**Creating A Superior Race: Eugenicist Themes in Films**

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December 3, 2022

**Abstract**

The eugenics movement was a destructive era that featured attempts to create a superior, homogenized world population filled with “desirable” traits. After the Holocaust, a eugenic-informed genocide, eugenics was stigmatized and socially censored from all conversations. Though it was not talked about, eugenic thought and conventions persisted throughout the 20th and 21st centuries. For my research, I posit that eugenicist themes in films contribute to their continued relevance in real life. Previous research has analyzed singular films with one eugenicist theme. My research fills a gap here since it will contain multiple films with multiple forms of eugenics spanning different genres and time periods. I will conduct my research by gathering and consuming sources such as films, film analyses, and eugenic history. I will analyze the sources, contextualize them within the time they were released, and synthesize my findings to see the connection between eugenic films and real-world trends. I expect my research to serve as a warning for readers about the possible new wave of eugenics related to gene modification. In reading my paper, I hope readers feel empowered to oppose the new eugenics movement.

**Introduction:**

Eugenics is the study of how to improve the human population by maintaining desirable human traits and breeding out undesirable mental health “defects”. The eugenics movement occurred from the late 19th century to the 1940s, and it used methods such as selective breeding to both promote racial improvement and control which traits are passed down from parent to child. Twenty-eight states in the United States created criteria for legal eugenic sterilization. Many states, such as Alabama and South Dakota, said “feebleminded” individuals should be sterilized. West Virginia and Wisconsin said those who were “insane”, and “epileptic” should not reproduce (Stern 2021). The eugenics movement came to a peak during the Holocaust since Nazi Germans used eugenics rhetoric to justify the mass genocide of Jewish individuals, people with disabilities, and all non-heterosexual individuals. The Nazis posited that Jewish individuals were unfit for reproduction since they had harmful genes in their blood (Nelson 2016). After the Holocaust, many people around the world were terrified by the impacts of eugenicist ideologies; therefore, they denounced it and shunned conversations laced with these themes. However, eugenic ideas have persisted throughout the 20th and into the 21st century through the depictions of eugenics in films, showing that these ideas have remained relevant (Nelson 2016, Pernick 1999). In my research paper, I inquire about how eugenicist themes of “fit breeding” and superior races have surfaced within films and how it relates to real-world eugenic trends? I argue that several American films represent both pro and anti-eugenics themes, but they all confirm the presence of eugenic thought within the world at the time they were released. There would be no need to portray stories laced with eugenicist notions if it was not a pertinent matter in our world today.

**Background/Related Work and Motivation:**

Several articles have been published that dissect the presence and role of eugenics within certain films. Eugenicist themes in films, depending on the time period and genre, manifest in different ways. Therefore, most authors of these film analyses are limited to examining the significance of one type of eugenics. In his film analysis of the 1925 film *Free to Love,* Johnson analyzes the implications of the “disabled” criminals here. Tony is a jewel thief for a gang, and Kenton runs the gang. These qualities are regarded as mental defects, thus making them “disabled.” Johnson highlights a cure or kill binary used with eugenically disabled characters here because Tony is cured as he “abandons his life of crime”, and Kenton commits suicide. It sets the precedent that “disabled” individuals are eugenically unsound and therefore cannot survive (Johnson 2008). Similarly, Kirby analyzed the 1997 film *GATTACA* through the eugenic lens of human-gene therapy. *GATTACA* depicts a rise in genetic discrimination, homogeneity, and eugenic rhetoric caused by increased access to gene modification technology. He argues that science fiction cinema is a perfect venue to portray the “use (and possible abuse) of genetic technologies” (Kirby 2000). Also, in the 1916 film, *Where Are My Children?* Mann analyzes the abortion and birth control side of eugenics. The middle-class protagonists promoted access to abortions and birth control for lower-class citizens since they were “physically and morally defective” (Mann 2018). Most people thought that non-genetic factors were passed down to offspring such as poverty and criminality. Various movies, without formal articles, input eugenicist themes as well. The films *Get Out* and *Pinky* are examples of racial eugenics and white supremacy. The former depicts brain transplants from White to Black bodies since Black people have desirable bodies while older White people have superior mental capacities (Peele 2017). The latter depicts Pinky as superior since she displays a fair complexion and stereotypically White behavior; however, she is deemed inferior when others recognize her Black identity (Kazan 1949). Unlike previous works in the field of eugenics and film, my research will feature an amalgamation of films with various forms of eugenics spanning different genres and time periods. My research will not specialize in forced sterilization eugenics or impure blood eugenics. Rather, I will include more general information on more facets of eugenics in film. Also, my research is relevant because of the possible new wave of eugenics connected to human gene therapy, in-vitro fertilization, and pre-natal genetic testing (Nelson 2016). As the world has advanced, technology-wise, people have been able to see and alter their as well as their children’s genetic makeup. The increased availability of these resources has increased subconscious tendencies to deem certain traits desirable and others undesirable. Thought processes such as these create a culture where “those who are predicted to express illness, weakness, or other flaws” are not allowed to exist (Daar 2017). My research is quite relevant to the world right now and significant to the research community of eugenics and film.

**Methods:**

Within my research, my methods begin with consuming different types of media. I will be drawing from three types of sources. These three categories both shaped and led me to my proposal. The first kind of source provides information about the concept of eugenics in general. For example, it is important to include information on the use of forced sterilizations to control the reproduction of “unfit” populations in the 20th and 21st centuries (Stern 2018). The second kind of source is actual films with eugenicist themes. I have included films spanning different genres and decades such as *Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets* and *Pinky* (Columbus 2002, Kazan 1949). The third kind of source are analyses of films with eugenicist themes. For example, an analysis of the pro-eugenic film Where Are My Children discusses how members of the lower socioeconomic class were pushed to have access to birth control and abortions (Mann 2018). I will collect and write notes on these three types of sources.Next, I will conduct multiple analyses of my sources. I will analyze the stances on eugenics each film takes. I will also analyze the message the film is sending by depicting eugenicist ideologies. Then, I will contextualize these films according to the dominant eugenic policy at the time. I will see how real-world conditions—such as the current prevalence of in-vitro fertilization or the overwhelming number of forced sterilizations in the early to mid-20th century—impacted the content of the film. Lastly, I will synthesize this information to see how or if these films altered future eugenicist trends within real life.

**Expected Results:**

I expect to warn and inform people about the entirety of my research. I am writing this research paper to caution people against the possible new wave of eugenics with gene-modifying technology**.** I want my research paper to enlighten people on the signs and significance of eugenicist themes within films. If people have increased knowledge of these cinematic themes, they will be more apt in detecting these themes in real life. In the near future, I hope that people will be able to detect eugenics subliminal messaging within films more easily. In the more distant future, I desire one impact from my research paper. I hope that people feel more compelled to actively oppose the new wave of eugenics. In reading my research paper, people will have a greater awareness of the severity of eugenics within the real world and how film aided in its continued presence. I hope that everyone will feel more empowered to dismantle the dominant rhetoric of eradicating desirable and undesirable traits. If these ideas continue, the world population will be a homogenous group of individuals with no diversity. This is a scary future. Knowledge is power, and I hope my audience will use the information in my paper accordingly.

**Conclusion:**

My proposal addresses both how eugenicist themes have surfaced within films over time and how real-world eugenics trends have impacted these depictions. I will conduct my research over a 10-week timeline, and it will consist of collecting, analyzing, and contextualizing my sources. My sources will include films with eugenicist themes, article analyses about eugenics in film, and miscellaneous sources about the history of eugenics in the real world. I argue that my research will show that eugenicist themes in films confirm their presence in the real world. I also expect my research paper to increase awareness of eugenicist themes in films and also in real life. I hope that my research paper will encourage people to spot eugenics in films and oppose it in real life.

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**Budget and Timeline**

**9 weeks**

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| **Timeline** | **Weeks 1-3** | **Weeks 4-5** | **Weeks 6-9** |
|  | Gathering eugenic films, film analyses, and eugenic historical accounts in the United States. Reading and watching the sources. | Analyzing my sources on the basis of their stance on eugenics, its message, and its implications. Contextualizing the sources within the time they were released and the dominant eugenic trend at the time. | Synthesizing my findings and determining if the films altered real-life eugenic trends. Writing my research paper, detailing my process and results. |
| **Budget** | 30 hours x $15.00 per hour | 20 x $15.00 per hour | 30 x $15.00 per hour |
|  | $450.00 | $300.00 | $450.00 |
|  |  |  | **Total: $1200** |