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Major Paper 1

Reaping Profits from American Values

As a consumer of American popular culture, one may readily notice that values present in pop culture reflect those expressed by American society. If we were to analyze pop culture in America, we may claim that movies, television, or even songs influence modern American values. However, topics in popular culture are presented primarily to satisfy the public and to boost revenue. The producers of popular culture echo various American values in order to increase the number of viewers and thus profit. Some pop culture texts may have to goal of influencing modern values, but pop culture is largely produced to please its audience and maximize its own sales. Although American values may appear to be influenced by pop culture, pop culture displays an imitation of these values as proven by the presence of family and femininity in *Frozen,* anti-racism in *Remember the Titans*, and stereotypes that some viewers find humorous in *White Chicks*. Consumers should be aware that producers of pop culture portray specific values in their works not necessarily to strive for social change but simply to seek increased profits by comforting and entertaining their targeted viewers.

It may first serve beneficial to define American values as well as how these values can be “reflected” or “determined” in a given pop culture text. It is simple to define values as an individual’s moral compass; these values help determine an individual’s decisions and influence their daily lives. Some values have been passed on for generations (traditional values), some vary between countries and religions, but no individual thinks exactly alike another. American values thus must be generalized, as some citizens will certainly not agree with how the majority of their country thinks. One may argue that producers create pop culture texts that force the audience to question their perception and alter their values, an example of pop culture determining American values. However the opposite could be equally true, where pop culture simply echoes the thoughts of its audience: a reflection of American values. Pop culture often reflects American values in order to create a comfortable and respectable product that consumers will purchase.

Despite the apparent American values shown in pop culture texts, some argue that these productions also act to change these very values. Keith Booker claims that the “Culture Industry” seeks to raise young Americans to be active consumers that support society. Booker’s claim that movies such as WALL-E or Toy Story raise children to become active consumers may seem a bit far-fetched, but there is no doubt that successful family films rake in millions simply from merchandise. However, rather than mindlessly molding toddlers into consumers of pop culture, wouldn’t it be more reasonable to conclude that pop culture encourages short-term purchase of merchandise? By presenting relatable and comforting characters and stories, a children’s movie serves as the most effective advertisement for its own merchandise. By simply showcasing the American values that children were raised with, pop culture producers allow children to compare themselves to and thus further appreciate characters in pop culture. As a result, children are much more likely to find interest in merchandise involving these characters. Rather than establishing life-long consumer mentalities, family films produce a strong short-term interest in the pop culture text. Whether it’s an action figure or a DVD release, pop culture films will drive their audience to invest in their products. Thus, producers implement American values into their works in order to bond with their audience and gain short-term profit. Although Booker claims pop culture attempts to alter the views of its audience in order to support the “Culture Industry,” in fact the media utilizes American values in order to satisfy the audience and make profit simultaneously. Pay attention to the internal logic of this paragraph. You move back and forth a bit too quickly between changing values and reflecting values for profit. Rather than going back and forth, set up the paragraph with the counterargument, with Booker, and then respond to it in the second half.

One powerful example of the reflection of modern values in popular culture is Disney’s new film *Frozen*. Two sisters Elsa and Anna are torn apart by Elsa’s inability to control her icy powers, which when revealed in front of the entire town cause Elsa to flee and create an eternal winter. In order to prevent spoiling *too* much, I will simply state that the love between the sisters eventually allows Elsa to control her powers and bring happiness to Arendelle. Disney’s latest movie notably expands on their recent trend of female protagonists guiding the storyline. Rather than the princess relying solely on prince charming to save the day, characters like Anna take charge of their own destiny. Leaving Arendelle despite the behest of others portrays Anna as a character full of willpower and strength, paralleling modern Disney characters such as *Brave’s* Merida rather than the virtually helpless Snow White. The personalities of these characters can be attributed to modern views of gender equality, presenting the fact that female characters should be just as powerful and important as male characters rather than simply a supporting role to the action. By presenting two main characters who are capable and empowered females, Disney has provided two excellent role models that boost interest in the film among female audiences. These main characters are portrayed as strong female characters in order to attract audiences in support of gender equality, which in turn would draw a large profit from American audiences. In addition to the attention given to the growing American value of gender equality, *Frozen* also upholds the traditional American value of family by making it integral to the plot. Anna and Elsa are separated due to the danger and unpredictable nature of Elsa’s powers, but Anna constantly tries to reunite with her sister despite the risk. Anna’s optimistic and loving behavior reflects the American value of family in a positive manner that allows families to deeply enjoy the movie. Gary Westfahl notes Disney’s success despite presenting typical values, stating “Executives recognized that while many would reject such entertainment as dull or antiquated, there remained a large audience for wholesome family fare.” Even though some movies may present more extreme American values, companies like Disney have flourished simply by producing films that comply with American values. The importance of gender equality and family presented in *Frozen* is certainly not a challenge to modern American values – it is a reinforcement of American values, such as gender equality and family unity, which like many films before it has given Disney incredible profits from their family films.

Yet another Disney film that showcases modern American values is *Remember the Titans*. Set in 1971, the text follows the predictable path of a football team gaining the motivation to win each game, including a dramatic win in the last few minutes of the championship game. Not only does this film follow the cookie-cutter path of any feel-good sports movie, but it also integrates the conflict of race. Conflicts frequently arise between black and white players, and they must overcome their differences in order to play effectively and win. By presenting a film 29 years after its setting, producers are able to modify characters and storyline from the 1970’s to reflect those of current values. The initial racial tension present between players is reasonable for 1971, and the conflict’s resolution and team cooperation is reflective of the absence of segregation today. Rather than maintaining racial conflict throughout the film, Disney created a resolution to this conflict in order to make the movie optimistic and reflective of modern values. If *Remember the Titans* was shown to an American audience in 1971, many viewers would be opposed to the attitudes of desegregation present in the films conclusion. Such anti-racist values presented in this film are brought up in order to reflect the values present in the viewer’s own mind and allow them to better enjoy the film. New York Times columnist David Brooks generalizes the entire genre of sports films, stating that the typical coach “forces his players to work harder than they ever thought they could… [inspiring sacrifices as] he leads them to glory over richer and more respected rivals.” In *Remember the Titans*, such sacrifices come to represent the struggle and eventual victory over racial segregation. By presenting a dramatic shift in racist opinion in the film accompanied by the emotions of an American feel-good sports movie, Disney crafted a film that will please audiences by reflecting their own anti-racist ideals and making this view seem increasingly virtuous. Respect across races has certainly become a common value by 2000 in America, and *Remember the Titans* presents this concept in order to satisfy and comfort audiences. The anti-racist values presented in the film allow audiences to feel better about their own views, and pushes them to enjoy and spend more of their hard earned cash on the film. This predictable sporting film is an excellent example of pop culture’s reflection of American values in order to uplift viewers and increase box office sales. There’s a bit too much back and forth here.

Another film that deals with race in an entirely different fashion is *White Chicks*, where racial stereotypes are used to comedic effect. Rather than presenting a film where racial tension is overcome, two black cops go incognito as rich white teenagers and make fun of both races in their antics. America has an incredibly racist past, and the lighthearted jokes made in this film are meant to entertain those with slight racist opinions still inside them. Ranging from dance moves to musical preference, *White Chicks* gains most of its humor from stereotypical acts that are certainly deemed offensive to some Americans. Even though not all audiences may appreciate the nature of the film, the movie certainly appeals to American viewers who are able to laugh at the ridiculousness of stereotypes crafted by society that remain today. Westfahl addresses the variance in viewer opinion reflected in film: “since consumers of popular culture belong to diverse groups, writers or filmmakers might consciously decide to adopt mildly heterodox stances to appeal to certain audiences, and garner their financial support, though they might alienate other audiences.” Although American films hope to portray views shared by all Americans, some films such as *White Chicks* may depict more radical views than others. However, even if some values may not correspond with those of some Americans, there is no doubt some viewers of the pop culture text will agree with these values. *White Chicks* embodies an offensive and racist sense of humor that will capture some audiences, but will likely fail to entertain a majority of Americans. Some may interpret the presentations of race in *White Chicks* as a satirical critique of stereotypes, akin to how Booker states “American popular culture is a powerful and pervasive force that clearly exercises an important influence on the values and tastes of consumers.” However, the silly and cheerful nature of the film makes it more logical to think that the producer’s goal in this film was to entertain a possibly untapped audience rather than seriously question stereotypes. Films such as *White Chicks* embody values that may not be represented by all of America, but these values still accomplish the goal of pleasing the intended audience and boosting revenue at the box office.

Despite the temptation to pin a change in American values on popular culture, it is logical to consider the fact that producers reflect current values in order to comfort their audiences with familiar concepts. Rather than challenge their viewers with unfamiliar ideas, pop culture seeks to content viewers by reflecting their own thoughts in the media. It is important to realize that a film is not necessarily trying to challenge American values, producers are more likely to be doing their job to strive towards profit. When engaging in pop culture, it is important to acknowledge that the primary goal of film is to entertain – not to solely challenge modern views. You need to expand this conclusion (primarily with a re-summarization of your argument) to be more persuasive.

Works Cited

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*Remember the Titans*. Dir. Boaz Yakin. By Gregory A. Howard. Perf. Denzel Washington, Will Patton, and Wood Harris. Buena Vista Pictures, 2000. DVD.

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Writer’s Memo

I feel like I did quite well with this paper, as it gave me plenty of freedom involving the content of my work. I simply chose an interesting topic on PCU, considered the viewpoints of the two authors on PCU, and wrote about my own perspective. I thoroughly enjoyed being able to take in some evidence I knew about through my own experiences with pop culture, and tying in this evidence with the discussion on pop culture was fun and made the writing process much smoother. I feel that I may not have excelled at expressing my point with perfect clarity to my audience, so hopefully I can improve on this with my future writings. I think that my peer review and second draft helped me see and correct this flaw. My revision involved extensive notes on my peers’ feedback, and they both had very similar opinions on my work. This allowed me to focus on restructuring my claim and incorporating it throughout my essay, which came as a priority next to minor MLA and grammatical fixes. Next I went through the essay and clarified points my audience may not fully comprehend. I finally proofread the essay and ensured that it would be incorporated well with the discussion on PCU and reflected my own thoughts. The only feedback I didn’t incorporate was Phoebe’s comment “Counterclaim?” I simply modified my counterclaim paragraph and hopefully it appears to be a counterclaim… because I can’t state that specifically in the essay. I’m quite satisfied with this essay and looking forward to my next essay.

Jack,

Your prose style continues to be your strength, but what also jumps out at me in this essay is your balance between secondary sources and your own argument. Just as you say in your memo, you really use the PCU sources as a jumping off point for what YOU want to talk about, which is fantastic. The two main issues are of scope and internal logic. The first is a pretty easy (though seemingly daunting) fix: just talk about one movie. You can mention the other movies as other examples of your argument, but the causal/reflective dynamic you are exploring will be much more persuasive if you explore it, in depth, in a single film. I am personally most compelled by your *Frozen* section, in part because you strike a nice balance between traditional and progressive values and in part because it’s so much more contemporary than either *WC* or *RTT*. This gives your audience something more relevant to connect to. In focusing on that one film as demonstrative of your central argument, you give yourself more time to explain to your readers both sides of this complicated dynamic (and, as I mention above, room to explore the two main characters you argue are so important). As for internal logic, you really just need to decide what your audience needs to know and AGREE WITH before certain points. I’ve indicated a few of these areas above, but definitely be on the lookout for it in each paragraph and with future writing assignments. This will help with not only clarity, but persuasiveness as well. Take your audience on a clearly progressing journey with you WITHIN paragraphs rather than just between to keep them persuaded the whole time. With your strong prose and authorial confidence, such revisions will yield a much stronger paper. Glad to hear you’re excited about the next assignment; I look forward to seeing what you do with the second sequence!