

MOVIES AND TV

## The history, resistance and future for Black directors

Although the first Black-directed film was produced in 1919, the modern industry still holds back Black filmmakers. Despite that, some of them feel optimistic for the future opportunities.

BY DANG LE

The Shorthorn managing editor

The story of Black filmmaking began in 1913 when Oscar Micheaux knocked door-to-door to sell his first novel, *The Conquest: The Story of a Negro Pioneer*. After a successful debut, he wrote *The Homesteader*, which caught the eyes of a production company that approached Micheaux for movie rights.

Micheaux asked to be involved in the film's production, but that plan fell through during negotiations. Later, he opened a production company then adapted and directed *The Homesteader* himself in 1919. He became the first known African American director.

Seventy years after Micheaux's death and more than a century after he blazed trails, filmmaking style, technology, culture and the audience have changed. But one thing remains constant — Black directors still have more to express through cinematic language. The battle for Black equity to make landmarks in the film industry and receive award recognition is just the beginning.

### The vision

Black artists don't just do art because they want to; they do it to survive and pave a way, speech communications senior Michael Hill said. At 22, he is the CEO and founder of his film production company, MicHill Entertainment, in Mansfield.

The intention of voicing their oppressions behind filmmaking decisions makes Black directors unique, Hill said.

"As far as music or film or photography, it comes out of a necessity," he said. "It becomes a fight."

The release of *Black Panther* in 2018 stood out to him as it lightens the portrayal of Black people and tells the struggle narrative differently, Hill said.

"A lot of films prior to that focus on the struggles of African Americans: someone gets shot, or there's something with the police. There's some with racial profiling," he said. "But *Black Panther*, even though it did touch on that issue, it put African Americans in a light of we are royalty, and we can have high technology."

*Black Panther*, directed by Ryan Coogler and starring the late Chadwick Boseman, is the first Marvel Studios film to have a Black director and a predominantly Black cast. The movie grossed over \$1.3 billion worldwide and received seven Academy Awards nominations, winning three.

"You might say that this African nation is fantasy," Boseman told *Time* magazine. "But to have the opportunity to pull from real ideas, real places and real African concepts, and put it inside of this idea of Wakanda—that's a great opportunity to develop a sense of what that identity is, especially when you're disconnected from it."

In a rare occurrence, Black people saw themselves in royal garments, Hill said.

But while *Black Panther* serves as an encouragement for young boys and girls to dream big, it doesn't change how Black directors are perceived in Hollywood, said Raven Carter, film production graduate student at Florida State University.

Carter interned in the Academy Gold Rising program last summer. The program, which is under the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Science, allows young talents to have more access to the industry.

Coogler, being the first Black filmmaker to direct a Marvel film, doesn't change much because there are thousands of Black directors out there, Carter said. Changes only happen when it's consistent, and more Black directors should be vocal about getting

opportunities.

"I'd be lying if I said I thought *Black Panther* just changed the world and changed the way people view white people and Black filmmakers," she said.

In an interview with *Essence* in 2017, director Ava DuVernay said only a few Black women have had sustainable careers in the film industry. In 2014, DuVernay received a Best Director nomination at the Golden Globes for *Selma*, which told the story of Martin Luther King Jr.'s fight for equal voting rights.

"I feel, if I'm honest, that there's a short window for me in the business," DuVernay said. "There's no Black woman who's had a 20-to-30-year consistent career in

### The recognition

The history between Black directors and award ceremonies has always been complicated, even when films like *12 Years a Slave* and *Moonlight* captured Best Picture, the biggest prize of the night.

Despite both winning, they had different ways of tackling racial issues. While *12 Years a Slave* focuses on highlighting the Black experience

"We should not only be winning Oscars that only highlight oppression," she said. "We're more than that, and we are doing more than that."

When the comedy-drama *Do the Right Thing* premiered at the Cannes Film Festival in 1989, its controversial approach to civil rights and racial tensions caused a huge cultural shock. The movie didn't sugarcoat racial discussions like many Hollywood filmmakers did.

The movie ended up with two nominations on announcement day at the Academy Awards — Best Original Screenplay for Spike Lee and Best Supporting Actor for Danny Aiello. It won none.

The audience may perceive both *Do the Right Thing* and *Driving Miss Daisy*, the eventual Best Picture winner that year, as Black

films because they both have

during the slavery era, *Moonlight* reflects on a coming-of-age journey of a man struggling with his identity



which she's been free to make what she wants to make and has people wanting to finance that."

Carter said funding issues haven't stopped DuVernay from telling challenging stories about race. It's one thing to strive for more accessible stories to get funding, but she has chosen to stand by her vision.

"It shows us that it is possible to tell a radical and truthful story and get the funding, get the investors, get the support," she said.

Carter said while many people believe there's no originality in writing movies before and that every story has been told, there are untapped territories from directors of color that people should learn about.

"In reality, maybe every white story has been told, but every Asian story, every Black story, every Hispanic story, every Native American story, those stories have not been told, and that is untapped territory," she said.

and sexuality in modern times.

Carter said although many Black people have given up on reliving the trauma of watching movies about slavery, she appreciates their existence and how they're still being made given the current ignorant and blinded society.

"I recently had a friend tell me, 'I honestly thought that racism didn't exist anymore,' and this was within the last month," she said. "For that reason, because people like that exist, I think slave movies do need to continue being made."

But *Moonlight* brings forth a different perspective on modern Black life: what they do, how they live, think and feel, Carter said.

tary, Carter said.

While both movies have white characters in authority roles, Morgan Freeman's character in *Driving Miss Daisy* tried to win the white protagonist over, while the Black men in *Do the Right Thing* chose to challenge the system, she said.

"In a world, especially at that time where people don't want to be challenged, they don't want to hear the truth, they don't want honesty," Carter said. "They want to be comfortable. *Do the Right Thing* is not a comfortable movie, depending on who you are."

When actress Kim Basinger stood at the Oscars podium that year, she

praised the five Best Picture nominees because "they tell the truth." But she then added a few more words.

"There's one film missing from this list that deserves to be on it because ironically, it might tell the biggest truth of all, and that's *Do the Right Thing*," Basinger said.

Lee never received any recognition from the Academy until 2016, winning an untelevised, honorary award. Three years later, he was nominated for Best Director and Best Original Screenplay for *BlackKkKlansman*, a movie about an African American detective infiltrating a local Ku Klux Klan chapter. Lee won his first and only competitive Oscar for his screenplay.

That was also the last time the Oscars nominated a Black director. In its 94 years, the Academy has only nominated Black directors six times — John Singleton for *Boyz n the Hood* in 1992; Lee Daniels for *Precious* in 2010; Steve McQueen for *12 Years a Slave* in 2014; Barry Jenkins for *Moonlight* in 2017; Jordan Peele for *Get Out* in 2018 then Lee in 2019 — None of them won.

### The expectations

Fewer than 6% of writers, directors and producers of U.S. films are Black, according to McKinsey Insights last March. The data also shows if a movie has a Black producer, there's a higher chance of it being directed by a Black director. However, only 5% of lead producers are Black.

The current state of Black cinema comes from the gatekeeping of Black representation in the production process, whether writing, directing or producing, Hill said.

Hollywood, being one big family with a closed circuit, makes it hard for outsiders to receive opportunities, he said. But the growth of streaming services, social media platforms and YouTube has made it easier for Black directors.

However, Hill said he doesn't want Black directors to receive recognition only because of their skin color as it's performative and doesn't show genuine interest in representing Black vision in cinema.

"I do want my people to be represented in film and in media, but I don't want it to be done out of pity," he said.

Carter said while current Black filmmakers face difficulties finding investments for their stories, she has faith that the world is slowly changing.

"We're in a hard place, but it was way harder 10, 15, 20 years ago, so we just have to do the work day-by-day and hope for the best," she said.

Carter said while being a cinematographer guarantees better job opportunities than being a director, she's a dreamer who wants to write and direct her own projects.

While she has been working on indie arthouse films, she said she would love to experience directing a blockbuster and put a twist on including deeper conversations about race.

"That's my goal. Whatever I do, it's gonna have to be honest, it's gonna have to tackle an issue," Carter said. "I don't want to tell the safe story, I want to tell the honest story."

The movie industry makes many assumptions and puts Black filmmakers in boxes, Carter said. But not all Black people agree with each other or share the same perspective as they come from all around the world.

Black directors have so much untapped potential, and it doesn't feel right to cluster them together, she said.

"We can tell all sorts of stories. We don't just have to tell the slave story. We don't just have to tell the *Moonlight* story," she said. "We are very diverse people. We're multifaceted."