Jack Gentsch

Alexandra Jay Burgin

6 March 2014

Major Paper 2

Black Blockbusters: An Analysis of Stereotypes in the Cinema

Modern American popular culture has the unique ability to influence the values of America. Countless films and television shows have allowed viewers to question their perspectives on society and how they interact with the world. However not all films drive positive social change: some reinforce negative and offensive ideals. In fact, the media often supports racism through the presentation of racial stereotypes. In the film *White Chicks*, black cops Kevin and Marcus Copeland go undercover as two rich white blonde women. Stereotypes depicting black males and the white “valley girl” are apparent throughout the film for comedic effect, further ingraining various racial stereotypes into the minds of the film’s audience. Despite disguising themselves as white girls, the two cops exhibit many offensive stereotypes throughout *White Chicks*. Although some may point out that the satirical and comedic nature of *White Chicks* voids its impact on America’s perception of race, the Copeland brother’s skills in a dance-off, chasing after a purse thief, and free usage of the N-word portray offensive black stereotypes. The film justifies racism through the characters of Kevin and Marcus Copeland, which like other aspects of popular culture supports racism through the usage of these stereotypes.

Stereotypes are a tool used to isolate one group from another, as they generalize behaviors to a particular group. Rather than allowing an individual to express themselves as unique, a stereotype places an individual into a specific group that they may not necessarily identify with. These generalizations are often created to make one group a victim of hurtful labels, allowing the aggressor group to feel superior. Alternatively, positive stereotypes can be used for personal gain, as seen in a study performed by several psychology professors. Steven Fein, William von Hippel, and Steven J. Spencer claim that positive stereotypes are used to establish trust or respect in an individual that someone may not otherwise trust. Their research states that “participants who received praise from a Black doctor were quicker to activate the positive stereotype for doctor. Presumably, these participants were motivated to see the target person positively so that they could feel better about the praise he offered them” (50). Stereotypes therefore can be used to help or hurt a group, as a black doctor can be characterized as participating in a trustworthy profession but could also be offensively characterized using various black stereotypes. In either case, stereotypes are used to categorize someone as part of a one-dimensional group, preventing individuality and freedom of the victim. Fein, Hippel, and Spencer consider that stereotypes may be “activated automatically on exposure to stereotyped groups, group labels, or similar cues” (50). They claim that stereotypes are passed on to the next generation through exposure to these very stereotypes, and that these stereotypes are utilized when faced with the stereotyped group. This allows popular culture to be a vehicle of stereotype propagation, as it has the ability to present stereotypes and cause Americans to perceive generalizations as truth and in turn isolate a particular group.

Kevin and Marcus Copeland have the unique role in *White Chicks* of portraying both white and black stereotypes, which may cause some to argue that these stereotypes are simply used satirically and won’t affect the audience’s perception of racial groups. However, the very presence of these stereotypes in film still perpetuates their existence in society. Even if the goal of *White Chicks* is to use stereotypes for a cheap laugh, the audience will feel enabled to use racial stereotypes in their own jokes. If Americans use stereotypes in their own daily humor, it would be easy for a victim to become offended by their words. Even with the possibility of the limited intentions of *White Chicks* humor, the use of stereotypes in popular culture still provides a negative example of stereotyping that society can blindly follow. In yet another example of culture, Professor Bettye Latimer details the racial prejudice present in children’s books in her article "Children’s Books and Racism." She notes that while many books fail to include black characters, stories that manage to include a diverse cast often fail to portray the reality of racism accurately and instead desensitize the hurtfulness of racism. For example, of the many syndromes that Latimer identifies in children’s books is the “Avoidance syndrome,” where the author fails to fully identify the struggles that black characters have undergone that influence their character. For example, Latimer cites a children’s biography of Martin Luther King Jr. that fails to describe what spurred Dr. King to fight injustice (23). Such ignorance of the harsh reality of racism in children’s literature or film allows Americans to take racism lightly, perceiving it as less horrifying than it truly is. This is the case with underestimating the racism within *White Chicks*: by allowing stereotyping present in the film to slip by as merely comedy, the harmful effects of racial stereotypes are entirely ignored. By turning stereotypes into a joke rather than explaining the pain dealt by their use, *White Chicks* simply propagates the usage of these stereotypes by its viewers. It is crucial to understand that racial stereotypes present in *White Chicks* can truly influence its audience and result in the longevity of harmful stereotypes in society.

*White Chicks* utilizes stereotypes for Kevin and Marcus that results in the continuation of harmful and isolating stereotypes in society. One black stereotype depicted by Kevin and Marcus’ actions in the movie is the incredible dancing skills of blacks. In a scene in a dance club, the two have a dance-off with the snobby Vandergeld sisters, and end up having ridiculously superior dance moves. The two breakdance like they have been learning since birth, and even manage to do headspins to conclude their routine. Compared to the stale moves of the white Vandergeld sisters, it is obvious that the film is contrasting the two stereotypes of dancing ability. Although dance moves may not be controversially offensive, it is regardless a stereotype that is further ingrained into society through viewing *White Chicks*. This stereotype places the assumption that blacks are naturally gifted with dancing ability, and that other races generally are not. Simply assuming that one race is superior to another (even in the context of dance) could easily offend these other races. By depicting a stereotype of blacks, although it may not be extremely controversial, spreads this stereotype and causes viewers to assume that all blacks are great dancers. The usage of this stereotype in *White Chicks* further isolates blacks from other races, even if the nature of the stereotype is not meant to insult the group it targets. The stereotype of blacks being great dancers as shown by Marcus and Kevin serves to separate blacks from other races in the eyes of the viewer, causing the stereotype and racism to spread throughout society.

Kevin Copeland also embodies the stereotype of black athleticism in a scene where he chases down a purse snatcher. Kevin manages to leap over several fallen bikers, roll over the hood of a car, and tackle the thief while disguised as a woman. Kevin’s ability to run as fast as a purse snatcher, even in women’s shoes, is clearly a reference to the black stereotype for incredible athleticism. Kevin’s agility is questioned by another cop in the film, “what is this girl, a track star?” It is clear that the black stereotype for athleticism is used in *White Chicks* for comedic effect, but how could its usage negatively impact blacks and society? In his article “The Ball Curve: Calculated Racism and the Stereotype of African American Men” Dr. Ronald E. Hall ponders the implications of the athlete stereotype attributed to blacks. By contrasting IQ scores between blacks and whites with races performing in the NFL and NBA, Dr. Hall analyzes the stereotype of the “dumb black.” Despite the overall high IQ’s of those with European descent and professional sports teams being largely African American, Dr. Hall strives to tear down this stereotype and its supposed tie to genetics using examples of exceptions to this stereotype (107-111). The stereotype of the “dumb black” emphasizes that blacks are genetically determined to be less intelligent but more athletic, an extremely racist and offensive stereotype. Although *White Chicks* does not display the lack of intelligence aspect, the stereotype of the athletic black is certainly tied to the insulting “dumb black” stereotype. By portraying Kevin’s unbelievable athleticism even while wearing women’s shoes, *White Chicks* lends support to the “dumb black” stereotype. Even if Kevin’s intelligence is not insulted, stereotyping blacks as athletic reinforces this and other closely related stereotypes in the audience’s mind. *White Chicks* presents the stereotype of the athletic black and further ingrains this offensive generalization in its audience. You’re doing good intertextual work here.

Yet another racist stereotype occurs when Marcus and Kevin are listening to the radio with their trio of white girlfriends. After the two black male cops listen in confusion to “Thousand Miles” by Vanessa Carlton, the radio changes to “Realest Niggas” by 50 Cent. The two immediately start singing along, presenting the stereotype that blacks love rap music. Although this stereotype is certainly tied to hip-hop’s history as part of African American culture, *White Chicks* includes other details in this scene to expand on its racism. The girls in the car are clearly shocked by what they perceive to be two of their white girl friends singing the N-word, but are talked into joining the two cops in song: “So? Nobody’s around.” This scene ties to Bettye Latimer’s “ostrich-in-the-sand syndrome,” where a children’s book blatantly brings up racist topics but fails to explain them to the reader (25-26). *White Chicks* fails to give any historical significance or meaning to the N-word, as is to be expected of a comedy. By failing to address the oppressive history of the N-word, the audience of the film may perceive the N-word as somewhat acceptable to say. As explained by Latimer’s “ostrich-in-the-sand syndrome” (25-26), *White Chicks* does not detail the racist nature of the N-word and fails to educate its audience about its harmful capability. The film has captured the stereotype that blacks love rap and freely use the N-word, and managed to also apply this word usage to white women. Many find the free use of the N-word, regardless of who says it, to be offensive due to the centuries of hatred attached to the word. Not only does *White Chicks* manage to make a joke from the generalization of black’s free usage of the word, but they have the audacity to have their white actors sing along and laugh with the two cops. By making this incredibly offensive word the butt end of a joke, the Copeland brothers and their trio of friends teach the audience that the N-word is acceptable to laugh at. The initial stereotype of blacks is expanded in this scene to make the N-word seem acceptable, and despite the offensive nature of the word, the “acceptability” of its usage is passed onto the audience. The Copeland brothers’ stereotypically black antics result in reinforcing these hurtful stereotypes in viewers.

*White Chicks* applies black stereotypes to the Copeland brothers and in turn promotes racism through the use of these stereotypes. While some may claim the comedic nature of the film will keep it from truly affecting perceptions of race, Kevin and Marcus clearly reinforce stereotyping through their dance moves, sprint after a purse snatcher, and free usage of the N-word. Pop culture presents topics to American audiences who can certainly be influenced by what they watch. When watching a film like *White Chicks,* the viewer should be aware that values impressed by the film have the possibility of negatively impacting them and the rest of society. Racism is very prevalent in the media, and consumers of pop culture should be able to actively question perspectives portrayed by the media. In order to prevent pop culture’s perpetuation of racism, Americans must realize that what they see on television does not accurately depict the world around them or how they should behave in society.

Works Cited

Fein, Steven, William Von Hippel, and Steven J. Spencer. "To Stereotype or Not to Stereotype: Motivation and Stereotype Activation, Application, and Inhibition." *Psychological Inquiry* 10.1 (1999): 49-54. *JSTOR*. Web. 15 Feb. 2014.

Hall, Ronald E. "The Ball Curve: Calculated Racism and the Stereotype of African American Men." *Journal of Black Studies* 32.1 (2001): 104-19. *JSTOR*. Web. 21 Feb. 2014.

Latimer, Bettye I. "Children’s Books and Racism." *The Black Scholar* 4.8/9 (1973): 21-27. *JSTOR*. Web. 21 Feb. 2014.

*White Chicks*. Dir. Keenen I. Wayans. Perf. Marlon Wayans and Shawn Wayans. Columbia Pictures, 2004. DVD.

I am absolutely thrilled with my paper so far and have no doubt I will include it in my portfolio. I put a lot of effort into this piece, especially with my first draft, and think it is looking great. My greatest weakness in writing this paper was probably being able to focus on one topic in a paragraph and continually introduce new analysis. I’m sure there are still points that are redundant or could be improved, as Rebekah noted in her peer review. I was able to fix the grammatical and clarity issues that were prevalent in my paper’s first draft, and I think the argument is a bit clearer and well supported as a result. Picking a topic that I loved and focusing on it definitely helped motivate me to work harder to polish this piece, and also it made evidence from *White Chicks* easy to think of and integrate into my argument. This also made it easier to read through my paper and edit it a few times, which would otherwise not be particularly entertaining. A large portion of my revision was looking at my evidence and making sure it was well sandwiched with analysis, as this was a problem addressed by all three of my peer reviewers. Hopefully my evidence is better integrated into my topic and is also logical. This was an important revision to make because I had personally read the articles and completely understood them, while an outside reader would need much more introduction to any given quote or paraphrase. Overall, I’m entirely satisfied with what I have done with this paper and look forward to editing it further to better support each outcome. This was one of my favorite assignments of the quarter (despite its difficulty) and I think it ended up looking great.

Jack,

I absolutely agree that this is one of your best pieces this quarter, in part because of your clear level of engagement (helped, I suspect, by the fact that you started writing about this film pretty early on ☺) but also because of some really strong prose work on your part. Your integration of secondary sources is especially impressive as they are just that—integrated—rather than bookended in your work. What you should work through for your showcase revision (which you seem, rightfully, interested in pursuing), is this issue with stakes. Ultimately, this argument is your own and you should stay true to that, but I do have concerns about making it that “some people my find these jokes offensive and the movie makes it ok for people to use these jokes.” For one, it shifts the blame (albeit accidentally) from joke-teller to joke-audience, ultimately saying offensiveness is about interpretation. The problem with stereotypes, however, is something more than that. This clarity will have to come right away, in tightening up your stereotypes paragraph, but you might consider 1. That the process of stereotyping helps create a clear “Other,” by creating more of a divide between groups and 2. Those stereotype and Otherization are necessarily hierarchical. In short, does humor that invokes racial stereotyping serve to re-entrench racist rhetoric of hierarchical difference? I’m hesitant to tell you to argue something that you don’t want to argue, but certainly this would be a question that might come up for other academic readers as well. The other option, of course, is just to dig a little deeper with your topic as is and make it more explicit, again starting with the first body paragraph on stereotyping. You’ve done good work here and I’m glad that you can recognize that as well. I look forward to seeing where it goes from here, whichever direction you decide to take it.