were not that convincing, a wave of disagreement and protests was not to be awaited too long. Several civil right institutions, such as the new NAACP (National Association for the Advancement of Colored People)²³ strongly required casting African-American actors in black roles. Certainly, several black actors proved themselves to be talented and even achieved unexpected success, like Noble Johnson and Caroline Snowden in silent films *The Ten Commandments* (1923), *The Thief of Bagdad* (1924), *Little Robinson Crusoe* (1924), *The First Year* (1926),

²² minstrel. Dictionary.com. *Collins English Dictionary - Complete & Unabridged 10th Edition*. HarperCollins Publishers. <<http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/minstrel?s=t>>, Accessed March 6, 2015.

²³ naacp. Dictionary.com. *Dictionary.com Unabridged*. Random House, Inc. <<http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/NAACP?s=t>>, Accessed March 6, 2015.

Topsy and Eva (1927), and many others.²⁴ Thanks to these remarkable performances, the practice of blackfaces gradually stopped being enough to satisfy the audience. However, the enormous breakthrough and the beginning of a new era was brought by the year 1927 and the talking picture *The Jazz Singer*.²⁵ Al Jolson, a Jewish comic appeared in the leading role and in blackface.²⁶ The invention of sound literally caused a hunger not only for talking, but also for singing, dancing and entertainment in films. Therefore in the time between 1927 and 1940 the amount of roles for African-American actors increased significantly, since there was one thing no one could deny – the sense of music and rhythm had always been in their blood. Fox Pictures and MGM were the two studios to realize it and decided to sell it to their audience, and so in 1929 *Hearts in Dixie* and *Hallelujah* came out. One could think that this was the start of a fair play and that the white filmmakers would treat their talented black actors with respect. But even though *Hearts in Dixie* was the first all-black musical, it firmly held on to the set stereotypes of the silent era. Set on a plantation in the South, and playing pickaninnies, always content toms and working hard all day long surely did not seem as a step toward better tomorrows. There was a simple explanation to it, all-black cast and above them a white director, a white screenwriter, white make-up artists, etc. The world kept being interpreted from the white perspective.

Before moving toward more recent history, it is necessary to discuss in detail two milestones of the early cinema, regarding *The Birth of a Nation* (1915) and *Gone with the Wind* (1939). In the 1930's and 1940's several promising black actresses appeared on the screen and it would be a shame not to highlight their effort and appreciate the footprints they left in the American cinematography. And lastly, it is important to focus on black musicals and their absolute star Lena Horne.

3.1. The Birth of a Nation

David W. Griffith's *The Birth of a Nation* from 1915 is best labeled as record-

²⁴ Bogle, *Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies and Bucks*, 26.

²⁵ Alan Crosland, dir., *The Jazz Singer* (USA: Warner Bros., 1927).

²⁶ Cripps, *Slow Fade to Black*, 219-220.

breaking, and that is in many senses. Firstly, it is important but not essential for this thesis to point out the innovations this picture brought in the field of film making technique. Not only was it the very first movie to deal with history, but up to that date films were only short pictures not exceeding fifteen minutes. *The Birth of a Nation* offered more than three hours of screening, which was rather progressive and therefore rare and exciting. Beside its length, Griffith surprised his audience with novelties such as “the close-up, cross-cutting, rapid-fire editing, the iris, the split-screen shot, and realistic and impressionistic lightning.”²⁷ Even though, all these basic methods have undoubtedly had a major impact on shaping the future of film industry, the movie still caused an enormous resistance as well as a wave of enthusiasm and appreciation. All that because of Griffith's interpretation of African-Americans as the picture displayed his very clear yet sharp opinion that the world is in the right order once and only when the blacks know their place, obey their masters and stay happy and hardworking under the white supremacy. Such an open presentation of Griffith's philosophy towards the African-Americans, naturally stirred up a significant amount of controversy.

The story of *The Birth of a Nation* could be divided into three units, peace and harmonious life before the Civil War, the war itself with all the terror and disorder and lastly, the period of the so called Reconstruction of the South.²⁸ There are two families, the Stonemans from the North and the Camerons from the South, living in Piedmont in South Carolina. The Camerons nicely take care of their slaves, they smile at each other when passing the cotton plantations, the slaves do not even hesitate to happily dance for their masters. The house servants are also treated with respect. The world seems so idyllic. There is a romantic line of the story as Phil Stoneman is in love with Margaret Cameron and Ben Cameron falls for Elsie Stoneman minute he sees her picture. Then everything is ruined by the beginning of the Civil War and the friendly South and North become enemies. Several battles, Ben Cameron's heroic acts and the devastated South are captured. When the war is finally over Ben comes back home to find it in a total disrepair. Few days later Phil

²⁷ Bogle, *Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies and Bucks*, 10.

²⁸ Pospíšil, *Sambo tu již nebydlí?*, 24.

and Elsie Stoneman witness Lincoln's assassination in the Ford's theater and their father, a politician Austin Stoneman gains power. Rather harsh times are also yet to come with the Reconstruction. The South is full of carpetbaggers and groups of terrorizing black raiders who arrived from the North. And with their violent behavior they instigate all the remaining slaves to revolt against the white people. The events turn even worse when a mulatto Silas Lynch takes the lead in Piedmont and gradually incites the blacks to rebel against the cruel and tyrannical white Southerners. As the blacks take over the Piedmont government, thanks to the manipulated elections, they are captured as uncivilized, stupid and arrogant, since they are unable to suppress their natural savagery. They come to the Congress meetings barefooted, secretly drinking alcohol, etc., simply portraying the worst manners possible. The already tense events culminate when a typical black buck Gus follows Cameron's younger daughter, Flora, who rather than being raped by the black villain, decides to end her life and jumps from a cliff. Another drama takes place within the Stoneman family when the wicked mulatto Silas Lynch tends to marry Elsie Stoneman by force. Meanwhile, Ben tirelessly seeks for a solution to this seemingly hopeless situation. Then he notices a group of white children with white sheets over their heads having fun scaring black children. And that is how the idea of the Ku Klux Klan comes to life. In the end, everything is saved and solved by the glorious cavalry of the fearless white heroes with covered faces and led by Ben Cameron himself.²⁹ And as the title card says: "The Ku Klax Klan, the organization that saved the South from the anarchy of black rule,..."³⁰

Apart from the brief summary of a rather complex story, it is important to spend some time on the stereotypes that appeared in the movie and which Griffith through *The Birth of a Nation* established. It has been already said that Griffith used all the stereotyped characters and even divided them into categories. One he called the "faithful souls" and as it is obvious from its name, this group included those black servants, especially uncle tom and mammy, who stayed loyal, faithful and protective of the Cameron family through all the good and bad. Via these characters

²⁹ Pospíšil, *Sambo tu již nebydlí?*, 24-26.

³⁰ David W. Griffith, dir., *The Birth of a Nation* (USA: David W. Griffith Corp., 1915).

Griffith confirmed his theory of happy servants who know their place in the white world and therefore everything is as it should be.

The brutal black bucks and black brutes group is the total opposite. They were Griffith's favorite medium to express the true nature of every black man, cruel, violent and longing for white women. Also the mulatto Silas Lynch can be included in this variety of the black bucks as he is determined to have young Elsie Stoneman (Lillian Gish) for his wife no matter whether she likes it or not. Griffith made use of the angel-like appearance of Elsie Stoneman. With her snow white skin and blond hair she seemed the perfect contrast to evil Silas Lynch with both dark skin and soul. However, most important with respect to the topic of this thesis, are the characters of black women in the movie and their significance in it. No need to remind that all the African-American characters in the picture are portrayed by white actresses in blackfaces. Nevertheless, Griffith pays big attention to the individual shades of black used for a particular character. As explained in chapter 2, mammy is always recognizable by her very dark skin and robust unattractive body. Contrarily, the tragic mulatto (the senator Stoneman's mistress Lydia) has much lighter skin which gives her the opportunity to at least approach the white ideal of beauty such as Elsie Stoneman, for instance. Still Lydia is never treated equally and for that reason despises the whites.³¹ This seemingly unimportant classification, not only of black actresses but of all the stereotypes in general, had a great impact on the future of African-American performers. Of course, the movie being extremely controversial and explicitly racist did cause many protests and demonstration, most of which came from the rows of NAACP (National Association for the Advancement of Colored People). In consequence, it was forbidden to project *The Birth of a Nation* in five states. Nevertheless the film-making society accepted Griffith's model of "blackness" and for several decades many actresses were not given roles simply because their skin was too dark.³² This tradition of stereotypes, that Griffith so successfully enforced, survived at least until the 1960's and unofficially even longer. Naturally, the white filmmakers had to hide the fact that they were not willing to

³¹ Pospíšil, *Sambo tu již nebydlí?*, 27.

³² Pospíšil, *Sambo tu již nebydlí?*, 27.

cast African-Americans for any suitable and respectful roles. And so, according to Bogle:

What has to be remembered is that the servant's uniform was the guise certain types wore during a given period. That way Hollywood would give its audience the same product (the types themselves) but with new packaging (the guise).³³

It stays true that *The Birth of a Nation* was at one time the most hated and the most admired picture in the American cinematography.

3.2. Early African-American stars

Before the success and popularity of Hattie McDaniel, there were three black actresses who almost reached Hollywood's respect and the audience's recognition. Nina Mae McKinney, the first African-American lady who was likely to conquer the silver screen, became known thanks to her role as Chick in King Vidor's *Hallelujah* (1929)³⁴. For the first time in an American motion picture, a black woman was considered as a beautiful sex object. It can be even stated that with "Chick" a new stereotype of an attractive black female character was born. With her "cinnamon-colored" skin, Nina Mae McKinney entered the film history as "the screen's first black love-goddess – and its first black victim as well."³⁵ After her first and only success in *Hallelujah* and several minor roles, she was quickly forgotten. For in her times "there were no leading roles for black ladies."³⁶

Fredi Washington, was a legendary beauty and another black actress who seemed to have the chance to become the African-American leading lady. Her white features, dark hair, green eyes and almost white skin, promised her a great opportunity to be accepted as the true black movie star. Unfortunately, for the white audience, it was too soon to acknowledge the tragic mulatto as the first class actress in leading roles, however gorgeous and talented. Fredi Washington achieved short

³³ Bogle, *Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies and Bucks*, 18.

³⁴ King Vidor, dir., *Hallelujah* (USA: MGM, 1929).

³⁵ Bogle, *Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies and Bucks*, 32-33.

³⁶ Bogle, *Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies and Bucks*, 33.

time fame by starring as Peola in *Imitation of Life* (1934).³⁷ For Fredi together with Louis Beavers, who captured Peola's, mother, this movie success turned out to be the start of a promising future. But in the 1930's black actors and actresses' characters were destined only to be servants, maids and mammies. Therefore, Fredi's stardom quickly faded away. Louis Beavers as a prototypical mammy had better chances to win a longer-lasting recognition.³⁸

Louis Beavers could be considered as a forerunner and simultaneously the rival of mammies that Hattie McDaniel later brought to perfection. But contrary to Hattie's characters, who never bit their tongues, Beaver's cooks and mammies were too joyful, naive and always happy. They definitely lacked Hattie's celebrated bossiness. Louis' most famous picture is the already mentioned *Imitation of Life* as it opened the door wider for the other domestic servant roles. Her performance was thought to be so exceptional and convincing that the critics officially complained of Beavers not being nominated for the Academy Award. But such a breakthrough landed in Hattie McDaniel's hands in 1939 with *Gone with the Wind*.

3.3. Gone with the Wind

Talking of famous and influential movies, *Gone with the Wind* (1939)³⁹ is a hot candidate to challenge Griffith's masterpiece. It may not have brought as many innovations as *The Birth of a Nation*, but with its gripping story full of romance, sadness and action interlaced with the drama of the Civil War, *Gone with the Wind* is one of the most beloved and successful movies ever. There is, however, one main difference between these two films. That is the way the African-Americans are captured, as they are viewed in a much more friendly and respectful manner.⁴⁰ In the year 1939, there are no more actors in blackfaces, of course, and so much larger space is given to the black artists to prove their talent in front of the camera. In *Gone with the Wind*, Hattie McDaniel as Mammy and Butterfly McQueen as Prissy

³⁷ John M. Stahl, dir., *Imitation of Life* (USA: Universal Pictures, 1934).

³⁸ Cripps, *Slow Fade to Black*, 207.

³⁹ Victor Fleming, dir., *Gone with the Wind* (USA: MGM, 1939).

⁴⁰ Cripps, *Slow Fade to Black*, 356.

were the most significant black female characters, even though the only black female characters. But still for her top-class performance, Hattie McDaniel was awarded with the Oscar and so she went down in history as the first African-American winning the Academy Award.

Before talking about *Gone with the Wind*, which was undoubtedly Hattie's performance of a life-time, it is important to follow her footsteps on her way up to Hollywood's Olympus. Considering the fact that she always portrayed maids makes it even more admirable how much effort and how much of herself she put into her characters. No matter how inferior or humiliating playing the role of a servant may seem today, it stays true that thanks to her assertiveness and even aggressiveness she managed to shift a common unimportant black maid to a socially equal level with her white masters.

When Hattie McDaniel arrived to the Mecca of film industry in the 1920's, there were not many possibilities for a black woman to do that. Hattie provided the best explanation by saying: "Why should I complain about making seven thousand dollars a week playing a maid? If I didn't, I'd be making seven dollars a week actually being one."⁴¹ Having only these two options and thinking of her future success, Hattie made a good choice, indeed.

Still it took some time for her to build up "the perfect mammy", and even though she was rather fearless and bossy right from the start, the natural impudence so typical of her came around with her 1935 film *Alice Adams* and reached a total summit in *Gone with the Wind* four years later.

Even in her early films, Hattie did not hesitate to show her natural strength and determination that had absolutely nothing to do with the original image of an oppressed black servant. Her mammy characters embodied true mother figures, who deep inside their hard and unyielding shells carried the warmest heart and willingness to do anything for their loved ones.

To point out all films in which Hattie started as an indispensable mammy is almost impossible as she always gave a one hundred percent performance. However, there

⁴¹ Bogle, *Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies and Bucks*, 82.

are several movies which are worth mentioning – movies in which she challenged the borders of the relationships with her white masters.

First was the year 1932 and the picture *Blonde Venus*⁴² by director Josef von Sternberg. Here McDaniel provides a hiding place for the protagonist, played by Marlene Dietrich, who is running away with her son who is to be put in prison. Together they find a shelter in Hattie's house and finally she saves the situation when she warns them about the coming police. In *Blonde Venus*, Hattie's character may not have been as authoritative as she was yet to become, but more likely she portrayed her mammy as a carrying and comforting black woman who is not only there to help Dietrich in a seemingly hopeless situation, but also as a loyal friend of a white heroine.

The second example is from George Stevens' 1935 *Alice Adams*⁴³ movie where Daniel's mammy gave her first ground breaking performance. The mammy in *Alice Adams* got her one step closer to perfection and her famous role in *Gone with the Wind*. This time Hattie appeared next to Katherine Hepburn, who played a low-class, poor but smart and well-educated girl longing to be a part of the high society. In order to make a good impression on a rich young man, the Adams family pays a black cook to prepare and serve dinner for them. Hattie, however, speaks her mind too often and without any hesitation and so the family has to take all kinds of unwanted comments (more likely commands) from their part-time black servant. This rather progressive attitude wholly changed the concept of the early set stereotype of mammy.

Through her performance in *Alice Adams*, Hattie uncompromisingly set down all her future relationships with the white masters. Simultaneously, she never stopped being a loyal and hard-working maid, who always enforced her opinions and never hesitated to criticize everyone around when necessary – but only with the best intention, of course.

Her courage to speak what she thought of the white uncivilized people out loud

⁴² Josef von Sternberg, dir., *Blonde Venus* (USA: Paramount Pictures, 1932).

⁴³ George Stevens, dir., *Alice Adams* (USA: RKO Radio Pictures, 1935).

naturally met with an incredible reaction from the black audience, almost as if Hattie McDaniel had spoken for them all.

Before the height of *Gone with the Wind*, was a movie made a year earlier in 1938 called *The Mad Miss Manton*⁴⁴. Hattie played a maid named Hilda who takes care of a young reckless girl portrayed by Barbara Stanwyck. Hilda throws orders all around her, which brought her even more respect and jealousy of the black audience. Still at the end thanks to her maternal instinct and attitude towards Stanwyck, she saves the protagonist's life.

Finally, there was the year 1939 and McDaniel's best performance as a mammy in *Gone with the Wind*. This American very classic is set in the Old American South. The main story line concerns the stormy relationship between young, stubborn and rebellious Scarlett O'Hara (Vivien Leigh) and charming cynic Rhett Butler (Clark Gable) that turns into a tragic romance. However, Scarlett is blindly in love with naive Ashley Wilks who is to marry his cousin Melanie. And so Scarlett marries a man she does not love just out of spite. All this complex net of relationships is set into the drama of the Civil War and then the Reconstruction.

Despite all the tragedies and misfortunes Scarlett has to face, her never-ending energy and unbreakable spirit is truly admirable.

Hattie McDaniel portrayed the unforgettable Mammy who acts like the one and only head of the entire O'Hara family. And even though she does everything with love and good intention, Hattie definitely does not hold her tongue back and always enforces her idea of right and wrong. It would not be an exaggeration to claim that Mammy takes up the role of a mother and builds up a very strong and protective relationship especially with Scarlett, although Hattie does not take anything from her.

Apart from McDaniel's figure there is a young rather hysterical but kind servant girl Prissy, played by Butterfly McQueen. Her performance unfortunately often stays underestimated or even left unnoticed. In contrast to Hattie McDaniel who is more like a representation of order and good morals, McQueen's Prissy is the complete opposite. Her character is comic, frivolous, and she behaves a little absurdly.

⁴⁴ Leigh Jason, dir., *The Mad Miss Manton* (USA: RKO Radio Pictures, 1938).

Nevertheless, Prissy serves as a perfect lightning rod during several tense moments and with her high-toned voice she provides a certain element of comedy. Besides Prissy and Mammy, there are other black characters worth mentioning. There are O'Hara's house servant Pork played by Oscar Polk, or Everett Brown in a role of Big Sam who happens to save Scarlett when being attacked in Shantytown. All in all, the 1930's were the era when African-American actors and actresses could only appear as servants. Yet *Gone with the Wind* was the first American motion picture whose white characters treated their black servants and maids as human beings.

The movie and the Oscar represented a watershed, after which blacks were owed some due in roles and in public attention to their feelings. If

McDaniel was not a causal factor she represented a shift in racial arrangements.⁴⁵

Considering that Hattie McDaniel, the central mammy figure of the silver screen, dared to command such stars as Marlene Dietrich, Kathrine Hepburn, Clark Gable or Vivien Leigh was a great step forward in terms of social equality, at least in films. Her courageous, straightforward but kind nature opened many doors for the future generations of talented actresses who continued and completed her endeavor.

3.4. Black-cast musicals

Ever since sound entered the film industry, singing, dancing and any other kind of entertainment was more than welcomed - it was searched for. It was also the period of time when African-Americans had the chance to stand out above others. With their natural musical and dance talent they could become successful entertainers. The era of black-cast musicals could be framed approximately from 1929 to 1943 when the most famous pictures appeared on screens, introducing several shining stars, such as Ethel Waters and two beauties Hazel Scott and Lena Horne.

To truly understand the development with its big paradox of the black-cast musicals, it is important to turn the attention to the historical and sociopolitical context.

⁴⁵ Cripps, *Slow Fade to Black*, 365-366.

Between 1910 and 1930 the so called Great Migration took place in the United States which had an enormous effect not only on African-Americans but the entire American population. Up to 40% of black inhabitants decided to move from the South to the big cities in the North, such as New York, Pittsburgh, Chicago or Detroit. These urban places symbolized some kind of a promised land where individuals had the opportunity to start all over and lead their lives in better conditions.⁴⁶

Contrarily, the filmmakers continued with their point of view on the lifestyle of the African-Americans. The position of the blacks in the United States in films stayed unchanged as the filmmakers totally ignored the significant sociopolitical progress and the entire migration process that had been going on. And so all of the films and musicals particularly made between 1929 and 1943 were set in a pastoral Southern setting. The early musicals were even connected with the old plantation system.⁴⁷

Three pictures that can be considered as key black-cast musicals are *Hallelujah* (1929), *The Green Pastures* (1936) and *Cabin in the Sky* (1943), what they have in common is the already mentioned rural setting put into contrast with the urban space.

The youngest of this musical trio *Hallelujah* from 1929 was already mentioned when talking about Nina Mae McKinney who portrayed the memorable and first sexy female character Chick. Before focusing on the two important female roles and the other actresses, the picture should be introduced in a more general sense since it happened to be the model storyline for several future films.

As explained earlier in this chapter, the process of the Great Migration did have a big impact on the presentation of the African-Americans on the screens, even though the impact meant either ignoring the movement to the cities or capturing it as a rather undesirable situation. This principle was widely applied in the film industry, and *Hallelujah* was the front runner.

The film tells a story of the Johnson family whose members happily work at their little farm, take care of each other and, of course, sing all the time during labor or at

⁴⁶ Paula J. Massood, *Black City Cinema: African American Urban Experiences in Film* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2003), 12.

⁴⁷ Massood, *Black City Cinema*, 14-15.

their leisure. They represent an exemplary rural hard-working but content family. The idyll is, however, ruined when the oldest son Zeke (Daniel Haynes) and his younger brother travel to the city to gather the family's finances and meet with a beautiful cabaret singer and dancer Chick. Zeke is yet to discover that this attractive lady is going to turn upside down not only his world, but also all his family earnings. Chick tricks him into gambling and without even knowing it he happens to lose all the money, and even worse, he kills his brother by accident in a bar fight. After these unlucky events, Zeke decides to redeem his sins by becoming a preacher. Chick follows him but brings him only more trouble. In the end Zeke with burst of anger kills both Chick and her lover. Finally, he returns back to his peaceful home to the love of his life Missy Rosse (Victoria Spivey), his adopted sister.⁴⁸

In *Hallelujah*, the contrast between the country and the city is expressed through the characters of Chick and Missy Rosse and what parts they play with respect to Zeke. Clearly, Missy Rosse, the good girl, embodies the calm, warm environment of the rural life and security. Contrarily, Chick is a typical wild city girl who enchants anybody and everybody with her energy and charm. And so she represents all evil hidden in the city that has the power to destroy all the morals and values of good country people. Not only do the girls stand for totally different spaces, village and urban, but they are also given totally different personal qualities that are thought to be prototypical for country and city inhabitants. That is why Chick comes out to be selfish, arrogant, reckless and flirty, and Missy Rosse, perfectly the opposite with her caring, loving and selfless nature spending her day doing household chores. Chick's sexuality and manners are based on her clothes, language, seductive appearance and moves and, of course, confident behavior.

Since *Hallelujah* is a musical, the songs carry similar features as Chick and Missy Rosse, for the city lives in the rhythm of untamed jazz and blues, meanwhile the countryside flows from work to rest with spirituals and gospels.

By introducing the city space with all the bad and wrong possible and the village as the idyllic and peaceful place, the filmmakers wanted to achieve at least some kind of limitation of the black migration to the big centers. However, it is sad to think that

⁴⁸ Bogle, *Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies and Bucks*, 28-31.

the first movie ever concerning life of an African-American family would hide inside a motif of such an unfriendly attitude towards the black newcomers.⁴⁹

The year of 1936 brought to life a big hit, another black musical, which was produced by Warner Brothers and directed by William Keighly and Marc Connelly, *The Green Pastures*⁵⁰. It was one of the most famous and successful American classics that kept the message that the Southern rural space was the idyll place for the African-American families. What was only a little seed in *Hallelujah*, grew into a tree with *The Green Pastures*. The concept of the city being bad and evil and the country good and friendly was exaggerated by using the metaphor of heaven and earth. Surprisingly heaven represented exemplary country life.

The picture consists of several parts each of them telling one biblical story. The purpose of the main theme was to point out the importance of religion and faith in general and to place it inseparably right next to the rural space, emphasizing that good morals are not a common practice of the big cities.

As well as in *Hallelujah*, “the women from earth” are vulgar, rude and impolite, and their behavior is controlled by their sexuality. The men spend time gambling and drinking, carry guns, nobody works and similarly to women, respect and religious belief are foreign words to them. The heaven – rural inhabitants capture the typical well-behaved, religiously devoted society that can only wonder and mourn for the pitiful sinners from the earth.

Although, the film gained a great deal of appreciation and popularity, only one actor, the protagonist of *The Green Pastures*, Rex Ingram did have a bright career. The ladies had to wait for their turn for quite some time.

Cabin in the Sky and also *Stormy Weather*, both released in 1943 turned out as a total climax of the black-cast musicals and of Lena Horne's career. The storyline of *Cabin in the Sky*⁵¹ may seem from today's point of view a little old-fashioned and off topic, but basically all of the 1940's musicals copied the *Hallelujah* theme – a good black boy is tricked by a devilishly attractive girl. In the center of the story, there is

⁴⁹ Massood, *Black City Cinema*, 16-22.

⁵⁰ Marc Connelly, William Keighley, dir., *The Green Pastures* (USA: Warner Bros., 1936).

⁵¹ Vincente Minnelli, dir., *Cabin in the Sky* (USA: MGM, 1943).

an ordinary couple Little Joe Jackson and his wife Petunia who lead a happy married life, but then the leaders of heaven and hell start to argue over Little Joe's soul.

Lucifer Jr. definitely does not intend to play fair and so throws dangerously beautiful Georgia Brown into Little Joe's way in order to trick him. Finally, Little Joe's soul is saved thanks to his loving wife who keeps praying for his salvation.

As already indicated, the plot may not have been very original and exciting, but in 1943 it was considered an amazingly entertaining spectacle packed with all the black stars of that time. Apart from gorgeous Lena Horne starring as Georgia Brown, Ethel Waters got the role of Petunia and Eddie Anderson played Little Joe Jackson. But the film's success was also supported by other big names, such as Rex Ingram in the role of Lucifer Jr., Butterfly McQueen or Louis Armstrong.

Sadly, even with the great approval from the side of the white audience, *Cabin in the Sky* did not managed to change the representation of blacks in film. "Again Negroes were removed from the daily routine of real American life and placed in a remote idealized world."⁵²

Finally, it would be a shame not to mention one significant lady who mixed up the stereotyped conventions in Hollywood. In the 1940's, an extremely talented and lovely young woman and Lena Horne's rival known as Hazel Scott appeared on the American culture scene and soon reached its very top. Scott stood out from all the other actresses that had come before her, not only because of her extraordinary beauty and music knowledge, but mainly thanks to her determination not to fall into any of the early set black categories. It stays true that of everyone, she was the right celebrity with her perfect education and appearance, who could afford to rebel. And as she said herself in 1945: "[the] black women were too often cast as whores or maids."⁵³ And so she achieved roles of a sexy but sophisticated, charming pianist, in pictures such as *Something to Shout About* (1943), *I Dood It* (1943), *Broadway Rhythm* (1944) or the famous *Rhapsody in Blue* (1945). However, one could claim that her female characters, usually cabaret singers and performers were not any better than the roles of "Chicks", Hazel Scott undoubtedly managed to shift the

⁵² Bogle, *Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies and Bucks*, 131.

⁵³ Bogle, *Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies and Bucks*, 122.

position of black actresses towards a brighter and more promising future.

In closing of this chapter and before getting to the period when the set conventions and stereotypes finally underwent crucial change, it is important to realize that all of the brilliant actresses of the later cinema owe their success to those who fought for the equal film opportunities. And maybe without even knowing it, great ladies such as Hattie McDaniel, Nina Mae McKinney, Fredi Washington, Lena Horne or Ethel Waters kept opening the gate to Hollywood and its silver screen wider and wider. Step by step, role by role they got closer to breaking free from the stereotypes, but yet it was too soon for the white audience to overcome racial prejudice and to welcome a black leading actress to any respectful and serious role. Even though, the stereotyped characters, or at least such labels were not in use in the 1940's, the principle did not change. Even the exceptional and outstanding actresses had to settle for types of roles as Chick (*Hallelujah*), Georgia Brown (*Cabin in the Sky*), or various cabaret singers, dancers, etc. However, the filmmakers tried to hide the fact that all of these characters were based on the "good old" tragic mulatto. It was rather clear that breaking from the stereotypes was going to be an uneasy task. But as the following chapter will reveal, stars like Dorothy Dandridge, Whoopi Goldberg, Halle Berry or Oprah Winfrey rose to the occasion quite well.

4. Today's Cinema and Breaking from the Stereotypes

It would not be exaggerating to claim that the motion picture industry has always had an enormous power to influence public opinion.

The emphasis on film is so central because it more than any other media experience determines how blackness and black people are seen and how other groups will respond to [them].⁵⁴

Therefore, the last chapter will introduce several excellent actresses who in any way significantly affected the representation of the African-American women in American film and so gained recognition and respect not only of the white audience but also the entire film industry. As the time went on, the possibilities for the African-American actresses grew larger and roles slowly stopped being limited only to the stereotypes. At the beginning of this, let's say recent history of the American cinema and the first step on a ladder of future appreciation, there stood Dorothy Dandridge. On the very top and decades later, Halle Berry definitely knocked down the remaining prejudice about the African-American actresses when she became the first black lady in a leading role to win the Academy Award in 2002 for *Monster's Ball*. Between Dorothy Dandridge and Halle Barry, there are fifty years and an immense number of actresses who contributed to the future success and with their talent and great determination slowly worked their way to that one evening of 2002 when through Halle Berry the history was finally changed.

Unfortunately, it is rather impossible to mention all the actresses who would certainly deserve to be included in this thesis. And so the main focus will be kept on those who anyhow and in any extent took part in breaking from the stereotyped characters. Naturally, actresses awarded with an Oscar cannot be omitted either. The following paragraphs will be divided into decades, starting in the 1950's and its representatives Ethel Waters and Dorothy Dandridge as the key figures, however, only the crucial films shall be discussed. The 1960's were the period of changes, power and determination and each picture as a whole stood above individual actors and actresses. The 1970's and 1980's and actresses Diana Ross, Diana Sands, Cicely

⁵⁴ Bell Hooks, *Black looks: race and representation* (Boston: South End Press, 1992), 5.

Tyson slowly predicted the success of the 1990's stars such as Whitney Houston, Whoopi Goldberg. Their effort was then fulfilled with start of New Millennium, particularly by Halle Berry, Mo'Nique, Jennifer Hudson and other great actresses who has written history with their perfect performances.

4.1. The 1950's

In this period, it would be too soon to talk about any magnificent changes or even growing apart from the established characters. As the two extraordinary actresses, even though completely different and suitable for completely different roles, rose high above others, Ethel Waters and Dorothy Dandridge.

Ethel Waters experienced success already in the 1940's, particularly in 1943 as she starred in the black-cast musical *Cabin in the Sky*. Later in the 40's Waters and basically the whole Hollywood underwent an unemployment crisis and it was not until 1952 when Ethel Waters gained back her fame and recognition thanks to Stanley Kramer and Fred Zinnemann's *The Member of the Wedding*⁵⁵. Most importantly, “[for] the first time a black actress was used to carry a major-studio white production.”⁵⁶ In *The Member of the Wedding*, Ethel Waters portrayed a housekeeper and cook named Berenice who nourishes, comforts and provides security for two lonely children Frankie Adams and John-Henry. From today's perspective the plot may seem a little flat, but the film brings a deep psychological story capturing the relationship between Berenice and the children, as she, by sharing her own often pitiful and tough experiences, helps the children find their own place in life. It is true that the role of Berenice strikingly resembles the mammy characters, but she gave so much of herself into the part she played that it brought back her stardom.

For black audiences, Ethel Waters was the personification of the black spirit they believed had prevailed during the hard times of slavery, and they felt she brought dignity and wisdom to the race.⁵⁷

⁵⁵ Fred Zinnemann, dir., *The Member of the Wedding* (USA: Stanley Kramer Company, 1952).

⁵⁶ Bogle, *Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies and Bucks*, 162.

⁵⁷ Bogle, *Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies and Bucks*, 164-165.

Her last movie of the 1950's *The Sound and the Fury* (1959) sadly never achieved any great interest or positive response and so the star-like career of Ethel Waters headed to its end. Up to the 1970's she could be seen in several minor pictures and TV shows, but it was the ultimate end of one of the greatest and most successful actresses of the 1950's.

Dorothy Dandridge was a top class actress, admired beauty and the brightest African-American star of the 1950's. She was also a woman who had the talent and potential to rule the Hollywood empire. To prove herself a professional, and also to attract the attention of the filmmakers, Dandridge created and preserved an image which included and expressed all the typical attributes of her predecessors, such as Nina Mae McKinney, Fredi Washington and Lena Horne.⁵⁸ For the future generation of actresses, Dorothy Dandridge became the symbol of hope and belief in better tomorrows. For those whose days of fame were over, she possibly represented the accomplishment of their own efforts to put an end to the African-American woman performers being placed into inferior and demeaning roles. Unfortunately, what the white filmmakers saw in her was just another perfect fit for tragic mulatto characters.

In any case, Dorothy Dandridge turned out to be an exceptionally good actress and the first genuine movie star ever. Before giving her best performance in *Carmen Jones* (1954), she appeared in three minor pictures yet for Dandridge's career crucial, *Tarzan's Peril* (1951), *The Harlem Globetrotters* (1951) and *Bright Road* (1953).

Otto Preminger's *Carmen Jones*⁵⁹, inspired by George Bizet's opera *Carmen*, is often called "the last of the black-cast musicals."⁶⁰ The film tells a story of an African-American girl Carmen Jones (Dorothy Dandridge) who works in a factory and a foolish boy Joe (Harry Belafonte) who is so enchanted by her that runs away from army and both leave for Chicago. After cheating on him, Joe kills Carmen for her infidelity. *Carmen Jones* as a movie may not have been anyhow progressive or

⁵⁸ Bogle, *Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies and Bucks*, 166.

⁵⁹ Otto Preminger, dir., *Carmen Jones* (USA: Carlyle Productions, 1954).

⁶⁰ Massood, *Black City Cinema*, 15.

extremely exciting in terms of the plot, as it followed the story line of *Hallelujah* (1929) and other earlier musicals capturing a well-behaved boy who goes astray because of a bad but attractive girl. However, Carmen Jones as a character seemed to be tailor-made for Dorothy Dandridge, and it immediately turned her into a number one African-American leading actress. Furthermore, the part in *Carmen Jones* was a major breakthrough to a larger extent for Dorothy Dandridge happened to be the very first black woman ever nominated for the Academy Award as the Best Actress in a Leading Role.⁶¹

Although, the Oscar nomination looked like the perfect start of the perfect career, nothing of that kind was predestined to happen in Dandridge's future.

Still, after the great success, Dorothy Dandridge did star in other movies but none of them managed to achieve such recognition as *Carmen Jones* in 1954 and sadly, all the roles she was offered were more or less only slightly different versions of Carmen. Three years later in 1957, one picture of a bigger importance came to Dandridge's way, *Island in the Sun*⁶². What was so surprising or even shocking about the movie in that time was the fact that for the first time the protagonist couple consisted of a white leading man (John Justin) and an African-American lady by his side.

Today some might think it totally unimportant that Dorothy Dandridge was the first black woman ever to be held in the arms of a white man in an American movie. Yet, because she was permitted to bring integrated love to the mass audience in an age about to erupt in chaos over the issue of integration, she remains a socially significant figure in this film.⁶³

This picture clearly was a big deal and it must be pointed out that several Southern states refused to screen *Island in the Sun*, simply because they strongly disagreed with the interracial love romance, even in a movie.

After *Carmen Jones* and *Island in the Sun*, Dorothy Dandridge was cast in several pictures, for instance *The Decks Ran Red* (1958), *Tamango* (1957), and *Malaga*

⁶¹ "Meet This Year's Governors Awards Honorees," November 10, 2014, <<http://www.oscars.org/news/meet-years-governors-awards-honorees>> Accessed April 4, 2015.

⁶² Robert Rossen, dir., *Island in the Sun* (USA: Twentieth Century Fox Film Corporation, 1957).

⁶³ Bogle, *Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies and Bucks*, 171-172.

(1960), and no matter her brilliant acting talent, the audience did not accept the films very well. In 1959, Dandridge starred next to Sidney Poitier, a living legend of the African-American film, the movie is known as *Porgy and Bess*⁶⁴ which for her memorable performance as Bess guaranteed her the last triumph. From then on very few roles crossed her way and her stardom gradually faded away. And that was a sad beginning of an even sadder end of the great Dorothy Dandridge.

Still, she was one of the best actresses of the 1950's and possibly of all time.

Dorothy Dandridge always gave everything and more into her characters, although she was stuck with the label of a tragic mulatto. But maybe all the sorrows, failures and misfortunes she had to face and go through during her life made her such an exceptional actress and her characters much more believable and authentic.

In the early 1960's it was a known fact that Dandridge lived a rather self-destructive life, after her divorce in 1962 she found herself with no money and no hope for better future. In 1965, only forty-two years old, the once-famous leading actress decided to end her life via overdose.

In the end, Dorothy Dandridge lived out and apotheosized the role she was best at, the doomed tragic mulatto, trapped, so the film industry believed, because of her color.⁶⁵

4.2. The 1960's

There are way too many things, figures and events that characterize the United States of America in the 1960's. More than anything else it was a decade of the Civil Rights Movement and the Space Race between the USA and the Soviet Union. The Civil Rights Movement, its development, consequences and the key personality of Dr. Martin Luther King are closely connected to the topic of this thesis for the 1960's may be considered the most important period in the history of the African-Americans. All the political changes, later fights for equality and racial tolerance naturally transformed into the motion picture industry as well. At the beginning

⁶⁴ Otto Preminger, dir., *Porgy and Bess* (USA: Samuel Goldwyn Company, 1959).

⁶⁵ Bogle, *Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies and Bucks*, 175.

there were demonstrations, sit-ins and boycotts which later grew into violence, fights and riots. "In 1960, Negroes were quietly asking for their rights. In 1969, blacks were demanding them."⁶⁶

The world of film-making was forced to experience similar process. Black performers no longer cared for inferior and oppressed characters, they became militants. Such radical transformation of African-Americans' attitude came hand in hand with a change of movie themes, places and issues that begged to be depicted. And so the real cruel world of ghettos, racism, hatred and poverty entered the screens. Another remarkable step forward in the process was provided by the arrival of African-American screenwriters who took care of authentic dialogs and realistic characters.⁶⁷ But the attention and recognition belonged more to the particular motion pictures than to the actors and actresses. Not that there were not any significant performers, one could be named as a representative of them all, Sidney Poitier. But in a severe period such as the 1960's and the Civil Rights Movement, the message included in a film was just of a bigger importance.

Message movies signify a crucial phase in American cinematic production. Not only do they redefine the spaces in which African-Americans had previously appeared, they also acknowledge the social environment surrounding and enabling them through the inclusion of discourses of racism and integration."⁶⁸

In 1961, a dramatic movie by Daniel Petrie *A Raisin in the Sun*⁶⁹ was shot and well accepted by the audience. The story of the Younger family takes place in Chicago where mother Lena Younger (Claudia McNeil) lives together in a small apartment with her son Walter (Sidney Poitier) and his wife Ruth (Ruby Dee) and children Beneatha (Diana Sands) and Travis. The film was progressive and special for it focused on the psychology, feelings and inner struggles of every family member and the family as a whole. Moreover, the three ladies Claudia McNeil, Rube Dee and Diana Sands, the youngest and least experienced, were all praised for their performances in *A Raisin in the Sun*.

⁶⁶ Bogle, *Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies and Bucks*, 195.

⁶⁷ Bogle, *Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies and Bucks*, 195.

⁶⁸ Massood, *Black City Cinema*, 81.

⁶⁹ Daniel Petrie, dir., *A Raisin in the Sun* (USA: Columbia Pictures Corporation, 1961).

Diana Sands had a rather successful career ahead of her. She presented herself as a modern, sophisticated, witty young woman and refused to be classified into any of the stereotyped categories, neither mammy nor tragic mulatto. Later on she appeared in a less memorable picture *An Affair of the Skin* (1963), but in the 1970's she was cast in more appreciated films such as *The Landlord* (1970), *Georgia*, *Georgia* (1972), *Willie Dynamite* (1973), etc. Unfortunately, in 1973 Diana Sands died of cancer at the top of her career and at the young age of only thirty-nine.⁷⁰

Ruby Dee was viewed as a fragile, weak and very vulnerable woman hoping to be loved but always meets with rejection or disrespectful treatment. However, many times Rube Dee proved this theory wrong and untrue. She showed that the scale of female characters she was able to portray was much larger. Ruby Dee continued to play all kinds of different roles, as in *The Balcony* (1963), *Gone Are the Days* (1964), *The Incident* (1967) and many more, although none of them was as successful as *A Raisin in the Sun*. In 1972, she starred next to Harry Belafonte and again Sidney Poitier in a picture titled *Buck and the Preacher*⁷¹, and there was "a typical Ruby Dee understanding-endurable-sensitive-wife character."⁷²

As for Claudia McNeil, her role of mother Lena Younger in *A Raisin in the Sun* was considered well performed, nevertheless critics found her acting little man-like and so she was often compared to Hattie McDaniel's mammies but seemed too serious.

4.3. The 1970's

In the 1970's, many successful actresses whose careers started off in the previous decade, such as already mentioned Diana Sands, kept their places in the film industry. However, the main importance of the 1970's lied in the increased number of the African-Americans working in the motion pictures industry. There were never as many black actors, actresses, screenwriters and directors involved with film as in the seventh decade of the 20th century. Ironically, side by side such a progress, something of the old stereotype system survived, there were bucks, coons and the

⁷⁰ Bogle, *Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies and Bucks*, 198.

⁷¹ Sidney Poitier, dir., *Buck and the Preacher* (USA: Columbia Pictures Corporation, 1972).

⁷² Bogle, *Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies and Bucks*, 199.

all time favorite tragic mulatto. All of them could be found in the 1970's films, only dressed in current clothing and set in a different situations and environment. By the end of the 1970's the genre of black-cast musicals returned to the screens and once more attracted a big deal of attention. But still the black audience longed for a movie hero that would stand up for not only his, but for the rights of the entire African-American community in the United States. A hero they could identify with and who would carry on the spirit of the 1960's and the Civil Rights Movement. There is a simple explanation to this primarily male perspective, for the 1970's nationalistic and emancipation tendencies were mainly based on the African-American masculinity and strength. The issue of African-American femininity became a center of interest in the 1980's.⁷³ Clearly, the 1970's belonged to the men of the African-American population. Therefore, the required heroic qualities were more likely to be found among the male performers, but neither the actresses fell behind and showed some great acting skills, *The Landlord* from 1970 starring Diana Sands can serve as a perfect example. Apart from Sands, Diana Ross and Cicely Tyson should be named as the two main woman representatives of the 1970's. Cicely Tyson, "the first great black heroine on the screen,"⁷⁴ started her career in the late 1950's, but the greatest success had been waiting for the year of 1972 and the movie titled *Sounder*⁷⁵. Similarly to Diana Ross, Tyson symbolized an intelligent and brave woman and so were also her characters. For her performance in *Sounder*, she was nominated for an Academy Award as the best actress. Moreover, Cicely Tyson became the first African-American actress of a dark skin, unlike tragic mulatto, who was given a chance to portray respectful, serious, leading characters. Apart from the movie hit *Sounder*, which was almost worshiped by the audience and the critics, Cicely Tyson, sadly, played in pictures that did not managed to really fulfill her true potential. Nowadays, Diana Ross may be better known for her long-lasting and more than successful career of a soul singer. But starting in the 1970's, she has been a

⁷³ Pospíšil, *Sambo tu již nebydlí?*, 85.

⁷⁴ Bogle, *Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies and Bucks*, 249.

⁷⁵ Martin Ritt, dir., *Sounder* (USA: Radnitz/Mattel Productions, 1972).

respected actress with a rather impressive acting career behind her. She gained her recognition by starring a 1972 picture inspired by life of Billie Holiday, *The Lady Sings Blues*⁷⁶, where she appeared next to Billy Dee Williams. The movie came out as an autobiographical romance and thanks to the great performances of the leading couple was very well accepted by the audience. No wonder then that the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences nominated Diana Ross for an Oscar as the Best Leading Actress. In a Berry Gordy Jr.'s *Mahogany* (1975)⁷⁷, Diana Ross portrayed an appreciated model who is forced to choose between a shiny future career and love.

Black audience [...] seemed happy with this romance – and the fact that at least here the upwardly mobile young black woman was portrayed as having a chance to make a choice. [...] *Mahogany's* central character [...] is determined to keep her personal racial identity intact.⁷⁸

This new interpretation of an African-American woman who is not afraid to leave the urban ghetto and to follow her dream to succeed in the big world, was viewed surprisingly well by both black and white audiences.

The last movie to point out in Diana Ross' 1970's career and also the last movie to mention within the decade is *The Wiz* (1978)⁷⁹. Regarding Ross's earlier characters of strong, emancipated, can-do-anything women, her role of shy, fearful Dorothy in *The Wiz* was truly a step backwards. However, the musical was packed with stars, besides Diana Ross, Michael Jackson, Mabel King and others, but even these famous names did not manage to save the poor script by Joel Schumacher which was together with direction of Sidney Lumet, according to the critics very badly done. As a consequence, the film industry believed the black audience did not care about black pictures and therefore, the 1970's starting off with an enormous potential, ended up lacking any kind of interest. Fortunately, the 1980's finally were to mix up the Hollywood conventions and to attack the African-American characters classification.

⁷⁶ Sidney J. Furie, dir., *The Lady Sings Blues* (USA: Paramount Pictures, 1972).

⁷⁷ Berry Gordy, Jr., dir., *Mahogany* (USA: Motown Productions, 1975).

⁷⁸ Bogle, *Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies and Bucks*, 254-255.

⁷⁹ Sidney Lumet, dir., *The Wiz* (USA: Universal Pictures, 1978).

4.4. The 1980's

The 1980's African-American cinematography is inseparably linked with the personality and work of Spike Lee, the very first highly appreciated black director whose films redefined the African-American cinema and helped many unknown actors and actresses to start off their careers.

Besides Spike Lee, the 1980's introduced names which are in today's perspective the greatest African-American performers, such as Eddie Murphy, Danny Glover, Morgan Freeman, Whoopi Goldberg or Halle Berry. They all sowed the seeds of their future success in the soil of the 1980's decade.

Similarly to the 1970's men actors had much bigger chances to be cast into leading roles and women were left with minor or uninteresting parts. There were, of course, exceptions such as Spielberg's *The Color Purple* (1985), and brilliant ladies such as Whoopi Goldberg and Oprah Winfrey.

The 1980's also brought a new phenomenon that is the interracial film partnership between white and black men, based on mutual respect, trust, honesty and friendship, however, the white man was always the one in control. Such duos could be found in many popular pictures, typical examples being Sylvester Stallone and Carl Weathers as Rocky and Apollo in the *Rocky* series (1976 to 1985), or Mel Gibson and Danny Glover in *Lethal Weapon* (1987), and many others.⁸⁰ An unforgettably hilarious performance was also given by Eddie Murphy as Axel Foley in *Beverly Hills Cop* (1984), or later in *Coming to America* (1988).

Anyway, *The Color Purple*⁸¹ with its topic of Southern women's hard lives and outstanding performances of Whoopi Goldberg, Oprah Winfrey, Margaret Avery and Danny Glover, has been one of the most interesting picture of the 1980's focusing on African-American women. Nominated for eleven Oscars, including Best Picture, Best Actress in a Leading Role for Whoopi Goldberg and two nominations for Avery and Winfrey as Best Supporting Actresses, however, *The Color Purple* being rather controversial caused both approval and refusal.

The movie was based on an Alice Walker's novel of the same name, *The Color*

⁸⁰ Bogle, *Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies and Bucks*, 271-272.

⁸¹ Steven Spielberg, dir., *The Color Purple* (USA: Warner Bros., 1985).

Purple, for which she received the Pulitzer Prize. The protagonist Celie (Whoopi Goldberg) is an ordinary uneducated woman whose life has been a living hell, full of experiences with violent cold-hearted men. Therefore, Celie turns into a very closed lonely woman who finally develops a special intimate relationship with her husband's (Danny Glover) lover Shug (Margaret Avery). Thanks to this true more-than-a-friendship, Celia gradually gains emotional strength and courage to oppose her cruel husband. The happy end is intensified by Celia's reunion with her beloved sister Nettie.⁸²

Whoopi Goldberg came out as the ultimate African-American female star, even though she was most often cast as a comedian, or an absolutely unattractive little masculine woman. Still, in the 1980's, Goldberg definitely was the best-known black actress in American film industry, however, the Hollywood feared the influence she might have had on her audience and for that reason she kept being given roles which wasted her talent and potential. Goldberg's other 1980's movies were, for example *Jumpin' Jack Flash*, *Fatal Beauty* or *Burglar* all of them made in 1987.

Whoopi Goldberg's triumphal role was yet to come in 1990 with the famous picture *Ghost*.

The work of the young just starting director Spike Lee undoubtedly secured a significant progress of African-American cinema and gave it a totally new direction. Lee's first attempt, *She's Gotta Have It* (1986)⁸³ meant an important breakthrough since for the first time, a black director captured a true life, relations and issues of the African-American community without imposing any fixed interpretation on his audience. Moreover, the protagonist is an independent, and sexually very active, woman Nola Darling (Tracy Camilla Jones) who enjoys company of three men from different social classes.⁸⁴

This independent production picture certainly brought some fresh air to the 1980's film industry, but it was Lee's fourth movie *Do the Right Thing* (1989)⁸⁵ which took

⁸² Jacqueline Bobo, "Reading Through the Text: The Black Woman as Audience," in *Black American Cinema*, ed. Manthia Diawara (New York: Routledge, 1993), 272-287.

⁸³ Spike Lee, dir., *She's Gotta Have It* (USA: 40 Acres & A Mule Filmworks, 1986).

⁸⁴ Pospíšil, *Sambo tu již nebydlí?*, 100.

⁸⁵ Spike Lee, dir., *Do the Right Thing* (USA: 40 Acres & A Mule Filmworks, 1989).

him up and placed him between the top Hollywood directors. *Do the Right Thing* captured the typical African-American environment - New York's Brooklyn. What made the picture special was Lee's ability to transform the real world of the black Americans to the screen, for "there is racial tension, animosity, misunderstanding, discontent, anger, and frustration."⁸⁶ Much more could and surely should be said about Spike Lee's films for he has been a true treasure of the African-American cinematography. Unfortunately, the extent of my thesis does not allow me to fully analyze Lee's work.

4.5. The 1990's

The last period of the 20th century proved to be quite favorable to the African-American actors and actresses. Naturally, most of them started building their careers in the previous years already, and Hollywood warmly welcomed the black performers and cast them in suitable leading roles. Still the representatives of the male sex seemed to prevail over actresses, nevertheless, the ladies did not give in and so the 1990's raised some shining stars.

Released right in the 1990, Jerry Zucker's *Ghost*⁸⁷ took care of Whoopi Goldberg's career breakthrough. Being the medium of Sam (Patrick Swayze) and Molly's (Demi Moore) reunion, Oda Mae Brown (Goldberg) provides the possibility of afterlife connection between Sam's ghost and devastated Molly. Finally, together they discover the strange circumstances of Sam's death, reveal the murderer and so enable Sam to calmly exit the world of people, leaving Molly behind with Oda Mae. Goldberg is the true heroine of the story for without her, Sam and Molly could never communicate again, but simultaneously she serves as comic relief and Molly's nurturing protector. One must love her craziness, stubbornness and warm, sensitive heart. No doubt, Whoopi Goldberg won, and fully deserved, an Academy Award for the Best Supporting Actress and so she became the second African-American woman to receive it since 1939 Hattie McDaniel's victory for *Gone with the Wind*.

⁸⁶ Houston A. Baker, Jr., "Spike Lee and the Commerce of Culture," in *Black American Cinema*, ed. Manthia Diawara (New York: Routledge, 1993), 169.

⁸⁷ Jerry Zucker, dir., *Ghost* (USA: Paramount Pictures, 1990).

More movies, most likely comedies, followed and were loved by the audience. The famous *Sister Act* (1992) and *Sister Act 2* (1993) happened to be very successful for their musical bases, sense of humor and mainly for Goldberg's irreplaceable comic, moves, singing, acting, simply altogether.

In pictures, such as *Moonlight and Valentino* (1995), *Eddie* (1996), *The Deep End of the Ocean* (1999), not all of them being always exceptional, but Goldberg has proved her talent every single time. And because of her hard work and positive attitude, around 1993 she was one of the best paid actresses in Hollywood.⁸⁸ *Boys on the Side* (1995), *Ghosts of Mississippi* (1996) were some of the movies with serious topic and there, too, Whoopi Goldberg confirmed her unquestionable acting abilities.

One more interesting and worth mentioning fact about this extraordinary actress, in 1994, as the very first African-American, Whoopi Goldberg hosted the prestigious Academy Award ceremony and even there she showed some perfect performance. Although, many African-American actresses waited for any breaking point in their careers, most of them had to accept secondary parts. Among all these Hollywood newcomers, there were few who stood their ground and resolutely refused to be pushed aside.

Naturally, the already successful actresses who won recognition in the previous decades, such as Whoopi Goldberg or Alfre Woodard being the most admired ones, kept their places in the tough film industry in the 1990's just as they did before. Alfre Woodard started her career in the 1970's thanks to movies *Remember My Name* (1978) and *Health* (1979) and went on through the 1980's. In 1992, she starred in a picture directed by John Sayle *Passion Fish*⁸⁹, in which Woodard captured a nurse named Chantelle who takes care of an annoying white actress May-Alice. In the end, they end up being good friends.

After the seriously tuned story of *Passion Fish* (1992), Alfre Woodard played in other well received movies, for example *Blue Chips* (1994), *Crooklyn* (1994) and *Down in the Delta* (1998) in each of them she depicted strong women in rather uneasy

⁸⁸ Bogle, *Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies and Bucks*, 334.

⁸⁹ John Sayles, dir., *Passion Fish* (USA: Atchafalaya, 1992).

dramatic situation of life.⁹⁰

According to Bogle, at least partial change came with the 1995 Forest Whitaker *Waiting to Exhale*⁹¹, comedy/drama which finally focus on four African-American women, their lives and love struggles. However, it was not only due to the film's unusual topic, but the exceptional cast, Whitney Houston, Angela Bassett, Loretta Devine and Lela Rochon, and of course, the fantastic soundtrack greatly contributed to its success.

The character of Loretta Devine, Gloria, may because of her body structure slightly remind the audience of any mammy figure from the early cinema, but her performance of a self-confident, attractive woman totally tore down the generally adopted opinion that African-American lady of dark skin cannot be an object of sexual interest. Sadly, neither Devine's nor Rochon's acting future did not turn out so great, for both of them were cast most often in minor supporting roles.⁹²

Angela Bassett and Whitney Houston came out as ones of the African-American female celebrities of the decade. Bassett proved best her talent playing autobiographical roles, for instance Tina Turner in *What's Love Got to Do with It* (1993)⁹³ for which she was nominated for an Academy Award as the Best Leading Actress. Unfortunately, as Bassett tried really hard to be as good as possible at her work, sometimes her acting seemed too exaggerated.

Whitney Houston, beautiful and talented as she was, always amazed everybody and everyone regardless of race with her magical, powerful voice which seemed to be out of this world. As already pointed out, Houston entered the film industry and remained its beloved African-American actress. One of the most significant milestones in her career was the all time favorite romantic drama *Bodyguard* (1992)⁹⁴ which told the story of a pop goddess Rachel Marron (Whitney Houston) and her meticulous, disciplined bodyguard Frank Farmer (Kevin Costner). This interracial love story became an over-night hit loved by the American and European

⁹⁰ Bogle, *Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies and Bucks*, 371-372.

⁹¹ Forest Whitaker, dir., *Waiting for Exhale* (USA: Twentieth Century Fox Film Corporation, 1995).

⁹² Bogle, *Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies and Bucks*, 375-377.

⁹³ Brian Gibson, dir., *What's Love Got to Do with It* (USA: Touchstone Pictures, 1993).

⁹⁴ Mick Jackson, dir., *The Bodyguard* (USA: Warner Bros., 1992).

audience. Whitney Houston reached the absolute top of the Hollywood and anything she was involved with got all the attention and the best reactions.

No other African-American actress before Houston, not even Whoopi Goldberg during her brief period as the highest paid woman in films, was viewed by the studios as a genuine box-office mega-star. In the mid- and late-1990's, Whitney Houston was the only African-American actress whom the studios were willing to create movies around; to finance almost anything in which she appeared.⁹⁵

However, by the end of her relatively short yet powerful career, Whitney Houston focused mainly on her projects as a singer. Sadly, her personal life, at least according to the press, might not have been as bright as her career itself, mainly because of her reputed drug addiction. The tragic news of her sudden death on February 12, 2012 at the age of forty-eight, immediately flew around the world leaving millions of people heart-broken.⁹⁶

Before entering the final and most current movies and performers, it is important to comment on films and work of one African-American lady, known by everyone, successful in anything she has done so far and admired for what she has achieved regardless the race, Oprah Winfrey.

Winfrey discovered the motion picture world when she was cast in Steven Spielberg's *The Color Purple* (1985), and later *Native Son* (1986), *Beloved* (1998). All her nominations and received awards themselves speaks for her hard-working attitude and determination. However, the dominant field of her enormous influence has been her activity in television, particularly *The Oprah Winfrey Show* which has been on since 1985, that is for incredible thirty years.⁹⁷ And it is a generally known rule among the first class celebrities: who has not been in *The Oprah Winfrey Show* is no celebrity at all.

Having worshiped the great personality of Oprah Winfrey, it is now the best time to

⁹⁵ Bogle, *Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies and Bucks*, 381.

⁹⁶ "Whitney Houston, US singer and actress, dies aged 48," BBC News, February 12, 2012, <<http://www.bbc.com/news/world-17001548>>, Accessed April 13, 2015.

⁹⁷ "Oprah Winfrey Biography," Academy of Achievement, Last modified November 14, 2014. <<http://www.achievement.org/autodoc/page/win0bio-1>>, Accessed April 13, 2015.

move towards the new Millennium for which Winfrey has provided the perfect link.

4.6. The New Millennium

The last section of this thesis will concentrate on several movie successes that ensured the appreciation and great recognition to the African-American actresses who appeared in them. Firstly, it will be *Monster's Ball* (2001) which can be considered an African-American movie milestone, secondly, the drama *Precious* (2009) and then other pictures that were awarded with an Oscar and so brought more prestige to the African-American women.

Right in 2001, Halle Berry starred together with Billy Bob Thornton and Heath Ledger in a gripping drama by Marc Forster titled *Monster's Ball*⁹⁸. The picture's main protagonists, the prison guards Hank (Thornton) and his son Sonny (Ledger) represent an escalated form of racism as they do not hesitate to bully the black prisoners. After an execution of a black prisoner Lawrence, Sonny commits a suicide and devastated Hank decides to leave his job. In a small dinner he meets beautiful Leticia (Berry) who has been having hard times as well. As Hank and Leticia approach each other, his transformation from a racist, insensitive man begins with this interracial love and desire. The movie reaches its summit once Leticia finds out Hank is the one who led her husband Lawrence's execution.⁹⁹

Monster's Ball became a celebrated movie, proving that breaking from the chains made of racism is possible. In the 2002 Academy Award ceremony, Halle Berry's triumph became the triumph of all the African-American actresses who contributed to the development of history of the black cinema.

In 2009, Lee Daniels' *Precious*¹⁰⁰, came out and received many Oscar nominations including the Best Picture, Actress in the Supporting Role which was conquered by an African-American actress known as Mo'Nique. The film itself has a very strong story about an overweight teenage girl Precious (Gabourey Sidibe) who is bullied

⁹⁸ Marc Forster, dir., *Monster's Ball* (USA: Lions Gate Films, 2001).

⁹⁹ Aimee Carrillo Rowe, "Feeling in the Dark: Empathy, Whiteness, and Miscege-nation in *Monster's Ball*," *Hypathia*, vol. 22, no.2 (2007), 125. <<http://www.jstor.org/stable/4640065>>, Accessed, April 14, 2015.

¹⁰⁰ Lee Daniels, dir., *Precious* (USA: Lionsgate, 2009).

and emotionally tortured by her mother (Mo'Nique) and repeatedly abused by her father. All of that has a negative impact on her education, and for that reason Precious is basically illiterate. After switching to an alternate school, Precious pulls herself together and with an unbelievable determination she decides to grab the chance for better life and finally succeeds.

[This] individual refusal to accept the circumscribed fate that the environment seems to impose inevitably leads to self fulfillment, transcending the world and its cruelties and focusing our attention instead on the failings of the community rather than of the person.¹⁰¹

Besides these two pictures, that became big hits among their audience and critics, the New Millennium brought Oscars also to Jennifer Hudson for her outstanding performance in a musical *Dreamgirls* (2006) full of stars such as Beyoncé, Eddie Murphy, Jamie Foxx or Danny Glover.¹⁰²

Another African-American Oscar winner is Octavia Spenser for role of a maid named Minnie Jackson in 2011 *The Help*¹⁰³, where she appeared together with Cicely Tyson and Viola Davis.¹⁰⁴

And the last Oscar went to the Best Supporting Actress Lupita Nyong'o in the 86th Academy Award ceremony in 2014 for her performance in *12 Years a Slave*, which also won the Best Picture category.¹⁰⁵

Halle Berry stays, however, the only African-American actress to win the Best Leading Actress category. But all the other black ladies who convinced the entire world about their acting qualities shall be fully respected and admired for what they achieved in this tough and often intolerant world. Nevertheless, the door that remained closed for so long has been finally open.

¹⁰¹ Bernard Beck, "The Awful Truth: Unflattering Portraits in *A Serious Man* and *Precious*," *Multicultural Perspectives*, vol. 12, no.3 (2010), 154. DOI: 10.1080/15210960.2010.504491.

¹⁰² Derek Wong, "2007: The 79th Academy Award Winners," Last modified December 18, 2014, <<http://oscar.go.com/blogs/oscar-history/2007-79th-academy-award-winners>>, Accessed April 14, 2015.

¹⁰³ Tate Tylor, dir., *The Help* (USA: Dreamworks SKG, 2011).

¹⁰⁴ Mike Krolak, "2012: The 84th Academy Award Winners," Last modified December 18, 2014, <<http://oscar.go.com/blogs/oscar-history/2012-84th-academy-award-winners>>, Accessed April 14, 2015.

¹⁰⁵ Micheline Goldstein "2014: The 86th Academy Award Winners," Last modified December 18, 2014, <<http://oscar.go.com/blogs/oscar-history/2014-86th-academy-award-winners>>, Accessed April 14, 2015.

5 Conclusion

As I started with a quote that said everything, I will finish with one by Halle Berry that exactly expresses my feelings after having written this thesis.

This moment is so much bigger than me. This moment is for Dorothy Dandridge, Lena Horne, Diahann Carroll. It's for the women that stand beside me – Jada Pinkett, Angela Bassett and it's for every nameless, faceless woman of colour that now has a chance because this door tonight has been opened.¹⁰⁶

These words flu through the famous Academy Award ceremony in 2002 and so Halle Berry was the one to change the history thanks to her best actress performance in *Monster's Ball* (2001).

Having gone through the history of the African-Americans in the American film, I have fully realized the horrifyingly enormous impact of David W. Griffith's *The Birth of a Nation*. Although, the movie experienced a great recognition, and faced both hatred and appreciation, in that time no one would think of the incredible influence it would have on future of the American cinematography.

Politics of race and gender were inscribed into mainstream cinematic narrative from *The Birth of a Nation* on. As a seminal work, this film identified what place and function of White womanhood would be in cinema. There was clearly no place for Black women.¹⁰⁷

By the end of my work, I have come up with two theories based on my previous research of this topic.

Firstly, from my point of view, the African-American actresses freed themselves from the stereotyped roles, gained certain amount of independence and possibility of self-expression as late as in the 1970's more likely 1980's. Ever since, they have tended to capture either hard lives of the black women in the past, or strong, emancipated women determined to go against all conventions. Simply, their aim has

¹⁰⁶ "Halle Berry's acceptance speech," BBC News, February 25, 2004, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/in_depth/entertainment/2002/oscars_2002/1892608.stm> Accessed April 13, 2015.

¹⁰⁷ bell hooks, "The Oppositional Gaze: Black Female Spectators," in *Black American Cinema*, ed. Manthia Diawara (New York: Routledge, 1993), 292.

been to emphasize the cruelties and unfairness of the past and present period, such as in movies *The Color Purple* (1985), *Monster's Ball* (2001), *Precious* (2009) or *The Help* (2011).

Moreover, pictures as *Ghost* (1990), *The Bodyguard* (1992), *Sister Act* (1992), *Waiting to Exhale* (1995), or *Catwoman* (2004) depicted either women who achieved something extraordinary and for African-American actresses untypical and therefore progressive. In *Ghost* Oda Mae (Goldberg) is the essential figure which the movie stands on, in *Catwoman*, no matter what a failure the movie was, Halle Berry portrayed an extremely attractive woman who demands justice and revenge and so she gets it. In case of *Waiting to Exhale* and to it similar films, the woman protagonists long for stability, equal living conditions and fair treatment, and they do not hesitate to show their sensitivity and vulnerability supposing they will be treated like ladies.

Secondly, however, it has been exactly one hundred years since Griffith released *The Birth of a Nation*, some of the once long-lasting influence has still remained in the present days. Unless being hypocritical, today's white world opinion on African-American actresses and their appearance is still under the Griffith's set "scale of black beauty." Halle Berry, Whitney Houston, as before them Dorothy Dandridge or Lena Horne, all these great ladies have been considered beautiful only because they lack the most typical African-American features, and the other way around they approach the white ideal.

Sadly and unfairly, Whoopi Goldberg, Ruby Dee or Oprah Winfrey would never be taken, in the white perspective for charming beauties. This widely adopted attitude is, in my opinion, yet to be overcome, if it ever will be. And I am sure that any person truly loving and interested in the art of film-making shall accept all the African-American performers with all their qualities. Because if nothing else, they deserve to be respected not only for their work, but also for their almost hundred and twenty years old journey full of struggles and intolerance. Still they did not move back but forward and knocked down the gates of Hollywood.

Resumé

V mé bakalářské práci jsem se soustředila především na významné afroamerické ženské představitelky v americkém filmu. Cílem bylo prozkoumat a zdokumentovat jejich činnost a s ní související vývoj nejen ženských postav, ale také obecného postavení afroameričanů ve filmovém průmyslu.

První kapitola se věnuje definici jednotlivých hereckých stereotypů, jmenuje jejich nejznámější představitele a představitelky a uvádí příklady filmů, ve kterých bylo těchto stereotypních rolí využito. Konkrétně se jedná o postavy Toma, hlupáka Coona, malých černoušků Pickaninny, tragických mulatek, brutálního samce a prostořeké chůvy. Přestože byly tyto nelichotivé role ustanoveny ještě před počátkem samotné kinematografie, pevné základy jim položilo až dílo režiséra Davida W. Griffitha *Zrození národa* z roku 1915. Tento film plný rasismu a nesnášenlivosti vůči afroamerickému obyvatelstvu zapříčinil sice značnou míru odporu a protestu, ale jeho vliv byl nevyhnutelný a v americké filmové tvorbě přítomný až do 60. a 70. let 20. století.

Zrození národa je detailně analyzováno v následující druhé kapitole, která pojednává o postavení afroameričanů v raném americkém filmu. Byl to také první snímek zachycující příběh z americké historie. Inovativní byl i v mnoha jiných směrech, především pak z technického hlediska. Griffith přišel hned s několika novými filmovými postupy, použil například retrospektivu, detailní záběry, dvouprojekci nebo dramatický střih. Progresivní, ale již ne tak pozitivní, bylo *Zrození národa* z hlediska sociálního a rasového. Prostřednictvím svého díla dal Griffith jasně najevo své stanovisko vůči afroameričanům a vyjádřil názor, že lidé s černou barvou kůže musejí být pod nadvládou „bílých“, jedině tak je vše v pořádku.

V kapitole věnující se rané kinematografii nemůže chybět rozbor filmového klenotu *Jih proti Severu* (1939), který jako první pravdivě zobrazil vztahy mezi afroameričany a jejich pány. Slavná romance podle románu Margaret Mitchell vypráví příběh nebojácné a paličaté Scarlett O'Hara a jejím vztahu s Rhettem Butlerem, odehrávajícím se na pozadí americké občanské války. Ve filmu se objevují dvě afroamerické herečky, Hattie McDaniel a Butterfly McQueen. Přestože obě podaly

úžasný výkon, Hattie McDaniel, díky své postavě chůvy, byla ve své době jedna z mála uznávaných černých hereček. Největším úspěchem tohoto filmu, alespoň tedy pro jeho „černé“ publikum, bylo ocenění pro Nejlepší herečku ve vedlejší roli, Hattie McDaniel, která se tak stala prvním afroameričanem s cenou Akademie.

Vedle úspěšného snímku *Jih proti Severu*, který poskytl pohled na afroameričany o něco mírnější a přátelštější, nebyla situace pro černošské umělce nijak příznivá. Raný americký film a jeho představitelé však stále zarputile bojovali za svá práva a přívětivější přístup a to za i před kamerou. V každém desetiletí se samozřejmě objevila talentovaná a nadějná herečka či herečky, které měly úspěch mnohokrát na dosah ruky a už se zdálo, že jim „bílý“ filmový svět projeví úctu a uznání. K jisté změně došlo s nástupem zvuku v roce 1927, kdy byl filmový průmysl nucen uznat afroamerický smysl pro rytmus a vrozené nadání pro zpěv a tanec. V letech 1929 až 1943 se proto objevilo množství černošských muzikálů znějících jazzem a oplývajícími skvělými tanečníky. Mezi takové afroamerické muzikálové umělkyně patřily například Nina Mae McKinney, Fredi Washington, či Lena Horne, které zazářily ve filmech jako *Aleluja (Hallelujah, 1929)*, *Zelené pastviny (The Green Pastures, 1936)* nebo *Chata na nebesích (Cabin in the Sky, 1943)*, ale naneštěstí jejich sláva rychle pominula. Všechny sice měly potřebnou krásu i potenciál, přesto je „bílé“ publikum odmítlo jednoduše kvůli jejich barvě pleti.

Poslední část práce pátrá po zlomových okamžicích a samozřejmě herečkách, které se snažily osvobodit od zaběhlých stereotypů. Kapitola je rozdělena do jednotlivých desetiletí, od 50.let až po současnost a každá podkapitola má své klíčové herečky, jejichž filmy a v čem byla jejich role důležitá.

Absolutní hvězdou 50.let byla Dorothy Dandridge, která se nejvíce proslavila filmem *Carmen Jones (1954)*. Ale ani této proslulé krásce a talentované herečce se nepodařilo vymanit ze stereotypní role tragické mulatky.

Celá 60.léta se nesla v duchu hnutí za občanská práva a doba patřila velkým mužům jako byli Dr. Martin Luther King. Ženy tak byly odsunuty do pozadí a stejné to bylo i u filmu a rolí pro afroamerické herečky bylo pomálu. Mezi výjimky patřily třeba Ruby Dee nebo Diana Sands.

V 70.letech ovládly americký film Cicely Tyson a Diana Ross, které ve svých filmech ztvárnily mnoho silných a nezávislých postav a posunuly tak pojetí afroamerických žen zase o krok dále.

Lepší situace nastala až v 2.polovině 20.století, přesněji v 80.letech, kdy se herečky Whoopi Goldberg nebo Oprah Winfrey rozhodly vystoupit z řady a vzepřít se tak dlouho prosazovaným stereotypům. Jeden z mála snímků, který zobrazoval těžký život afroamerických žen amerického jihu, je Spielbergova *Barva nachu (The Color Purple, 1985)* v hlavní roli excelovala právě Whoopi Goldberg.

Opravdový zlom přišel až v 90.letech, a to díky hvězdám jako Whitney Houston, Angela Bassett, Halle Berry a stále neunávné Whoopi a Oprah. Těmto dámám se postupně podařilo překonat všechny překážky a společenské konvence. Whitney Houston se právě v 90.letech stala naprostou hvězdou a prvotřídní herečkou, kterou proslavila především role popové královny Rachel Marron, po boku se spolehlivým Kevinem Costnerem, samozřejmě ve filmu *Osobní strážce (The Bodyguard, 1992)*.

Ještě větších úspěchů a náležitého ocenění se dostalo afroamerickým herečkám až v novém tisíciletí. Naprostým vrcholem a symbolem zadostiučinění se stala soška Oscara, kterou získala Halle Berry za svůj skvělý výkon ve filmu *Ples příšer (The Monster's Ball, 2001)*. V roce 2006 byla cenou Akademie za svou roli v muzikálu *Dreamgirls* odměněna Jennifer Hudson, v roce 2009 ji následovala Mo'Nique oceněná za roli tyranské matky ve filmu *Precious*. Oscara se dočkaly i Octavia Spenser jakožto Nejlepší herečka ve vedlejší roli ve snímku *Černobílý svět (The Help, 2011)* a roku 2014 pak Lupita Nyong'o za výkon ve filmu *12 let v řetězech (12 Years a Slave, 2013)*.

Na konci této práce uvádím dva závěry, ke kterým jsem dospěla díky důkladnému studiu uvedené literatury a filmů. Za prvé, afroamerickým herečkám se podařilo osvobodit od stereotypních rolí a tím pak získat nezávislost a větší šanci na sebevyjádření. Již od 70. a 80.let si však afroamerické herečky vybíraly především role utlačovaných žen a chtěly tak znázornit jejich těžké mnohdy ponižující životní podmínky, příkladem je snímek Stevena Spielberga *Barva nachu (The Color Purple, 1985)*. Tyto tendence, dle mého názoru, pokračují dodnes, a proto hlavní hrdinky filmů jako *Ples příšer (The Monster's Ball, 2001)*, *Precious (Precious, 2009)*, *Černobílý svět*

(*The Help*, 2011) nebo *12 let v řetězech* (*12 Years a Slave*, 2013), vždy bojují s nepřízní osudu a společnosti, která je neskrývaně odsuzuje.

Pak jsou zde filmy, jejichž prostřednictvím se afroamerické herečky chtějí stát žádanými a úspěšnými, a to jak v osobním, tak i profesním životě, například *Osobní strážce* (*The Bodyguard*, 1992) nebo *Až si vydechnu* (*Waiting to Exhale*, 1995).

Za druhé jsem si uvědomila, jak obrovský byl a do jisté míry stále je vliv Griffithova *Zrození národa* (*The Birth of a Nation*, 1915) a jím ustanovené pojetí afroamerické ženské krásy. Všechny afroamerické herečky, od Fredi Washington, přes Lenu Horne a Dorothy Dandridge až po Whitney Houston a Halle Berry, jsou považovány za krásné ženy, a to především kvůli jejich bělošským rysům. Griffithova idea, že pouze afroameričanka se světlejším odstínem kůže má šanci ve světě filmu uspět, je ať už vědomě nebo ne stále přítomna i v dnešní době.

Bez ohledu na všechny předsudky a netoleranci se afroamerickým herečkám přece jen podařilo vymanit ze stereotypních rolí a díky jejich odhodlanosti, vytrvalosti a talentu jim nakonec Hollywood musel své dveře otevřít.

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Annotation

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Thesis Topic: African-American Woman Characters in American Cinema

Thesis supervisor: Mgr. Flajšar Jiří, PhD.

The number of pages: 60

The number of words: 18 198

The number of signs: 114 445

Key words: African-American Woman Actresses, African-American Cinema,
American Cinematography, African-American Stereotypes

This bachelor thesis deals with the representation of African-American women in American film. First chapter concerns stereotypes used in American cinema and their definitions. Second chapter describes situation of the African-Americans in the early American films, such as *The Birth of a Nation*, *Gone with the Wind* and black-cast musicals. The last chapter goes from the 1950's to present days and points out the most important performances of African-American actresses.

Anotace

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Název katedry a fakulty: Katedra anglistiky a amerikanistiky

Filozofická fakulta

Téma práce: Afroamerické ženské hrdinky v americkém filmu

Vedoucí práce: Mgr. Flajšar Jiří, PhD.

Počet stran: 60

Počet slov: 18 198

Počet znaků: 114 445

Klíčová slova: Afroamerické herečky, afroamerický film, americká kinematografie,
afroamerické stereotypy

Tato bakalářská práce se zabývá postavením afroamerických žen v americkém filmu. V první kapitole jsou uvedeny a definovány zavedené stereotypy. V druhé kapitole je popsána situace afroameričanů v rané americké kinematografii a filmy jako *Zrození národa*, *Jih proti Severu* a černošské muzikály. Poslední kapitola postupuje po jednotlivých desetiletích, od 50.let až po současnost, a zaměřuje se na nejvýznamnější role a filmy afroamerických hereček.