The Black Panther is dead, long live the Black Panther!

Fahid Qurashi, 23rd February 2018

There is a certain allure to seeing black characters, front and centre, in a mainstream Hollywood movie. More alluring, as in the case of Black Panther, is the representation of black characters as strong and intelligent, living in the most advanced nation on Earth, in possession of scientific and technological knowledge to offer the world.

It is a sad indictment of Hollywood that a film like Black Panther, with its horrific politics, is supposed to represent an important cultural moment signalling the arrival and acceptance of black people into the mainstream. Of course, the film can be applauded for its positive representation: of strong black characters as leaders, good guys, and scientists; and celebrated for a vision of Africa, not as some dilapidated backwater, but the site of the world’s most advanced nation with cultural values that are respected; and as Mark Kermode points out in his review of the film, equality amongst the genders with both men and women in leading positions in science, politics, and the military.

The question however, is whether this is enough. Is this what black people should aspire to be – black masters? The sheer joy of witnessing black characters in positive respectable roles functioned as a deliberate distraction from the politics of the film. There were signs of this early on as Muslim ‘baddies’ popped up with a truck full of kidnapped girls as though to signal the political alignment of Wakanda, with the west, as they both share a common enemy and fight in the same struggle against “terror”. Then there was the anti-refugee nativist rhetoric (‘they just bring their problems with them’) which wouldn’t be out of place at a UKIP party hosted in honour of Donald Trump. The aim of this is to get the audience on side with this western friendly leadership of Wakanda (against others that might make a claim to the throne).

If this wasn’t clear enough, the film threw in a CIA operative, Everett K. Ross, with which the Wakandan leadership collaborated. Again, this collaboration functions to signal the acceptability of the leaders of Wakanda and lets the audience know which blacks to trust. The Wakandan leadership is acceptable because they share the politics of the west and they operate within a western neoliberal, neo-colonial paradigm, much like Turkey’s AKP or Egypt’s Muslim Brotherhood. They may be “Islamists”, but they are neoliberal “Islamists”. One of the strongest features of capitalism is that it thrives in crises. Commentators have been forecasting the death of capitalism for a long time. But the point is, capitalism needs crises to survive and thrive. It adapts extremely well and doesn’t care much about the politics of leaders and nations so long as they are capitalist leaders and nations. So, it doesn’t matter that Wakanda is a free black nation, that it has a strong non-western cultural heritage, that it has strong, competent, and intelligent black leaders and scientists, and that Wakanda is presented as desirable. What matters for the west is that it is situated within the paradigm of neoliberal capitalism so that its rationality can exercise influence in determining the direction of Wakanda. As with Turkey’s AKP, it doesn’t matter whether capitalist policies are implemented with a local flavour: what matters is that they are implemented. In this way, capitalism continues to grow in the face of perceived crises from ‘liberation movements’.
All of this makes Black Panther a rather dangerous and insidious film. It lures its audience in with positive representations of black people and black culture (such as the scene in which a white man at the UN mockingly asks T’Challa what Wakanda could possibly offer the world), with excellent camerawork and action, gets the audience on side with T’Challa’s (Obama) leadership, and then feeds it the same neoliberal, neo-colonial politics, except with a black face.

Rather than siding with T’Challa we should be on the side of N’Jadaka (“Killmonger”). He understands the oppression of the status quo and wants to ‘burn it all and start over’. This is what makes him dangerous and results in an even closer collaboration between T’Challa’s family and a desperate CIA that wants to ensure the survival of the western world order against a “radical” black leader with superpowers who wants to reorder the world and redistribute its resources. The film however, denigrates his radicalism and presents it as something dangerous, not because he wants to reorder the world, but by associating it with murder – he gets his name ‘Killmonger’ because of the sheer number of people, including children, that he has killed.

The film is telling black people how to be successful and accepted on the world stage as black people - to be “moderate”, to operate within the confines of the neoliberal, neo-colonial world order. If you want to make changes and help people, do so incrementally. Go to the UN, like T’Challa, and announce the creation of a charity organisation that will “help” those that have been oppressed and abused. Don’t ever think about ‘burning it all down and starting over’. If you try something like that, we’ll come together in a coalition and destroy you. And you will die, just like N’Jadaka. The moral superiority of this position is evident in the closing scenes as a triumphant T’Challa stands tall and proud at the UN. In short, the film is a validation of the western world order.

We don’t need black power for its own sake. We don’t need a black master to replace the white master and sit at the head of the same world order. We don’t need strong and intelligent black leadership if it uses its strength and knowledge in service of the same world order. What we need is a politics of emancipation. Social justice isn’t dependent on a nice liberal ‘woke’ President or Monarch. During the era of slavery, the kind slave masters were worse than the brutes, because their kindness made the slaves forget (if even momentarily) that they were slaves held in bondage. Rather than struggling for their freedom and building networks of solidarity they opted to make the best of their relatively comfortable situation (because others had it a lot worse. There is a scene in 12 Years a Slave in which Solomon and Eliza argue about the virtue of their slave master. ‘Mr Ford is a decent man’ claims Solomon. ‘He is a slaver!’ Eliza shoots back. Solomon tries again with, ‘Under the circumstances...’ but it shot down again by Eliza, ‘Under the circumstances he is a slaver!’). Malcolm X also had something to say on this matter: ‘I have more respect for a man who lets me know where he stands, even if he’s wrong, than the one who comes up like an angel and is nothing but a devil’.

In the end, the problematic politics of Black Panther undermine any value the film may have. If this is what representation means, then it may be time to rethink the value of representation. Black Panther speaks to, is an affirmation of, and a trust from western elites in the rich powerful westernised neoliberal black elites around the world. It signals the arrival of this black elite onto the world stage and into the mainstream and reminds them how to be black. It doesn’t have much to say for the mass of black people around the world.

In the world of Hollywood, Black Panther may seem radical and progressive. But that is more of an indictment of Hollywood than a sign of its progressiveness. Black Panther is Hollywood in
blackface. Zizek is right about something; we can imagine the end of the world much more readily than we can imagine the end of capitalism.

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