Trent Feehan

Dr. Champion

MFS 260

12 September 2022

Response to the Introduction and Chapters 1-3 of the Bogle Reading

In the early years of cinema, black people were portrayed in a select number of stereotypical archetypes, and among the first was the old and humble “tom.” When discussing the tom archetype, the most famous example of this archetype is where this stereotype hails its namesake: the portrayals of Uncle Tom in the film adaptations of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*. One of these starred James B. Lowe, specifically the 1927 version by Universal Studios. His character may have been likeable for black and white audiences due to his performance appealing to the liberalism of the time, and that the fact he was so revered for his performance that “those who are religious say that a heavenly power brought him to Universal” (Bogle 4). However, it quickly became problematic due to the “tom” stereotype still being reinforced and essentially sugar-coating the harsh realities of slavery for a more appealing performance.

Another topic of interest from this reading was the surprising length of the history of blackface in American cinema. It mainly started with the 1903 adaptation of Uncle Tom’s Cabin, where all of the black characters were white actors with blackface. It was of course very much popularized by *The Birth of a Nation* in 1917 with all of the black characters being depicted the same way. However, what I found so surprising is how quickly the public turned on this practice. As soon as the late 20s, blackface in mainstream cinema was utterly casted out in favor of having real black actors instead. Bogle attributes *The Jazz Singer* (1927) as the film that ultimately gave the way for sound to be a required element of films. Because of this, Hollywood needed “music, rhythm, pizzazz, singing, dancing, clowning” and as such gave the way for more black actors because they believed they could provide these elements the most effectively (Bogle 21). While this provided great change for black people in cinema, it did not ultimately kill blackface entirely, as it still lived on through comedy routines and sketches into the mid twentieth century.

Works Cited

Bogle, Donald. *Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies, and Bucks: An Interpretive History of Blacks in American Films*. 21st Century Edition ed., Bloomsbury Publishing, Inc., 1973.