

Cut and Paste: The Blackface Stereotypes of Michael Ray Charles and Al Jolson

By

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Text and Textuality



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The problem with a stereotype is not its ability to persuade or to transform definition from one position to another, but its systematic suspension of definition to create a copy. The essential point of a stereotype is that it creates an indirect or flat atmosphere, a caricature. In the moment when an identity is remodeled into a description, the individual or group is seen as a mirrored version, neither full of life nor reflective in thought. What remains in the mirror is a shadow of reality, a misfire, a picture, and a voucher. The possibility, or lack of reflection in a stereotype, is that the stereotype gives up definition for a multilayered manipulation of the traditional identity for the copy, the cast, and the caricature. The stereotype succeeds by removing all remaining definitions of and connections between the copy and the original, leaving a second meaning to reside as the sole survivor of the connection. In this moment, where the definition and description intertwines, one finds the paintings of Michael Ray Charles and the real life representation of Al Jolson in *The Jazz Singer*.

Both Al Jolson and Michael Ray Charles present their work with a duality of sorts, where stereotypes seek to obstruct individual recognition, which then inevitably leads to a clash within the flat caricature. From these points of duality, Michael Ray Charles pushes his images to what it might mean to be a representation of a stereotype and Al Jolson changes his original identity to become the copy, a Jazz singer. It is Al Jolson, the son of a Jewish Cantor, who chooses to put on Blackface in order to truly become free in his performance in *The Jazz Singer*. Applying Blackface in this auto-biographical film allows Jolson the ability to put away his past as a promising Jewish Cantor in order to become the entertainer he wishes to be. The physicality of Blackface

enables Jolson to have the freedom to be an entertainer because the Blackface rebuilds Jolson character as a comical copy to the original. Jolson's success in navigating between these dualities arrives at a moment in the film when Jolson puts down his past as a Cantor to become the Jazz singer. In a dramatic turn, this suspension happens at the moment when the viewer sees Jolson applying Blackface. Jolson's experiment with his identity proved to be a comment rooted in the expression of 1920's America, where Jazz was seen as an experimental commodity. During this time Jazz was a commercial undertaking of a minority group and was understood as an experiment with identity, class, and race.



Blackface flourished in the 1920's as a form of popular entertainment and, according to Jolson, incorporating Blackface into his act made him a more successful entertainer. Early in his career, Jolson was not unable to achieve fame as a white Jewish jazz singer. In order to succeed in the entertainment industry, Jolson adopted a stage

persona. He decided to first change his name and then later perform in Blackface. Jolson came to this decision after asking his servant

‘How am I going to get them to laugh more’ he mused. The Darky shook his head knowingly, ‘Boss, if yo skin am black they always laugh.’ The idea struck Jolson as plausible and he decided to try it. He got some burnt cork, blackened up and rehearsed before the negro. When finished he heard a chuckle followed by the verdict ‘Mistah Jolson, you, is as funny as me.’ (*The Jazz Singer*)

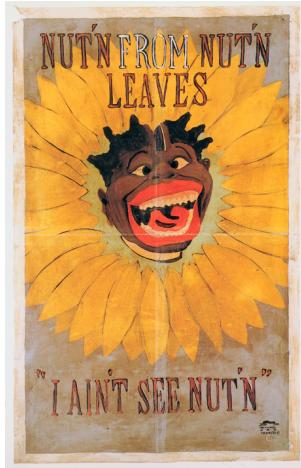
While Jolson attends to his application of Blackface for a performance rehearsal, the movie starts to take a turn. At this moment, the inner turmoil between his own past as a Jewish man and his future as a Jazz singer in Blackface starts to tighten around him sending him into a panic of what he should and needs to do. Here, Jolson is confronted with a multilayered decision for definition. The decision leads Jolson to choose that his show must continue, because he is a true Jazz singer, even though he is the shadow of the character we see. Even at this pivotal moment of definition Jolson is confronted by his family friend who says; “he talks like Jackie- but he looks like his shadow.” (*The Jazz Singer*) Jolson’s decision to continue with Blackface as a Jazz singer can be understood within the context of his time, when Blackface generally was not interpreted as a negative stereotype, but a comical addition to a performance, a step for entertainment. The suspension of the original in this case was a way to acquire laughter, thus leaving the copy to hold a direct connection to the stereotype. Jolson as a Jewish man, the original, was pushed away while the copy, the Blackface Christian-named young jazz singer, took on the description.

At the beginning of the 21st century, almost 80 years after the filming of *The Jazz Singer*, Blackface and racial Stereotypes of African-American culture have reached a point of total suspension within the comical caricature. In fact, racial stereotyping currently pushes black culture and identity to an extreme point, and has constructed a

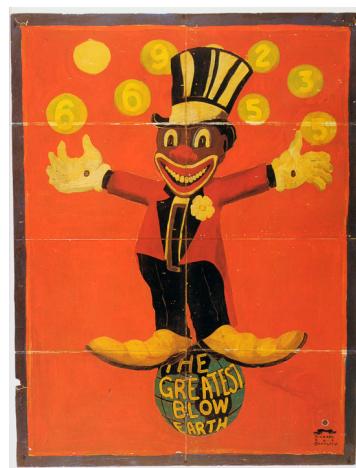
totally different environment, one of anger, shame, blame, confusion, guilt, and even despondency. It is at this time when a visual representation of the stereotype relies on the description, a caricature, instead of the definition of its original. Charles remains conscious of the duplicitous position the image holds. As Kern Foxworth suggests, “He sees within the black experience a caricature image and uses provocative images that require intense thought to decipher. In an effort to do this, he exploits dualities.” (Kern Foxworth PG 7) The stereotype is an utterly flat representation of the original, allowing for multiple layers or descriptions to be applied as the connection. Directing the viewer to consider multiple racial stereotypes, Michael Ray Charles uses Blackface and other stereotypical devices in the exact opposite way as presented in Jolson’s *The Jazz Singer*. Charles’ paintings are built, defined, and even exploited by the identity crisis in African-American culture.



Michael Ray Charles
(Forever Free)
You Only Live Once
1995



Michael Ray Charles
(Forever Free)
Nutm
1995



Michael Ray Charles
(Forever Free) #9
1997

Without a doubt, to look at one of Charles’ paintings, the imagery would strike some sort of chord with the viewer. The overly charged imagery of Black stereotypes is used directly as a comical announcement, or calling card, of the identity crisis between

the original image and the copy. This is exactly where Michael Ray Charles wishes to be. His images are a visual question for the viewer. Do we stand and watch the continuation of such flattening of the original or do we try to fight our reflexes? The viewer is left with a decision to make in front of Charles' painting. Interestingly, that evaluation reflects Al Jolson's memorable decision-making distress in *The Jazz Singer*. The viewer of Charles' work cannot escape the subject. As Kern Foxworth suggests, "His descriptions serve as a sort of shock treatment for those who are unwilling to acknowledge the existence of stereotypes or as a wakeup call for those who are too sheltered to recognize their potential to harm." (Kern Foxworth pg 7)

This extremely charged flat representation, with many layers of attachments, is somewhat new to the original image of black culture. Not too long ago, the imagery of black culture included loaded symbols like "Sambo," the representation of a mentally challenged young black child who fumbles around and tends to get into much mischief. Charles uses "Sambo" to bring awareness to the multilayered atmosphere of the stereotype. As the artist notes, "the Sambo image was conceived by whites and believed by blacks. That became the reference, the substitute for the real person. Perception and reality got confused."



Michael Ray Charles
(Forever Free)
Hear Yo Freedum
1997

One reference or layer that Michael Ray Charles uses as a basis for his imagery is the dualities found within the entertainer, the athlete, and the performer, which can then be suspended further into caricature with the use of text in the work. In the connection with an entertainer and athlete, Charles speaks about one of his images, *Hear Yo Freedum*, by recalling on Al Jolson's appearance with Blackface; "Al Jolson was possibly the most memorable blackface image in history. Can you imagine him hawking tennis shoes? And notice the text, 'Hear Yo Freedum.' 'Hear' as in hearing, but also 'here' as in something being offered." (Shafrazi pg 15) Text plays an important role in Charles paintings, where even more of the multilayered connection between the copy and the original can be questioned. The text generates a type of billboard atmosphere where we interpret these images as having commercial value. With the text Charles explores various interpretations of and connections to the stereotype as a brand of that image. The inclusion of that brand informs its perception.

This copy is a stereotype that can be comprised of a brand. The copy only acts as an image as long as the encoded description gives it enough room, time, and breath to fully be realized. The stereotype, in this case, has the ability to become just a passing change in meaning or to become confused as the hypertext of the meaning. Originally the term Stereotype referred to a text printing technique described as,

A plate upon which letters had been cast to created a permanent and unchangeable record. Around 1824 the term was first applied in a metaphorical sense because of its association with consistency and monotony. The stereotype was introduced to the general public by Walter Lippmann in 1922 in his book Public Opinion. Lippmann referred to stereotypical images as 'the pictures in our heads' and forever linguistically transposed the meaning into a convenient definition that would allow people to catalog, categorize, or encapsulate ideas or situation for every recognition by others. (Kern Foxworth pg 7)

In order for the stereotype as a copy to work, a branding must be a successful link to an original image and thus must act with harsh suspension of the original to allow enough

room for a new description. The image steps out of the way of the copy to become the attachment; as W.J.T. Mitchell suggests, “The stereotype is an especially important case of the living image because it occupies precisely this middle ground between fantasy and technical reality.” In other words, the image construction of a stereotype relies upon how well the entertainer conceives of and convinces us of his or her transitional identity. Al Jolson’s responsibility to convince us that his changeover from Jewish cantor to Jazz singer can best be realized by the addition of Blackface during his performance. It is that identity exchange that allows for the act to take place. The viewer now can rearrange his or her concept of a stereotype to allow for the substitution to fully and easily take place. The life of the image is then left up to the viewer’s ability to continue the description, as Mitchell continues, “Images come alive, as we have seen, in two basic forms that vacillate between figurative and literal sensed of vitality or animation. That is, they come alive because viewers believe they are alive...or the come alive because a clever artist/technician has engineered them to appear alive.”

Both Al Jolson and Michael Ray Charles use the copy of the original as a discussion point to evaluate identity as it relates to the social stereotype. What both artists discover is that by referring to the original, they have to ask us, the viewers, to understand. They are suspending the original in order for an involved exploration of each layer, in hopes that we, as viewers, can do the same. The stereotype description is up to the viewer. It is the viewer that must acknowledge the full responsibility for creating a flat copy, a caricature. In *The Jazz Singer* the viewer is asked to participate in helping Al Jolson use blackface to achieve his goal of fame and success as an entertainer, while in the paintings of Michael Ray Charles, the viewer is asked to realize that he or she has

allowed this participation. It is that participation with stereotypes that has encouraged the viewer to flatten the original, to take the original and suspend it.

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Al Jolson in Blackface

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The Great Entertainer (WOW)

<http://video.google.com/videoplay?docid=1528022783447222656&ei=NDDdSOXGNpKYrQLU4pmhCw&vt=lf&hl=en>

LOOK AT THIS Judy Garland sings FDR Jones

<http://video.google.com/videoplay?docid=1528022783447222656&ei=NDDdSOXGNpKYrQLU4pmhCw&vt=lf&hl=en>

Ring, Ring da Banjo, Waitin' for the Robert E Lee

<http://video.google.com/videoplay?docid=1528022783447222656&ei=NDDdSOXGNpKYrQLU4pmhCw&vt=lf&hl=en>

Milton Berle applies blackface and does an Al Jolson.

<http://video.google.com/videoplay?docid=1528022783447222656&ei=NDDdSOXGNpKYrQLU4pmhCw&vt=lf&hl=en>

Black Hollywood Film Posters

<http://flickr.com/photos/blackheritage/sets/72157603332831478/show/>

Banned Cartoons

<http://video.google.com/videoplay?docid=-5022481771850367847&ei=mSrdSKl1kJCpApnmueME&q=Black+Cartoons&vt=lf>

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NWA FAT ALBERT VIDEO (STRONG LANGUAGE)

<http://video.google.com/videoplay?docid=2623964109870469873&ei=ai3dSMujOJLAqALF3-ylCw&vt=lf&hl=en>

Southpark Spoof of Fat Albert (STRONG LANGUAGE)

<http://video.google.com/videoplay?docid=-2623964109870469873&ei=ai3dSMujOJLAqALF3-ylCw&vt=lf&hl=en>

Artworks

Edmonia Wildfire Lewis

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<http://english.uiowa.edu/courses/boos/galleries/afamgallery/image/lewisfree1867.jpg>

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Sargent Johnson

http://www.sfmoma.org/exhibitions/exhib_detail/98_exhib_sargent_johnson.html

Betty Saar

<http://www.metropolitan.org/saar/saarwork.html>

https://www.brooklynmuseum.org/eascfa/feminist_art_base/archive/images/283.324.jpg

http://www.csupomona.edu/~plin/women2/images/saar2_big.jpg

Black Hollywood Film Posters

Slideshow

<http://flickr.com/photos/blackheritage/sets/72157603332831478/show/>