

Modern Hybrid of Older Black Female Stereotypes in Hollywood Film

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Abstract : Nearly a century ago, the groundbreaking 1915 film 'The Birth of a Nation' popularized the way Hollywood made movies with its avant-garde, feature-length style. The movie's subjugating and demeaning depictions of African American women (and men) reflected popular racist beliefs held during the time of slavery and the early Jim Crow era. Although much has changed concerning race relations in the past century, American sociologist Patricia Hill Collins theorizes that the disparaging images of African American women originating in the era of plantation slavery are adaptable and endure as controlling images today. In this context, a comparative analysis of the successful contemporary film, 'Bringing Down the House' starring Queen Latifah is relevant as this 2004 film was designed to purposely defy and ridicule classic stereotypes of African American women. However, the film is still tied to the controlling images from the past, although in a modern hybrid form. Scholars of race and film have noted that the pervasive filmic imagery of the African American woman as the loyal mammy stereotype faded from the screen in the post-civil rights era in favor of more sexualized characters (i.e., the Jezebel trope). Analyzing scenes and dialogue through the lens of sociological and critical race theory, the troubling persistence of African American controlling images in film stubbornly emerge in a movie like 'Bringing Down the House.' Thus, these controlling images, like racism itself, can adapt to new social and economic conditions. Although the classic controlling images appeared in the first feature length film focusing on race relations a century ago, 'The Birth of a Nation,' this black and white rendition of the mammy figure was later updated in 1939 with the classic hit, 'Gone with the Wind' in living color. These popular controlling images have loomed quite large in the minds of international audiences, as 'Gone with the Wind' is still shown in American theaters currently, and experts at the British Film Institute in 2004 rated 'Gone with the Wind' as the number one movie of all time in UK movie history based upon the total number of actual viewings. Critical analysis of character patterns demonstrate that images that appear superficially benign contribute to a broader and quite persistent pattern of marginalization within the aggregate. This approach allows experts and viewers alike to detect more subtle and sophisticated strands of racial discrimination that are 'hidden in plain sight' despite numerous changes in the Hollywood industry that appear to be more voluminous and diverse than three or four decades ago. In contrast to white characters, non-white or minority characters are likely to be subtly compromised or marginalized relative to white characters if and when seen within mainstream movies, rather than be subjected to obvious and offensive racist tropes. The hybrid form of both the older Jezebel and Mammy stereotypes exhibited by lead actress Queen Latifah in 'Bringing Down the House' represents a more suave and sophisticated merging of past imagery ideas deemed problematic in the past as well as the present.

Keywords : African Americans, Hollywood film, hybrid, stereotypes

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