

Research article

The Circus and the Dream: Representation of the American Dream of Minorities in The Greatest Showman

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Abstract.

This research analyzed the commercially successful American musical film entitled The Greatest Showman, released in 2017. This film depicts the journey of P.T. Barnum, who becomes a showman. Barnum founded a circus that includes people from minority racial groups and who have physical uniqueness. This research aimed to examine how representation of the American dream is portrayed in this film and is reconstructed by focusing on minority characters in the circus troupe. A descriptive-analytical method was used with a qualitative approach by considering narrative and cinematic aspects. Inspired by P.T. Barnum's 'freakshow' and circus in the nineteenth century, the film portrays the circus as the pathway to the American dream for multicultural and disabled minorities. The circus provided equal opportunities for all people to show their talents and abilities to perform in a circus show, regardless of class, social status, or gender. However, problematically, the representation of the American dream in the film still affirms white, male privilege by maintaining white males as the leaders of minorities in the circus space.

Keywords: American dream, film, freakshow

1. INTRODUCTION

The United States is known for its diverse society. Except for Native American communities, the people of the United States (U.S.) are all immigrants. Based on Pew Research in 2020. U.S. is the country with the highest number of immigrants of any country and more than one million immigrants arrived in the U.S. every year [1] The immigrants came from various countries such as Mexico, China, India, the Philippines, El Salvador, and other countries. Immigrants also come to the US for a variety of reasons, either because of their own will, fleeing their country's conflicts, or even being forced by circumstances that cause them to flee to safer places. The underlying essence of the immigrants is a dream to get a better life in America or known as the American Dream.

The American Dream refers to the aspiration of not only Americans but also immigrants to improve their lives in America. The American Dream describes the hopes

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of immigrants leaving their country to pursue individual freedom and opportunities for success in the new world or America [2]. The American Dream rests on the idea that anyone can achieve success in America. This makes the American Dream attractive to people around the world because this dream is for anyone regardless of skin color, religion, or nationality [3]. American films can be entertainment also medium of propaganda that plays a role in promoting the American Dream to other countries. American films still dominate the ranks of the highest-grossing films compared to films produced locally in various countries [3]. This causes not only Americans who want the American Dream but also people outside America.

This study will examine one of the commercially successful American films entitled *The Greatest Showman* (2017) (TGS). The film was inspired by the journey of a successful figure in America in the 19th-century named Phineas Taylor Barnum (P.T. Barnum). P.T. Barnum was known for controversial publicity to promote his freakshow and circus in 19th-century America [4]. Although TGS was a debut for director Michael Gracey, it was considered commercially successful. After closing its release in 2018, TGS became the highest-grossing musical film in the world and the third in the United States [5]. *The Greatest Showman* (2017) tells about the journey of Barnum to become a successful showman by establishing a circus that includes people from minorities who are of various races, skin color, and physical uniqueness. In this research, the author will focus on the characters from Barnum's circus who represent minority communities of various races and physical uniqueness. Therefore, this research aims to evaluate the representation of the American Dream for the minorities in the film.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

The term "American Dream" refers to a dream or hope of better life for everyone in America. The term "American Dream" was first described in a book entitled *The Epic of America* in [6] by the American historian James Truslow Adams (as "dream of land which life should be better and richer and fuller for everyman" (Adams, [6]). In his book, Adams [6] stated that America is the land of equal opportunity for everyone to get the fullest stature of their capability, be recognized by others for what they are, regardless of the fortuitous circumstances of birth or position. [6] argued that success could more easily be achieved in the United States than in Europe because Europe's class system provided less favorable conditions. From that definition, United States has sought to cast itself as a beacon of hope for foreigners seeking to improve their lives.

The American historian Jim Cullen [7] argues that the meaning of “better and richer and fuller” is not always manifested in terms of wealth but various ways. It could be an improvement in spiritual matters such as religion, political reform, education, sexual expression, and so on. The Declaration of Independence (1776) became the “charter of the American Dream” because it contained the basic concept of the American Dream in the modern era [7]. This declaration was made by white aristocratic Europeans who place the highest value on individual freedom. An important part of the American Dream concept in this declaration is in paragraph two which reads, “We hold this truth as self-evident, that all Humans are created equal, they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among them are Life, Freedom, and the Pursuit of Happiness” [8]. The phrase “all men are created equal” means the opportunity to achieve a better life applies equally to all people regardless of origin or social status. In his book, Cullen explains the concept of equality by focusing on the story of the struggle or movements of minorities in achieving equality in opportunity, rights, and justice. The presence of the concept of equality is important because it gives the impression that the American Dream applies to everyone [7]. There are three important elements in this declaration, namely: “life” according to the Cambridge Dictionary [9] Life is the experience or state of being living, which means to be alive; “liberty” which means getting the freedom to determine how to live without restraint; whereas “the pursuit of happiness” means the chasing of happiness. Thus, “life, liberty, and the Pursuit of Happiness” has the meaning of freedom in pursuing a happy life. The meanings of “life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness” are also often associated with the pursuit of material freedom. This is contained in the Declaration of Rights for Virginia (1776) which paraphrased “life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness” as “the enjoyment of life and liberty, with the means of acquiring and possessing property, and pursuing and obtaining happiness and safety.” After the Declaration of Independence (1776) was made, Americans in the modern era were free to decide their life with their own will.

In the 19th-century, freakshow became popular entertainment in America. Freakshow is a show or exhibition featuring exotic animals or humans who have anomalous or abnormal physical, mental, or behavioral forms. Freakshows have actually appeared since the mid-16th century in England but have become popular in America since the 19th century [10]. In 1840, P.T. Barnum first set up a freakshow in America under the name of the American Museum, located in New York City. During the Civil War, the American Museum became popular and made huge profits because visitors needed entertainment or a diversion from conflict [10]

In the 19th-century, freakshow can be a pathway to financial success for minorities such as immigrants or people with physical deformities or disabilities in America. Examples of successful people with physical deformities or disabilities who participated in freakshows in the 19th-centuries are Captain Constantenus the man with full of tattoos on his body, and Chang and Eng the Siamese twins financially successful after they joined freakshow. Constantenus was a Greek-Albanian immigrant who partnered with P.T. Barnum and has earned over \$1,000 per week from the freakshow [11]. Chang and Eng were conjoined twins who were brought to America in 1829 as slaves then become successful in making money for themselves by freakshow [12]. Adams (2015) views that freakshow can actually become institutions for people with disabilities. According to Adams (2015), freakshow can be a pillar of the economy for people with disabilities. Between 1867 and 1974 there was a law called the Ugly Laws which forbade people with physical deformity or disability to expose themselves in public places [3]. However, Ugly Laws do not prohibit persons with disabilities from appearing to entertain (Schweik, 2009). Freakshows provided opportunities for minorities and disabilities to work and make money for themselves. Thus, freakshow can be the American Dream for minorities such as immigrants and disabled people to gain financial success.

However, not all minorities who follow freakshows have the same success. One example is the case of Joseph Merrick, who was nicknamed the "elephant man". Merrick was born with a normal physique, but when he was five years old, his body began to change, such as thickening of the skin, then swelling on the lips, forehead, and sagging skin. Because of the abnormality of his body, Merrick decided to take a tour of the "elephant man" exhibition to make a living. After touring around Europe following the exhibition, Merrick was robbed and abandoned by his manager (Howell & Ford, 2011). From this case, freakshow can be considered an exploitative activity because it takes advantage of exhibiting body abnormalities due to genetic mutations or diseases.

The circus in the film *The Greatest Showman* (2017) has the same characteristic as the freakshow. Same as the freakshow, Barnum's circus highlights the uniqueness and physical diversity of each performer. Although freakshows in the 19th-century had their pros and cons, I argue that the representation of the freakshow/circus in *The Greatest Showman* (2017) represents American Dream.

3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

In analyzing the film, the author will use a descriptive-analytical method with a qualitative approach. This research focuses on film as text by paying attention to narrative and

cinematic aspects [13]. The discussion of narrative aspects relates to plots, characters, conflicts, settings, that form a cause-and-effect relationship of events. The discussion of cinematic aspects relates to cinematographic techniques such as acting, shots, and mise en scene (settings/properties, costumes/makeup, and lighting/colors). The author analyzes and interprets parts of the film by examining scenes, actions, song lyrics, and dialogues that related to the circus and American Dream.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

The circus allows the marginalized minorities of New York society to perform in public. The formation of the Barnum circus was originated from the failure of his museum business in attracting visitors. After getting advice from his two daughters, Barnum decided to create a show featuring unique people. The Barnum's circus gives equal opportunities for all people to show their talents and abilities to perform in the circus performance, regardless of their class, social status, or gender. The first person in Barnum's circus was Charles Stratton the 22-year-old man with dwarfism. Stratton came from a poor family because he did not have much money as collateral to get a loan from the bank. Due to his physical deformity, his own mother distanced him from New York society because she did not him to be the object of a laugh. This made the idea of appearing in public and earning respect so important to Stratton. Then, Barnum meets Lettie Lutz, a bearded woman with a beautiful voice who previously was worked as a laundromat. Lutz seemed to be aloof from the other laundry workers because of the beard on her face. After seeing the advertisements posters on the streets of New York, the unique people came one by one to join the Barnum's act audition. Initially, each person with a unique body came with pessimism in their ability. W.D. Wheeler, a black trapeze artist said, "You know, people aren't gonna like it if you put us on the stage". Then, Lord of Leeds the fat man whispered in a whisper that he weighed 500-pounds but Barnum loudly and proudly said 750pounds. Barnum accepts all people who came to the audition such as Anne and WD Wheeler the black sibling trapeze artists, Tattoo man, Dog Boy, Lord of Leeds the obese man, the Irish Giant, and Chang and Eng the Siamese twins. Barnum performs on the same stage as the circus performers who have a variety of skin colors and unique physical forms, which led the show critic Joseph Gordon Bennet to think that the circus is a "celebration of humanity." The presence of Barnum's circus members in the film is a representation of minorities in New York City such as immigrants and people with disabilities. With their variations of forms, race, and colors, the varied circus troupes represent America as diverse individuals.

The Barnum's circus also became a meeting point between the upper-class like Phillip Carlyle and the marginalized like other circus performers to live together in harmony. Carlyle is a young playwright who owns a grand theater for upper-class audiences. Carlyle was born into the upper-class but, she did not get his happiness as part of the upper-class so she was often seen drinking alcohol as an escape activity. Carlyle was seen compulsively drinking alcohol at an upper-class party while the rest of the upper-class were chatting with each other. Then, Barnum met Carlyle who was seen drinking alcohol again in front of his theater. Barnum, who had noticed that Carlyle liked to drink alcohol then invited Carlyle to drink at the tavern while negotiating to become his co-worker. When Barnum offered to collaborate to increase his circus business to appeal to the upper-class, Carlyle replied "If you only knew how suffocating they are." Carlyle implies that life as an upper-class is restrained and unpleasant. At first, Carlyle continued to refuse Barnum's offer because he did not want to risk his inheritance. Barnum said, "You'd be risking everything. But on the other hand, well, you just might find yourself a free man" which implies that he knows what Carlyle wants is liberty.

One of the reasons Carlyle stayed in Barnum's circus was because he fell in love with one of Barnum's circus performers named Anne Wheeler, a black trapeze artist. Anne Wheeler was also the sister of W.D. Wheeler the trapeze artist. Carlyle and Anne realize they are in love holding hands while watching Lind's concert. Their love affair was hindered by the blessing of Phillip's parents because of Anne's race who came from black. Carlyle's father said, "Associating yourself with Barnum's business is one thing other than parading with help?" The word "help" users that black people in the 19th century were still associated as "slaves" or "servants" who served the upper classes. The sentence shows that the determinants of social class are not only economic factors but also race. This event shows that American society in the film is still with the social class system.

The song "This Is Me" is a depiction of the struggle for equality for circus performers to survive as rejected minorities by some New Yorkers. The song "This Is Me" is about the struggles of those who survive to keep performing circus shows. In the sentence "Hideaway, they say // 'Cause we don't want your broken parts," they describe that so far the public has told them not to appear in public because of their body abnormalities. In the end, they realized that no one else would love their deformity but themselves. The phrase "I am brave, I am bruised, I am who I'm meant to be, "This is Me" shows that they have accepted themselves. The phrase "I'm not scared to be seen, I make no apologies, "This is Me"," shows that they finally dared to show themselves to the world and decided to stay as circus performers without Barnum.

The film suggests that happiness or success is not about wealth but spiritual things such as feeling at home and feeling belong to the family. At first, Barnum thought that the circus performers were only objects for making material profits, then these circus troupes became subjects who made Barnum realize the importance of family. After experiencing a series of disasters that claimed his wealth, reputation, and found his circus on fire, Barnum chose to be alone and vent his sadness by drinking at the tavern. Then, the circus troupe came to Barnum who was slumped both materially and spiritually. Barnum, who was still materialistic, thought that the circus troupe wanted to collect the money by saying, "if you've come to get paid the money is gone." Then Lettie replied, "Our own mothers were ashamed of us. Hid us our whole lives Then you pull us out of the shadows [...] you gave us a real family". Then, W.D. Wheeler continued, "And the circus, that was our home." The circus troupe came to ask Barnum to rebuild his circus. With this circus, they can show themselves and gain acceptance for what they are. Circus troupes find happiness by making the circus function not only as a home but also providing them with a real family that accepts their talents and physical deformity. The circus performers also earned all three points of the charter of the American Dream. The marginalized minorities got a new life as circus performers. Then, the circus performance got their happiness by finding a family willing to accept them as they were. The circus performers also get the liberty to show themselves and their abilities through the circus performances. This makes the American Dream happen in Barnum's circus.

However, the representation of the American Dream in the TGS still perpetuates male and white privilege. The film depicts Barnum as the main white character who is active and optimistic, while the characters of the circus performers as representatives of racial minorities and disabilities who are passive and pessimistic about their body abnormalities. During Barnum and the circus performer's trip to Buckingham Palace, Barnum gets a new chance at success by meeting opera singer Jenny Lind, while the circus performers get the laugh response that Stratton has been dreading. Upon their return from Buckingham Palace, Barnum found new success with a Jenny Lind concert, while the circus performers continued to be rejected by some New Yorkers. After the circus building catches fire, the circus performers ask Barnum to rebuild the circus because they have considered the circus as their home and family. That scene not only illustrates that the circus will not run without Barnum's presence but also implies Barnum is a hero for minorities. In the end, Barnum returns to his family and appoints another white man, Phillip Carlyle, as leader of the circus. This shows the film maintains a hierarchy that whites remain the leaders of society.

5. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the TGS film depicted Barnum's circus as the American Dream. Barnum's circus provides equal opportunities for everyone to show their talents and abilities to perform in a circus show, regardless of class, social status, or gender. Adopting the phenomenon of the freakshow in the 19th century, Barnum's circus showcases each unique talent by highlighting the uniqueness and physical diversity of each performer. While American society in the film shows social inequality such as between the upper and lower classes, Barnum's circus is a meeting point between the upper class and the marginalized people of various races and physical uniqueness who live side by side in harmony. However, the representation of the American Dream in the TGS film still perpetuates the privilege of white men.

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