Heart-Shaped Box

My topic is Nirvana’s “Heart-Shaped Box” (*YouTube)*. I chose it because I believe that this music video is extremely politically-incorrect and made people feel very uncomfortable all the while being hypnotizing to watch, as it plays with fire so much. The piece of media I am using is the “Heart-Shaped Box” music video. The 3 keywords I will be applying are Representation, Race, and Content. This music video is known to be one of the most controversial music videos of all time (*Ranker)*. Using media, Nirvana was able to create distress through their music video by putting in content that was incredibly politically incorrect and would create backlash in the community. The sources I plan to cite are: keyword readings for race, content, and representation, Youtube, and M/S 161,172.

The argument of my piece is to outline to controversy between Nirvana’s “Heart-Shaped Box” music video. Nirvana was a grunge-rock band in the 90’s that was lead by Kurt Cobain. Cobain was notorious for his ragged, edgy look, as well as his band’s songs and album covers that were extremely politically incorrect. For example, Nirvana had a song called “Rape Me” and also had an album titled “In Utero” which featured a baby swimming underwater, and it showed the baby’s genitalia. The thing with Nirvana was that they did not care who they offended, their music was not made to please society, they sang and performed their music because it was a way of representing themselves. In addition, Cobain suffered from mental health issues and addiction, making his music that much more personal to him.

Going back to the three keywords I decided to use to focus on this assignment (race, content, representation), I will describe this music video and I hope that you will see why I found I found these three to be most relatable towards the music video. The different scenes of the music video go like this:

It starts a room with the old man in a hospital bed with a blood bag connected to him, and the members of Nirvana sitting across in large red chairs just waiting, as if they are waiting for him to die. Next, it goes into a scene where the old man is in nothing but a diaper and a santa hat in an open field, to which he climbs up onto a wooden cross, and it depicts him like Jesus Christ on the cross, with crows around him. As it goes into the chorus, the man is gone and Nirvana is singing and playing their instruments in front of the cross, focusing in on Cobain, as he makes crazy eyes at the camera as he sings.

Going into the second parts of the song, we are introduced to the little child in a KKK costume looking at a tree that has fetuses hanging from it, and then an obese woman in a flesh outfit with wings has her arms extended towards the child going towards it, and then focuses back on the child jumping up trying to grab a fetus from the tree. From this, it goes back to the old man on the cross, but this time in a Pope hat, and the little child skipping by, then flashing towards the woman again but this time she is just standing in front of the tree and cross, and there are no signs of the old man, little child, or fetuses hanging from the tree. This second chorus part features Nirvana again just in different scenes (being at the cross and other times in a sinister looking forest), and Cobain punches the guitarist for no reason.

The third part includes the wind sweeping the hat off the child and it looks like it is trying to catch butterflies, but ends up falling into a pool of red water, and it turns the hat from white to dark black, then floats up back onto the child who is now covered in the same outfit from before but this time all black, right next to the hospital bed of the old man who is lying in the bed, with his blood bag now containing a fetus. This leads into a next scene with Nirvana back in this hospital bed room, and then in a “Heart-Shaped Box” and the child is back in all white opening up a box shaped like a heart on a bed in this heart-shaped box room, finally concluding with Nirvana back in the hospital room where they began with the old man and the curtains open letting in light as the guitar screeches the song to an end.

I considered using many different key terms for this project, such as gender or religion, but I felt that the most fitting would be the three I chose, just because gender and religion could both fall into sub-categories of content and representation. I felt using the music video and just annotating the video with lyrics would be most beneficial to my audience because it keeps the focus on what is actually going on in the video, as opposed to pausing and stopping to talk. I used a bit of an interview with Cobain in the first chorus, as he talks about how people think he is always “pissed off” which relates to the “Hey! Wait! I’ve got a new complaint” lyric he sings, because he is trying to bring up how people view him. This was the only other media I used in the video.

In conclusion, I feel as though these three words really resonated well with the music video. For race, the child dressed up in a KKK costume and absence of any people of color really highlights race, the content of the music video is extremely dark, and has multiple underlying messages within, which became apparent after reading through the explanation of the lyrics (*Genius)*. Race is defined as “a legal, social, and cultural invention rather than given in nature, and the knowledge of race and its deployment *are exercises of power* expressed in the encounter among groups for control over resources” (Keywords for Media Studies, 161). Representation is defined as “an achievement of language and other symbolic forms, especially visual images and nonverbal sounds, styles, and gestures” (Keywords for Media Studies, 172).

Works Cited

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