

Film Analysis – *Higher Learning*

Comparative Ethnic Studies 101

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“I’m not racist, because everybody is exactly the same regardless of what they look like.”

This statement is, in fact, a racist ideology all its own. As explained in context by Eduardo Bonilla-Silva and David Dietrich in their article “The Sweet Enchantment of Color-Blind Racism in Obamerica,” color-blind racism is just as harmful as Jim Crow-era discrimination. Although more socially and culturally acceptable, colorblind racism breeds tension and resentment just as damaging as the racial divides of the 60’s. John Singleton’s 1995 movie *Higher Learning* presents the effects of the colorblind ideology through the character of Maurice Phipps.

A kaleidoscope of race and gender, *Higher Learning* presents a colored, varied view of America’s higher education and cultural ideologies within the academic system. Set at the fictional Columbus University, the cast of characters include Malik Williams (Omar Epps), a Black track runner struggling to find motivation in college, sports, and life, and professor Maurice Phipps, a black faculty member who promotes an “all are equal” approach to teaching. Phipps’ and William’s relationship throughout the movie is used as a foil to expose Phipps’ colorblind ideology.

The underlying characteristic of the colorblind ideology is that the person holding this idea believes that the individual is evaluated by everything but the color of their skin. Phipps believes he is being nonjudgmental of his students, but is instead breeding resentment against students who claim that there are racial tensions on campus, like Williams. In this excerpt, Phipps gives the class their semester’s assignment:

“Your assignment for the semester is as follows: to formulate your own political ideology. This will be dictated by your sex, background, socioeconomic status, personal experience, etc., etc. This course will be like anything in life: it will be what you make of it... Remember: no one is going to treat you special because you are black. Or white. Or Hispanic. Or Indian. Or Asian. Or because you are a woman” (Fishburne 1995).

In a single swoop, Phipps fells the notion that there is any racial judgment at play in his assignment or in life, which is false. Notice that he does not list race as a factor in the political ideology assignment, and continues to state that race or gender will not earn an individual ‘special treatment.’ By choosing to not recognize race as a contributing factor to social/cultural tensions, Phipps makes himself a prime example of the colorblind ideology.

Although colorblind racism is mainly characterized as being a white behavior, Singleton takes the unique challenge of depicting a person of color having this ideal. Colorblind racism, as defined by Bonilla-Silva and Dietrich, “rationalizes the status of minorities as the product of market dynamics, naturally occurring phenomena, and their alleged cultural deficiencies” (2011). Cultural deficiencies include “lack of effort, loose family organization, and inappropriate values”. This particularly ugly bit of colorblindness can be seen in Phipps’ interaction with Williams during Phipps’ office hours. Phipps tells Williams that he is “lazy,” and that laziness is a characteristic that holds back blacks from making societal progress. Williams later returns to Phipps’ office and explains to Phipps how he feels that he is “be(ing) treated like an enemy by one of my own (Phipps)” (Epp 1995). However, Phipps rebuts Williams and insists that there is no one out to prevent Williams’ progress but himself, which employs the “blaming the victim” frame discussed by Bonilla-Silva and Dietrich, and also denies the existence of contemporary racism. Tragically, Phipps’ beliefs are proven wrong following a Neo-Nazi student’s rampage that kills William’s girlfriend.

The colorblind racism ideology and its presence in institutions of higher education is expressed through Phipps’ character as shown throughout several scenes in the movie. Director

John Singleton allows Phipps' interactions with students of color act as a foil that expose this behavior, but also help the viewer to see what colorblind racism looks like, and its effects.

Bibliography

Singleton, John, Jennifer Connelly, Ice Cube, and Omar Epps. 1995. Higher learning. Culver City, Calif: Columbia TriStar Home Video.

Silva, Eduardo Bonilla, and David Dietrich. "The Sweet Enchantment of Color-Blind Racism in Obamerica." *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, 2011: 190-206.