

“Mulattoes, Half-Breeds, and Hapas”: Multiracial Representation in the Movies

For decades, white filmmakers have used multiracial characters to dramatize messages about race and racism. What follows are a few of the multiracial stereotypes filmmakers have used – and a few questions about how depictions of multiracial characters may develop in the future.

Multiracial characters have often been depicted as “Wild Half-Castes,” sexually destructive antagonists explicitly or implicitly perceived as unable to control the instinctive urges of their non-white heritage. Examples include George Siegmann as the mulatto villain Silas Lynch in “Birth of a Nation” (1915), Lon Chaney as the “half-breed” predator Jerry Jo in “The Place Beyond the Wind” (1916), and Jennifer Jones as the “half-breed” temptress in “Duel in the Sun” (1946). “The Crow” (1994) elides mention of the ethnicity of its hero, Eric Draven, played by the Eurasian star Brandon Lee, but perpetuates the association of multiraciality with sexual aberration and violence through its murderous, incestuous half-sibling villains, played by the white actor Michael Wincott and the Chinese actress Bai Ling. Like their “full blood” counterparts (including “The Savage Black,” “The Wild Injun,” and “The Dragon Lady”) “Wild Half-Caste” characters have little room for multi-dimensional development, over-determined as they are by the symbolic use of ethnicity to represent uncontrollable appetite and violence.

Another recurring stereotype is the “Tragic Mulatto,” a typically female character who tries to pass for white but finds disaster when her non-white heritage is revealed. Donald Bogle tracks “Tragic Mulattoes” from the “The Debt” (1912) to “Imitation of Life” (1934), “Pinky” (1949), and African-American director Carl Franklin’s “Devil in a Blue Dress” (1995). Filmmakers typically use the “Tragic Mulatto” to critique racism by inspiring pity. But a pitiful character seldom becomes a fully formed protagonist. Bogle writes that Peola, the “Tragic Mulatto” of “Imitation of Life,” “became a character in search of a movie.” Although Peola’s rejection of her black mother gives the movie its deepest drama, Peola is a secondary player; her story only exists to give the white protagonist an emotional life lesson, and thus the film never lets her escape from the “Tragic Mulatto” stereotype.

In Westerns and proto-Westerns of the fifties, sixties, and seventies, the “Half Breed Hero” provides a more “empowering” stereotype. While the “Wild Half-Caste” causes fear and the “Tragic Mulatto” engenders pity, the “Half Breed Hero” seemingly inspires identification as he actively resists white racism. Native American writer Sherman Alexie writes that “back in the day, Indians worshipped Billy Jack [the half Indian hero of the 1971 film “Billy Jack”]... We Indians cheered as Billy Jack fought for us, for every single Indian.” But Alexie notes that “we conveniently ignored the fact that Tom Laughlin, the actor who played Billy Jack, was definitely not Indian.” It’s hard to watch the films without being painfully aware that almost every “Half Breed Hero” was played by a white actor (Jeffrey Hunter, Elvis Presley, and Steve McQueen, to name just a few). When Tom Laughlin as Billy Jack says, “being an Indian isn’t a matter of blood – it’s a way of life,” he seems to expose the genre as more a white liberal’s dream of inclusion and authenticity than an honest depiction of a multiracial character’s experiences.

In the films we've considered, (primarily) white directors seem to use multiracial characters instrumentally to convey messages based explicitly on race. But in recent years, multiracial Asian, or Hapa, characters have appeared in films which, on the surface at least, have little to do with race – for example, science fiction movies like “The Adventures of Buckaroo Banzai” (1984), “The Matrix” (1999), and “Final Fantasy: The Spirits Within” (2001). Meanwhile, multiracial filmmakers like Kip Fulbeck and Eric Byler are depicting multiracial characters in their own work.

These developments beg a number of questions, including:

Do/will self-identified multiracial filmmakers depict multiracial characters differently?

Does the inclusion of multiracial characters into a narrative inevitably introduce a racial message or subtext?

Is it possible to depict characters who “just happen to be” multiracial? What would such an undertaking look like? Should it even be an objective?

Can multiraciality be seen or used as a symbol for the absence of race or racism? What are the ramifications of this kind of thinking?

How does the telling of narratives about multiracial characters by non-multiracial filmmakers affect viewers and communities of color?

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