



THE FRIDA
ZINEMA

BLACK CINEMA

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BEHIND THE GREASE PAINT

by Brian Ly

From its very inception, Hollywood has been inextricably tied to the exploitation of the Black experience, stemming from traditional performance theater where, while they themselves were often excluded from the actual cast, Black people were often played by white performers in blackface. This heightened imagery of tar-black faces with exaggerated red lips served to dehumanize an entire people, with their personas in the public consciousness being defined by these racist depictions that served both as mockery and socialized oppression. When Black performers began to integrate into the Hollywood system,



early roles often had them donning the greasepaint as well, reduced to becoming a caricature of themselves. Even as the actual practice of blackface began to fade, not necessarily out of any noble intent in consideration of how reprehensible and damaging it was to an entire demographic of people so much as due to a sense of

shame over the overt racism of the practice, its cultural impact can still be felt all throughout media, whether for continued comedic effect or as part of the established vernacular of the cinematic language.

There's a direct interrogation of blackface in Ralph Bakshi's *Coonskin*, an animated film that lampoons Disney's *Song of the South* in its own co-opting of the Br'er Rabbit story recontextualized in contemporary Black America. The film grapples with its own depictions of racist iconography, where it can at times feel difficult to divorce the comprehensive catalog of the history of racist caricatures from its ac-

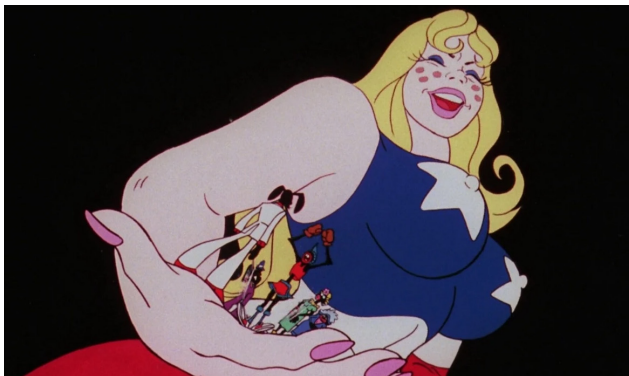
tual intent to satirize these depictions as mocking past representations of Black culture in film rather than Black people themselves. Bakshi strips away the sanitized depictions of these characters that have since been canonized into the Disney oeuvre by reaching back into its more classical origins of traditional African mysticism while not necessarily disavowing modern African American folktales that have since shaped the culture and continue to evolve. While the film is clearly well-researched and well-intended, it was released in a context where its reception was unclear, regardless of its actual attempt as a satire piece. Given his reputation as a provocateur, Bakshi was naturally not the most believable messenger, as the perception led to more straight interpretations of what was harsh, bold imagery rather than recognizing them as tools for deconstruction. The sheer overexposure of iconography was interpreted as a celebration of racist imagery rather than an attempt to paint it as the inherently problematic and harmful exaggerations they truly were, marking that we as a culture weren't quite ready to move on from these as a part of our existing film vernacular.

While positive representation of Black people

had certainly become more common in the post-Civil Rights era, this was almost entirely conditional, particularly in terms of its expectations regarding the conduct of exactly how a proper Black person was supposed to behave. This served to be more limiting than freeing, further dividing the Black population into delineations of those who conformed more to white society and those who exhibited undesirable traits that formed the foundation of harmful stereotypes, cementing a sense of anti-Blackness through racial dog whistles. At the same time, the culture also fortified these stereotypes, which, while not literal blackface, became the new personas by which Black people were depicted in media and in the public consciousness. This only further limited opportunities for Black people, both within the entertainment industry and the greater economy, and proximity to whiteness became a one-way ticket out for those

who endeavored to distance themselves from other Black people. *The Cosby Show* and *The Jeffersons*, among other idealistic portrayals of the perfect upper-middle-class Black family, while superficially positive forms of representation, set an unrealistic standard for Black excellence that no other race was held to. Everyone else became a part of the monkey show that was essentially the modern minstrel.

It became clear that nobody was going to stand against this injustice besides Black people themselves. This is the very thesis of Robert Townsend's *Hollywood Shuffle*, an ensemble piece built around the Hollywood Shuffle Players, which chronicles the journey of aspiring actor Bobby Taylor, a fictionalized version of Townsend himself, as he endeavors to establish himself within the Hollywood system and ultimately finds himself consumed by the rigidity of Black representation. As he



toils through audition after audition trying to break through, he finds himself shackled both by the expectations of Black society to pursue a more stable life in an economic system that is already inherently oppressive toward Black people yet still a more realistic path to success than an industry that stifles Black creativity. He reluctantly accepts that he has to play a certain role to the chagrin of those around him that find the roles he accepts embarrassing, and it's only by leaning entirely into them that he's able to find even a modicum of success, acknowledging that it's all part of the game. This clearly doesn't change even as he becomes something of a star, leading his own Black films, with one stereotypical characterization after another until he realizes that he has completely embodied exactly what his family had been warning against the entire time. Just as he storms off set, he is just as easily replaced

by anyone else willing to take up the mantle, as it never really was about who he was as an artist so much as it was about a Black body fulfilling a role. The film is clearly in direct conversation with the Eddie Murphy effect, and to a glancing eye in the video store, it wouldn't be impossible to mistake Townsend for Murphy himself on the cover art, which likely isn't an accident. Though Murphy found success for himself within the industry with many iconic films and roles in his own right, he sort of became a genre in himself.

The more overt discourse with blackface continues in Spike Lee's *Bamboozled*, where television producer Pierre Delacroix struggles to find his footing as a Black creative, with positive representations of Black stories being viewed as schmaltzy "Cosby clones" as he's forced to lean into the more negative Black stereotypes, and he absolute-

ly takes that as a challenge by developing an unsightly racist minstrel show. To his complete dismay, everyone absolutely eats it up. The film chronicles the rise and fall of the homeless street performers that Delacroix reinvents into modern minstrel personas, and while they initially embrace the glitz and glamour of stardom, the entire racket eventually collapses due to the sheer weight of the exploitation and humiliation that is expected of them, amongst other internal turmoil and external pressures. Where Lee succeeds while Bakshi fails is not inherently due to his own race and personal experience, but it's through this clear understanding that overexposure doesn't reveal the racism for its true ugly face, but rather, it only serves to reinforce the stereotypes as inaccurate beliefs that are held true by those who seek for it to be confirmed. It's an illustration of the perpetual cycle that defines Black art, and though



there is absolutely the factor that the white powers that be continue to exert their control and influence from the establishment of this narrative, a significant part of it is this tension of exploitation being the primary avenue for Black representation while also inherently limiting opportunities for Black creatives and breaking out of this mold.

As a sort of cultural subversion, the Wayans Brothers attempt to flip the narrative in the buddy cop comedy *White Chicks*, where a pair of Black detectives in whiteface pretend to be young, vapid blonde socialites in the Hamptons while undercover on a case. Though this is entirely played for comedic effect with very little in the way of actual social commentary, whether on gender or race, the film stands in the context of what would appear to be the post-racial reality

of the turn of the millennium that defined much of the social discourse following a generation of Black cultural normalization with representative stars in film such as Will Smith and Eddie Murphy, both of whom benefited largely from tokenization and palatable acceptance as safe ambassadors of the culture, in the preceding years of the Black Lives Matter movement, and while subtle, it's very clear that the film very much exists within the same cultural context as the aforementioned *Bamboozled*, where Black people are still the butt of the joke, whether it's the entire characterization of Terry Crews's character and his fetish for white women, though obviously played more for comedic effect when he recoils when discovering that the woman he was trying to pursue, despite exhibiting traits of Black culture in the more socially desirable white package, more over

the fact that she was actually Black rather than her being a man, or when the pair of detectives while donning their whiteface disguises belt out lyrics to a rap song with the n-word grant the pass to their fellow girlfriends in the car, noting that it's totally okay because there aren't any Black people around, serving as a sort of tacit acknowledgement that the outrage culture over the power of the word is overblown. Though the film doesn't inherently posit Black people as strictly inferior, it's clear that these Black men are able to enter designated white spaces through their temporary appearances while never being excluded for their inner Blackness, which is only elevated and accepted when donning whiteface. Even if the racial comedy is inherently self-deprecating from the perspective of Black creators, their works still exist within the context of a very white system that



is only further empowered by the suppression of Black voices, which is very much why the Wayans family and the later Tyler Perry empire largely became silos and systems within themselves ancillary to mainstream Hollywood.

The resulting cultural developments have more than indicated that despite the superficial improvements in racial harmonies, the deep-seated hate born from harmful racial stereotypes very much still defines the general sentiment of American culture. Jordan Peele's *Get Out* very much emerges as a direct response to current events and the modern Black experience. There exists both a hyperawareness of racism by white individuals and an underlying inherent subtle racism that particularly defines

the way white people interact with Black people that is immediately palpable to the lead, Chris, who is acutely aware of his own Blackness and how that inherently shapes his perspective of the world and his interaction with all of those around him. Likewise, this has also developed into a nonverbal code between Black people with a shared experience of living in an inherently white world, which makes it all the more apparent through his uncanny interactions with the Black servants of his girlfriend, who, despite having familiar appearances in Black bodies, don't react in a natural way that would reflect a lifetime of experience living as a Black person. The entire cult practice of hijacking Black bodies to prolong the lives of an aging white population serves as a sort of meta-commentary

on the entirety of the modern Black experience. Their bodies are appreciated for their sheer physical superiority while also having their minds viewed as strictly inferior, easily controlled, and replaceable by the more valuable white minds that deserve to have their existence preserved. It's an inversion of the *White Chicks* scenario where the swag of Black culture in a white body is a fun and exciting novelty, but perhaps it further reveals the truth of the modern discourse where we're no longer at the point where Blackness is superficially celebrated for its cultural contributions so much as it's viewed as an inconvenient reality where these overpowered physical specimens are being piloted by a race that is viewed as strictly intellectually inferior, making them exceedingly dangerous and the need to be controlled all the more urgent. There is no real prescription in this film beyond its diagnosis of a horrifying reality, where perhaps the only answer for Black people in a white society that feels villainized by their very existence is to get the fuck out. While a hell of a genre filmmaker who has managed to seize his own career from the confines of what would have previously been a culturally limited scope as a race-based comedian, Jordan Peele perhaps has his greatest contributions yet to come in



Black film and contemporary film in general, not purely through his directorial output, which are absolutely some very compelling works both thematically and in terms of being pure exercises in genre, but rather through his work in enabling further Black voices as a producer with the rise of Monkeypaw Productions.

Perhaps one of the most compelling contemporary films that reevaluates the Black experience is Boots Riley's *Sorry to Bother You*, which centers around a struggling Black man who finds his life turned around

when he starts using a "white voice" in his telemarketing job. As a sort of alternative take to the clear racist imagery of blackface that denigrated Black people, the white voice serves as a sort of invisible way for a Black man to integrate into white society, stripping away characteristics of blackness that are very sonically clear yet not apparent without a visual indicator, reinforcing this sort of idea that proximity to whiteness is ultimately still the path of least resistance in modern society. Even as more blatant racism and obvious iconography have fallen out of the current lex-

icon, there is still an inherent bias against being perceived as Black, and when the film goes off its rocker completely with the entire plot around the human-horse hybrids, there is still something that rings true in the process of dehumanization as a continued allegory of Black bodies being exploited for their physical qualities and perceived ease of control. It just goes to show that conforming to whiteness for economic prosperity is only a temporary reprieve that is granted, because at the end of the day, you are never allowed to forget who truly owns you.



Much like there is a literal Black voice, there is also a literary one that is represented both in the actual vernacular as well as the subject matter of trauma and poverty porn, as explored in Cord Jefferson's *American Fiction*, where a struggling (this seems to be a recurring theme) writer, upon seeing the contrast between his own recent career failures and the success of a rising star shamelessly pandering to a white audience with stereotypical portrayals of Black people, submits a fabricated memoir filled with the entire gamut of Black clichés, only to find that the publishing executives absolutely eat it up (another recurring theme), and despite every attempt at self-sabotage, manages to ride the wave to success. The film is inconclusive in terms of any clear statement, even presenting multiple possible endings, but it does

drive home the sobering realization that Black representation largely still exists through a particular cultural gaze that highlights its most problematic and vulnerable moments, partly out of a misplaced guilt that ironically continues to perpetuate negative stereotypes, rather than move on from a past that is admittedly permanently stained by the trauma of both the actual atrocity that was slavery and the sins of overt segregation and the subtle displays of discrimination that still exist to this day.

Even as the actual black greasepaint fades away from the silver screen, the specter of blackface is still very much present throughout Hollywood, whether it's the actual harmful stereotypes that continue negative perceptions of Black people, seemingly positive repre-

sentations that serve to only divide a vulnerable population, or the exploitation of a people that is used to placate a sense of white guilt. There are clear efforts from Black creatives that express their frustration through their works, and even if there's a clear diagnosis of the problem, they usually meet the unfortunate conclusion that there is still much work to be done and that they're no closer to a sea change than any of their predecessors. At the same time, there remains a clear progression, and while there may be no true divorce from the ugly origins of blackface in the history of film, Black artists are clearly making their mark and redefining the medium in their own way, and while it's important not to forget the sins of the past, we are at the very least that much closer to a future that isn't entirely defined by Black trauma.





Blackenstein



Blacula



Vampira

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