

Black stereotypes in the media during the harlem assignment



For rather understanding of the common stereotypes, we looked at W. C. Handy SST. Louis Blues. This short film featured many popular artists of the time, most notably, blues artist Bessie Smith. We discussed both the musical aspects, as well as our initial response to the film. I wrote down several key moments during the viewing of the film. First, I noticed the stereotypes presented in the opening scene, all of which are in reference to black men.

In the scene, a group of black men, most of whom were obviously supposed to be working, shooting dice, and speaking in a common vernacular associated with African Americans. Also, they were obsessing over a female character of the light-skinned complexion (this becomes important later). This scene represents quite a few stereotypes about black men: that black men are lazy, not well dressed, and looks and behaves like a buffoon. Other stereotypes are seen in the main male character, Jimmy.

Jimmy is an opportunist, who takes advantage of the character by stealing her money and running off with the light-skinned woman, who was presented as more desirable. The color caste system became one of the most important features of the film, as we understood the origin of the system: during slavery, mixed offspring had closer access to the house, and, ultimately, more power. Therefore, the idea was that light-skinned blacks were better than dark-skinned blacks.

The character, in my opinion, was the most interesting depiction of the black woman: she was overestimated, violent, and strong-willed, yet weak and vulnerable at the same time; she was invisible to her lover; and she solved her problems through drinking. This short film shows how movies

were a representation of culture, so whoever was exposed to this film was exposed to “black culture,” and could easily think: “This is how black people are.” Though this was not true, it was an unfortunate circumstance for African American artists of the time.

St. Louis Blues is a work by a black musician, and features African American folk idioms, such as call and response (between Bessie Smith and the chorus) but there are also European aspects that contribute to the overall work. For example, the chorus, arranged by James Roseland Johnson and W. C. Handy, is organized in a form called the “Greek hours.” This style of choral writing features the chorus as part of the text of a larger work, almost in a narrative form.

In the short film, the chorus is almost part of the scenery, but when they are singing, they are usually the background music for Bessie, as they empathize with her condition. In another short film, we see the importance of art in the black community. It was understood that, at the time of the Harlem Renaissance, artists had to sacrifice and succumb to some unfortunate circumstances—especially racism. Mario Van Peebles talked about “up-side down” racism, where artists would have to classically play by the rules of whites in order to be noticed and appreciated and valued for their talent: “People don’t think you’re smart... Oh, you can get a lot accomplished if you keep your mouth shut.” This quote applied, specifically, to artists involved in minstrelsy, but sums up the unfortunate circumstance for black entertainers at the time. The early 20th century gave rise to newer forms of entertainment, other than minstrelsy: opera and film. Though progressive in the form of entertainment, many

scholars argue that these forms were not much different than minstrelsy in that they obscured and diluted the black American image.

I will examine two operas and two films, all of which present very detailed characteristics of black culture and stereotypes. *Territories* (1910) is an opera written by the famous ragtime composer, Scott Joplin. The opera deals with life after slavery, where many of the uneducated slaves were submissive to superstition and voodoo, as opposed to using logic to make their own decisions. The opera is centered on *Territories*, a woman who is young and educated, and assumes the responsibility as the one who would deliver the ex-slaves from their ignorance.

Some of the negative stereotypes show blacks as ignorant, naive, and rather helpless. The opera was commercially unsuccessful, and wasn't produced until 1972. *Porgy & Bess* (1935) is an American opera written by George Gershwin, a white composer who was exceptionally proficient in the art of Jazz. He attended many performances by Jazz pioneers, such as Duke Ellington and Fats Waller, learning the concepts and incorporating it into his own music. His opera called for a predominately black cast, and a more authentic African American dialect, which was uncommon in opera.

Interestingly enough, this opera eventually became very successful, though it contained many of the common negative stereotypes seen in film and opera. The main male characters were helpless (*Porgy*), conniving (*Sporting Life*), or hyper masculine (*Crown*). The main female character, *Bess*, was a very interesting role: she was the most desirable female, even though she was unstable. She was dependent, and was torn between different

relationships. Birth of a Nation (1915) is a very introversion movie that depicts life in the South after the Civil War.

Many of the theories in this silent film are racially divisive, showing how slaves were the true cause of the Civil War, which destroyed the " True South. " There was one scene in particular that stood out, because it is a representation of some issues that we face in America today: there was a scene that explained the purpose of " The Freedman's Bureau," which provided emergency food, housing, and medical aid to refugees. There was a caption that read: "... Negroes getting free supplies. " This issue relates to mom of the issues we have now, regarding healthcare.

There seems to be a contemporary issue, amongst many Americans, that people feel that they should be " entitled" to certain privileges, rather than producing their own wealth. In the movie, there was a scene where blacks were walking along the sidewalk as whites did, and many of the white characters were furious about it. The depiction of black culture continues to be a controversial issue, as we see how popular entertainers are seen in a negative light, often giving the world a misinterpretation of the African American sis of minstrelsy, and in some ways became a common practice in media.

After viewing the films and operas, one can see more clearly how many of the Harlem Renaissance leaders rejected the images that were portrayed. Even though blacks were given the opportunity to succeed in entertainment, many of the images they portrayed were hardly progressive to the overall black image. Unfortunately, even today, it was apparent that in order to

achieve economic success, one was expected to submit to the misrepresentation of black culture.