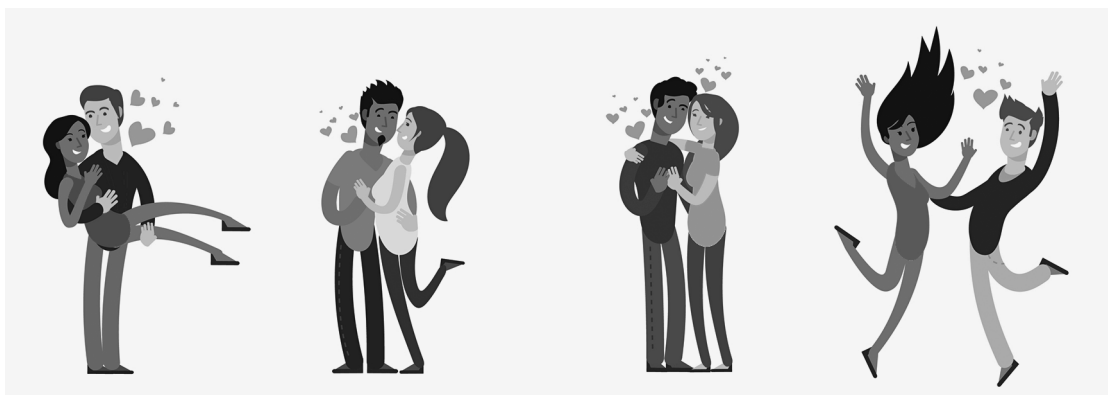


Too few on film

adapted from an article by Kevin Noble Maillard



- 1 The recent drama "Loving" is about an interracial marriage and takes place in midcentury rural Virginia, but there are no burning crosses, white hoods or Woolworth counters. Richard Loving and Mildred Jeter, a white man and an African American woman kiss in public at a drag race, and no one voices disapproval. A few white spectators stare and scowl. But the couple embrace and laugh, unsullied.
- 2 "Segregation wasn't a clean divide in these communities," the drama's writer-director, Jeff Nichols, told me, and for "Loving" it's true: The film, about the 1967 Supreme Court case striking down laws banning interracial marriage, addresses the long ignored topic of mixed race in America. Mixed-race couples existed in America long before 1967, but the Lovings (played by Joel Edgerton and Ruth Negga) were among the first to demand official recognition through marriage. According to the codes of popular culture and the law of domestic relations, families like theirs did not exist. Sustaining the legitimacy of racial boundaries requires 8 these narratives. Without policing and erasing by law and popular culture, taboos lose their authority.
- 3 Despite "Loving," which drew an Oscar nomination for Ms. Negga, and other recent films, the struggle to be seen onscreen is still real. The census finds record rates of mixed marriages and relationships, but few of these couples or their children make it to the screen. We may see and know mixed couples and families, but the anecdotal does not translate into collective visibility. #OscarsSoWhite is only the beginning of a conversation about diversity in Hollywood.
- 4 For many years, the industry forbade depictions of interracial relationships. From 1930 until the late 1960s, the Motion Picture Production Code banned "vulgarity and suggestiveness" so that "good taste may be emphasized." The code curtailed criticism of law enforcement, marriage and public institutions, and prohibited nudity, drugs and interracial couples.

- 5 The code reveals the systematic dissemination of social and political values through entertainment. Film is a repository of societal beliefs — it authenticates experience, archives cultural memories, and suggests moral standards. Paired with legal proscriptions, film is a persuasive medium for administering racial convention and shaping romantic aspirations.
- 6 Mainstream film presupposes the abnormality of interracial intimacy, leaving little room for alternate stories. Features about historical subjects are likely to focus on rape and subjugation, as in "12 Years a Slave," in which white men sexually abuse black women. More contemporary dramas, like "White Girl" or "Heading South," posit racial and cultural difference as eternal inhibitors to real chances of stability. Romances, like the remake "Guess Who" or "Something New," feature race as the central element of the narrative arc.
- 7 Rarely do mixed-race couples — especially black men and white women — exist in their own, universal right.
- 8 Interracial love is the complicated, unacknowledged silence of the American past. The overwhelming lack of these stories onscreen reveals a tacit cinematic apartheid that insists upon racial separation. The absence of these accounts wordlessly 12 the impossibility of integration at the most intimate, personal level. It is the duty of film and art to fill these narrative voids.

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