

CHAPTER TWO

Stereotypes, Problematic Crossovers, and the Larger Cinematic Background

Objectives:

- Identify Black cinematic stereotypes and explain why they exist
- Draw informed conclusions that reflect an understanding of multiple (and sometimes conflicting) sources of information
- Explain hegemony

Origins and Crossovers

From the earliest days of our nation, Black American expressive cultural appears as part of dance, folktales, music, and so forth. The appeal of black dance, musical, and other creations in the U. S. is linked to its origins. It functioned to encourage, offer catharsis, and empower people who lived under horrific conditions. Shared expressive culture reinforced the reality of humanity; it fought nihilism or the emptiness that suggested there was no viable future in sight. It celebrated the distinctive culture that African Americans were developing while one simultaneously respecting African past and African influences. Black creativity in the United States was powerful enough to encourage people to continue life even when it seemed unlikely individuals would personally experience freedom or equity.

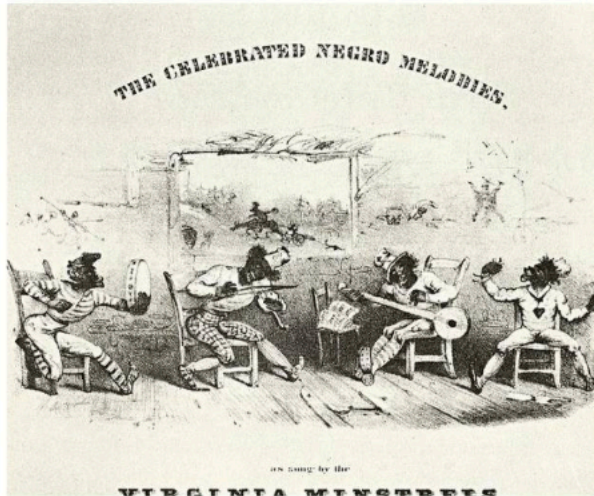
The many different people of various nations and ethnicities combined to become the ancestors of a new people, Black Americans. They

crafted from what was available – retaining and recombining African aesthetics and commonalities while at the same time making use of European instruments and styles. This expressive culture not only focused on freedom, humanity, and survival, it also could express great love and joy in moments of communal interaction. Incubated out of the sight of white dehumanizing forces, it developed primarily in safe Black arenas, such as covert meetings or work places. Another factor is stress. Stress, along with contact with different cultures, can serve to intensify creation, according to art historian Suzanne



Blier. All of these offer a partial explanation for why these forms originated in a specific Black American circumstances and a specific new formation of people. These expressive arts inspired others who appropriated the creations and added to growing American styles in indirect ways. Scholar Craig Werner writes:

Most of the people taken into slavery came from West African cultures that understood how developing individual character contributed to the health of the community. When West Africans confronted the nightmare realities of slavery, they improvised ways of surviving that have come down to us through the voices of Mahalia Jackson and Sam Cooke, the instruments of Jimi Hendrix and John Coltrane, and the communal explorations of Sly and the Family Stone and the Wu-Tang Clan. While those strategies are grounded in the specific history of blacks... they're available to anyone who doesn't call Babylon home. Bruce Springsteen, Madonna, and Steve Cropper have their place in the story that, today, is being passed on by blacks and whites, Asians and Latins.



Scholar Arthur Knight notes that earliest musical contact between American white and Black races occurred at number of events, such as harvest festivals, slave purchasing, and stage performances. This appropriation of Black talents and skills coexisted with

denouncement of Black people. Enslaved people with musical talents had reduced housework on some plantations while slave ads would mention their musical talents as part of their value. Some were prized as carpenters or painters. After emancipation, Blacks continued to perform at white parties and other events. This phenomenon, as well as cultural appropriations of Black expressive styles, is suggested in the film *Back to the Future*, when the character Marty, a child of integration and increased exposure to Black styles, plays with a Black band. The film positions Marty as the *inventor* of a Black style that Black members had to struggle to keep up with.

Ironically, these black styles represent ones that many whites in the past era had limited or no exposure to. At times, the original creators might even abandon the expressive form and move on when it no longer served its initial purposes of sustaining a Black community. It is theorized that country music, for example, falls into this category.

Mentioning this crossover effect is important because crossover has not often included a real understanding or connection to the Black

May 11, 1769. Run away from the subscriber in Charles City county, the 14th of April last, a VIRGINIA born Negro fellow named PETER, about 44 years of age, of a Black complexion, a slim fellow, his teeth cut before as if broke off, and is a sly artful rogue if not watched; he carried with him sundry clothes, such as crop Negroes usually wear, also a white Virginia cloth waistcoat and petticoat, a Tarlton plaid gown, and sundry other of his wife's clothes. He also carried away a gun of an uncommon large size, and a fiddle, which he is much delighted in when he gets any strong drink, which he is remarkably fond of, and then very talkative and impudent. I suspect he has gone to Amelia county, to Mr. Tanner's, as Mrs. Tanner, alias Mrs. Johnson, sold him to Mr. Richard Hayles, and by him sold to the subscriber, as he often told the other Negroes that if ever I used him ill he would go to his old mistress, as she never sold him to Mr. Hayles, but only lent him during pleasure, and that he would go to her and be protected. The said Negro is outlawed; and I will give £10 to any person or persons that will kill him and bring me his head, separate from his body, or 40s if delivered to the subscriber near the Long Bridge.

— William Gregory

[Transcriptions of Virginia Gazette Runaway Slave Ads](#)

experience and people responsible for the genesis of the aesthetics. Cinema has played a distinct role in an American culture that eagerly consumed Black creations but mocked and ridiculed the humanity of the people that produced it. This phenomenon is rooted in a colonial need to justify slavery by portraying Blacks as intellectually inferior and as humanly flawed. The portrayals began with Black slavery and European dominance of the world several centuries ago. Consequently Black culture and the very human reactions to difficult circumstances would be portrayed as comical, inexplicable, or as sinister and frightening, requiring punishment. This dichotomy persisted beyond the end of slavery and segregation.

Early Cinema and a Dual Heritage

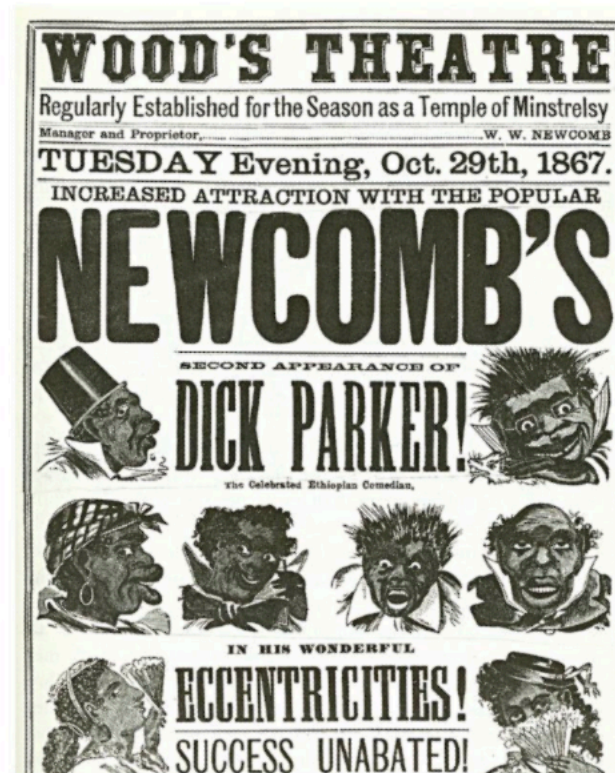
Early minstrel shows and vaudeville performances illustrate this lack of appreciation. They incorporated Black performing aspects, but there was a crucial difference in crossover appropriations. Whereas Black expressive cultural and its aesthetic aspects revitalized Black communities and reaffirmed the principles of freedom and human dignity among its members, in the hands of a racist society, the music patronized, caricatured, or marginalized its creators.

Similarly, Blacks often appeared in many popular films as servants or perhaps comical bumbling fools. The portrayals assured white viewers that Blacks did not notice or mind

widespread economic exploitation, they were unfit for anything other than second class citizenship and no damage had been enacted on human aspirations or psyche. Yet the same movies would freely and contradictorily incorporate musical forms such as ragtime and jazz created in Black communities. "Black musicians (would) turn up, play a song or two, and disappear in comedies, melodramas and films noir or, to note some familiar non-musical classics, in *Jezebel* (1938), *Citizen Kane* (1941) and *Casablanca* (1942)," scholar Arthur Knight notes.

It is worth considering how white psyches were also damaged. Whites dressed up in blackface as the characterizations were widely disseminated. Blackface involves placing burnt cork or other

darkening agents on faces and/or bodies, and then talking, dancing, or singing to represent Blacks in the most stereotypical forms. Blacks who wanted to make livings within vaudeville as well as the Hollywood structure would conform to the practice. *Birth of a Nation*, mentioned earlier, featured "Black" characters played by whites in blackface. These characters and others following them exemplified the depiction of good Blacks as simple minded, slavishly devoted to white people, and the political structures that dehumanized them. Most importantly, many cinematic Blacks seemed disinterested in their own freedom or well-being. Conversely, Blacks who wanted citizenship status or



other rights were unnatural, dangerous and violent. Most actual Black actors in the film appeared in background group roles or as out-of-control troops. Academician Eric Lott notes:

From “Oh Susanna” to Elvis Presley, from circus clowns to Saturday morning cartoons, blackface acts and words have figured significantly in the white Imaginary of the United States... The early history of motion pictures was bound up with blackface – witness its importance to such major cinematic developments as Uncle Tom’s Cabin (1903), Birth of a Nation (1915), and The Jazz Singer (1927) – and the movies have regularly returned to it since then... Indeed, in minstrelsy’s cultural force, its racial crossings, and what the New York Tribune called its pleasing “insanity” (June 30, 1855), its emergence resembled that of early rock ‘n’ roll. Every time you hear an expansive white man drop into his version of Black English, you are in the presence of blackface’s unconscious return.

According to Donald Bogle, the most common and oldest American Black stereotypes include:

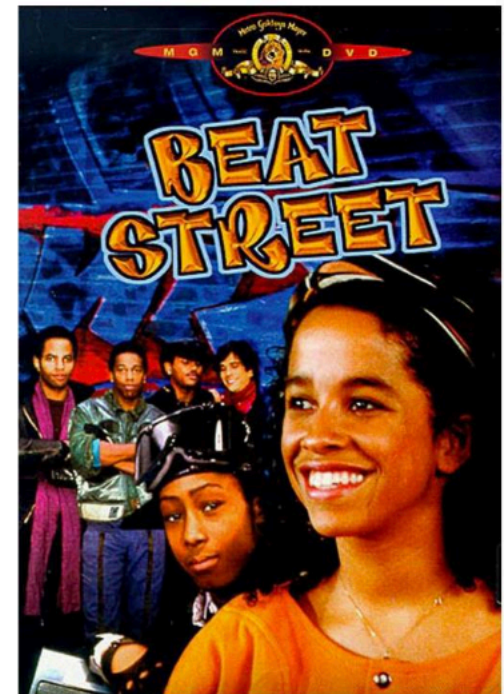
- **The toms and Aunt Jemimas** – Blacks who were slavishly devoted to white people and political structures that dehumanized them. [See a short clip](#) from the Jim Crow Museum.
- **The coon** – a Black person with limited intellectual understanding that provides comic relief because of inappropriateness or reduced mentality. See an example of [Stepin Fetchin](#) in “Miracle in Harlem” (1942).
- **The Jezebel** – a Black woman who was oversexed, with little or no maternal instincts. See an example of Josephine Baker’s

“[Banana Dance.](#)”

- **The buck** – a savage, brutal Black man intent on sexual intercourse with white women, usually by rape. See a 1915 cinematic example of [Gus in Birth of a Nation](#). (Gus is played by an actor in black face.)

Black stereotypes had distinct functions. They served to reassure the ruling class that the people they oppressed deserved inferior treatment because they actually were inferior. For instance, coon stereotypes demonstrated the perceived folly of allowing Blacks equal political and economic places in society, while Black men positioned as bucks or brutal rapists reassured that legislative barriers and an oppressive police state as appropriate for these humans. Similarly, representations of Black women and men as morally or intellectually challenged, justified rape during slavery, lower wages, rejection of citizenship rights, and segregation.

Stereotypes worked to obscure the reality of a human species that will exist and behave in ways that are NOT incomprehensible but consistent with a particular social and historical situation. Questions to consider would be are people actually defined by a trope? Why is it being applied, where did it originate from, and who embraces and normalizes it? None of these questions can be



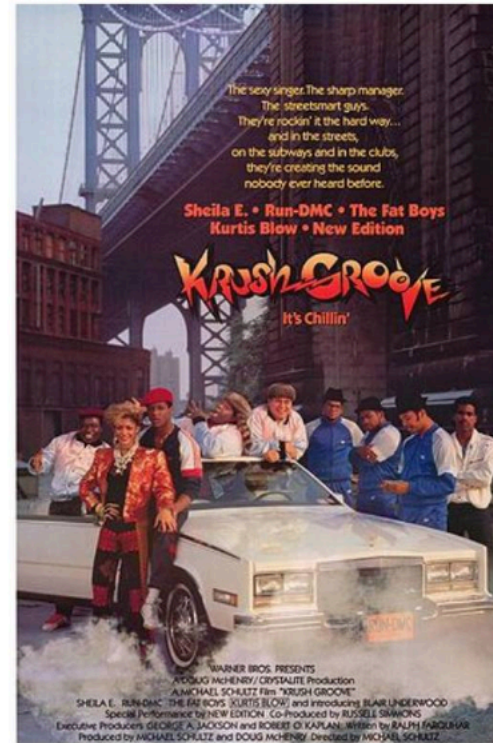
answered without research or connections to people involved. Racial stereotypes also bring up the issue of hegemony.

The phenomenon of representing groups of people in ways that served to convince society that the group (or class) was invalid and unworthy of equal status and treatment is a human phenomenon, according to many cultural theorists. Antonio Gramsci, who lived in fascist Italy in the 1930s, referenced this cultural domination, this cultural hegemony. People consent to being led by classes they believe should be in charge. Reasons for leading are based on political notions that come from the ruling classes. These notions or ideas are defused through society and seem natural to people living in the society. Cultural hegemony strives to convince subjugated peoples that they should be treated the way they are and this is the normal order into which they fit. It also works to convince the ruling class they naturally are where they should be.

Thomas R. Bates, writes:

Civil society is composed of all those “private organisms” – schools, churches, clubs, journals, and parties—which contribute in molecular fashion to the formation of social and political consciousness. Political society, on the other hand, is composed of those public institutions—the government, courts, police, and army – which exercise “direct dominion.” ... The intellectual succeed in creating hegemony to the extent that they extend the world view of the rulers to the ruled, and thereby secure the “free” consent of the masses to the law and order of the land.

In this specific case, the dynamics involve racial hierarchies and the idea that racial differences are a natural order that must be enforced.



But subjugated groups, particularly when they come from or have access to alternate cultures, can have their own understandings. Michel Foucault, a French theorist, noted that dominant cultures ignore or disqualify subjugated cultural perspectives. But, he also noted that subjugated cultures could and did articulate and retrieve their own alternative histories and explanations. Cornel West puts it together more succinctly, describing the power of Black American culture to shape and

form alternative worlds of critique, restoration, and resistance. Black cultures had the knowledge of their own humanity, alternate aesthetics from another continent, and used these to affirm themselves. In all of these analyses, dominant views normalized as inherent ignore the different opportunities, privileges, categorizations, and constructions of individuals.

Treatments and representations of human value simultaneously could encourage people not to question more deeply the reasons groups existed in their current positions and why they arrived there in the first place.

Again, stereotypes promoted a simplified view/explanation of Black Americans as less human rather than to interrogate the whys and

whats of humans in specific situations of domination and oppression. In other words, the stereotypes obscured the analysis of society and humanity operating in a particular circumstance in favor of regarding a particular group as odd and/or violent—without rational explanation or as operating within parameters of normal humanity.

It is important to note that these categorizations and stereotypes, prolific in cinema and accepted in other aspects of culture, did not actually depict the ongoing reality of the people enslaved or later segregated and discriminated against. Most Black people tried to survive and live well. They resisted their exploitation when they could, by creating vibrant lives within the margins, taking advantage of opportunities when they could and by routinely poisoning slave owners, petitioning in the courts, questioning and critiquing their society, and so forth. They balanced this with the knowledge that to protest in any way could easily mean death of self and family. The murder of pregnant 20-year-old [Mary Turner](#) in 1918, who protested after her husband was killed by lynching mobs, is an example.

This split, this dual heritage of using Black expressive culture to reinforce stereotypes or conversely to reinforce community humanity, can be seen in the first movies made by Blacks. Bell hooks notes that:

When most black people in the United States first had the opportunity to look at film and television, they did so fully aware that mass media was a system of knowledge and power reproducing and maintaining white supremacy. To stare at the television, or mainstream movies, to engage its images, was to engage its negation of black representation. It was the oppositional black gaze that responded to these looking relations by developing inde-

pendent black cinema. Black viewers of mainstream cinema and television could chart the progress of political movements for racial equality via the construction of images, and did so. These “race movies” offered diversified views of Black humanity that could include ranges of morality and intelligence, all within a Black social context. Knight remarks:

...like Hollywood films, sound-era “race” films—Black-cast films intended for Black audiences and made outside the Hollywood system by both Black and white filmmakers—also emphatically link blackness and music... In some instances, however, the interest of race films lies predominantly in their use of music, which is sometimes quite like and other times very different from that of a Hollywood musical. These “musical race films” have been as under examined and even less acknowledged than Hollywood’s Black-cast musicals, specialty numbers, and shorts.

Knight notes that musical performances could be nuanced. *Showboat*, released in 1936, offered critiques of racial inequities and of labor, although the films “structure undermines its progressive features.” Black characters disappear as the film progresses. The sequence of song and image in “[Ol’ Man River](#)” as performed by Paul Robeson, has been described as a secular spiritual, removed from its life affirming Black expressive and faith elements. Yet, it is aesthetically pleasing, and visually suggests labor issues in its depictions of Blacks carrying burdens. Knight notes that Robeson deliberately altered the lyrics when he performed this popular song in later years. The changes reject depictions of African Americans as long suffering and accepting, into ones that suggest a Black

perception of Black communities as ones of sites of survival, strength, and resistance. Changes included:

“You gets a little drunk and you lands in jail” to “You show a little grit and you land in jail” and “I’m tired of livin’ and scared of dyin’” to “I keep on fighting until I’m dyin’.”

During the modern civil rights revolution starting in the 1950s, the Hollywood system began producing limited numbers of films by Black directors. 1971’s *Sweet Sweetback’s Baadasssss Song*, a violent film about resistance against exploitation and police brutality, became extremely popular, kicking off Hollywood-style versions known as blaxploitation films. These blaxploitation films arguably maintained aspects of historical stereotypes, but often left out aspects of the social critique that underlay Black dynamics. The novelty of Blacks in major roles thrilled many, but others decried the monolithic depictions of Blacks as pimps, prostitutes, drug users, pushers, etc. Alternative independent films about Black life did appear during the blaxploitation era, such as 1979’s *Killer of Sheep*, a sensitive and nuanced look at urban life. Such films won artistic awards but did not become Hollywood models for Black representations. Profitable blaxploitation films proliferated and set the stage for establishing what would be considered the contemporary authentic Black person – a violent, urban-based individual.

Hip hop culture emerged in the late 1970s. When Hollywood first began including aspects of hip hop culture in film—aspects such as DJing, dance, or music—a diversity of representations appeared. Many films became the product of collaborations between Black directors and the Hollywood system. As scholar S. Craig Watkins

notes the artists had to negotiate their own visions with those of the studios. The system, Watkins writes, is deeply involved in an ideology that routinely perceived Blacks and other urban dwellers as needing discipline or as threatening.

Nonetheless, youthful is a word used to describe the vitality of early hip hop films. They celebrated youthful energies, urban concerns, budding sexuality, and the new musical forms that created beauty in dire urban landscapes. The 1983 documentary *Wild Style* focused on graffiti art, and music in New York. *Beat Street* in 1984, by Black director Stan Lathan, offered urban youths of varying ethnicities and racial groups refashioning their walls and subways into colorful artworks. They dance exuberantly amid bleak or burnt buildings. In 1985’s *Krush Groove*, artists and entrepreneurs collaborate or disagree about ways to economically empower ghetto inhabitants. *Flashdance* (1983), with mixed race actress Jennifer Beals, is the story of a struggling welder/dancer who incorporates a variety of dance styles in a spectacular dance sequence that mixes dance aesthetics but climaxes with break-dancing. A vignette of hip hoppers performing on a street corner pointedly looks at hip hop innovation from youths. By the mid-1980s, hip hop music had become so ubiquitous in American society that its potential profitable use in mainstream films became obvious. But in subsequent years, the party/survival aesthetic created in urban environments, would turn more directly to stereotypical Black savagery, violence, and inhumanity in gangsta movies.

New associations with old stereotypes would emerge. While the buck and coon imagery never really left but were simply updated as pimps and drug dealers, newer framings of Black women appeared. Contemporary hip hop stereotypes of Black women broke the Jezebel

stereotype into more specific categories. Academicians Dionne P. Stephens and April L. Few identify them as “the Diva, Gold Digger, Freak, Dyke, Gangster Bitch, Sister Savior, Earth Mother, and Baby Mama.” They call these characterizations “scripts,” describing them as follows:

The Diva who they describe as “based on Westernized standards of beauty (namely long straightened hair, light skinned, and having a slender build).”

The Gold Digger whose sexuality is used for material gain.

The Freak is described as “a ‘bad girl’ who gains male attention through an overt sexual persona... A debate rages over whether the Freak reflects a true persona of sexual empowerment, or if she is simply reinforcing and falling victim to male desires about female sexuality.”

Dykes are women who are not interested in sexual relationships with men. They write, “Heterosexuality is viewed as the natural emotional and sexual inclination for women, and those who go against this are seen as deviant, pathological or as emotionally and sensually deprived.”

Gangster Bitches have the same background as the “endangered African American male” but significantly do not “expect long-term love from men. They have become emotionally hardened in that sex is viewed as a means to release stress and to feel good for that moment.”

The Sister Savior is a religious woman who shuns sexual “that reflects African American religious institutions’ foundation in a tradition of patriarchy that often places women in submissive and oppressed positions.”

The Earth Mother is politically and spiritually away and challenges “traditional views of beauty” as well as “ideals embedded within an Afrocentric framework.”

Baby Mamas are “the mother of a man’s baby and nothing more.” She uses the child to possess the father.

Many people who have never met individual Black people or have had little if any contact with Blacks assume that the hegemonic depictions have given them an accurate image of issues, situations and people. Stephens and Few note that these representations impact the way Blacks are seen – including by themselves. Blacks and others who are uneducated on the reality of hegemony and racism or who have no access to different Black communities and diversity may believe and reenact the stereotypes. They may refuse to see normal ranges of humanity or recognize the production of imagery as part of social control. In addition, the representations, Stephens and Few state, become, among other things, “justification of violence against women.”

Mise-en-scène

Mise-en-scène is a basic element in cinematic analysis. As we watch cinema, we don’t just listen to a dialogue, we also participate in a visual language which is connected to our specific discourses and ideologies about life. We understand the plot and

characters not simply because of what characters do or say, but because of visual and audio cues. In other words, there are at least two levels of story telling, the actual narrative which is the upfront story and the visual narrative which is the undercurrent. It tells you the story in a way that links to ideology. It may support or subvert the upfront obvious narrative. This comes from the deliberate choices of the director and other cinema artists as they decide what to place before the camera. *Mise-en-scène* includes hair styles, colors, set designs, clothing/costumes, set designs, and, of course, music.

As theorists Roland Barthes, Ferdinand de Saussure, Michel Foucault and others explain, these elements signify. They are part of our conceptual maps that allow us to understand on specific levels. They are part of a symbolic code that is culturally based and relies on arbitrary ideologies about life and people. Codes can be completely subconscious or very blatant. If our culture, for example, has stereotypical views about Black people as violent, inferior, etc., then representations/images may place Black characters in shadows and may change musical elements to indicate assumed characteristics when Black characters appear or leave the scene. Gus in *Birth of a Nation* is an early example. Gus attempts to rape the white female, Little Sister. His face is significantly shadowed and in the dark. Camera angles may also change so that Black characters are lower in the screen when next to white ones or are positioned so that they are looking up to white characters. They conversely could be larger and more imposing on the screen to indicate danger. Clothing can indicate a character's imagined respectability. Hoodies or pulled down pants, when matched to a Black character, can cue us to expect violence. Even dialogue can cue ignorance or intelligence.

Mise-en-scène elements are deliberate choices that play on social understandings. So even while the story may indicate that a black character is equal to others, the *mise en scene* may say the opposite. It can place the character in the shadows, may situate him/her behind the others or barely focus on the face while spending more time on white actors. The black character may have little to contribute to the dialogue, while the music may change to indicate a culturally understood sinister aspect or a frivolous one that suggests lack of importance in what the character does.

Another way to understand this is to also look at connotations about color. Red can indicate danger, while blue may suggest peace. Skin color is part of casting and plays into meanings. Darker skinned actors may be more frequently cast as morally problematic, while lighter skinned ones are portrayed as more evolved or civilized. All of these are subjective culturally based notions arguably tied to colonialism. Once you start to notice the elements, notice what tends to appear when cultural elements associated with ideas about race are in Hollywood films. What hair styles appear with "respectable" women? How do directors defy or play up the difference? Hair styles that are simply normal for curly hair are often associated with stereotypes of what a Black human is supposed to mean. Dreadlocks may be a hairstyle for a cinematic criminal for example. It is important to realize these are arbitrary, and often detached from their uses and origins in Black communities. Their symbolic meanings are instead part of an historical system of exploitation.

During sex/love scenes, the music may change from (white) elevator music to Black rhythm and blues or Latino music. Voices may change.



In *Bringing Down the House*, (2003) when Steve Martin's character Peter wants to become a wild sexy beast, he adopts a Black dialect as rhythm and blues plays in the background. These elements are part of the way the movie communicates, but the nuances of that communication are rooted in our colonialist past and exploitation of people of African descent. The basic idea is that whites have refined physical encounters, while nonwhites are

more animalistic and inclined to wild sex. The dichotomy may not appear in every situation but exists in significant numbers.

Consider Nick Cannon's "[Too Broke to Vote](#)" video. This video stirred some controversy because it was seen as encouraging young black people not to vote, a right many died for. Others saw it as a critique of politics, opportunity and promises about change. Regardless of how it is interpreted, the video offers some insight into how *mise en scene* can reinforce an overt narrative and simultaneously offer a secondary nonverbal visual discourse about the same topic. In this case both messages match.

Cannon's spoken work/narrative suggests that politicians and political practices—despite promises—have not worked for many blacks, making voting almost pointless. At the same time, his nonverbal

message via *mise en scene* concurrently submits that there is a long standing tension and contrast between hopes of African Americans and full opportunity in achieving the American dream. The narrative/rap bluntly states, "Flip sides back and forth it's political gymnastics like Olympic acrobats Go for the Gold cuz that's who makes the rules and all this pageantry is just designed for fools," suggesting that participation in politics is rather useless.

As it continues it become a warning that blacks should be wary of a system that espouses equality but does not produce it, "The government is hopeless. It's like a reality show. The real lives of the House Liars." He then tells the viewer that inequality is a basic characteristic of the political system noting, "In actuality, the Constitution said I was just 3/5th of a man, so what's stopping them from saying that again?" His overt message is reinforced by setting and clothing. That this is a discourse about America is seen in colors of his red cap, white top and flag design shorts. That this is about politics is clearly displayed in the on screen message "Life is political" and in its setting in front of a polling station. His *mise-en-scène* message further strengthens the idea of a larger backstory—one where blackness has lived in an uneasy coexistence within an American structure of racial dictatorship. His red cap is suggestive of the bandanas of Tupac Shakur and implied black protest and death. His muscle shirt suggests clothing of the inner city and its residents. As he stands and raps in front of a polling booth, it is significant that he does not actually enter. A off camera voice warns him that he must be at least 100 feet beyond the site. In the background whites can be seen entering, suggesting what is routine for some, at least in terms of discourse, in not routine for others. It also suggests the practice of