

Film Review

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The Hunger Games: Confronting Innocence and Deconstructing Black Prejudice Through Rue, Screenplay by Gary Ross, Suzanne Collins, and Billy Ray; Cinematography by Tom Stern; Editing by Christopher S. Capp, Stephen Mirrione and Juliette Welfling; Directed by Gary Ross; Produced by Lionsgate

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Film Synopsis

Based on the best-selling novel by the same name, *The Hunger Games* is set in a dystopic United States, named Panem. Katniss, the film's 16-year-old heroine, is thrust into the national spotlight when she volunteers as tribute to replace her younger sister Primrose, in the country's annually televised battle royal. Justified as atonement for a "rebellion" 75 years ago, the Games provide entertainment for the elite citizens of the Capital, who do not participate. Katniss and Peeta, the male tribute from her district, strategize to stay alive in a "game" designed for one survivor and unknowingly set the stage for rebellion against the State. In total, the film provides a critique of present-day American culture obsessed with reality television and celebrity, while remaining apathetic toward growing inequality and ongoing war.

Rue and the Role of Race

While the film was a box-office hit, it was not without controversy, most notably around the race of Rue—a 12-year-old Black girl, the youngest tribute. Our interest in analyzing the film was motivated by coverage of racist social media outrage from book fans when 13-year-old Black actress, Amandla Stenberg was cast as Rue. The website Jezebel (Stewart 2012) captured many Twitter responses such as:

"I was pumped about the Hunger Games. Until I learned a black girl was playing Rue"

"HOW IN THE WORLD ARE THEY GOING TO MAKE RUE A FREAKIN BLACK BITCH?!?!?!?! lolol not to be racist buuuuut . . . I'm angry now :o"

“Sense when has rue been a nigger”

“Kk call me racist but when I found out rue was black her death wasn’t as sad #ihatemyself”

Additional responses ranged from disappointment to shock that Rue was Black. One fan wrote, “[I] just pictured [Rue with] darker skin, [but] didn’t really take it all the way black.” This is despite Katniss describing Rue with “dark brown skin and eyes, but other than that, she’s very like Prim in size and demeanor” (Collins 2008:45). How could so many not imagine Rue Black, and why such public vitriol? Our answer: Rue’s character embodies innocence and through her death, audiences confront feelings of empathy and compassion (usually reserved for White characters) for a Black character, which historical depictions of Black bodies have not done (Collins 1999; Vera and Gordon 2003). In turn, readers bonded with her in ways they were unwilling to allow when confronted with Rue as a Black girl in film.

Frequently, Black characters in predominately-White films fall into one of several racialized tropes used to instill fear and justify Black subjectivity. One such trope is the Magical Negro (MN), a mystical often uneducated character attributed with a “natural folk wisdom” (Hughey 2009: 558) whose “mission [is] to redeem the White character and establish White moral purity” (Hughey 2012:756). Rue’s character is a departure from these depictions. In Katniss and Rue’s relationship, neither is subordinate to the other; both are in a mutual battle for survival. Rue does not redeem Katniss because she does not require redemption. In fact, Rue’s presence rather than establishing White purity underscores the barbarism and injustice of the much-celebrated Games. Moreover, Rue does not have magical or mystical abilities. Her expertise with plants is rather a component of her lived experience in an agricultural district and like Katniss, she uses her knowledge of the earth to survive the Arena where tributes must use resources found in nature.

Another aspect of this trope is that the MN must eventually disappear because the continued interracial relationship “would unsettle the racial status quo” (Hughey 2012:759). While the book provides more insight into the ways racism and classism operate within Panem, Rue’s death in the film becomes the catalyst for social unrest. Her life had meaning beyond the Arena as we see Black and White citizens from Rue’s district mourn her death by rioting against the Capital.

Finally, Rue is not depicted as a racialized “Other,” she is a parallel, almost prophetic look at what would have happened to Primrose. Katniss and Rue develop a sisterly bond that unravels Katniss when she is unable to prevent Rue’s death. Rue dies in Katniss’s arms, depicting a *pietà* (Vera and Gordon 2003), a visual representation of the loss of innocence. Katniss sings to ease Rue’s suffering—the same song she sings to Primrose to chase away night terrors—reinforcing Rue’s humanity. A distraught Katniss honors Rue by placing flowers around her body, highlighting Rue’s innocence and shaming those in power. This provides moviegoers with a counternarrative to dominant racialized images of Black bodies. Rue is seen for what she is—an innocent Black child killed at the hands of an oppressive state.

Conclusions and Implications

Films provide powerful images through which many view the world. Black depictions in media often present racist stereotypes that reinforce anti-Black sentiments and become the societal norm for how we view African Americans. “The Hunger Games” and reactions to it offers a contemporary example of how racial stereotypes frame expectations of and interactions with Black characters. Not accustomed to affirming images of African Americans as whole people, these Twitter responses demonstrate a rejection of Black people occupying non-stereotyped roles. Furthermore, these reactions provide context to understand recent nationally polarizing discussions around the killing of young Black women and men as their deaths were often justified in terms of perceived threat, devoid of both innocence and humanity.

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