

**A Depiction of Black People as Villains in Western Cinema - An Examination From the
1920's to Present Day on How These Roles Have Shaped the Perception of Black People**

By

Angelica James

A Bachelor's Thesis

Submitted to the Honors Department

State University of New York at New Paltz

In Fulfillment of the Requirements

For a Bachelor's Degree with Honors

December 2022

ABSTRACT: Throughout the years, media has been, and continues to be, a powerful tool used to spread knowledge and awareness about different groups of people, cultures, social issues, and other topics of societal importance. This study aims to examine the perception of members of the Black community because of stereotypes endorsed and encouraged by Western cinema from the 1920's to present day. By further countersigning the misrepresentation of Black people, Western cinema has impacted the ways in which the Black community is negatively viewed in the present and has encouraged other forms of media, such as magazine advertisements and children's cartoon shows, to adopt the misconceptions of the members of the community. As a result of early depictions of the Black community in Western cinema, we see the significant damage done by various forms of media in how Black people are perceived, damage that is still trying to be corrected, even now.

Keywords: Digital Media Production, Race, Blaxploitation, Stereotypes, Identity, Entertainment, Global Awareness

Throughout history, we've seen the struggle between the Black community and White America regarding the fight against social justice disparities and racial discrimination. As a result of these historical events, it has become recurrent in Western Cinema that the villain is akin to members of the Black Community. In the 1970's, the era of cinema, known as Blaxploitation, a term created by Junius Griffin, further reinforced pre-existing negative stereotypes about the Black community. This era evolved after the Civil Rights Movement with the intention to erase, or respond to, the work that members of the Black community had conducted against social and racial injustice. This cinematic movement directly responded to the ways in which Black people were viewed during this time, by continuously associating the Black man with the 'bad man's struggle' and making it more challenging for members of the Black community to gain equality, empowerment, respectability, and the American dream (as cited in Wright, 2014, pg.64). Films that fell under the era of Blaxploitation often had an urban geographic setting (the ghetto) in the North, Midwest, or West, an overemphasis on outwardly expressive acts of blackness, a soundtrack of contemporary soul or rhythm and blues music, Black protagonists and White antagonists, promiscuous men, and women as well as an ample supply of action and violence. The characters were frequently one-dimensional and lacked depth. The plots were simplistic and dealt with rising from rags to riches, revenge, escaping a life of crime and immoral behavior, and defeating White antagonists (also known as "the man") (as cited in Wright, pg. 66). These characteristics serve as an explanation of the cinematic stereotypes that exist today and indicate how the ongoing misrepresentations of the Black community and lifestyle continues to be an ongoing issue.

One film in which predates the Blaxploitation cinematic era in which the Villain was a Black person is *The Birth of a Nation*. The film was created after the conclusion of both the Civil War and Reconstruction, both of which were attempts to resolve racists perspectives, practices, and policies towards a more equitable interracial democracy. *The Birth of a Nation* was quickly criticized by the NAACP, while White America was enthralled by the film, furthering these tensions, and not resolving them. *Myth and Fact: The Reception of 'The Birth of a Nation* states that, "'And now...comes the protest of the darkies and the interference of the police' Immediately a court injunction was secured restraining the Chief of Police from stopping the show" (Lennig, year, pg. 120). This sums up the dominant response of White America reacting to the concerns of the NAACP and the African American community. While the NAACP and the African American community were offended and concerned about the perceptions of slavery as result of this film, White America continued to describe this film as a blockbuster hit, their skewed knowledge of history evident in their overzealous consumption of the film. The NAACP tried to have the

film banned as it depicted the Black community in an unfavorable light and because it put in graphic and highly dramatic terms certain issues that by that time had passed into history, and that according to viewers at the time, were best forgotten (as cited in Lenning, year, pg. 120). Unfortunately, instead of the protests of the NAACP and the Black community being respected, the press from their protests generated more interest in the film and ended up reaching a larger audience than initially intended. This film furthered the widespread stereotypes about the Black community and made it difficult, if not impossible for the Black community to stop the spread of misinformation.

Many different forms of media adopted the harmful stereotypes associated with the Black community, and they are still prevalent to this day. In the context of Blaxploitation films, the Black man was the bad man, in particular, the criminal, and was a popular protagonist in American popular culture. The Black man was portrayed as the outlaw figure, the villain of the story that was fighting against the White community (as cited in Wright, year, pg. 65-66). Current day depictions of the “bad” Black man goes as far as being implemented in children’s cartoon shows such as *Total Drama Action* where the Black man is a large, imposing, brown/dark-skinned man and has the tendency to make people wet themselves with a single glare (*Scary Black Man*). With this comes the idea that the appearance of the Black man is something to fear and further reinforces the stereotype that the Black man is dangerous and incapable of being mellow. This is even more detrimental to the Black community as children most commonly watch these cartoon shows. It is showing them an inaccurate representation of the men of the Black community not only in how they behave, but in how this kind of behavior is associated with people from a specific background. Black young boys can watch shows such as this and feel as if these are accurate descriptions not only of themselves, but the other Black men that are a part of their community. Just as important, non-Black communities consume these negative and inaccurate descriptions as well. This says a lot about how cinema has continued to stereotype people of the Black community and misrepresent them as the villains of their stories. From dramatic films to cartoons, the villanization of the Black community thrived in media.

Transitioning into the 20th and 21st century, magazine advertisements also enforced negative stereotypes related to Black women and the perception of beauty. Much like the Blaxploitation era of cinema, current day advertisements began with the negative representation of the Black community both in predominately white magazines as well as magazines catered towards Black audiences. Advertisements hold the power to perpetuate and reinforce traditional gender roles and gender inequality by portraying how ideal men and women act and present

themselves (as cited in Clarke & Hazel, year, pg.6). Advertisements are both shaped by, and shape, our communities, and their inherent values. To compare, White women tend to be presented in these advertisements as submissive, whereas Black women tend to be presented as dominant, independent, headstrong, and overly expressive” (as cited in Clarke & Hazel, year, pg.9). The stereotypical depiction of the Black woman influences how they perceive themselves based on internalizing said stereotypes and using them to determine the markers of beauty. By constantly showing that the Black woman is rougher around the edges in comparison to the delicate White woman, these magazine advertisements, carelessly, if not intentionally, reinforce the stereotypes that are also present in Western films. Though the advertisements are present in print rather than on screen, it is still possible for the Black woman to be villainized based on the way in which she is depicted in comparison to the White woman. These advertisements even being adopted by Black magazines goes to show the unawareness of the ideologies of racism and white supremacy pervaded in ads featured in Black magazines (as cited in Clarke & Hazel, year, pg.18) so much so that even in magazines created for Black audiences, we still see the constant reminders of White markers of beauty and the systemic psychological impact of anti-Black racism. This includes, but is not limited to, Black models never wearing their natural hair or having specific models for these advertisements that resemble the White beauty standard. Gender and race play a significant role in media portrayals and when Black women are portrayed negatively in comparison to their white counterparts, it creates the improper assumption about the reality of life and culture as a Black woman. These kinds of advertisements are especially detrimental given the influence that the media has on perceptions of beauty and lifestyle. They can also contribute to why there was a need for many states to pass the Crown Act where employers are now held accountable for not allowing members of the Black community to wear their hair in a style more reflective of their natural identity.

To prevent such depictions in the future, we, as a society, would have to re-evaluate the way in which people of the Black community are viewed and valued in society. These stereotypes that prior to 1619 and evolved in the 1920's and 1970's continue to exist today because as a society, there has been measurable, but minimal change, in the ways in which Black individuals are viewed in society. We still see the depiction of the scary or “bad” Black man because the creatures of new age cinema and other forms of media still view Black men in this way. We still see advertisements that enforce the White standards of beauty onto White women because that is what is seen as acceptable. Strides have been made in some regard to improving the ways in which we appear on screen and in other formats, but it has begun customary for certain stereotypes to still exist currently because for so many

years, the stereotypes were seen as accurate depictions of Black people and culture. To prevent further inaccurate descriptions of members of the Black community, the age of cinema needs to deviate from the model used to create Blaxploitation films and its racist forebearers. The misrepresentation of the Black community and lifestyle continues to be an ongoing issue, but with the acknowledgement of Western cinema's wrongdoings and power to create meaningful change, we can create films that no longer take away from the Black community, but instead add to their significance and value as members of society.

References

Bristor, Julia M., et al. "Race and Ideology: African-American Images in Television Advertising." *Journal of Public Policy & Marketing*, vol. 14, no. 1, 1995, pp. 48–59. JSTOR, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/30000378>. Accessed 23 Sep. 2022.

Hazell, Vanessa, and Juanne Clarke. "Race and Gender in the Media: A Content Analysis of Advertisements in Two Mainstream Black Magazines." *Journal of Black Studies*, vol. 39, no. 1, 2008, pp. 5–21, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0021934706291402>

Lennig, Arthur. "Myth and Fact: The Reception of 'The Birth of a Nation.'" *Film History (New York, N.Y.)*, vol. 16, no. 2, 2004, pp. 117–41, <https://doi.org/10.2979/FIL.2004.16.2.117>.

"Scary Black Man." TV Tropes, <https://tvtropes.org/pmwiki/pmwiki.php/Main/ScaryBlackMan>.

Staff, NPR. "100 Years Later, What's The Legacy of 'Birth of a Nation'?" NPR, NPR, 8 Feb. 2015, <https://www.npr.org/sections/codeswitch/2015/02/08/383279630/100-years-later-whats-the-legacy-of-birth-of-a-nation>.

Wright, Joshua K. "Black Outlaws and the Struggle for Empowerment in Blaxploitation Cinema." *Spectrum: A Journal on Black Men*, vol. 2, no. 2, 2014, pp. 63–86. JSTOR, <https://doi.org/10.2979/spectrum.2.2.63>. Accessed 26 Oct. 2022.