Note to Reviewer:

My topic was Does Popular Culture Reflect American Values or Determine Them? I would appreciate if you focused on the organization, structure and flow of my essay. Does my argument make sense and does it build upon itself throughout the essay? Are my points understandable and clear? Thank you!

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Major Paper 1

Reaping Profits from American Values

By watching any modern film, it may be immediately noticeable that values presented in American popular culture parallel those in its citizens. 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. Although some texts are created largely to influence American values, pop culture is designed to please its audience and maximize its own sales. Although American values may seem to be influenced by pop culture, pop culture displays an imitation of current values that seek to please audiences immediately as evidenced by pop culture texts such as the films *Frozen, Remember the Titans,* and *White Chicks.* Consumers should be aware that producers of pop culture construct values to portray in their works not necessarily to strive for social change but simply to seek increased profits.

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. Some writers may note traditional values (i.e. those that have been passed down for generations) as defined in pop culture. However, these values are much less likely to be questioned or challenged in any medium than political or moral values. One may argue that producers create texts that force the audience to question their perceptions and change their values, an example of pop culture determining American values. However the opposite could also be true, where pop culture simply echoes the thoughts of its audience: a reflection of American values. By reflecting cultural values, popular culture emulates American values to create a comfortable and respectable product.

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 that pop culture encourages short-term and widespread 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 the pop culture text. Thus, producers implement American values into their works in order to connect to their audience and gain short-term profit. Although it may provide the illusion that pop culture attempts to alter views in order to gain profit over time, in fact the media utilizes American values in order to satisfy the audience and make profit instantaneously.

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. 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” (Westfahl). 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 beliefs.

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 every game (including the championship in the last minutes of the game). Not only does this follow the cookie-cutter path of any feel-good sports movie, but it also integrates the conflict of race. Conflicts often 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 were able to tailor characters and story within the film to represent 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. 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” (Brooks). In *Remember the Titans*, such sacrifices come to represent the American victory over racial segregation. By presenting this change in values accompanied with the traditional American feel-good sports movie, Disney crafted a film that will please audiences by reflecting their own ideals and making these ideals seem more 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. 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.

Another film that deals with race in an entirely different fashion is *White Chicks*, using racial stereotypes 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 remainders of it can be easily seen in the jokes that are made in this film. Ranging from dance moves to musical preference, *White Chicks* gains most of its humor from stereotypical acts that may be deemed offensive to some. 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 our society that remain today. Westfahl addresses the variance in views present 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” (Westfahl). 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” (Booker). However, the silly and light-hearted 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.

Works Cited

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