

“ “You can’t tell me that representation isn’t important. You just can’t”. (Tweet from #WhatBlackPantherMeansToMe) – The Revisibilization of Sub-Saharan Africa in Black Panther (Ryan Coogler, 2018) and its Impact on English-speaking Audiences. ”

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'You can't tell me that representation isn't important. You just can't'. (Tweet from #WhatBlackPantherMeansToMe).
The Revisibilization of Sub-Saharan Africa in *Black Panther* (Ryan Coogler, 2018) and its Impact on English-speaking Audiences.

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INTRODUCTION

The present chapter[1] proposes to consider new pathways for research on mainstream representations and their impact on audiences.[2] The approach used here does not, however, completely stray from the usual perspective on representations, which is based on a comparison between representations and their real-life origins or consequences, and often leads to the conclusion that a huge gap remains. When it comes to racial issues, for instance, it is hard to avoid concluding either that on-screen depictions remain generally negative, or, more recently, that the increase in positive representations is not enough to trigger real improvements. In this respect, the present chapter innovates by focusing on a film that has been acclaimed as a long-awaited exception for its treatment of sub-Saharan Africa and its inhabitants, *Black Panther* (Ryan Coogler, 2018). The film corrects the preconception according to which stereotyping is necessarily connoted negatively. It does so by offering representations that have been greeted as hyper-positive, to the extent of prompting the hope that the old vilifying stereotypes could in one fell swoop be replaced by positive ones. In the case under study here, the replacement clichés are based on ideas of strength, intelligence and wealth – all of which of superior, not to say supernatural quality. In the first part of the chapter, I shall therefore study how *Black Panther* uses an imaginary sub-Saharan African country, Wakanda, as a positive symbol. Wakanda ultimately revalues but also, more importantly, re-visibility the proverbially dark continent.

The second element of novelty to be introduced here is consistent with the general purpose of this interdisciplinary book. The present contribution seeks to account for the indestructibility of some stereotypes by complementing the study of media representations with a tentative assessment of their reception. It also examines the overlapping areas between media representations and historical events. Indeed, it makes sense to balance the analysis of *Black Panther* as a mass media phenomenon that exposes and renews stereotypes with a concurrent qualitative *and quantitative* study of the nature and scope of the *Black Panther* phenomenon. Given the nature of the film, the first part is not too arduous. After watching it just once, one has a precise notion of what makes it important to African people and to African-Americans. The second part, however, comes with many issues. Indeed, it seeks to go beyond the mere observation of change to delve into Internet and social media testimonies about what *Black Panther* means to different kinds of viewers, particularly depending on their ethnicity (Dafedjaiye 2018). Ultimately, the chapter provides a tentative assessment of the supposed ability for the film to substitute new progressive stereotypes

[1] I wish to thank Susan Ball and Lori Maguire for their rereading of and comments on this chapter. Some of the latter have been reproduced almost verbatim, mainly in the footnotes.

[2] This approach is similar to Stokes and Maltby's work on American audiences. (Stokes 1999; Maltby and Stokes 2004), but with major differences. It is also different from the work of Philip Napoli on media reception, which is mostly based on audience ratings (Napoli 2013, 2004).

for the old ones. Accordingly, the term 'representation' is understood here in the full range of its acceptations. They include, beyond the study of film and TV depictions, an analysis of how stereotypes may act as political *representatives* by newly empowering Sub-Saharan countries thanks to role-model Hollywood blockbusters.

1 FROM SIGNS OF HOPE TO CULTURAL SIGNIFICANCE – *BLACK PANTHER*, OR, 'THE FILM THAT WILL CHANGE EVERYTHING' (MARGOLIS 2018)

The elements featured in the film, but also in its paratext, in its production context, and in the circumstances of its premiere, speak for themselves in many regards. They explain the cultural significance and symbolic importance of *Black Panther*. By merely listing them and describing them, one also depicts how they work as outer signs of empowerment for Africa, Africans, but also African-Americans, whose real grievances are voiced, for some of them, by characters in the film. *Black Panther* dispenses its viewers from having to connect what it is to what it is supposed to mean. Simply, it provides audiences with many shortcuts to what it purports to stand for (Diaz 2018). Consequently, because it does not rely on logical connections to be made by its viewers to stand as evidence of change, the film does not seem to have an underlying ideology. On the contrary, it wears its agenda on its sleeve: re-visiblizing and re-empowering Africa and Africans. Nevertheless, to consider that this utter simplicity conveys a form of contempt for *Black Panther*'s main target audiences, and especially black people, would be to jump to conclusions (Hedges-Stocks 2018; Mumbere 2018; Respers 2018). In our global media context, and especially in France, in the UK or in the US, increasing the representation of minorities or 'diversity' on screen is considered an important symptom of improvement. In the countries above, it is even a matter that is dealt with by national institutions. Consequently, for a mainstream Hollywood production, and in this case a massive blockbuster, to have an almost all-black cast carries more political meaning than may seem at first. Besides, the political scope of the film is not limited to African or African-American audiences. This being a Disney production, the positive representations included in the film are no more exclusively targeted to black audiences than *The Princess and the Frog* was when it was released in 2009.

I shall return to this implicit connection between increased visibility and empowerment in the second part. I will then show that it is an undebated premise that informs viewer response, especially among black audiences. Before turning to interpretations of the film as progress, however, it is essential to go through the list of features in the film likely to trigger satisfied reactions of the '*Black Panther* means a lot' type. First, *Black Panther* implies that African countries are not necessarily 'developing countries', in the implied sense that they are trying to catch up with those in the West. On the contrary, as is the case with Wakanda, some African nations can be *overdeveloped*. As a result, some may have to hide their superior powers from the world around. Besides, African countries should not be considered either poor or uncivilized. The wealth and superpowers of Wakanda, for instance, come from vibranium, but the Wakandan language,[3] culture, art, fighting

[3] Interestingly, the Wakandans speak Xhosa, a South African language which happens to be Mandela's native language. Perhaps in a deliberate attempt to make Wakanda unidentifiable, or to suggest that it represents more than just one African country, a variety of accents are used by the characters, coming from a number of different places,

techniques, and superior intelligence cannot all be ascribed to their ownership of the precious material. The film, therefore, does not merely undertake to alter stereotypes that are often attached to sub-Saharan Africa. More largely, it seeks to completely overturn them by substituting hyper-positive visions for negative or even derogatory visions of Africa as a land of poverty and ignorance, as epitomized in the old notion that civilizing Africa is 'the white man's burden'.

Another key element in the film that is likely to trigger positive reactions is its presentation of one pathway to progress that excludes alternatives. In *Black Panther*, the re-empowerment of Africans must be achieved without violence. This is illustrated in the struggle between two characters whose views on black power are translucently descended from those of Martin Luther King and Malcolm X. The parallel works, at least, if one refers to the simplified version of their supposedly Manichaean divergence of opinion. In one corner of the ring is T'Challa, the rightful heir to the Wakandan throne. His policy for his country is isolationist and non-interventionist. The very notion of re-empowerment does not seem to exist for him. He merely seeks to keep his country hidden away from the rest of the world, and therefore protected. In the other corner is Erik 'Killmonger' Stevens, Prince N'Jobu's son and T'Challa's foe in the film. Like his father N'Jobu, who disagreed in that respect with T'Challa's father T'Chaka, Erik seeks to overthrow T'Challa before leading Wakanda out of its isolationist position into a global war for the rights of African people. Killmonger thus confronts T'Challa with what he presents to be his obligation to fight for his race. In his view, the struggle for equality cannot dispense with violence. Nevertheless, even though Killmonger defeats T'Challa in one-to-one combat before taking his place on the throne of Wakanda, the villain he is presented to be eventually loses to the superhero T'Challa/Black Panther. This outcome explicitly demonstrates that violence is not a prerequisite to the re-empowerment of black people. In the end, T'Challa decides to help black people around the world, but without one drop of blood being shed in the process. Because the use of violence is discarded as a non-option, only the political and diplomatic ways remain as potential solutions. The isolationist position, therefore, which recalls the American tradition, is preserved here by an African leader against an African opponent. This suggests that Americans of African origin are just as able as whites to hold office and defend policies that have defined the American stance throughout history. In the wake of Obama's election as president, and despite the subsequent election of Donald Trump, *Black Panther* then reasserts that African-Americans are no different from other Americans as Americans. In the film, this is symbolized through their effectiveness at carrying the torch of wartime isolationism. Once again, it takes very little oversimplification to conclude from the film's plot that the black kids shown playing basketball in the second sequence will eventually not have to die as collateral damage to the war waged by their elders for black empowerment. To go just one step further, it may even be that the new global balance to which the film seeks to lead will have no use for a 'Black Lives Matter' movement. In the world T'Challa offers for the viewers to contemplate at the end, there will be no more tragic killings of black men or women by white cops. *Black Panther* depicts a world where no one mourns for Trayvon Martin, Freddie Gray, Michael Brown, or Pamela Turner, an unarmed black grandmother killed in a police shooting in Texas in May 2019.

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but notably the great Lakes region. See Harris 2018. This variety of origins also points to migration within the continent, which calls into question the view that people only emigrate from the continent.

Black Panther also fishes for popular and critical acclaim with its use of intersectionality. It follows the vein of the already much-celebrated *Wonder Woman* (Patty Jenkins, 2017), praised chiefly for its introduction of a strong female character. Wonder Woman was deemed even stronger, as a super heroine, than the lead characters featured in the also acclaimed 'female-centred' movies that have been released in the decade (O'Reilly 2005; Cocca 2014). *Black Panther* goes further. The film introduces a whole cast of female characters that are not only black, but also supernaturally strong, skilled, and clever. As exemplified by T'Challa's younger sister Shuri, women can fight, but they are also talented when it comes to using Wakandan state-of-the-art technology. Although a petite young woman, Shuri saves Wakanda thanks to her genius-like intelligence and overdeveloped IT skills. The film thus gains credentials by introducing positive female characters among a crowd of positive African characters. With an ounce of cynicism, one might say that this strategy offers a double guarantee of politically correct acceptance.[4]

The film is also substantially different from other Marvel Studio productions in that it devotes no screen time to the narrative of how T'Challa alone became gifted with superpowers. Instead, the prologue to the film defines its storyworld by presenting the audience with a fictional hypothesis that concerns one exceptional individual but immediately extends to a whole people. The animated prologue takes place ages ago. It shows an African warrior eating a strange herb that was irradiated by vibranium. This turns him into the first ever Black Panther. The superhero's origins thus suggest that T'Challa is not the only superhero by the name of 'Black Panther'. He is in fact one individual among many to have borne the Black Panther title – and outfit. The film, therefore, is technically not about a 'black superman' (Fain 2015; Nama 2011). Instead, it introduces a race of superior people, one of whom at least has superpowers, and whose country is located in sub-Saharan Africa. The movie, therefore, does not just offer people of African descent a unique counter-stereotype showing that they can be stronger, more intelligent and more advanced than, among others, white people. It more generally endows a whole line of human beings with the very same aptitudes. Additionally, it underlines that Wakanda as a country has been compelled to cover up as a 'Third World' nation to keep away from covetousness and war. In so doing, *Black Panther* bases its whole storyworld on the notion that Africans may not have been under civilized compared to white people. They may, in fact, just have been prevented from expressing or even just exposing their superior skills to the world for fear of being punished for destroying ancient racial prejudice. This fictional hypothesis may originate in historical facts restricted to specific domains. In sports, for instance, it is not uncommon to hear that had African people not been brought to the UK and the US, the said countries would never have harvested so many gold medals in the Olympics (Cooper 2003). It is all the more an operative comparison as Wakandans are characterized by their superior strength and fighting skills. They use fighting techniques that are akin to gymnastics and even dancing. Their superiority, however, is not limited to those fields.

Black Panther thus mechanically reads as a glorification of black people. As such, it quite conveniently comes with a negative depiction of white people. There are only two white characters

[4] On the evolution of media representations of sub-Saharan women and its impact, see Yemisi Akinbobola's chapter in the present volume.

of some significance in the plot. The first is the bad guy, Ulysses Klaue,[5] an arms dealer determined to harness the power of vibranium by pretending to offer his help to Erik Killmonger. The second is T'Challa's ally in the CIA, Everett K. Ross. This unheard-of white-to-black ratio in the cast also overturns a whole set of conventions. First, Klaue is all but an archetypal super villain. In many ways, he is no super villain at all, but rather a regular bad guy deprived of any superpowers. Klaue just aids and abets the more aptly named 'Killmonger', though not very efficiently. Second, as a white villain among black good guys, he offers a negative print of old clichés about film villains being ethnically or racially different (Hoch 1979). Once more, the film does not merely alter a stereotypical pattern. Rather, it offers an inverted, complementary stereotype where racial difference signifies a character's villainy, but as a white among blacks. A similar reading applies to Everett Ross. Although a CIA agent, Ross is neither characterized by his skills nor by his efficiency. As a result, although he appears to have contributed to T'Challa's final victory, it is only in a supportive and indeed trivial way.

One should also note that the dialogues, especially in the post end-credits sequence that takes place at the UN, ironically implies that the film introduces Wakanda to debunk a number of clichés. *Black Panther* may almost be considered to show off its own capacity as a film to expose and explode stereotypes. In the post-credit ending, a United Nations representative most sceptically asks T'Challa, 'What does a third world country have to bring to the world?' To which the Wakandan leader responds with a faint smile addressed directly at viewers who know better. This character-viewer intimacy reminds us that, after seeing the film, we are aware that Wakanda is stronger than any other country in the world.[6]

Despite this final dash of irony, there remains a final ambiguity. The question above remains purely rhetorical. As a result, there lingers some doubt concerning what we are supposed to conclude from the movie. To put it simply: has *Black Panther* really proved that Wakanda is useful to the world *as a third world country*? Or is Wakanda useful because it is *not* a third world country, but in fact a superpower in disguise? After all, Wakanda is not even emerging: the movie shows it was always more advanced than other countries.[7] Additionally, the country's superiority derives from possessing one hundred percent of the vibranium available worldwide. Such a hyperbolic angle is typical of superhero movies. *Black Panther* depicts Wakanda as a country that hypothetically possessed, unbeknownst to the world, the whole resources of a substance more precious than oil, gold or diamonds. The implications of the premise are also out-of-the ordinary. What if, in real life, one small sub-Saharan country was suddenly found out to own more oil than Saudi Arabia? The whole distribution of wealth would suddenly be called into question, with potentially disastrous consequences, whether short-term or long-term, commencing with the threat of impending war. What keeps this dystopian hypothesis from sounding realistic is a plot element that derives from

[5] The character is alternatively known as Klaw, especially in the Marvel Comics universe. Indeed, when he loses a hand in a fight against T'Challa, he has it replaced with a kind of gun in the shape of a claw. Both the prosthetic hand and the name make him the obvious villainous counterpart to the feline superhero, Black Panther.

[6] In another Marvel production released a few months after *Black Panther*, *Avengers: Infinity War*, the climactic battle against arch-villain Thanos takes place in Wakanda, which is presented to be the most developed country on Earth.

[7] By thus suggesting that Wakanda has simply outpaced the West, the film reproduces the idea that there is only one narrative of development, which is itself attached to the dominant perspective on what constitutes 'progress'. In spite of superficial appearances, therefore, *Black Panther* contributes to keeping the West from having to realize that development can take many different forms.

the above. Vibranium gives Wakanda indomitable strength in, for instance, warfare. Indeed, the material can be used to build lethal super weapons. This allows Wakanda to choose how to use its invaluable wealth when King T'Challa finally opts the country out of its non-interventionist position and chooses to help rebuild and equip impoverished urban areas in the US. The vision is indeed quite progressive, especially when compared to the opposite view. T'Challa's opponent Killmonger, in fact, intended to arm African Americans and Blacks around the world to help them fight their way out of poverty. T'Challa comparatively expresses hope for a policy based on social progress and care rather than social Darwinism, i.e. the survival of the fittest. As such, the ideology T'Challa represents is likely to appeal to those who feel nostalgic for the Obama administration. In the age of Trump, however, this final development may also stoke the well-entrenched belief that Hollywood is a byword for liberal worldviews (Prindle and Endersby 1993).

Nevertheless, one should not forget that, in the case of *Black Panther*, supposedly liberal Hollywood is in fact represented by Marvel Studios, recently bought out by the Disney Company. This implies the presence of some level of political correctness. At the very least, this suggests some market research was conducted in the form of viewer-panel test-runs. As in one of the posters for the film (Fig. 1) that shows a map of Africa scarred by the claws of the Black Panther, awareness that the film is a Disney production scratches the ebony veneer of African empowerment that primarily impacted the movie's reception. In similar fashion, the perfectly polished surface of the film needs to be dented in order to appraise what lies beyond Disney's well-honed attempt at controlling the film's reception.



Figure 1

2 *BLACK PANTHER*: THE BIRTH OF A NEW NATION?

In his book *D.W. Griffith's* The Birth of a Nation*: A History of the Most Controversial Motion Picture of All Time*, Melvyn Stokes devotes a full chapter to the transformation Griffith's film effected on American movie audiences (Stokes 2008). As the title to this second part suggests, one may consider that *Black Panther*, by giving birth to a (fictional) new African nation, Wakanda, triggered a rebirth of Africa as a major player on the global chessboard. The film achieved this especially by giving new hope to both African viewers and African-American viewers. In other words, *Black Panther* transformed a wide section of its audience. Besides, it did so in ways that make its promotion and reception similar to *The Birth of a Nation*'s. Indeed, Griffith's film was also marketed as a one of its kind – to the extent that it is still wrongly considered to have been the first feature film. Like *Black Panther*, groups of American people travelled many miles to watch *The Birth of a Nation*. Based on dissenting opinions, however, it seems inaccurate to assert that the film transformed American audiences *as a whole*, the way *The Birth of a Nation* is supposed to have – let alone worldwide audiences. To some, '*Black Panther* is a movie and a movement' (Respers 2018).[8] To others, '*Black Panther* is not the movie we deserve' (Lebron 2018). It is therefore necessary to qualify what *Black Panther* really means. One needs to go beyond numerous comments that it means 'a lot', to assess its ability to transform audiences and have a real effect on prejudice. For that purpose, three complementary questions need to be asked. Which audiences did the movie primarily impact (or not)? What was the nature of the transformation it effected? To what extent should one consider that the film altered its viewers' perception of Africa and Africans, or even that it was instrumental in annihilating enduring stereotypes?

First of all, one should bear in mind that *Black Panther* generated huge profit for Disney. Converging sources mention $1.3 billion worldwide so far (Dec. 2018), boosting profits for 'Walt Disney Studios Entertainment' (formerly known as Buena Vista Entertainment) and for the company's themed parks. Noticeably, company officials are prompt to ascribe such unprecedented success to the introduction of 'the first black African superhero'. In so doing, they implicitly link milestone box-office results with a progressive cast of characters. Rather than an indubitable sign that Disney company supports racial progress, this is primarily the consequence of an effective marketing strategy. First, because as has been demonstrated in a number of books and journal articles, Disney productions have always been careful not to be too far ahead of the spirit of their times when it came to the representation of gender or ethnicity (Cheu 2013). Accusations of a tendency to sway with the prevailing wind in matters of race have been levelled at the company in the past. In this context, it is no mean feat for the company to have been able to sell *Black Panther* as a risk taken where representations of race and Africa were concerned, in a move to overturn the company's reputation. With *Black Panther*, indeed, Disney seems to have replaced its usual 'wait-and-see' stance with a progressive posture that generated tremendous profit by gathering approval from millions of viewers throughout the world. The question of whether or not the film had that massive an impact on altering representations of Africa is off the point, if one considers that racial progress is not the company's top priority.

Taking a look at how the film was marketed before its premiere confirms this impression. According to the Online Marketing Institute, which released a specific article when the film was

[8] The statement is not the most fortunate. As the phrase 'Black Panther movement' is usually used to refer the historical Black Panthers, the name applies to a movie after being, quite literally, a movement.

launched, the campaign was ground-breaking in that it sold a whole movement rather than just a movie (Lang and Lopez 2018; McCarthy 2018). Comments abound about how the film 'broke the models' (OMI 2018), in the field of marketing at least as much as in that of representations of sub-Saharan Africa. Indeed, *Black Panther* was sold around the world as a one-off. Allegedly, it was the first movie ever to have been 'created by blacks, starring blacks, marketed by blacks, revolving around a story set in alternate-reality Africa' (OMI 2018). Yet what looks like a hazardous operation was in fact carefully-thought-out business as usual. First of all, previous experiences have shown that addressing neglected audience types is often very rewarding financially (Halter 2002). Moreover, the film's marketing before its release included a package of derivatives likely to pander to the tastes of a very wide audience, and not just of Africans / Americans. The package included a new graphic novel adaptation of the franchise, a rap album by Kendrick Lamar for the soundtrack, and the broadcast of a short for the Super Bowl. Besides, the very notion of risk should be qualified. In fact, polls were conducted well ahead to confirm that *Black Panther* would meet its target audience. But above all, the OMI article demonstrates that key to the film's success was the ability to launch a campaign that identified 'America's underrepresented black moviegoers' as the film's central audience. It was to that effect that the first teaser was released to the public during the NBA finals. Consequently, the representations of Africans that take pride of place in the film qualify as implicit representations of black Americans. With its largely American cast, American writers and an American director, the film constructs representations that do not appear to have been primarily designed for African viewers. The utopian African country depicted in the film, rather, is at best a repository for hopes of social improvement mostly held by African-American viewers. At worst, it is a parallel universe where and whereby the representation gap is symbolically bridged, to meet the demands of the mainly American citizens who use the Internet and social media to complain about being invisiblized or misrepresented. The widespread misperception of Wakanda as a country that is a faithful representation of actual African countries, sadly, provides evidence for the latter possibility.

The targeted audience, however, did not limit itself to African Americans. Indeed, special attention was paid to potential African viewers. First, there was the poster campaign. Many posters, while focusing on the eponymous character, did indeed emphasize the presence of Wakanda for a background, thus focusing on the film's reimagining of Africa from an alternative, more positive perspective. In one of the posters (see figure 1), the one mentioned above, the masked Panther is seen in close-up gazing at the audience through an opening that has the shape of the African continent. The wall around is scratched by a panther's claws. The whole picture is mainly black, with a few white areas delineating the mask and the character's eyes as seen through the African peep-hole.

The poster's symbolism is quite obvious. First, a potential vengeful intention from fierce African people is conveyed by the claw marks – whoever tries to hurt a panther runs the risk of getting hurt. The white-on-black stare of the character's eyes as seen through the mask also dares the onlooker to stare back. Staring back would indeed compel the viewer to take a long hard look at the current state of Africa. Finally, the shape of the continent delineates the superhero's face, so that he literally becomes Africa. One might even go further and state that the poster depicts Africa as a hole in the map (the poster is after all a sheet of paper). The hole in the map thus points to our current ignorance of Africa and lack of knowledge regarding its civilizations. The missing patch

of land, however, will finally be filled by a new modernized and progressive representation ripe with notions of pride, empowerment, strength, but also wealth and technological development – the long-awaited Wakanda. Additionally, the overall construction of the poster globally negates perspective despite the presence of a hole-shaped Africa in the picture. It thus reworks the traditional dialectics of surface and depth by putting on the same plane, in 2-D, the age-old stereotypes concerning Africa that need only to be scratched on the surface to expose, behind the black coating of negative representations, an unexpected wealth of technology born from tradition. Indeed, the mask evokes tribal art that has evolved into a state-of-the-art version of itself thanks to Wakanda's vibranium resources and also thanks to the engineering skills of Wakandans. Finally, the colour layout, despite making the poster beautiful, adds a touch of irony by suggesting that representations of Africa can no longer be reduced to a matter of black versus white, nor to a Manichaean partition between black(s) and white(s).

The film's trailer resorts to the same notion that clichés about Africa need to finally be exposed at long last. Wakanda and the Black Panther, as depicted in the movie, will be instrumental, and indeed essential to the process. The trailer introduces bad guy Ulysses Klaue being interrogated by CIA agent Everett Ross about Wakanda. 'What do you know about Wakanda?' Klaue asks, to which the agent replies: 'It's a third-world country." Klaue goes on to assert that Ross is all wrong about Wakanda. To him, Wakanda is the El Dorado explorers have been searching for ages, scanning the depths of South America to find it while it was in fact lurking at the heart of sub-Saharan Africa. The point of this dialogue between the only two white characters is to focus on entrenched stereotypes white people may have about Africa. Klaue points to notions according to which the continent is a patchwork of third-world countries. He rails at the belief that lost advanced civilizations of the Aztec or Inca type may be found in the Southern part of the American continent, but that it is unimaginable to find any in Africa. In this trailer, *Black Panther* is thus advertised as the one cultural production that will finally debunk such stereotypes. The trailer also cleverly locates the clichés in white popular psyche. Almost mechanically, it seems that non-white audiences are not to blame for carrying or disseminating the said stereotypes. The teaser thus offers a quite explicit pat on the back to non-white viewers. It tells them that they know better, and that they will be complicit with the film's exposure of stereotypes when they watch it. To lure a specific type of viewer into movie theatres, this strategy is quite original for the way it establishes a partnership between the film and a group of ideal readers. This tactic aims at promoting a progressive agenda from which, it seems, all non-white people throughout the world could benefit.

3 Comparative reception / impact study. Does the new *Black Panther* movement exist outside media?

Generally speaking, this promotional campaign seems to have worked extremely well. Non-comprehensive analysis of Internet-reaped data proves that the film was received very positively, especially if tweets that contain the phrase 'Black Panther' or the word 'Wakanda'' are selected for sentiment analysis. On a slightly less positive note, a keyword search for *Black Panther* on the 'social Mention' website returns a 5 to 1 ratio for positive or neutral sentiment, with an average rate of 6 negative mentions out of 100 references in blogs, forums, tweets, and other Internet-based sources.

The 'Wakanda' search returns a 6 to 1 ratio. This search, however, shows that most social media and Internet references were neutral in tone, suggesting that positive comments were not as widespread as may have at first seemed.

Besides, a global query on Mediacloud. org returns results with Panther, Marvel, superhero, Wakanda as keywords, if no specific contextualization of the film is included in the query, whether political or ideological. (Fig. 2).

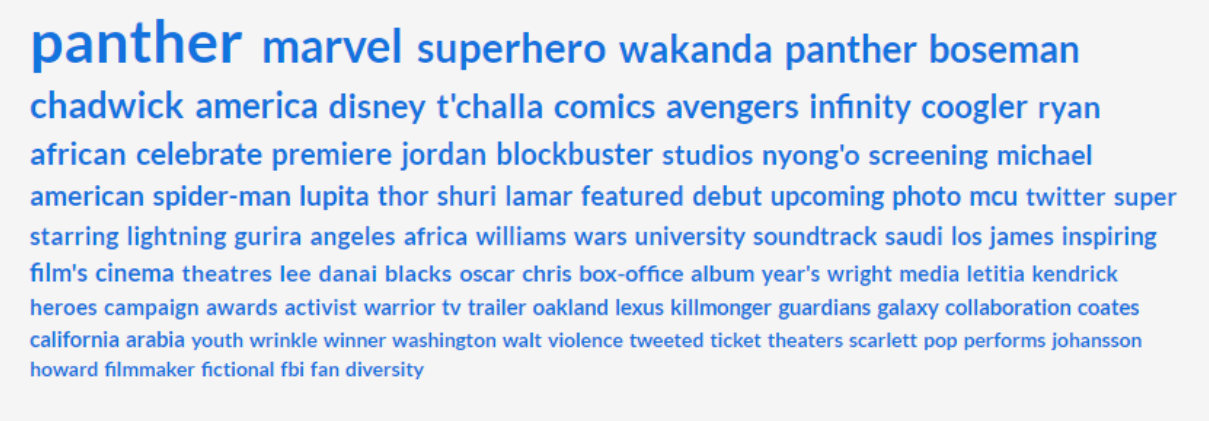


Figure 2

Geographic coverage shows media attention levels to be far superior in the United States and in the UK compared to the rest of the world. (Fig. 3).



Figure 3

Taking a closer look at the data, however, one realizes that the notion of a worldwide success should be qualified in at least two ways. First, statistics about the film's reception around the world tend to level out areal variations. Second, as the comparative analysis below demonstrates, the expectations people carried about the film before its release and their reception of the film after its release differ whether one looks at English-speaking media or at mainly sub-Saharan media.

Reception in the English-speaking world.

Comparative analysis of attention over time before and after the release shows a normal peak on the day of the US release itself and in the following months, with the maximum number of stories per day reaching 600. This is based on attention in media from the western part of the occidental English-speaking world mostly, namely US online news, global English language sources, and UK news. (Fig. 4).

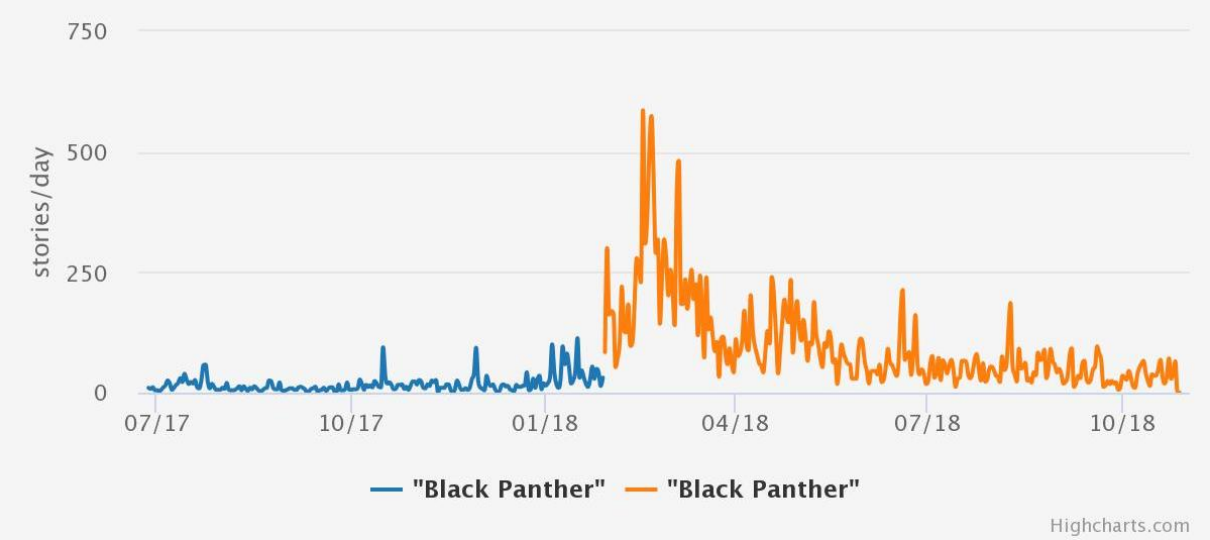


Figure 4

The top themes in the coverage were very similar before and after the release, with 'motion pictures' as the first theme, 'reviews' as the second one, and 'blacks' as the third. Strangely enough, television came fourth (10% of initial topics and still around 10% after the release). (Fig. 5). This may suggest that a connection was established with diversity representation on television in both the US and the UK.

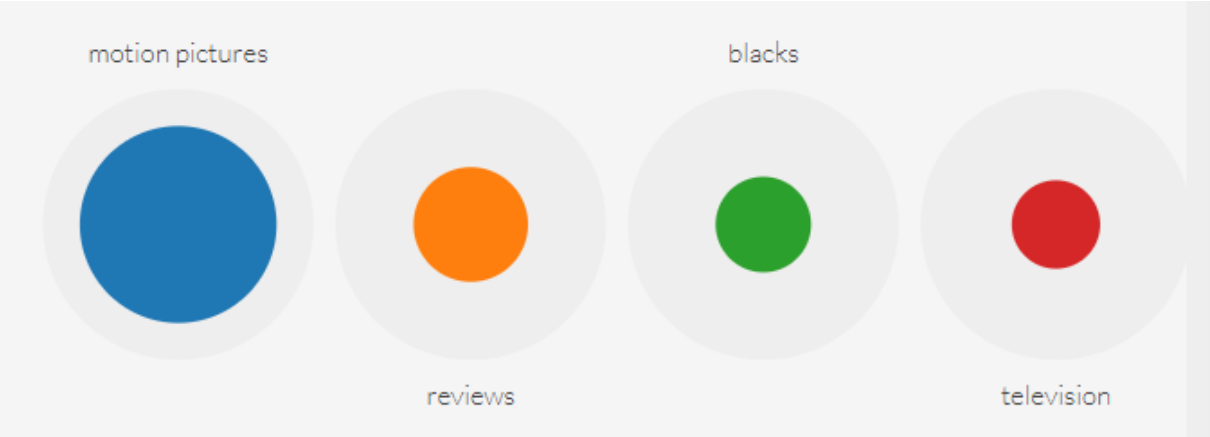


Figure 5

The 'top words' comparison is more telling. (Fig. 6). Common to results before and after the premiere are the expected 'Panther', 'Marvel', 'superhero', 'America', 'avengers', 'Wakanda', and 'African'. 'Disney' is also present, but not as a top-ranking term, showing that the film was not immediately identified as a Disney production. A cross-search with top organizations listed as references, however, shows Disney move up from 10th place before the release to 1st place after, with 17% of organizations, indicating growing awareness of the major company behind the movie.

Found mostly before the release are 'trailer' and 'upcoming', but also 'Obama'. The latter suggests that the film is in the wake of the work of the Obama administration for African-Americans. In similar vein, the term 'activists' is also present. So is 'lightning', which points to the precedent of the *Black Lightning* superhero series as the definer of expectations surrounding the film. After the release, some words make an appearance: 'blockbuster' and 'premiere', expectedly, but also, finally, 'representation' and 'fictional'. The film's reception in the US therefore seems defined by the question of how fictional representations may improve the situation of African-Americans. This central aspect of the problem, however, does not come first in the reception of the film.

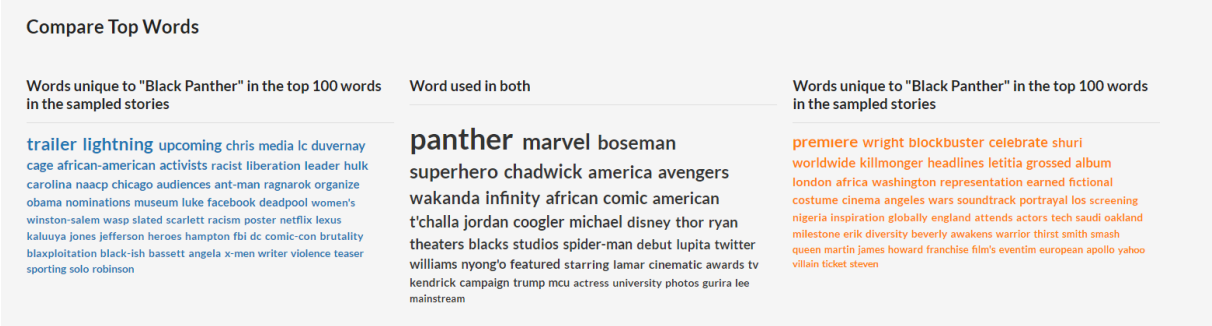


Figure 6

Equally expectedly, a joint search for 'Black Panther' with the word 'representation' added with a Boolean joiner triggers the word 'diversity' to show up in the top 15 words in the list. (Fig. 7).

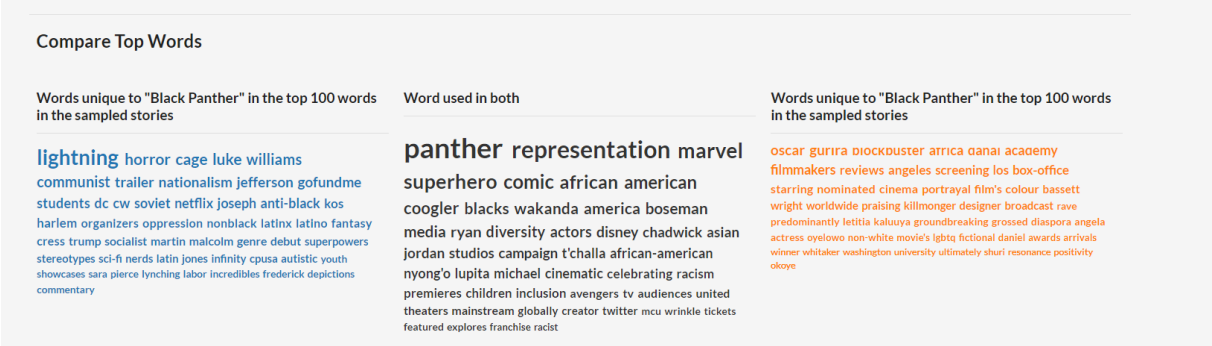


Figure 7

Adding the word 'fictional' to the query returns results that take 'Disney', 'colonialism', 'Jefferson' and 'Trump' further up the list. 'Racism' also moves up, enhancing the gap between progressive representations on screen and the daily reality of American society. (Fig. 8). The same query change makes the word 'women' appear as the third topic after the release, expressing the fact that the treatment of women, because it was as positive at that of Africans, was perceived to be an extra asset.

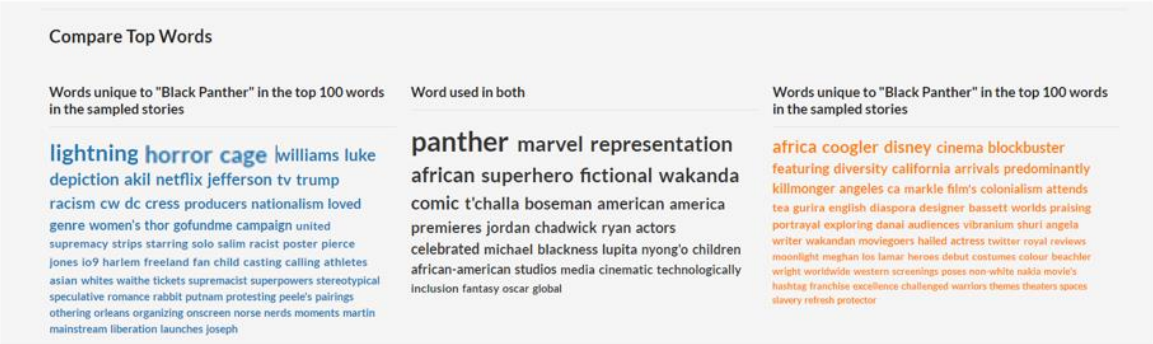


Figure 8

Finally, a word-in-context graph for the word 'representation' indicates, especially after the premiere, that the movie was identified in most sources as a movie that shows that representation and identity matter. (Fig. 9). In keeping with the film's marketing strategy described above, *Black Panther* was largely interpreted as a reminder that racism is about the underrepresentation of minorities on screen. This implies that more screened diversity may solve the problem.

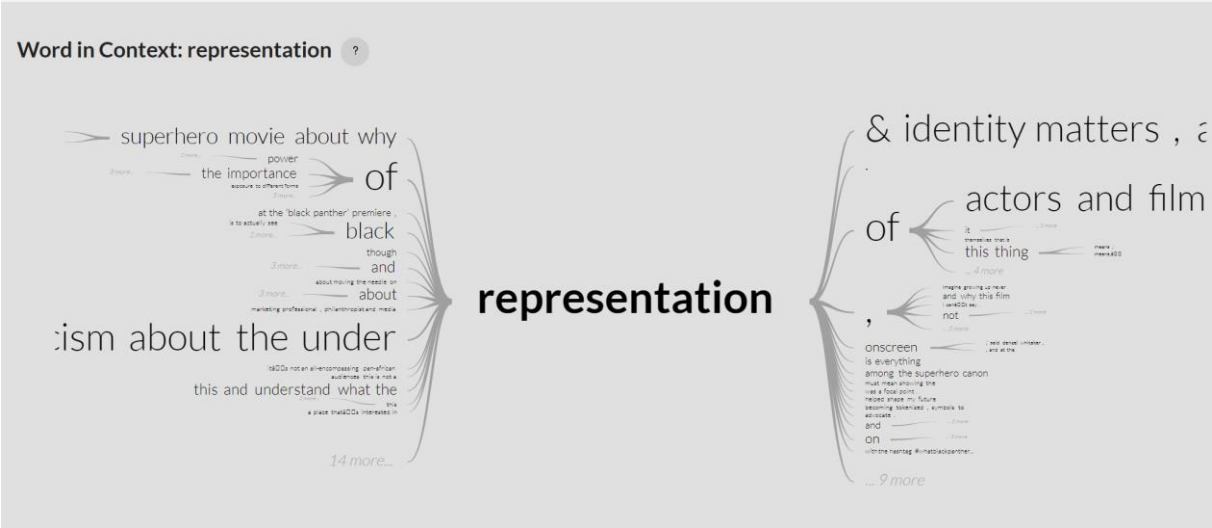


Figure 9

Reception in African media.

For the purpose of identifying differences in the expectations raised and reception of the movie between the occidental English-speaking world and Africa, the same search was performed on media sources from Ghana and South Africa mostly, but also Kenya, Mozambique and Nigeria. (Fig. 10). The first thing to notice in the results is that there is no media attention before the release. This is due to the lack of a marketing campaign directly focused at sub-Saharan media. As a result, keywords and topics are also lacking for the period before the release.

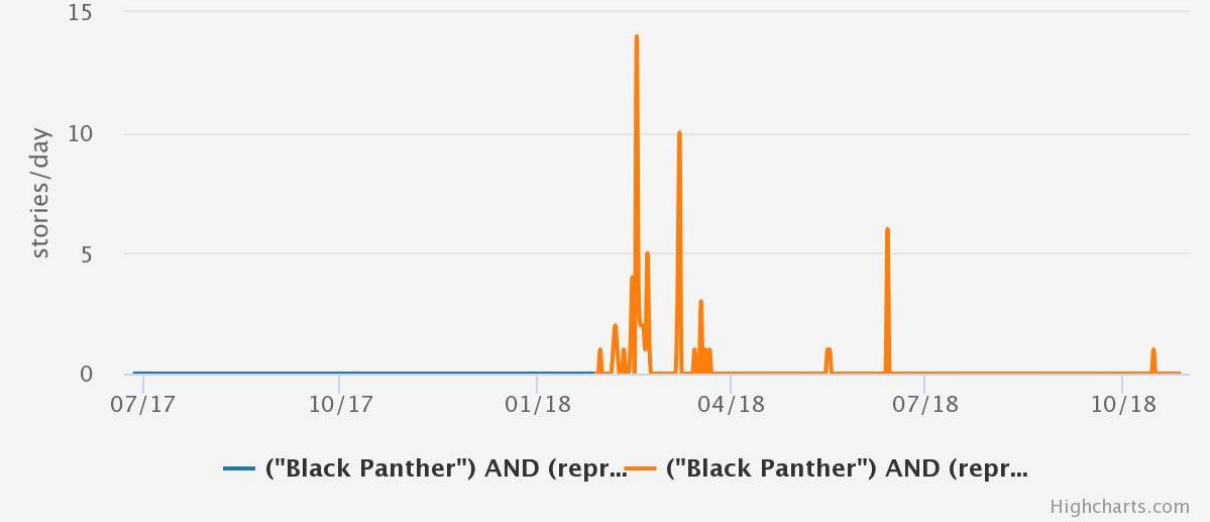


Figure 10

Focusing then on the African reception after the release indicates that 'Panther', 'African', and 'Wakanda' are among the top words. Then come 'paradigms', 'Caucasian', 'representation' and 'fictional', indicating the extra importance of *Black Panther*'s renewed representations for African audiences. (Fig. 11).

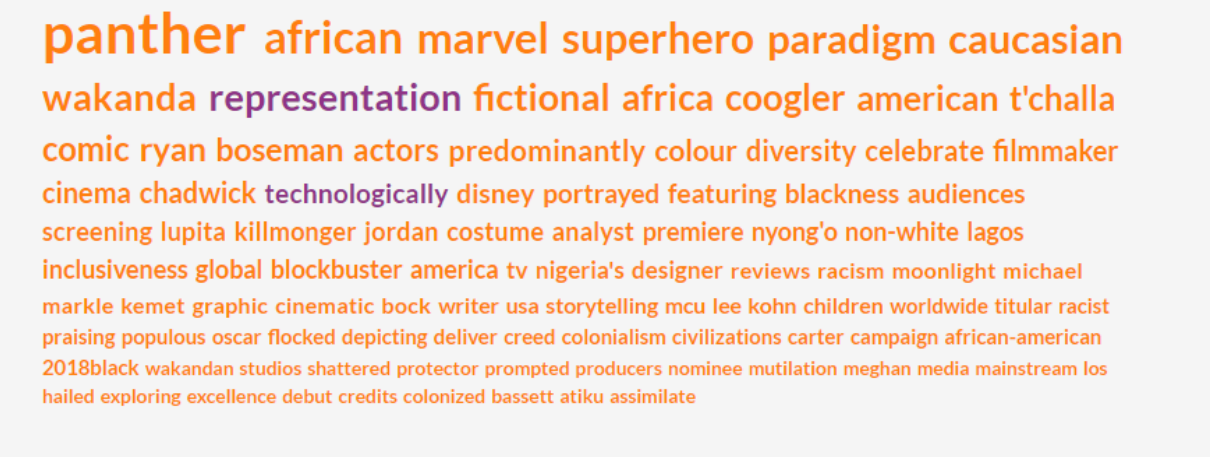


Figure 11

Furthermore, the context in which the word 'representation' appears includes mentions of a 'great stride in terms of representation'. (Fig. 12). The politics of representation seems important to African audiences, as well as the accuracy of the representations of Africa present in the film. Another key topic is the ignorance of Western audiences concerning African people. In closer detail, the word-in-context diagram also suggests that representation is perceived to work on several levels. Finally, it shows that African media implicitly compare the recent presence of African people on screen with the older, although deprecatory, presence of Muslim male actors on screen.

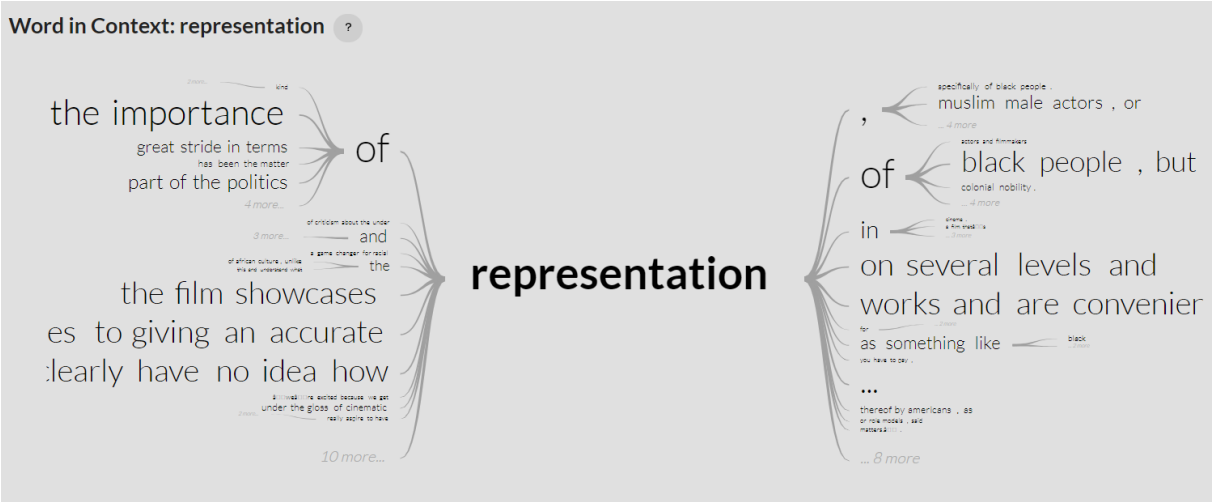


Figure 12

The list of organizations mentioned first is also different. 'Disney' comes third, after 'Marvel Studios' (indicating wider lack of awareness of the buyout in Africa) and 'Grammy and Academy Awards'. The latter appearing in second place suggests that should the film be awarded Grammys or Oscars, this would be interpreted as further victory for African countries.[9] Further down the list, 'FBI', 'Islam' and 'Muslim brotherhood' are to be found, along with American soft power. This all suggests that the film is interpreted in the context of political and cultural hegemony by the United States where African countries are concerned.

Other local differences and dissenting opinions.

There is no gainsaying that the Disney company's marketing campaign in Africa was a huge success. The pre-worldwide premiere in Kisumu, Kenya, which is home to Lupita Nyongo (and governed by her father, Governor Nyong'o) was a major sign of success. The film, however, was not positively received everywhere and by everyone. Numerous reviews, articles and responses tend to show that the all-black cast was far less positively received in China than it was in the rest of the world. Queries on China-based media returns a middling 6.7 out of 10 approval rate, comparing unfavourably with 9+ grades almost everywhere else in the world (Yang 2018). And while some articles blamed this non-politically correct score on the supposedly entrenched racism of Chinese people against black people, there are alternative ways of interpreting the comparatively mediocre approval rate. First, the mediocre success rate in China may be an indirect consequence of the backlash in Africa regarding China's ascent to the status of new colonial power. Second, given the praise surrounding *Black Panther*'s revisiting, revisibilization, and even glamorization of Africa, it is not surprising that China, which boasts more than one billion inhabitants, should resent the consensus surrounding Ryan Coogler's film. If representation matters so much, and if extended on-screen visibility, especially in Hollywood mainstream productions, is a sign of empowerment,

[9] At least, the success would then be interpreted as victory for Africa primarily from a Eurocentric or American perspective. Indeed, using as a point of reference the Nigerian box office (where superhero movies top the list and the first home-made Nollywood production usually ranks 10th or 11th), one might assume that the industry's awards mainly credit an already commercially successful film with extra marks of esteem. Obviously, little actual improvement can be expected from such a transplantation of the film's success into the realm of the symbolic, except perhaps for people of African descent living outside of Africa.

then *Black Panther*'s all-black cast is likely to have generated envy in Chinese people. This may be even more the case since their access to blockbusters has been steadily increasing over the last two decades. They may therefore feel all the more invisiblized or vilified in American super productions as Africans have finally been provided with superhero-like features in a huge box office hit.

Additionally, it makes sense to assert that the appearance of a black superhero in a film with a mostly black cast is not quite the surprise or improvement it is presented to be. It is not the first black superhero movie. There have been precedents such as *Spawn* and *Blade*. One might even say that Tarantino's Django, once unchained at the beginning of the film, becomes a kind of cowboy superhero. Conversely, a Chinese-centred or even Asian-American centred Marvel studio production would come as quite a surprise. Of course, this is mainly due to the near absence of East-Asian superheroes in the comics on which the films are based. Nevertheless, while there is always the possibility of creating a new character, the possibility for that character to be Asian does not seem to loom ahead, let alone be in the pipelines. The same reasoning may apply to Hispanics, who may be a long time waiting for a superhero movie of their own, despite their being the largest ethnic minority in the US. From this perspective, i.e. if representation matters that much to the now globalized film audience, Disney's business marketing program should be considered as so far incomplete. It may even become counterproductive until the representation of Hispanics and Asians is addressed as positively as that of African people and, through them, of African Americans primarily.

Besides, if one takes into consideration the dissenting voices that made themselves heard about *Black Panther*, one realizes that the main criticism levelled at Disney company is that they took advantage of a specific cultural and historical context to make their product more profitable. Evidence of this is epitomized in a 'change.org' online petition claiming that the film's marketing campaign profited from a release during Black history month, and more generally from the currently widespread 'black lives matter' movement (Doss 2018). The arguments detailed in the petition also mention the trailer's use of the hit 'The Revolution Will not be Televised', claiming that the film contradicted the lyrics by negating the possibility of a black revolution or, to put it mildly, of African-American empowerment in the United States. As a consequence, the petition's author demands that Disney set aside 25% of their profits to be allocated for investment in black communities.

The sum may sound huge, but the reasoning behind the claim is all the more convincing as it is based on a clever interpretation of the film's plot and particularly of its beginning and ending. The film opens and closes in the projects of Oakland, California, with kids playing basketball on a playground. In addition to being a clear reference to the real Black Panther movement, which originated in Oakland, in exactly the type of neighbourhood portrayed in the film, this surrounding for the plot provides a condensed symbol that summons several stereotypes (basketball as the only way out of poverty, for instance through a college grant). In the opening, the poor living conditions of the black community appear to be the breeding ground for resentment against social *and racial* determinism, hence for such a character as Killmonger. Killmonger is later to become the villain of the film. Later on, he seeks to take the throne from T'Challa to use Wakanda's resources in order to fight the white oppressor and defend the rights of the African-American community, and of black people throughout the world. This character arc suggests that Killmonger is the indirect product of the projects. Without the projects, it seems, there would have been no villain.

This is confirmed at the end of the film. Once Killmonger has been defeated by T'Challa, the latter returns to the Oakland projects saying he bought the buildings to turn them into an outreach centre. The second Oakland scene starts as a daylight replica of the first one, which was set at night – in both cases, the scene opens with a low-angle shot of a basketball crate on a playground. Another notable difference is that the second projects scene shows a girl among the kids playing basketball, which was not the case for the first one. This seems to suggest that the improvement of living conditions in the projects between the beginning and the ending of the film concerns race, of course, but also class and gender. More importantly, the second Oakland-set scene turns the character *Black Panther* into the – anachronistic – personification of the real Black Panther movement, or perhaps just as an idealized version of one of its founders, Bobby Seale, who spent some time working in the North Oakland Neighborhood Anti-Poverty Center. Through the superhero, the social part of the Black Panther movement's endeavour seems to be both continued and amplified, several decades later.

Then, after the credits, T'Challa is finally received at the UN, where he, as his country's leader, offers Wakanda's help to the world around. The ending thus conveys the notion that the only way of helping black communities is a form of charity (from black people to black people). While not incompatible with the possibility of climbing the social ladder, the practice substitutes for the notion of self-promotion here – except perhaps if one considers that Wakanda's aid is a reversal of the traditional pattern where Western countries aid Africa, or if one sees the ending as an implicit criticism of America's failure to provide for its own citizens. If, as the film suggests, money is needed in the impoverished areas where black communities live, then money should be given back by those who supposedly exploited African Americans and Black viewers throughout the world to turn their film into a massive box office hit. This is the very same argument as the one used in the petition against Disney.

Additionally, this ending negates the very idea of white oppression, or at least of white privilege, by suggesting that African-Americans have no reason to fight back. Indeed, the main contention that gives its backbone to the film, between T'Challa and Killmonger, has been a little too mechanically[10] interpreted as a metaphorical rendition of the Martin Luther King/Malcolm X difference of opinions regarding the form the struggle for civil rights should take (Shakur 2018). Schematically, T'Challa is supposed to favour peaceful action (MLK) where Killmonger (Malcolm X), as the name very unsubtly indicates, wants to go to war against white people. The defeat of the latter negates the possibility of resistance more than it does eradicate violence. It also equates T'Challa with Dr. King, suggesting that King's dream of peace dispensed with the very notion of resistance against white people or of a black revolution, in a shocking revision of historical fact (Paris 1991, 12). One may therefore assume that such a binary reading is prompted by the film itself, or by promotional TV appearances from its cast. This suggests that the film's agenda is to eradicate the very idea of black resistance rather than to promote peace. In the end, this confirms that *Black Panther* restricts the possibility of progress, especially where racial issues are concerned, to the realm of representations. The movie presents the possibility for on-screen empowerment to trickle down into real-life as little more than a dream.

[10] Indeed, Malcolm X's philosophy was similar to that of the historical Black Panther Party, which should have made T'Challa closer to him in the film. This is one of the many objections that can be levelled against interpreting the characters as references to one specific historical figure.

CONCLUSION

To conclude, I must observe how difficult it is to determine what *Black Panther* means. First, because as illustrated above, but also as goes without saying, it means different things to different people. Second, because it is doubtful that any quantitative analysis can be consistently complemented with enough qualitative analysis to claim access to the 'meaning' of the film, especially if the mass of data is big. Given those obstacles, I have opted to base this study on two complementary analyses. On the one hand, it is the result of my necessarily subjective, albeit scholarly, interpretation of the film, especially as far as its reconstruction of Africa through Wakanda is concerned. On the other hand, it stems from a mostly quantitative analysis of the film's reception by its audiences. On the one hand, then, the film offers an extremely positive, and even slightly utopian, representation of Africa as populated with persons of high talent, who have access to hidden wealth and superpowers. If taken metaphorically, this claims that Africa has a lot to offer to the rest of the world, and maybe even that so far its riches and talent have remained largely untapped. If taken literally, however, the film bases its narrative on a supernatural hypothesis. Its storyworld is an alternative reality where an El Dorado is concealed in the depths of Africa, and surrounded by Africa as we think we know it. Around the lost Atlantis, however, there remain lands of poverty and war, to which Wakanda does not deign to lend a helping hand.

Nevertheless, in a final twist, the new king of Wakanda decides to help the world around, and, we may suppose, offer the country's aid to African countries around besides financially supporting African-American communities in the United States. This final twist, however, negates the very notion that African-Americans and Africans are suffering from white oppression by suggesting that there is nothing for them to fight back against or to fight for. It seems only external help, if they were to be provided with it, would improve their predicament. This reading offers no less than a reiteration of the age-old notion of the white man's burden, according to which it is the duty of white developed countries to help African countries by colonizing them. The old theme, in the film, is merely tinged with a layer of political correctness in the final plot development. Indeed, *Black Panther* eventually allows an advanced black country to help African countries and, in a slightly patronizing move, to provide African-Americans with the social care of which they are deprived.

Quantitative analysis of the film's reception, though, tends to demonstrate that this subjective reading of the film is far from widespread. On the contrary, the film met with massive approval around the world. From a quantitative point of view, one has to admit that it means a lot to people. *Meaning*, however, is at the junction of construction and reception. Consequently, one also has to consider the apparent contradiction between one possible reading and the majority reading according to which *Black Panther* means *the world* to so many viewers. This presents us with a conundrum, the way out of which is easier than may sound. *Black Panther* obviously means 'a lot': quantitative elements point to a massively positive reception. The high approval rates, therefore, seem to result from the number of black characters in the film compared to white characters. They may also result from the number, a very low one this time, of positive depictions of Africa and Africans in Anglophone media before *Black Panther*. From this perspective, *Black Panther* is, or

should be the beginning, and even the trigger of a sea change to follow. As the first of its kind, it nevertheless offers a massive visibility growth for Africans and African-Americans, by multiplying a hundredfold their on-screen presence in anglophone media, triggering an immediate reflex of cheers and hurrahs.

Nevertheless, it remains to be determined what this increased representation actually means, or in other words, what it is representative of. The issue, as Ronald C. Tamborini puts it, is related to the very notion of exemplar heroes, and maybe of representativity altogether:

> In media, a flawed hero such as Harry Callahan (a.k.a. Dirty Harry), who is generally moral but also violent and uncompassionate, may be less representative of the class heroes than Superman, who clearly upholds all moral domains, including compassion. In these and other cases, an exemplar's representativeness is increased by the extent to which it is more concrete or emotionally charged (Tamborini 2013, 48).

This can be easily applied, although in reverse, to *Black Panther*. The same as a violent superhero is less representative of the class 'heroes' than Superman, a superhero who happens to be black is neither representative of the class 'superheroes' nor representative of the class 'black people'. The select cast of Wakandans, with their supernatural skills and out-of-this-world beauty and intelligence, may therefore be considered as figments rather than as true role-models to be imitated. Trying to emulate them would make no sense, as they are endowed with supernatural powers to be found in a substance, vibranium, which does not exist and does not have an equivalent on earth. In other words, one may doubt that the black superhero is a fair representation of black people, the same as Superman does not represent white people.

The only possible conclusion is twofold. First, the extremely numerous expressions of the film's importance, starting with the hashtag 'whatblackpanthermeanstome', are a strong, but although slightly saddening reminder that what *Black Panther* means is primarily that representation matters enormously to people. Second, representation matters almost exclusively to those who have been invisiblized or barred access to being given extremely positive role-models on screen. The downside of improving representations may then be that, as they matter more and more, representations may represent less and less. If, for instance, they are not met with change in real life, or if they are far from being true to the matters of real life, be it to the impoverished African people or to those formerly colonial countries in which African poverty originates, they may just fall short of prompting actual improvement. From this angle, *Black Panther* is like the people who photoshop their profile pictures to look better on screen than their real selves. As the (supposedly) first black superhero film, it reads first and foremost as a challenge to future filmmakers. Its very existence is a reminder that time has yet to prove whether similar examples will grow forth and multiply to be followed with real-life effects. If it failed to be the case, the Disney production would in hindsight appear to have been just a sop to African Black Panthers, whose rise remains to be seen and whose roar is still to make itself heard.

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