Tulpa: Critical Analysis and Reflection

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MSP 4701: Producing and Directing

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28 April 2021

Introduction

Tulpa is a pilot about a young therapist who begins to have strange dreams, in which she comes in contact with an extraterrestrial. She falls into paranoia as she does not know what is happening and what the purpose of the dreams are, and slowly comes to the conclusion that she is being followed. After working on producing this pilot, I have been able to notice many flaws in terms of representation of different identities; particularly race and gender. Even though unintentional flaws are not necessarily harmful with their intent, they are still harmful to the industry and varying identities as a whole. In order to normalize equal and true representation, creators have to make an effort to do so and not just be passive and follow the status quo of past production standards.

Analysis

Representation of Race in *Tulpa*

One of the largest issues with *Tulpa* was something that I realized during pre-production - there was a lack of representation within our cast. While we were writing the story of *Tulpa*, we did not have a particular physical identity carved out for any of the characters other than the Men in Black characters, who were meant to be stark pale and having sharp features (this physical description was based off of research on conspiracy theories previously written about the Men in Black). As we went to write the casting postings, we had to specify characteristics of the actors we wanted, whether it be gender, age, height, weight, hair color, or race, as well as many other categories. Our crew had never really discussed the physical characteristics of our characters, we just wrote them as characters without context, and that was probably a mistake upon reflecting. We knew Brad and Cara were going to be white and specifically gendered male and female, Blake and Jordan could be anybody, we had no specifications except for age range, but then with

Alice, we just knew we wanted a female lead around late 20's to early 30's. When it came down to specifying anything more, I felt as though we could have just kept the specifications there, but for some reason we felt as though we were picturing Alice as a white female. There was nothing about her in my opinion that was particularly white, but I did agree that I had been picturing her in my head as white. I think that this is something that is very important to deconstruct and ask myself: "Why did I picture her this way when there was nothing that made her have to be white?"

Susanne Mathies wrote an article entitled "The Simulated Self – Fiction Reading and Narrative Identity", which discusses the way that readers construct an identity based off of what they consume. Although Mathies' specific case she discusses the reading of fiction books but I believe this can be perfectly translated to the reading of digital media- and in this case film and television. Mathies refers to Ricoeur's (1992) concept of narrative identity "that we weave the past events of our life, our current experiences and our expectations for the future into a self-narrative in which we are the co-authors regarding its meaning" (Mathies, pg.328-9, 2020). According to Ricoeur, narrative identity has two levels: idem, the physical or external, and ipse, the mental or internal. The idem and the ipse of a person come together to "work as a practical identity that helps us to deal with the conflicts in our interaction with the world and our social nexus, and it provides our life with a sense of unity" (Mathies, pg.329, 2020). Mathies goes on to argue that readers (of media) can become connected enough with a story they are consuming, to the point that they begin to reflect what they are consuming. This concept can be perfectly reflected onto myself as a creator; throughout my life I have consumed film and television which are industries dominated by white creators telling white stories.

Because of the structures and norms of the film and television industry, I have been told that telling stories of white people is normal and- in simple terms- the standard. Along with that, I myself am a white woman, therefore I am seeing identities of myself reflected within media. Based on my idem (being a white woman) and my ipse (personality and opinions that were assisted in development by the media I had consumed in my life), I fell into creating a mostly racially homogeneous cast.

We did not have an intention of creating a mostly uniform cast, in fact there were no real intentions about racial representation - and that is a problem within itself even though we thought it to be okay. The route we took, unintentionally, was "colorblind casting", which can be defined as writing characters and casting those characters without a specific racial identity in mind. This practice was created with the intention of just casting the best talent as opposed to the best talent of a certain race for a role. At a surface level, color-blind casting may seem like a good route to some but upon further examination it can be discovered, as explained by Kristen Warner (2015), that colorblind casting, "shapes attitudes that reinforce whiteness at the expense of the racial and cultural difference" (Haggins, p.1, 2016). Colorblind casting is often a tactic used by creators in order to inject diversity into their cast, thus creating undeveloped characters or characters that do not make sense contextually, whether that be because of the setting or because of the way in which the character was written (Haggins, pg.1, 2016). In *Tulpa*, we posted Jordan as a role that could be filled by anyone, as long as they looked like they could be a high school student. We ended up casting Iyanu who had by far the best performance out of any of our auditions. However, upon further analysis of the context of his character, it could be argued that Jordan was written as a stereotypical black male - mother passed at a young age, "crappy health insurance", and mental health issues. Although Jordan was not written to be played by a young black male,

once Iyanu was cast for the role it happened that Jordan's character was another harmful stereotype.

In order to solve the problems that we ran into concerning casting and racial diversity within *Tulpa* (if we were to further produce this show or even create anything in the future), we must write characters with a developed construction overall, using identity conscious casting. Not only will this create more developed and full characters, but it will also help to more truthfully tell the stories of different identities in an unharmful manner. Race does not have to be the forefront of a character, but it is necessary to address a character's race in order to give fair and proper representation to varying racial identities.

Representation of Gender in *Tulpa*

In *Tulpa*, our main character Alice starts off as a generally calm and relaxed person who is experiencing strange repetitive dreams. As the story progresses, Alice begins to lose her mind and go crazy trying to figure out what is happening within her dreams. Eventually she comes to the conclusion that she is being followed by the Men in Black, and there is an alien trying to contact her. By the end of the story, Alice is completely mentally broken, paranoid and nobody believes her – she is somewhat painted out to be a crazy woman in the eyes of her friends, coworkers and clients. Upon reflection of our writing, I feel as though we may have fallen into some harsh stereotypes of women when writing Alice – she becomes mentally broke, weak and a victim.

In Wood's article, *Gendered Media*, she discusses how women are stereotypically painted within media – one that stood out to me in relation to *Tulpa* was "women as victims… and men as aggressors" (Wood, p. 36, 1994). The victim in our story is obviously Alice, especially when framed next to Brad – the manipulative, mind game playing male aggressor.

Brad toys with Alice, trying to break down her mental state and make her weak. Wood goes on to describe the typical characteristics of women and men within media when they are written in the frame of victim and aggressor: women are written as passive and powerless while men are written as aggressive, dominant and strong (Wood, pg. 36, 1994). This is exactly how Alice and Brad are in the relationship between the two of them. Alice falls for Brad's manipulative mind traps and Brad stays confidently at the upper hand and by the end, Alice completely cracks and not only falls victim to Brad mentally but also gets physically captured by him.

By falling into this stereotypical role of female victim and male aggressor, I think we failed to break the harmful and normative representations of women within media. In order to change and fix this problem, I think that if we were to further produce this show into a full season, we could fight to make Alice's story triumphant instead of her just becoming the weak and powerless victim. Alice could pursue her freedom and the freedom of the alien who is seeking her help. By writing the story like this, we would be able to undermine the stereotype that women are weak and always the victim.

Conclusion

Throughout the process of making Tulpa, I was very proud of what we have made and the challenges we have overcome. After further examining our writing of our story, however, I have discovered that there were some issues in terms of representation. Although there are mistakes and issues with our writing, I think that this is a natural process for media producers – making media and acknowledging the mistakes within that media. I think that the best way to progress as a media producer is just to continue to reflect and then learn to not make those same mistakes again. As a young producer, the experience of developing and producing a big project

was such a great learning experience in terms of production, but also in terms of cultural

representation and messages within the media I make.

References

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