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Media Criticism and Theory

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Tangerine: A Christmas Film for the Disenfranchised

Overview

Sean Baker's 2015 film *Tangerine* follows Sin-Dee and Alexandra, a pair of Black trans sex workers, on their quest to seek justice on Chester, Sin-Dee's cheating boyfriend, on Christmas Eve. Despite its setting and some imagery of traditional holiday movies, it is not likely that most viewers would call it a Christmas movie. But what constitutes a holiday movie? Is it determined by the imagery of reindeer and Santa hats, or are there socioeconomic factors at play as well? *Tangerine* subverts the traditional concept of the Christmas movie to paint a candid picture of the experiences of the economically disadvantaged and trans communities. The intersection between race, gender, and class shapes the complex relations between each of the characters. In this analysis, I will explore the unique position *Tangerine* holds in the Western film sphere through the lens of critical theories in the field of cultural studies.

Theoretical foundation

The cultural theories most relevant to the intersectionality of *Tangerine* can be accredited to Stuart Hall and Antonio Gramsci, both British Marxist thinkers and pioneers of cultural studies. Hall argued that all societal structures contain their own frameworks of meaning. Social

constructions and interpretation of any work— media, literature, or art— are intertwined. Drawing from Marxist theories, as well as his own experiences born in colonial Jamaica and moving to colonist England (Bogues 178), Hall establishes the concepts of race, class, and gender as the primary axes of division within society. It is, however, important to note that many of Hall's theories are based on his experience being a wealthy Black man. Julie Drew notes that Hall insisted that “we often misrecognize the way in which class intersects with race in precisely this way” (172). Hall claims that the intersectionality of inequality comes with its own struggle, that he, lacking privilege in only one of the three axes of division, cannot speak for (Drew).

Antonio Gramsci, on the other hand, is well-known for his theory of repressive state apparatuses (RSA) versus ideological state apparatuses (ISA). Gramsci argued that social norms and structures are enforced twofold: through the repressive and often violent institutions of the police, the military, and the prison system, and the ideological education, media, and family traditions. Janet Staiger concurs that RSAs “function primarily on behalf of the dominant class” and are “overdetermined in an effort to repress changes [that are] disadvantageous” (91-92). Staiger argues that all classes, not just the dominant class, struggle to take up space in the ISA structure in society. While the dominant class has the means and power to control the most prominent ISAs, all groups in society, regardless of privilege, are in a constant state of struggle for social power, and therefore ideological influence. Gramsci acknowledges that the state of authority is never static and consistently changing.

Hall's theory of primary axes of division and Gramsci's concept of ISAs both tie back to *Tangerine* in the intersectionality of the main characters' disenfranchisement and the ideological structures that define the film's place in the Western film sphere.

Textual Critique

When one thinks of a Christmas or holiday movie, films such as *Elf*, *Home Alone* or Hallmark originals come to mind. Even if the main theme of the movie is not directly related to Christmas, the setting being during the winter, with wreaths and string lights in the background. Most importantly, though— nearly all Christmas movies take place on Christmas Eve or Christmas Day.

Tangerine takes place on Christmas Eve, and though the date is relevant to the plot, the intersection of race, class, and gender takes the forefront of the message of the movie. This division is precisely why most viewers would not consider *Tangerine* to be a holiday film. Hall's primary axes of division are prevalent throughout, since both Sin-Dee and Alexandra are disadvantaged in all three; they are Black, economically disadvantaged trans women. While they are portrayed as agents of authority in their story, their societal position still takes precedence in the viewer's interpretation. These axes of division, along with sexuality, religion, and ability, illustrate who can be part of the Western concept of a holiday movie. Nearly all Hallmark holiday films, for instance, feature white, straight, Christian, middle- to upper-class characters and a relatively predictable plot line— which, in turn, form an ideological state apparatus, as argued by Gramsci. *Tangerine* subverts and satirizes the notion that the holidays are only for the wealthy and white by depicting both Black trans sex workers and an Armenian immigrant family. The subordinate classes depicted make new meanings out of tropes dominated by the authoritarian class by showing not how they suffer, but how they live and the choices they make. Baker's decision to set the movie on Christmas was a conscious choice, and thereby expands the boundaries of the exclusionary Western holiday film.

ISAs and their consequences are present throughout the film, most notably the unique ways the characters interact with each other. At the very end of the movie, Alexandra confesses to sleeping with Sin-Dee's boyfriend. Sin-Dee angrily leaves, but immediately after, someone throws urine at her while shouting slurs. Despite Alexandra's betrayal, Sin-Dee still turns back to her for help with washing her clothes because they still share the same experiences of facing transphobic violence. No matter how severe their interpersonal conflicts are, they are united under their being victims of ISAs that promote, often violently, the gender binary and gender roles. This begs the question that if not for such oppressive structures, would Sin-Dee have let Alexandra go more readily? The ISAs that uphold certain groups and oppress others affect who all of us surround ourselves with, consciously or not.

Another notable effect of ISAs present in the film is shown through Razmik, an Armenian immigrant taxi driver. Razmik regularly pays Alexandra and other sex workers for sexual favors. His preference (and possibly fetish) for trans women is evident when he kicks another sex worker out of his car after finding out that she is cis. At the end, he is discovered by the rest of his family, who are furious with him. Gramsci describes family as one of the most prominent ISAs (Staiger 92), which in turn explains Razmik's secrecy in his preferences. The dominant ideology looks down upon gender nonconformity and extramarital relations, upheld by his immigrant family in conforming to American culture.

Of course, such explicit topics would not be discussed so openly in a traditional holiday film, since many are made for viewers of all ages, including children. But that is another ISA depicted in holiday movies— that all aspects of Christmas must appeal to the whole family. This relies on the notion that all families include young children, or children at all. The traditional holiday movie reinforces the concept of the nuclear family, a structure the dominant class relies

on. *Tangerine* is rated R for a good reason, but the notion that it cannot be a holiday movie for not being “family friendly” plays into the authoritarian class’s insistence on the traditional (straight, cis, childbearing wife) model of “family.”

Contexts

The message of *Tangerine* cannot be fully realized without taking into consideration the intention of the director and the film’s production. In reaction to the resurgence of purity culture and negative media representation of sex workers, Sean Baker actively chose to make films destigmatizing those in the sex industry. In an interview with *Elle*, Baker notes how, “during the pandemic, with the narrative around people out of work joining OnlyFans, it really brought conversations about normalizing sex work to the forefront” (Krueger). However, Baker had been promoting this message for much longer, given *Tangerine*’s release in 2015. Throughout the *Elle* interview, Baker reiterates that his films are intended to destigmatize sex work and hopefully lead to its eventual worldwide decriminalization and acceptance. *Tangerine* does just that—fully humanizes Sin-Dee, Alexandra, and their cis colleague Dinah, and paints a candid picture of their economic status that led them to their positions. Similarly, Baker does not intend for the viewer to feel pity; the protagonists have agency in the plot and live through their status in society, rather than focusing solely on their struggle.

The production aspects mirror the limited resources available to the characters in the film. Despite having enough budget for a modestly sized camera, the whole movie was entirely shot on iPhone 5s. Editing was done in the non-industry-standard Final Cut and color grading in Davinci Resolve (Sciretta). While there are some practical aspects of low-budget cameras (such as filming in public without a permit and the ability to pay actors more), there is a deeper

meaning when it comes to representation. Through both its production and message, *Tangerine* represents deviation from the dominant class (white, cis, upper-class). It acts against the standard for both who is represented and how films “should” be made. In fact, due to being shot on phones without permits, “it was revealed that the LA city bus driver called the cops on them because a filmed argument looked “too real” during a scene which took place on the bus line” (Sciretta). The societal ISA of the expectation of films only made with equipment only the very wealthy can afford was (in this case, nearly) enforced through an RSA: the police system.

Spectatorship

My position in society is markedly different from the characters presented in *Tangerine*; I am white, live comfortably, and have had much less socially stigmatized occupations than Sin-Dee and Alexandra. I am not Christian and do not celebrate Christmas, so I have little expectation to see myself represented in a holiday film. However, as a genderqueer person, I enjoy seeing diversity of gender identity on the big screen. Sin-Dee and Alexandra are fully humanized, and never portrayed as anything other than women. Their being trans is only brought up when relevant, as well as to establish the story. While much of Hollywood shies away from films with LGBT+ characters due to fear of retaliation, the accurate portrayal of not only trans people, but Black women, immigrants, and sex workers as well opens the door for further representation of marginalized groups in the film industry.

That said, there are a handful of problematic moments— most notably, when Razmik’s family uncontestedly calls Sin-Dee, Alexandra, Chester, and Dinah “gay prostitutes.” This not only perpetuates an outdated view of trans people, but also negatively portrays the only known immigrant family in the film. Furthermore, Sean Baker is a white, wealthy filmmaker

capitalizing off his depiction of the struggles of the marginalized. He studied film at NYU and has family also in high-paying jobs (Flores). While any accurate portrayal is useful to closing the gap in representation, I would like to see more films about intersectionality made by people who have direct experience with existing at the intersection of multiple marginalized groups. Aside from that, however, I believe that *Tangerine* is a solid and mostly well-done attempt at representation of the intersectionality of oppression in the United States.

Conclusion

Throughout *Tangerine*, Baker provides a new angle on the experiences of intersectional oppression and challenges the white, wealthy norm of holiday films enforced through the media. Holiday feature films are one form of ISA, reinforcing the lack of people of color, non-Christian, and economically disadvantaged people. *Tangerine* examines the ways that these systems are perpetuated in our everyday lives. Trans representation in film is rare, and most mainstream depictions of trans people follow the Western media ISA in every other way, as if to compensate: depicting white, wealthy, able-bodied trans people. *Tangerine* is a step forward for intersectionality in media through all of the primary axes of division.

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