

## The Portrayal Of Jesse Owens' Character As The Representation Of Male African-American Athlete In Stephen Hopkins' Race (2016): New Historicism

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**Abstract.** *In the 1930s, African-American male athletes faced segregation and discrimination due to their skin color. Modern biographical films now offer a more accurate representation of their struggles and achievements. This research examines how the movie "Race" (2016) portrays Jesse Owens, a male African-American athlete from the 1930s, and its implications for present-day US race relations. Through qualitative analysis using Narrative and Non-Narrative methods, we apply Stephen Greenblatt's New Historicism to explore the movie's depiction of Owens. By comparing the film to historical records, we find that "Race" neglects to show Owens' dedication to sports, education, work, and the significant influence of his Irish first coach. These omissions are connected to the continued exclusion of African-Americans in contemporary American society. This study reaffirms the persistence of white supremacy beliefs and stereotypes surrounding African-American athletes, portraying them as solely focused on sports. The portrayal of Jesse Owens in the movie mirrors the current experiences of African-American male athletes, who still grapple with stereotypes and racial discrimination, even in the aftermath of President Obama's tenure.*

**Keywords:** *Stereotype, White Supremacy, African-American Athlete, Race*

**Abstrak.** Pada tahun 1930-an, atlet pria Afrika-Amerika menghadapi segregasi dan diskriminasi karena warna kulit mereka. Film biografi modern kini menawarkan representasi yang lebih akurat tentang perjuangan dan pencapaian mereka. Penelitian ini mengkaji bagaimana film "Race" (2016) menggambarkan Jesse Owens, seorang atlet pria Afrika-Amerika dari tahun 1930-an, dan implikasinya terhadap hubungan ras AS saat ini. Melalui analisis kualitatif dengan menggunakan metode Narasi dan Non-Narasi, kami menerapkan New Historicism karya Stephen Greenblatt untuk mengeksplorasi penggambaran film tentang Owens. Dengan membandingkan film tersebut dengan catatan sejarah, kami menemukan bahwa "Race" lalai menunjukkan dedikasi Owens pada olahraga, pendidikan, pekerjaan, dan pengaruh signifikan dari pelatih pertamanya di Irlandia. Kelalaian ini terkait dengan eksklusi berkelanjutan orang Afrika-Amerika dalam masyarakat Amerika kontemporer. Studi ini menegaskan kembali kegigihan keyakinan supremasi kulit putih dan stereotip seputar atlet Afrika-Amerika, yang menggambarkan mereka hanya berfokus pada olahraga. Penggambaran Jesse Owens dalam film tersebut mencerminkan pengalaman atlet pria Afrika-Amerika saat ini, yang masih bergulat dengan stereotip dan diskriminasi rasial, bahkan setelah masa jabatan Presiden Obama.

**Kata Kunci:** Atlet Afrika-Amerika, Ras, Stereotip, Supremasi Kulit Putih

### INTRODUCTION

History will always have its charm to be told again and again, whether it is the history of a glory, a tragedy or even combination of both. History is what happened in the past time. One history will be told in many different point of view, ways and delivered using different media. Most people were used to believe that the history is written and published objectively, yet new historicism opposed this believed and stated that history must contains bias and subjectivity of the historian, in this case is the director of the movie. As time goes by and the advance of technology, people become more critical towards things and start criticizing the

truth behind what shown in the media. One of the media is movie. Movie can be a good alternative media to know and understand a certain historical event.

A biographical movie entitled *Race*, directed by Stephen Hopkins, can be one of many good sources to learn about the history of African-American athlete in the 1930s. This movie is about life history of African-American Track and Field athlete, Jesse Owens. He lived in Cleveland, Ohio in the U.S in 1933. This movie is starred Canadian Actor Stephan James as African-American track and field athlete, who won four gold medals in Olympic 1936 in German under Hitler's regime. This movie shows us how Jesse Owens faces a lot of racial barriers in achieving his dream to become an athlete. His first step is coming to Ohio State University both to study and doing track and field. As the movie goes, the relationship between other white athletes and Owens becomes better than in the first time. Besides all the explicit racial discrimination because of the movie's setting, which is back to the 1930s, and a good race relation shown in the movie, the writer feels that the story of Jesse Owens in this movie is distracted by white characters' story. In a much simple word, the writer argues that the story of Jesse Owens in this movie is losing his struggling part and more focus on how the white characters help him to get what Owens wants. Furthermore, the ending chosen may represents today's African-American athletes in America as the end of Barack Obama's presidential era in 2016.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

There are some studies that analyse the portrayal of certain figure in the movie. The first movie is *42*, a study conducted by Mukhamad Abdi, it tells about the construction of Jackie Robinson as a black athlete in the movie. The writer used New historicism by Greenblatt and also narrative and non-narrative to analyse the movie (Abdi 2014). The second study is not talking about the same issue, but it has the same purpose which is discovering the meaning behind the differences between the movie and the actual history. The title of the second study is *The Genocide of Rwanda in Terry Georges Hotel Rwanda: A New Historicism Study*, a study conducted by Rizky Ardian. This study used New Historicism which later shows how this movie resists the common history (Ardian 2016). The next study is done by Bayu Prakasa, entitled *Back to Africa Movement: A New Historicist Reading of Lorraine Hansberry's Drama A Raisin in the Sun*. This study shows how the drama is made to represent what happened in the real life and written based on the subjectivity of the author.

As it is previously mentioned, that history must contains bias and subjectivity. This movie has some differences, which can be considered as the subjectivity shown by the director,

from any other sources. The first one is Jacqueline Edmonson's book entitled *Jesse Owens: a biography*. The second book, used by the writer is the book written by Jesse Owens with Paul G. Neimark entitled *The Jesse Owens Story*. This book is written using Jesse Owens point of view. This book is published in 1970, it tells more about Owens's feeling towards the event.

## **METHOD**

This study applies Greenblatt's New Historicism as the main theory. Together with *Representation and Subjectivity*, proposed by Stephen Greenblatt which will help the writer in achieving the aim of the study in finding the portrayal of Jesse Owens as the representation of the male African-American Athlete and how the subjectivity of the movie makers will influence the story. Recognizing that the subject of this research is a film, and it is categorized as a text. Thus, the method used to conduct this analysis is qualitative method, The primary data for this research is *Race*, a movie by Stephen Hopkins, a white male director, in 2016. This movie is bought via the online store in Instagram. The writer chooses *Race* because it is interesting how the film maker replicates the biography of Jesse Owens and somehow there are some major differences in some scenes of the movie with other written source. Moreover, this is the first motion picture about Jesse Owens.

The Secondary data used by the writer are some books which tell the story of Jesse Owens such as a book written by Jesse Owens with Paul G. Neimark entitled *The Story of Jesse Owens*, and *Jesse Owens: A Biography* by Jacqueline Edmondson, Stephen Greenblatt's New Historicism. There is also some online and offline source to support this study. Those sources are books, journals, articles, thesis, and any other sources that related to the topic and the theory which might help the writer to complete the analysis of this study.

The data of this study is gained through 1) doing the close reading, both the movie and the written history of Jesse Owens, 2) Capturing and sorting the scenes that are considered by the writer to have relation with the issue such as scenes that are telling different story form the written history to be the data of the analysis, 3) transcribing the dialogues. Furthermore, the data will be analysed from the narrative and non-narrative aspects.

The first thing that will be discussed in this paper is the narrative aspect which includes some main features such as story, plot, character and narration (Corrigan & White, 2012). These following stages are used by the writer to analyse the narrative aspect of the data:

### **1. The Birth of Jesse Owens**

This stage is important to see because we will know how Jesse Owens gets a chance to study and do sport. In this phase, there will be comparison between the movie and the written history in order to see how this movie portrays Jesse Owens. This first phase usually shows the struggle parts of the Athlete, however Jesse Owens in this movie is quite easy in getting his place.

### **2. People's Recognition of Jesse Owens**

This stage is about how an athlete starts being recognized by people through the races/competitions.

### **3. The Triumph of Jesse Owens**

This stage is very important in seeing how Jesse Owens' triumph cannot make him equal even after winning a very big match, in this case is the 1936 Olympic in Berlin.

After analysing the portrayal of Jesse Owens as the representation of male African-American athlete using those stages, this study will examine any bias or subjectivity from the director.

The second aspect that will be discussed is the non-narrative aspects. This aspect includes camera shots and movement, color, character, and setting. These elements are needed in order to find the portrayal of Jesse Owens together with the representation of African-American athlete, and also the subjectivity of the director of the movie.

## **DISCUSSION**

### **The Birth of Jesse Owens: Movie vs History**

In finding the portrayal of Jesse Owens in this movie, the writer will compare the history point in the movie with some selected books which have been mentioned previously. The first part of the analysis focuses on the portrayal of Jesse Owens' by comparing both the story shown in the movie and written sources. The historical points that will be compared is the first coming to Ohio State University.

**a. The First Coming to Ohio State University**

The movie begins with the scene on how Jesse preparing his departure to Ohio State University (OSU). In this stage, this movie shows how Owens' family lives their life, and clearly shows that Owens is the first child of the family who goes to college.

Mama: "First boy of mine to go to college is going to look respectable" (00:01:38)

After reaching OSU and running some rounds, he got trouble about shower with the OSU's football team, which all the member is white. He has not showered yet, and he is called by Larry Snyder, OSU track and field coach to see him in his office.



**Figure 1: Jesse meets Larry**

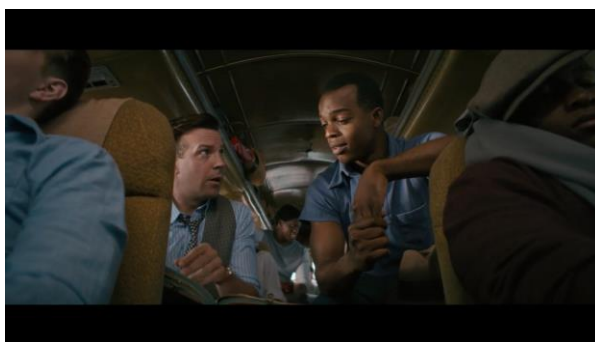
However, this scene is different from the written version. In both Jesse Owens' book, it is said that Owens is unable to get in the OSU and join any sport competition because he has already married, and there was a rule against student marriage at that time, besides OSU does not offer any athletic scholarship to Owens (Owens & Neimark, *The Story of Jesse Owens*, 1970). The one who makes Owens get in to OSU and join track and field team, and also manage to get Owens three jobs in OSU to pay for the tuition fee, dormitory and even send money to his family is Charles Riley, an Irish man, Owens' high school coach. (Owens & Neimark, *Blackthink: My Life As Black Man and White Man*, 1970).

Non-narrative analysis of figure 1 can be observed from camera's angle. Figure 1 uses medium long shot which shows Jesse on the right side while Larry on the right side, showing **Larry has more dominant power** (Bowen and Thompson 2013). The angle used in the figure 1 is eye-level angle, which allows the audience to make up their own minds what kind of people are being represented (Giannetti 2002). From the shot and angle, figure 1 focuses on the gestures of Jesse and Larry which shows how **Larry possesses the power** as we can see how Larry is seeing Jesse while Jesse is facing down. It shows the binary opposition of black and

white people. This figure shows how the power possesses by white people makes clear boundaries between black and white. In the written history, there is not any history talking about this scene. This difference may become one of the way the director showed his interpretation of the event.

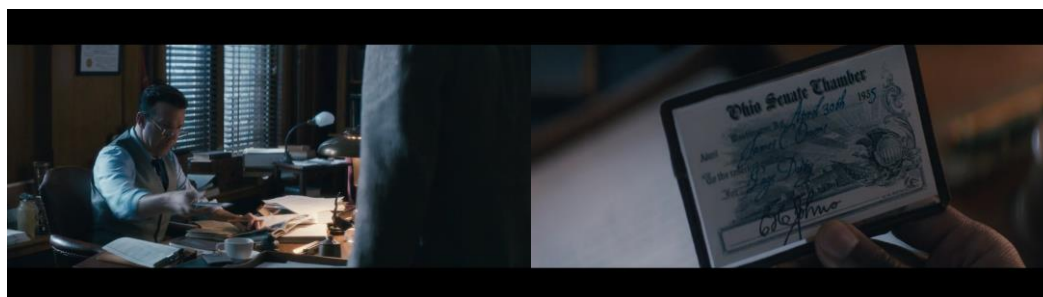
**b. The lack of Jesse Owens' struggling parts**

There are a lot of racial discrimination happened to Jesse Owens at that time, in the 1930s. However, this movie does not fully capture it. Jesse Owens and his friend, Dave, split the cost of a worn Model T ford so they can get to the track meet (Edmonson, 2007). The same statement also stated in Owens's book, yet in this movie, Owens is capture in the same bus going to the competition.



**Figure 2: Jesse is on the same bus with the whites**

Owens is having three different jobs to fulfil his daily needs, university needs and to support his family. Owens always tries his best to study, as it is said in Edmonson's book, "He was able to study during slow times on his shift" (27). In another book, "I studied hard at Ohio State, and I ran hard. I wanted to make my mark at college because it looked like I'd be the only one in our family to ever get to go there" (Owens & Neimark, *The Story of Jesse Owens*, 1970).



**Figure 3a: Larry gives an identity card**

**Figure 3b: the card**

Having this card means he can get money by doing nothing except running. this makes the struggling part of Jesse Owens to keep running, working and studying is missing. In figure 3a, Larry is working and giving the card half throwing to Owens. This gesture emphasized that Larry is having power in helping Owens. The used of deep focus with a wide angle which focuses on all images shows how important all the things such as books is important in portraying Larry Snyder (Corrigan & White, 2012).

### **People's Recognition of Jesse Owens**

From the above explanation, we can see how this movie gives a big role to Larry Snyder as someone who helps Jesse in achieving his dream and makes everything easier for Jesse Owens to do.

#### **a. Winning the Competitions**

This part becomes the point which Jesse Owens becomes well-known as the track and field athlete. The first competition is, Big Ten Championships. Once again, the role of Larry Snyder is being exaggerated.

Larry : They will love you or they will hate you. Does not matter. Cause either way, when you are out there, you are own your own. (00:33:06)

This line is captured when Jesse Owens will start running while the audiences there keep yelling "Negro" to him. This one is contradictive with what is written in Owens' book, "all at once the words of Charles Riley came to my brain....." (Owens & Neimark, The Story of Jesse Owens, 1970). This is when he feels hesitate and afraid if he lost.

### **The Triumph of Jesse Owens**

#### **a. Winning the 1936 Olympic in Berlin as USA representative**

Jesse Owens joins the track and field team to go to Berlin to compete in the 1936 Olympic. There are some moments portrayed in the movie, how Jesse Owens is captured as someone with dominant power but at the same time has less power. It is told that Jesse Owens is angry because he cannot train like the way he usually does and he wants Larry back, even if Larry is not the official registered coach for the Olympic.

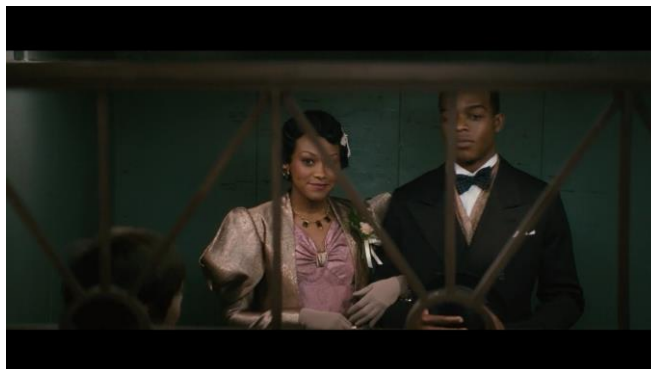
Jesse : All right. Well, I hope you know all the words to the German National Anthem, because you'll be hearing it every time one of those nazis win a medal I would've won (01:24:24)

This line is so powerful until he can get a pass for Larry Snyder to be part of the official, yet there is another line from Larry which shows that Owens is not that powerful. As it is stated by Greenblatt that actually a person with power can show their sympathy towards certain event or certain people so that other people will see how nice he/she is whereas at the same time man with power can make representation of the certain people (Greenblatt 1988). We can see here how Jesse Owens will never be equal or as powerful as Larry.

Larry : And here I am thinking this is your way of thanking me (01:25:43)

### **b. Gala Dinner Celebrating The triumph**

This is the ending chosen by the director where, Jesse Owens has to go to the service entrance instead of the main door because of his race, even though the Gala Dinner is the celebration of his triumph in the Olympic. This ending is something unusual for a biographical movie which talks about the triumph of Jesse Owens.



**Figure 4: Jesse Owens and wife are taking the service elevator**

Figure 4 shows a medium shot, from the waist up, to emphasize the expression (Corrigan & White, 2012). There is something interesting with this scene, which is the iron trellis which looks like a jail. Jail symbolizes law and order, the symbolic of alcoholic, gambling and excess, or simply criminals (Duncan, 2015).

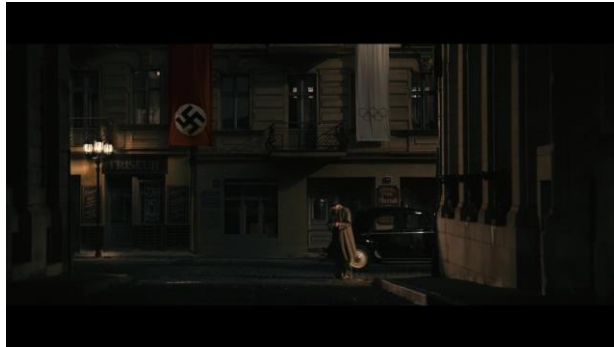
### **Subjectivity of the Director**

In this part, we will discuss about the subjectivity of the Director by taking a look on how the director chose the scene and developed the character.



**a. Exaggerating the Coach, Larry Snyder**

Stephen Hopkins in this movie likes exaggerating the role of Larry Snyder as the coach.



**Figure 5: Larry is in his way in looking for a shoes' company (Adi Dassler/ Adidas) to give it to Owens, in fact Adidas was the one who gave it to Jesse**

Figure 5 is using long shot, to emphasize the isolation and mystery of a character as he arrives in the distance (Corrigan & White, 2012). This scene shows how brave he is in walking around with Germany situation at that time just to get a pair of shoes for Jesse. In fact, Adi Dassler is the one who gives it to Owens.

From the previous explanations and evidences shown, how Larry Snyder has a big role in bringing Jesse Owens to success instead of Charles Riley. In this case, Charles Riley is an Irish man. The stereotype of Irish man is pretty much the same like African-American people. The scientist believed that Irish were like African which closely related to apes and in some conditions, they are considered as black in the US (Gwen Sharp, 2008).

**b. Showing Hitler's rejection**

The director capturing the myth, about how Hitler rejects to congratulate Jesse after winning the gold medal. The director even show it through the line which is spoken by Joseph Goebbels in German, Nazi minister of propaganda.

*Joseph : Do you really think he'd allow himself to be photographed shaking hand with that*

**CONCLUSION**

*Race* movie is kind of live cinema I which fails to challenge the traditional ideology (Stam, Burgoyne, & Flitterman-Lewis, 1992). In this case, the director of this movie, Stephen Hopkins, tells the story about the triumph of Jesse Owens yet it is shadowed with the white characters' story. Jesse Owens does not get his place even in a movie telling about his story.

This movie is keeping in mind that African-American is only good at using their physical strength instead of brain, even though there has been a prove that African-American can be more than just athlete, for example President Barack Obama. This movie shows on how African-American athlete is labelled with the same stereotypes even in Obama's Presidential era in.

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