

A film that pushes
racial boundaries film
studies essay



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Let us start with the protagonist, Pierre Delacroix, played by Damon Wayans. Although his skin colour is black and he is the son of a black comedian, played by the hilarious Paul Mooney, he refuses to act as a stereotypical black male. Mooney's character, Junebug, is perhaps one of the only ones that stick to his traditional race role as his jokes are primarily targeted at a black audience, but more on Junebug later. Delacroix, however, seems almost embarrassed with his father and after his visit with him states that that was the last time he would speak to him, as if it was too stark a reminder of where he came from and his roots. Delacroix attempts to speak like a white man, using many hand gestures, speaking in a nasal voice and acting very much rigid. I believe that Lee is alluding to, and mocking, the traditional race role reversal; it is seen that Delacroix is trying to become white, just as some white gangster wannabe teens try to become black through their dress and demeanour. However, in keeping with the style of the movie, this role is reversed. Although he is creating a minstrel show in blackface, it seems that Wayans' performance in this film borders on Whiteface; its extremeness implies that there's a disparity between succeeding in a predominantly white man's world and actually becoming white. He sees whiteness as his path to success. *Mantan – The New Millennium Minstrel Show* must be as stereotypical as possible in order for it to work. In one scene, Delacroix and Sloane are auditioning for a band for the show. One of the acts that they encounter is a didgeridoo player. He is looked upon with complete bewilderment by the auditioners because of his lack of the stereotypical black image. Even though he is talented in that respect, he cannot be used for the show because it would show the black man as doing something beautiful and graceful and would go completely

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against the image they were trying to portray for the show. Mau Maus also auditions for the part, performing a rap song whose political message is almost overpowered by their shouting and vulgarity. This somewhat goes against the entire crux of their political activism and almost works against them. Firstly, they are auditioning to be the musical act for one of the most racist, stereotypical television programs ever attempted, and secondly, their vulgarity and crudeness almost completely negates the message they are trying to convey. At the end of the audition process, Delacroix is so repulsed and disgusted by the performance that he remarks that he wants nothing to do with anything black for at least a week, clearly reinforcing his whitewashed attitude. The next example I will use to elucidate my point is Michael Rappaport's character, Thomas Dunwitty. This is another perfect example of race role reversal, as perfected by Lee. Dunwitty is a white executive working at CNS. He is Delacroix's direct boss. In one scene, he explains to him that he is blacker than him as he has a black wife and two mixed race children. Dunwitty also frequently uses the word "Nigger" and sees that he has the right to do so because of his status with the black community and his connection to it through marriage. This makes the whitewashed Delacroix quite uncomfortable and he asks him to not use the word in his presence. His office walls are adorned with pictures of black basketball and football players and at one point he even offers Delacroix \$1000 if he can identify someone in a picture. Delacroix is not able to do so. Dunwitty's attitude seems centred in the fact that we have moved past the era of racism. At one point in the film, a blackface Abraham Lincoln says "Four Score and seven years ago, they was kicking our black ass, but this is the new millennium!!!". Dunwitty tries to push the concept that racism is a

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thing of the past and that stereotypical images and conceptions of race are no longer relevant. He suggests that the only kind of racism that exists anymore is the overt, ultra obvious blatant type and that we can now laugh at it because these conceptions have become so dated and irrelevant. He makes absolutely no reference to the much deeper issues of race that keep the entire black culture and race marginalized and hold back talented performers such as Mantam and Delacroix's father Junebug. Dunwitty and Delacroix, in my opinion, are the two characters in this film that are trying the hardest to escape their predefined race roles. The show may be about blacks in black face but it can be clearly seen that they have no control over the situation or the writing of the program. This can be clearly seen when Delacroix assembles a troupe of writers to draft the pilot, none of whom are black. Delacroix even remarks " And an afro doesn't count, my Jewish friend." The final racial role reversal can be seen at the taping of the program. At one point, the aforementioned Abraham Lincoln in blackface walks around the studio and starts asking the white and Asian audience members, who are all in blackface, " Are you a nigger?" To which they all reply yes. There are, however, a few examples of characters that do exemplify their skin colour. Firstly, let us examine Delacroix's father, Junebug. Junebug is a comedian who plays in mainly black clubs to mainly black audiences. He is the epitome of the black entertainer and loves his job and what he does. In one scene, when Delacroix goes to visit him at a comedy club, he tells him the immortal words that "...every nigger is an entertainer". This bothers Delacroix to the point of him stating that this would be the last time he would ever see his father. He couldn't stand the fact that he was black and loved being black and was proud of it. Another

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example of the reinforcements of stereotypes is the show Mantam itself. Mantam plays on very dated stereotypical concepts. It is, as I had already mentioned, a minstrel show that is performed by actors in blackface. To complete the stereotype, they tap dance in a watermelon patch and pander to their white bosses every command. Another example of the stereotypical black role in this film is the group Mau Maus, which includes Sloane's brother. In the climax of the film, there is a shootout between the NYC police and the radical group Mau Maus. Mau Maus' one white member is the only one who is not shot and killed and at the end, he proclaims " Why didn't you just kill me!" He clearly wanted to be treated like the black members of the group, even if it meant his own death. This may also be a poke at the NYPD, who has had long standing friction with the black community in that city. In conclusion, we can see that Bamboozled is a film that clearly breaks racial boundaries and shatters stereotypes. Director Spike Lee tries to dismantle the pre-existing imagery and stereotypes we have of black people, but in some ways, does the exact opposite. His poignant film ends with a montage of many blackface comedians that have been shown in film and television. It is homage to the many performers who have been marginalized and shoved into their stereotypical roles, always subservient to the white man. I believe he was trying to do something completely different. He was trying to make us reconsider our race perceptions. In this, I believe that he was entirely successful in reversing