



Good Hair Discussion Guide

Director: Jeff Stilson

Year: 2009

Time: 96 min

You might know this director from:

GOOD HAIR is Jeff Stilson's first feature-length documentary film.

FILM SUMMARY

GOOD HAIR was inspired by Chris Rock's three-year-old daughter, who asked, "Daddy, how come I don't have good hair?" A devoted father of two young girls, Chris Rock tells his daughters they are beautiful every day, but when he heard this question he wanted to examine the cultural influences and reasons behind his daughter's heart-breaking question. The result is a film that explores the complicated politics and aesthetics of African American hair, including the perceptions of "relaxed" versus "natural" hair.

From beauty salons to scientific laboratories, Chris Rock's sharp-witted style tackles a complicated subject with humor and grace. He interviews multiple African American celebrities including Maya Angelou, Reverend Al Sharpton, Salt-n-Pepa, Eve, Raven Symone, Nia Long, and Ice-T about their hair. He also interviews a chemist who explains the dangerous sodium hydroxide used in many relaxers, as well as an Indian facility owner who processes Indian hair for the African American hair industry in the U.S.

Fascinating and hilarious, GOOD HAIR culminates in the Bronner Brothers International Hair Show, arguably the biggest event in the African American hair care industry. It's a trade show with theatrical competitions and demonstrations of new products and techniques. But more than that, it's a celebration of beauty and style and creative self-expression.

FILM THEMES

Instead of taking a polemic approach to its delicate subject, *GOOD HAIR* allows many different people to weigh in, sharing their own stories and opinions on societal perceptions of African American hair.

SHIFTING STANDARDS OF BEAUTY

Straightening African American hair began as an attempt to make the natural texture appear more Euro-centric. Straight hair was considered “good hair,” while words like “nappy” carried negative connotations. Eurocentric beauty standards are still in play, but current styles are more nuanced and evolved. The interviewed women say it’s about creative self-expression and versatility of style, no different than other ethnicities. All over the world, women change the texture of their hair for beauty or style, even using weaves and extensions. Reverend Al Sharpton, in regards to his own relaxed hairstyle inspired by James Brown, describes his hairstyle as coming from African American culture, which is not static, but is constantly changing over time.

POLITICS AND AESTHETICS

Paul Mooney said, “If your hair is relaxed, white people feel relaxed. If your hair is nappy, they’re not happy.” This joke alludes to how African American hairstyles have been historically restricted by white societal expectations. Under the oppressive conditions of slavery, black women weren’t able to care for their hair as they did in West Africa. Native cultures and identities were denied, and the headdresses they might have worn in their homelands were reduced to handkerchiefs. Before weaves became popular, many black women wore wigs. It wasn’t until the ‘60s that “natural” hairstyles, such as the Afro became popular among activists like Angela Davis. Even today, certain Afrocentric or “natural” hairstyles have connotations of radical politics. The regulations imposed on black women’s hairstyles, mostly coming from ignorance, can be seen most recently in the U.S. Air Force’s ban of hairstyles such as twists, dreadlocks, and large cornrows. Cultural critics say the new regulations are based on using white women’s hair as the norm, not understanding that black hair comes in various textures and that if it’s not chemically straightened, the hair needs to be styled differently.

RELAXERS FOR CHILDREN

Chris Rock never judges the people he interviews, but in promoting the film, he has urged parents to NOT have their children’s hair relaxed until they are teenagers. His biggest concern is the chemical damage, as products marketed as “Kiddie Perm” are only slightly weaker versions of the solution used for adults. Some critics are also concerned about the message it conveys, namely, that children grow up thinking that the hair they were born with is not acceptable and needs to be changed. It begs a larger question: what is “good” and who decides? Ultimately, Rock wants the definition of “good hair” to be “healthy hair.”

“I knew women wanted to be beautiful, but I didn’t know the lengths they would go to, the time they would spend – and not complain about it. In fact, they appear to look forward to it.”

Chris Rock

“When will our hair cease to be political? Every other group of women can do what they want with their hair, and it’s not seen as making a statement.”

Mikki Taylor

FURTHER DISCUSSIONS:

1. When Chris Rock’s daughter asked, “Daddy how come I don’t have good hair?” what sort of childhood memories were stirred up for you concerning your own hair?
2. What kind of hair did you want as a child? What kind of hair do you want now?
3. GOOD HAIR examines the culture surrounding black women’s hairstyles, but what are the film’s universal themes about beauty and self-expression?
4. Have European beauty standards become a global standard? Do you believe this was perpetuated by European imperialism and colonialism? How much is Hollywood responsible for perpetuating certain expectations for women?
5. What kind of aesthetic concerns do men have about their hair? Do you think men of ethnic minorities feel pressure to assimilate their hairstyles to fit the larger cultural standards?
6. Actress Tracie Thoms says, “It’s amazing that it is considered revolutionary to wear my hair the way it grows out of my head.” She describes natural hair as “freedom.” Do you think that not wearing make-up or not shaving is similarly “revolutionary” or “freeing”? Why or why not?
7. In India, many women cut their hair off as an offering and self-sacrifice. What are the ethical implications of temples selling the hair to the U.S. for large profits? How would you feel knowing that your hair extensions were a spiritual sacrifice offered by devout women?
8. The film shows how the \$9 billion dollar African American hair industry is dominated by Asian manufacturers and distributors. Do you agree with Sharpton that this is problematic, that profits made from black patrons should go to black businesses?
9. If your child asked you the same question Chris Rock’s daughter asked him, how would you answer?
10. If you didn’t have to worry about your professional look, or how your family and friends or society would judge you, how would you want to wear your hair? Does your age, gender, or community deter you from the style you would like to embrace?

NOTES:

FILM FACTS:

- In the early 15th century, hairstyles in many West African societies were coded and complex. A hairstyle could convey a person's marital status, wealth, rank, age, religion, and ethnic identity.
- When West Africans were enslaved and brought to the "New World," their identities were negated. They were stripped of their native clothes, language, and culture. Their heads were shaven, and their poor diet and cruel work conditions led to poor health in body and hair. The women could not care for their hair with the natural ingredients they would have used in their home communities, and they did not have time to dress their hair in elaborate styles. Suffering from ringworm and other scalp diseases, slave women had to make do with headscarves to cover their heads.
- Garret Augustus Morgan, Sr., born in 1877 in Paris, Kentucky, invented the first hair relaxer. He was the child of former slaves, and also invented the three-position traffic signal, safety hoods, and smoke protectors. Morgan was experimenting with a chemical liquid for use on a sewing machine needle. By chance, he discovered that it also straightened hair. He tested it on his neighbor's Airedale dog, and the dog's naturally curly hair turned straight. He next tested it on his own hair. Then he launched the product as the G.A. Morgan Refining Cream.
- Sarah Breedlove, known as Madam C. J. Walker, was born in 1867 near Delta, Louisiana and is regarded as the first woman to be a self-made millionaire in America. She developed and marketed a line of beauty and hair care products for black women. She established the Madame C.J. Walker Manufacturing Company, which also trained sales beauticians, who worked as "Walker Agents." With her wealth and success, she became a major philanthropist and activist.
- "Black is Beautiful" is an important cultural movement that was promoted by black Americans in the '60s that aimed to celebrate the natural features of black people, such as their skin color, facial features, and hair. The movement also encouraged people to stop straightening their hair and lightening their skin, and instead to embrace their natural features as beautiful.
- African-Americans make up only 12% of the U.S. population, but they account for 80% of the hair industry business.
- Human hair is one of India's major exports. Some girls have their hair cut off and stolen while they were sleeping or at the movie theatre.
- GOOD HAIR premiered at the 2009 Sundance Film Festival and won the Special Jury Prize.

WAYS TO INFLUENCE

1. Share this film. Give others a chance to learn how hair has been tangled up with history and politics for some, while for others hair has simply been a celebration of beauty and creative self-expression.
2. Sign the petition, "Tell Congress To Stop Discrimination Against Natural Black Hair," regarding the U.S. Air Force regulation that discriminates against African American women serving in the Air Force.
3. Donate your hair to Locks for Love, a non-profit charity that "provides hairpieces to financially disadvantaged children under age 21 suffering from long-term medical hair loss from any diagnosis."
4. Check out Natural Girls United, created and designed by Karen Byrd to provide dolls with hairstyles and textures of ethnic people. Byrd believes: "There is a serious need for our young girls to be able to have dolls that look like them. It is something that affects their self-esteem and confidence, and how they feel about themselves. But each day we learn that it is important to show them and teach them that their beauty is beautiful."