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The Film You Didn't See – Who's the Alien, Cowboy?

Marcia Alesan Dawkins · Thursday, August 25th, 2011

Chances are you didn't see *Cowboys and Aliens.* The film won't get to $100 million box office in the US, and it is sinking fast overseas as well. There's even been collateral damage – in the wake of its lackluster performance, Disney has put the brakes on the even-more-expensive *Lone Ranger*, to have starred Johnny Depp.

Cowboys and Aliens didn't get audience traction because of mixed genres and mixed reviews, but the most intriguing aspect audiences and critics alike missed is the film's approach to mixed races and mixed species. The movie is an overt critique of colonialism and racism. Think we're reaching for subtext? Well, it's about as obvious as a gigantic spaceship hovering over the Western sky.

Let's take a look at the characters. Alice (Abigail Spencer) is most obvious – an "undocumented" alien in human form. Beautiful, tough and mysterious, she is the last of her kind and uses her human form to save the Earthlings and her alien knowledge to destroy the invaders. Without her hybrid nature, Earth would be doomed. Emmett (Noah Ringer) is the quintessential mixed race character whose parents are dead and who leaves us wondering about his racial background. All we have to go on are clues from the racial/ethnic makeup of the town (white, Mexican American and Native) and Emmett's physical appearance. By keeping us from seeing Emmett's parents, *Cowboys and Aliens* falls in line with conventional Hollywood (and literary) traditions, as well as the current trend of mixed-race discussions, which focus only on the contemporary generation, and turn a blind eye to prior generations and the suggestion of sexual violence that may have given birth to the present, multi-racial character. However, unlike most early films, Emmett does not become a tragic mulatto. Despite his orphan status he is fully part of the community in which he lives and his undefined racial background does not seem to be an issue.

Perhaps the most interesting character, from a racial perspective, is Nat (Adam Beach), the son Dolarhyde (Harrison Ford) always wanted; instead of Percy, the sniveling, obnoxious son he actually has. Nat, Dolarhyde's adopted son, is the one who bridges the gap between Natives and whites, even serving as translator. Nat (short for Native?) reveres and adores Dolarhyde but also pushes Dolarhyde to stop being such a jerk and work with the Apaches in order to defeat the aliens. However, Nat dies before the end of the film and Percy is saved. Apparently, in the Hollywood narrative, the white son, annoying as he may be, is preferable to a non-white Apache.

There is one peculiar absence in the film – black people. They only exist off-screen, in the discussions of Dolarhyde's days as a Civil War colonel. (Incidentally, we don't know what side he

fought on and we don't know how far he has evolved in his racial thinking when he allies with the "Indians.") The absence of blacks says a lot about how mainstream Hollywood, and media in general, deal with racial realities – even when they are trying to be gently subversive in their messaging. . Black characters don't mesh with this Western landscape although we know that many blacks travelled west before and after the Civil War looking for freedom, and that as many as 20% of cowboys were black. There were also Natives with mixed African ancestry.

So, what does their absence from the film mean? Would the addition of black characters have drawn too much attention to race? Did the filmmakers or studio execs think the presence of blackness would automatically "darken" what was intended as light comedy? Or is was it the economic realpolitik of Hollywood, where studio execs believe African-American actors will hurt the international box office potential, at a time when international box office should account for 70% of the revenue on an event film? There's a reason why *Cowboys and Aliens* had a $170 budget and a $50 million marketing spend, while *The Help* was made for $25 million.

It's too bad most movie-goers won't see this film. It's exciting, entertaining and creative, and takes a stab at colonial and racial issues, even though it asks more questions than it answers. As the real world threatens economic collapse and prefers post-racial multiracialism, a film fantasy about aliens who steal gold and can only be defeated by the combined efforts of an alien woman, cowboys and Apaches seems right on the money.

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