Mythology and Affect: The Brands of Cinematic Blackness of Will Smith and Tyler Perry

Abstract

Among barber shop and beauty salon philosophers and front stoop film critics, industry hyphenates Will Smith and Tyler Perry are topics of discussions ranging from the quality of their product to their rumored homosexuality. Smith, a rapper-actor-producer is now regarded as “the most powerful actor in Hollywood” with a “worldwide career box office of $4.4 billion” and salary of $25 million a picture. Tyler Perry has accomplished similar success as a businessman, generating millions of dollars with his Christian themed melodramas, sitcoms, books, DVDs and stage plays. With Smith’s success playing out on international terrain, Perry has chosen to focus on the largely ignored domestic demographic of black American females starved for narratives which speak to and reflect aspects of blackness. Currently, Tyler Perry has “[t]he most popular African-American show on TV...’House of Payne,’” and has added the sitcom version of his film Meet the Browns to his TBS lineup. Despite what detractors may say, some of those salon and front stoop observers are consuming the Smith and Perry products.

This paper examines how blackness is branded, and commoditized in our current neoliberal moment. By putting Will Smith and Tyler Perry in conversation with each other, I will explain how they operate as a brand which can be sold within a cultural industry that has historically and continues to marginalize “blackness” despite having made considerable profit from the same. This in turn will hopefully uncover some useful observations for televisual and cinematic artists of color as they navigate the cultural industries.

During a 2007 staff meeting at a prominent film production company several projects were discussed for possible production. This is a routine practice as screenplays, books, and other source material are regularly solicited, submitted and discussed for production consideration throughout the industry. One particular screenplay had made it through the fray and producers were actively attempting to get the project set up. Unfortunately, none of the A-list, 50-plus year old white male stars that had been approached for the lead role were interested. Then a producer mentioned that an A-list black actor of similar ilk had expressed interest in the project; this casting choice, however, would mean black casting for a few other key characters. With the international marketplace in mind, the producer sighed his reluctance and stated that the black A-List actor would not work because “black doesn’t do well in foreign” and the project was dropped. The notion that the black cinematic and televisual are not profitable in the international marketplace remains a sentiment that is widely accepted throughout mainstream Hollywood and passed on from filmmaking generation to generation.

In the United States, blackness is intrinsically caught up with whiteness, which means that to some degree, whiteness from a deterministic perspective continues in many ways to influence the scope and breadth of black representation. Included among the many ways blackness has been theorized, is its function as a “master sign”, a “movement”, and “a strategy of culture critique”. Embracing all of these, it will be helpful to contextualize blackness,
MYTHOLOGY AND AFFECT

from a cultural studies perspective, as the state and practice of social being among pan-African and black diasporic people which is typically assumed to occupy subject positions from the periphery (in the service of) looking toward the center. Thus, while the United States is not solely responsible for negative attitudes toward blacks in other parts of the world, it is not inconceivable that America’s racial attitudes became as much of a consumable export as the films themselves.

Historically, black representations have waxed and waned cinematically: the independently produced “race films” of the 1920s and 1930s; the post WWII “social problem” films; the “race conscious” movies of the 1960s; early 1970s “blaxploitation”; buddy comedies of the 1980s; urban gangster dramas of the early 1990s; and black situation comedies since the early 1970s which experienced their own periods of boom and bust. These diverse eras articulate a particular evolution of black cinematic and televisual representations which, despite their relationship to America’s history and legacy of racism, have had demonstrated economic and cultural significance in the United States marketplace.[2] But in many ways these cyclical moments can also be seen as an archive of a symbiotic yet asymmetrical relationship between blackness and a dominant culture film industry: black cultural representation which variously contests and critiques mainstream narrativized versions of America compelling us to watch blackness simultaneously validate and grapple with its double consciousness.

Shifts in geopolitical power and priorities throughout the twentieth century continually impact socio-cultural and political expression, and cinema is no exception. That said, it is possible that narratives that served as evidence of legacies of oppression and domination—such as the intentionally anti-commercial efforts found in Latin American, Third, and post-colonial cinemas in the later half of the twentieth century, known as “misery cinema” or “cinema of hunger”—have lost their popularity and thus their power to liberate and generate large box office returns. Key to historical, political and/or “misery cinema” is its representational power: in this case, of black bodies performing in the service of the black condition, a sort of culture industry “nothing about us without us” particularly where liberation is concerned.[3] For many, this representation has evolved into an assumed conflation of black bodies with black cultural product, which is applied inconsistently within the industry. Such is the case of the screenplay referenced in the opening paragraph: for these producers, to cast the retired modern day gangster pulled in for “one more job” to remedy his son’s indiscretion, meant that the presence of black bodies in lead roles necessarily signified a black film.[4] Clearly, these phenomena are far more complex and nuanced than outlined herein; nevertheless, the misperception that black bodies equal “misery cinema” cannot be dismissed as one of the numerous factors that determine domestic and international production and distribution.

In our contemporary neoliberal moment where the preferred path to self-determination is bootstrap empowerment, and, where the antidote for poverty is entrepreneurialism, some have been led to actually believe that among our many social justice issues, there is no longer a need to acknowledge how we are tethered to histories which created the conditions of disenfranchisement, and we are therefore “post-racial.” It is within this context that we will briefly examine the careers of Will Smith and Tyler Perry, two of entertainment’s most prominent and profitable African American businessmen. Smith (since the early 1980s) and Perry (since the early 1990s), have managed to produce, package and market a brand of blackness that not only distinguishes them from other black leading men, distinguishes their products from traditional black cultural production. By putting them in conversation with each other, this will be an examination of how they operate as “brands” that can be typified, marketed and distributed in concert with an industry that has historically and continues to marginalize “blackness” despite having made considerable profit from it.[5] Additionally, we will examine how their brands of “blackness” have severed their roots from “misery” allowing them a liberation achieved not by acknowledgment of oppression’s reverberating impact, but by the individual’s will and ability to elevate him or herself.
Brand(s), Blackness, and Will and Tyler

Brands promise to provide a particular quality of product. Additionally, brands, in a combination of shorthand and semiotics, communicate to the consumer how they can distinguish between products that are materially the same. Taste, values, economics, politics, and other variables can be imbued within a brand, which is then marketed to a core demographic with room to extend beyond that core. Typically, celebrities (i.e. actors, athletes, singers, etc) who become established by performing their primary talent (i.e. acting, sports, singing) extend themselves by aligning their image (and what that image is perceived to stand for) with products ancillary to their primary talent (i.e. cell phones, beer, cars). Traditionally, there has been a line between celebrity-as-spokesperson and product. Tiger Woods was one such entity with Tag Heuer, Gillette, and Gatorade, until his infidelity scandal sullied the quality of his image and ended the alignment of those products with his persona. Celebrities such as Britney Spears, Beyoncé Knowles, Jennifer Lopez, Sean Combs, and Carlos Santana, trading on their identity, have moved beyond mere spokesperson status by creating consumer products such as perfumes, clothing, alcoholic beverages, and women's shoes ostensibly formulated by them and bearing their names. However, while they are still selling an aspect of themselves—their celebrity identity—these are still products that extend beyond their corporeality.

Among barber shop and beauty salon philosophers and front stoop film critics, industry hyphenates Will Smith and Tyler Perry are topics of discussions ranging from the quality of their product to their rumored homosexuality. Smith, a rapper-actor-producer is now regarded as “the most powerful actor in Hollywood” with a “worldwide career box office of $4.4 billion” and salary of $25 million a picture,[6] Smith's aura has eclipsed two other Hollywood power houses Tom Hanks and Tom Cruise and outranked Johnny Depp and Ben Stiller as the number one “mover and shaker” in Newsweek's Power Rankings measured by his ability to “open” a film to big box office numbers internationally with consistency. [7] As a businessman, Smith's brand has evolved over the years labeling him a viable commodity in multiple media: music, television and film – and with successful outings in multiple movie genres (romantic comedy, melodrama, science-fiction, and action).

Tyler Perry’s success as a businessman has generated millions with his Christian themed melodramas, sitcoms, books, DVDs and stage plays. With Smith’s success playing out on international terrain, Perry has chosen to focus on the largely ignored domestic demographic of black American females starved for stories which speak to and reflect aspects of their lived experiences and desires. To date, with “[t]he most popular African-American show on TV…Tyler Perry’s ‘House of Payne,’ the writer-actor-producer’s throwback to the family comedies of the ‘80s” Perry has been able to add the sitcom version of his film Meet the Browns (2008) to his TBS lineup, virtually unheard of for an African American producer since The Cosby Show era, which spawned its spin-off A Different World in the late 1980s.[8]

Upon first glance, both men’s body of work could not appear to be more dissimilar: Smith, with his big-budget, industrially produced and distributed international appeal; Perry with his niche market delivery of melodrama and extreme hi-jinks comedy. But upon closer observation, we see how Smith and Perry, as performers who happen to be black, have sidestepped what Isaac Julian and Kobena Mercer identify as “[r]epresentational democracy, [which] like the classic realist text, is premised on an implicitly mimetic theory of representation as correspondence with the ‘real’” that circumvent the trappings and “burden of racial representation.” [9] Unlike the 1960s work of Sidney Poitier whose presence in a film usually indicated that the film would be about being black in that contemporary moment, Smith and Perry's products avoid critiquing representations and social conditions. While their product continues to position the black male body at the center of the narrative, it is one that is detached from the social conditions that traditionally or historically mark the black body as other. As bell hooks explicates, the “commodification of difference promotes paradigms of consumption wherein whatever difference the Other inhabits is eradiated, via exchange, by a consumer cannibalism that not only
MYTHOLOGY AND AFFECT  

displaces the Other but denies the significance of that Other's history through a process of decontextualization [ ... ]" [10]  

When decontextualized then recontextualized with an alternate set of codes and meanings, and repeatedly reproduced, that body becomes associated with that new context, in Smith's case with mythology, and in Perry's case, affect. Consumers come to recognize the quality and consistency of the product by the face or logo associated with that particular type of product, or, to simplify, its brand. In her investigation into brand culture and its relationship to neoliberal capitalism, Sarah Banet-Weiser concludes that changes in constitutive elements between consumers, capitalism, branding, and citizenship "make sense" given neoliberalism's economic imperative to commodify, but not without compelling us first to ask whether "racial or gender identity [is] a commodity?" [11] To interrogate this last notion further, I would posit that to see the black body but adopt a posture of "not seeing color" is tantamount to an erasure of difference rendering black invisible or marginal. Thus, when we see black bodies in the form of Smith and Perry, we cannot deny that they are racialized; but in response to "neoliberalism's economic imperative" and Hollywood's attitude toward black representation, Smith and Perry have recontextualized the black body into brands of blackness characterized not by misery, lack, or oppression, but with myth and emotionality.  

Smith's brand of mythologically heroic characters—who happen to be black—can be seen as a slight inversion of hooks' theory of "eating the other" where otherness is commodified, rendering it a "sign that progressive political change is taking place, that the American Dream can indeed be inclusive of difference,...[in] recognizable forms" reliant upon "stereotypes of the 'primitive.'"[12] Smith has had tremendous success within the world of the "primitive" especially in his portrayal of characters who must battle inhumane creatures rendering the world safe for humanity as in Independence Day (1996), I, Robot (2004), and I Am Legend (2007). Now to be fair, contemporary white actors such as Tom Cruise, Cillian Murphy, and Arnold Schwarzenegger (himself a "brand of hypermasculinity") plus many others have had their chance to do battle with the undead and non-human life forms over cinematic history; but Smith's blackness at the center of a white cinematic landscape makes unavoidable an alternately coded but nevertheless still politicized black body.[13] Thus, one can read Smith's Dr. Robert Neville in I Am Legend as one who is naturally immune to the virus which has decimated humanity (which is consistent with the novel); physically capable to fight off the 'darkseekers,' the ravenous, vicious, violent, white-skinned undead; and intellectually endowed with the ability to discover the antivirus which will save the few million humans who remain in seclusion. Smith—clearly a "sign that progressive political change" is possible in Hollywood with regards to its relationship to blackness and that the "American Dream can indeed be inclusive of difference"—does not himself play the primitive, but must use his combined benefits/talents against the fictive primitive in the hostile asphalt jungle. In effect Smith's black body has been recast as an essentialist Tarzan a sorts, who by heroically sacrificing his own black body and thus erasing himself from the surviving cultural landscape, can reconcile whiteness by saving it from itself.[14] For Smith, this self sacrificing superhuman folk figure who lingers in our memories long after his demise plays well to diverse domestic and international audiences, as exemplified by his continued ability to open films "wide" and garner big box office grosses. What is significant about Smith's body of work is that he is frequently the black face in a majority white world, his blackness non-threatening to whiteness; a docile body who is individualized (in this case, separated from other black bodies), disciplined, regimented, then offered up in the service of dominance. His brand ushers him on to the scene, disarming (with charm or a big gun), and detached from any discernable history to contextualize his "difference" from the white players.
Entrepreneur Tyler Perry’s thirty-acre production studio operates outside of Hollywood; Atlanta, Georgia to be specific and he has over three hundred employees, who consistently provide films for a forgotten or ignored demographic (i.e. black women). A January 2009 Los Angeles Times article reports that Perry has an 80-episode commitment from TBS for Tyler Perry’s Meet the Browns, has sold over 25 million DVDs of his stage plays, consistently has big grosses for his opening weekends (i.e. Tyler Perry’s Madea Goes to Jail [2009], $41 million); and declares, in a recuperative move, that Perry “is now officially one of Hollywood’s most reliable brands.”[16]

Perry’s melodramas, by Hollywood’s standards are generally considered formally and narratively unsophisticated, which probably contributes to the bewilderment of those who seek to understand his success. Thematically, Perry’s message oriented melodramas deal with issues of lack, abuse, and dysfunction among black families in a world where white people exist on the margins (if at all). Though he has performed in various roles on screen, it is in the figure of Madea where his brand of blackness – neoliberal “boot strap” rhetoric concealed in emotionality – is most prominent. Madea, the breakout character that started it all for Perry, is a comedic, grandmotherly character in drag that serves as the moral center and sometime one-woman Greek chorus of his morality tales. Her old school sentiment and values leave us nostalgic, longing for an imagined past as a strategy for forward progress. Whether it be Tyler Perry’s Diary of a Mad Black Woman (2005), Tyler Perry’s Madea’s Family Reunion (2006) or Tyler Perry’s Madea Goes to Jail, the sharp-tongued, the gun-toting, arrest-resisting enigma at the center of intersecting story lines, always has the answer for what ails you from a hot pot of grits for an abusive fiancé to a consistently reoccurring reliance on God for divine intervention/retribution. [17] Madea the character communicates messages of inspiration and uplift. Further evidence of this can be seen via Perry’s ongoing communication with his fans via his website where they mutually express their “support,” “encouragement,” “inspiration,” desire for prayer and faith in God toward one another. At the risk of conflating the two, it becomes clear that this message is Perry’s personal ethos: as an auteur who writes, produces, and directs these films, his black male form expresses his message thinly veiled as Madea. With “Tyler Perry’s (fill in the blank)” emblazoned above his titles, his brand of healing through an expression of emotional excess becomes complete.

It may be difficult then to see how Perry’s brand of blackness undermines critical resistance to racism and other forms of structured dominance because of how much his product appears to be representational. But it does not speak for black people as a critique of historical socio-cultural formations and contemporary social conditions; this is fundamentally how Perry’s work differs from other black filmmakers such as Spike Lee, John Singleton, or Oscar Micheaux the pioneering independent entrepreneur who effectively used melodrama as social/cultural critique. Instead, Perry’s messaging appears to codify a particular brand of blackness which, despite the overwhelming presence of black bodies, is decontextualized from historical western race formations; Madea is no threat to whiteness as her neo-Negro Uplift message to “just trust in God” is aimed at keeping black folks in line. In recalling bell hooks, once the “other” is deracinated, the brand of blackness which Perry’s corporeality symbolizes, is then recontextualized to exemplify a version of what Raymond Williams called “structures of feeling;” a context which collectivizes a particular contemporary black experience, articulated via emotionality and affect, deliver an illusion of empowerment and catharsis which assuages rather than alters dysfunction and masks structures of dominance which we then serve to ourselves. Over time, we come to associate Perry’s brand with an almost narcotic affect of feeling good after a cathartic process masked as empowerment.

Madea’s relationship counseling.
MYTHOLOGY AND AFFECT

Conclusion

The American Marketing Association (AMA) defines a brand as a “name, term, sign, symbol or design, or a combination of them intended to identify the goods and services of one seller or group of sellers and to differentiate them from those of other sellers.”[18] Brands serve as a short hand which promises that a certain product will fulfill certain expectations. In celebrity, the brand and the product appear to be conflated making it difficult to separate the two. In this discussion, I hope that I have stimulated critical thinking as to how celebrities such as Will Smith and Tyler Perry problematize and complicate notions of celebrity, blackness, consumption, branding, marketing, and distribution in concert with an industry that has historically and continues to marginalize “blackness,” despite having made considerable profit from it. What I have discovered in my observation is that part of the success of Smith and Perry rests with their ability to decontextualize historical contexts for blackness then recontextualize blackness as brands of myth and affect which are then successfully commoditized. This discussion is the beginning of a much needed, larger discussion regarding cultural, social, and political economies potentially impacted by the Smith’s and Perry’s brands of blackness. A larger discussion would allow for deeper exploration of their respective personas, with particular attention to representations of masculinity, sexuality; how their brands of blackness translate into box office success when associated with projects they produce without benefit of their individual performances such Perry’s decision to produce Academy Award winning Precious (2009); and the transnational nature of production and distribution of which Smith—cultivating relationships within India and China—has already established a foothold.

The long-term effects of depoliticizing and decontextualizing of the male black body is still unknown. The right to work in the cultural industries for talented and business savvy black men (as for anyone) should be one that allows for full expression of creativity. However, the intersections of race, class, gender, sexuality, international business and trade continue to impact decisions about which stories get told and how these stories are visually rendered. Where the black body’s heightened visibility was once a sign of and terrain for resistance, the abstraction of these bodies from their historical conditions re-articulates a new sign: that of consumable product. bell hooks offers one possible outcome: “As signs, their power to ignite critical consciousness is diffused when they are commodified. Communities of resistance are replaced by communities of consumption.”[19] What’s at stake here is that black brands placed (i.e. distributed) within and across local, regional, and global markets will continue to alter not only how we remember our identities and our histories, but whether we will even recognize ourselves when we see us, and if we will buy it.

Leah Aldridge is a Ph.D. student in the University of Southern California School of Cinematic Arts, Division of Critical Studies. Her research interests include representations and circulation of black images; diaspora and globalization; independent, documentary and experimental production; and how race in America impacts television syndication practices. Leah has a B.A. in English Literature/Creative Writing from USC and an M.F.A. in Screenwriting from University of California, Los Angeles.

End Notes

[1] For individual discussion related to contextualized blackness, see Fred Moten In the Break: The Aesthetics of the Black Radical Tradition (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003); Jared Sexton Amalgamation Schemes: Antiblackness and the Critique of Multiracialism (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008); or Hortense J. Spillers “Introduction – Peter’s Pans: Eating in the Diaspora,” in Black, White and in Color: Essays on American Literature and Culture (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003). Rather than attempting to “fix” blackness as any one thing in particular, it was appropriate to draw from much of existing thought to assemble a context for blackness for this discussion.
[2] Obviously, not every black film/television endeavor will be a wild success any more than every white film/television show will be. The difference, typically, is that when a film/television show with blackness at the center of its narrative is financially, aesthetically, or otherwise unsuccessful, the it is not uncommon for the default assumption to be that it failed because of its blackness.

[3] “Nothing About Us Without Us” is appropriated here from the international disabilities rights movement (DRM) most recently of South Africa. It speaks to agency and voice of oppressed people; and its influence from the civil rights and feminist movements of the 1960s and 1970s. For more on this discipline see James I. Charlton’s Nothing About Us Without Us: Disability Oppression and Empowerment (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000).

[4] Clearly, the mere presence of black bodies does not make a black project. No one would call Couples Retreat (2009) a black movie especially after the film’s lone black couple was removed from international marketing materials; and, The Wire which had numerous black actors in key roles, did not become a black show until it was rebranded as such and appeared on BET.

[5] Much of this examination is informed by non-scholarly work: interviews, articles, marketing collateral, artist’s websites, etc., primarily because it is the majority of what is available and that there is little scholarship written on these two. In my survey of this material, I have attempted to characterize their respective personas.


[7] Ibid.


[14] A similar application can be made to 7 Pounds, Hancock, and I, Robot, all of which made significantly more in their foreign receipts than domestic (which does not necessarily preclude acknowledgement that foreign audiences are much bigger than domestic audiences).


[17] It is frequently unclear what Madea’s actual relationship is to Perry’s troubled female protagonists. She frequently mirrors the way many cultures require children to refer to adult friends of the family as “cousin” or “auntie”. Additionally, she is also the “community mom” who always had an eye on the neighborhood kids, and invariably reported to your parents what trouble you had been in before you even reached home, ostensibly as a good neighbor, or in the spirit of the entire-village-raising-a-child.
