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17 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 the film *White Chicks*, black cops Kevin and Marcus Copeland go undercover as two rich white blonde women. Stereotypes exhibited by the Copeland brothers, such as black athletic superiority and the wealthy white “valley girl” stereotype, are apparent throughout the film for comedic effect. These instances of extreme racism further ingrain various racial stereotypes into the minds of the film’s audience. 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 that reinforce these harmful generalizations in society. The film justifies racist ideals through the characters of Kevin and Marcus Copeland, whose embodiment of these stereotypes wrongfully supports racial Otherization.

Stereotypes are a tool used to isolate one group from another, as they generalize behaviors of 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. Resulting from these hurtful stereotypes is a distinct “Otherization,”where one group becomes the victim of hurtful labels, and the group forming the stereotype emerges with a sense of superiority. Similarly, stereotypes with positive attributes – such as the trustworthiness of a doctor – can be used by an individual for personal gain. 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 determined 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). In this example, participants chose to see black doctors positively, that is, as a trustworthy professional, so they could better accept the compliments provided by the doctor. 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 a separate “Other,” preventing individuality and freedom of the victim of the stereotype. 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 different 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 perceive the “Otherization” of blacks and view them as a separate and possibly inferior group. 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 for society. Another example of racism’s prevalence in society can be found in children’s books: Professor Bettye Latimer claims that racial prejudice is often portrayed to children 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 the treatment that spurred Dr. King to fight injustice (23). Such ignorance of the harsh reality of racism in children’s literature or film allows the “Otherization” resulting from stereotypes appear less harmful than it truly is. By failing to account for the history and emotions tied to racism, Americans may fail to realize that racism is offensive, emotionally painful, and serves to isolate different races. 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* fails to portray the painful isolating effects of stereotypes to its viewers. It is crucial to understand that racial stereotypes present in *White Chicks* can become imparted to its audience and result in the longevity of harmful stereotypes in society.

*White Chicks* utilizes stereotypes for Kevin and Marcus that result 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 vastly 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) intensifies the separation between blacks and whites. 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 segregates 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, creating a distinct racial Otherization between these races. Viewers must be aware that the stereotypes present in *White Chicks* do not reflect reality, and as a result these racist generalizations and their separating tendencies should not be brought into 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 high Caucasian IQ scores with the prevalence of African Americans in the NFL and NBA, Dr. Hall defines the stereotype of the “dumb black.” Despite this evidence, 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 Dr. Hall’s “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. By presenting this stereotype, *White Chicks* further segregates blacks from whites. *White Chicks* portrayal of the stereotype of the athletic black further ingrains this offensive generalization in its audience and continues to separate whites from blacks by treating failing to treat them as equals.

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 racist content. 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. 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. The film has captured the stereotype that blacks love rap and freely use the N-word, and thus created an obvious divide between black and whites. Not only are the two races divided by this racial vocabulary, but the word is given a fraction of legitimacy through its usage – which many will argue is completely unacceptable. 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 appropriate to laugh at. The initial offensive and segregating stereotype of blacks is expanded in this scene to make the N-word seem usable, and despite the hurtful 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 amongst viewers.

*White Chicks* applies black stereotypes to the Copeland brothers and isolates blacks 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 shift their perception of race based on what they see. 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 pop culture, and consumers 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

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