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Final Reflection

**Childish Gambino’s “This Is America”: How the Past Is Always Present**

With over 437 million views on YouTube, Childish Gambino’s “This Is America” music video is one of the most viral music videos this year, and it inspired lots of memes and conversations on social media. In recent years, there has been a rise in the number of “political” songs and videos in the music industry advocating for justice and equality, and artists who choose to speak about these topics are both applauded for bringing attention to these issues or ridiculed for stepping too far outside their role as entertainer.

I chose this music video because it is ripe with content for critique and close analysis as he comments on gun violence, police brutality, minstrelsy, racism and oppression, media and culture, and his own positionality as a black entertainer. Gambino presents the experience of being black in America as a counternarrative to the belief in a post-racial and colorblind America. For my videographic criticism, I chose to focus on the historical chains of meaning of minstrelsy stereotypes and blackface performance as well as Glover’s own critique of his responsibility as a black entertainer. The keywords I chose to apply are race, ideology, representation, and stereotype; however, other keywords I could also have included are power, memory, consumerism, and resistance.

It was interesting to create an argument about this music video as I was making an argument about media through a piece of media that was also critiquing media, specifically the black entertainment industry. Unlike a written critique, videographic criticism allowed me to be more creative about how I constructed my argument. A written essay would not have allowed me to convey the power of the images in Gambino’s music video and how unsettling and horrific some of the scenes are. Since Gambino’s video is so powerful, I tried to let it speak for itself, but made my own argument through the way I cut and compared the clips of the music video and scenes from the minstrel shows as well as adding in my own commentary through annotations. When Gambino first fires the gun to kill the guitar player, I used a freeze frame for emphasis and to draw attention to the similarities in his body language with Jump Jim Crow, a song and dance performed in blackface which inspired the genre of minstrel shows. I then used a picture-in-picture comparison with dancing from “Yes Sir, Mr. Bones” (1951) to illustrate the similarities to Gambino’s exaggerated dancing.

I also cut back and forth between the music video and scenes of Cotton and Chick Watts from “Yes Sir, Mr. Bones” commenting on finding a job as a parallel to the lyrics “get your money, black man” in Gambino’s music video. The black community often feels a sense of personal responsibility while clinging to a belief in the achievement ideology and hard work that ignores the structural inequalities that are obstacles to black success. In *When They Call You a Terrorist: A Black Lives Matter Memoir*, Patrisse Khan-Cullors states, “We lived a precarious life on the tightrope of poverty bordered at each end with the politics of personal responsibility that Black pastors and then the first Black president preached—they preached that more than they preached a commitment to collective responsibility. They preached it more than they preached about what it meant to be the world’s wealthiest nation and yet the place with extraordinary unemployment, an extraordinary lack of livable wages and an extraordinary disruption of basic opportunity” (12). Gambino’s success, his scope of influence, and the platform that his career as musician, actor, and director provides him produces a sense of responsibility to bring attention to these issues of inequality. Like the seemingly simple phrase “Black Lives Matter,” the phrase “This Is America” disrupts assumptions about a post-racial America. For the ending of my piece, I chose to use a scene from “I Dream of Jeanie” (1952) that featured a portrayal of Christy’s Minstrels, who were a popular group in the 1840s and 1850s. I used the music from the minstrel show as the background music of a scene of Gambino frantically running to create the effect of Gambino trying to escape from the historical chains of meaning of minstrelsy and stereotypes.

In creating this piece, I realized how critical it is to pay attention to the small details when consuming media. With Gambino’s music video, each time I re-watched it, I noticed something new that I did not see before. I also learned the difficulty of being successful as a representative of a minority group. When a person of color is famous, they are often viewed by society as being representative of their entire race, and with this often comes a huge responsibility to be both a spokesperson for their group and also a good role model. Much of black culture and entertainment is built on their history of oppression and suffering, but also their self-determination and resistance in spite of this history.

White supremacist ideology has existed and been articulated in media for so long that it has become naturalized in the way that people think about race and interact with racial minorities. The Marxist definition of ideology as “belief systems that help justify the actions of those in power by distorting and misrepresenting reality” illustrates the power of ideologies as they became normalized in society and spread through popular media and allow for the oppression and control of marginalized groups (Hoynes and Croteau 153). Race is “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” (Gray 161). Race is a socially constructed category that has real-life consequences. Slavery was a critical part of the American economy, and the deployment of racial categories allowed for the subordination of African Americans as slaves through white supremacist ideology of the inherently less human nature of African Americans and their need to be civilized. One of the definitions of power is that “A gets B to do X which B otherwise would not have done” (Couldry 145). Power is impressed upon the subject and oppression becomes internalized in the subject—their mind, body, and spirit become sites of oppression (Duncombe 177).

Stereotypes such as the “comic Negro” and “Sambo” existed as early as the late 1700s in novels and plays (Hoynes and Croteau 197). Looking at older media of blackface minstrel shows, people probably recognize them as overtly racist, but nevertheless, they fail to recognize the remnants of blackface and minstrel stereotypes in media and popular culture today. According to Stuart Hall, “the media’s main sphere of operations is the production and transformation of ideologies” (Hall 18). Media help to reify the social construction of the categories of race, and how the media portrays race is a constant ideological struggle. Media has the “power to mislead” and make people think that whiteness is superior, and media also has the power “to secure compliance to existing social relations” (Couldry 145). Whether it's a white actor playing the role of a minority character, underrepresentation of a racial minority, black reaction gifs, or the performances of stereotypes, media representation of race is still a crucial issue (Hoynes and Croteau 192-193). Representation “must capture not only the world as we know it but the world as we feel it and as we would like it to be” (Henderson 175), and the “This Is America” music video does just that by causing the audience to question the ideologies at work in America and the impact that these ideologies have in the lives of black Americans.

Ideologies do not exist in isolation but in a distinctive “chain of meaning” (Hall 18). Hall lists some stereotypes that are recurrent in the “grammar of race” such as the devoted slave, Sambo, the native, the clown/entertainer, and the Mammy (21-22). Walter Lippmann defines stereotypes as “pictures in our heads” that are an operation of ideology (Seiter 184). Stereotypes suggest that all people of a group are a certain way by nature, and they suggest available identities and affect how people view themselves. Stereotypes can also get you killed as seen in instances of police brutality and gun violence in the cases of Trayvon Martin and Stephon Clark. Stereotypes have real-life consequences: “How the media has taught us to hate ourselves and how that hate leads to our death...How racism makes us hate ourselves and misdirects our anger toward one another rather than focusing it on where the sources of the problem lie...How dangerous media and pop culture can be, how complicit they are in shaping how we move in the world” (Khan-Cullors, bandele 103).

Hall asserts that the representation of race in media today may seem different than the versions of the past, but in fact, traces of these past stereotypes can still be observed: “These *particular* versions may have faded. But their *traces* are still to be observed, reworked in many of the modern and up-dated images. And though they may appear to carry a different meaning, they are often still constructed on a very ancient grammar” (22). The current historical moment after Charlottesville’s Unite the Right rally, the Charleston church shooting, and increased hate crimes targeting certain racial groups illustrates how white supremacist ideology has always lingered “just below the surface” (22). Gambino’s music video brings attention to the historical chains of meaning of white supremacist ideology and the stereotypes produced by minstrel shows, and how the past is always present.

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