



Imaging Blackness: Race and Racial Representation in Film Poster Art

Audrey Thomas McCluskey

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These striking, colorful posters, selected from the more than one thousand housed at Indiana University's Black Film Center/Archive, graphically illustrate the artistic and thematic range of racial representation in the American film industry from its early days through the present. Chosen for their value as cultural artifacts, they combine art and commerce and are richly imbued with historical and social meanings that continue to engage and inform. The earliest posters, such as the one from pioneering black filmmaker Oscar Micheaux, represent truly independent productions. That crop of "race movies," dating from the late 1920s through the early 1940s, targeted a black audience hungry for respectful images of themselves. In Hollywood films, however, black life was often presented in contorted and narrowly defined ways, reflective of America's racial morass. Yet as a whole, the posters managed to capture the artistry, if not the full range, of black performance.

Many of these posters appear in the touring exhibition "Imaging Blackness: Film Posters from the Black Film Center/Archive." Since they were originally produced as ephemera that would follow the distribution of the film and return to the studio, it is surprising that so many early posters featuring African Americans are still in existence. This collection includes some of the rarer examples.

In addition to their relative merit as commercial art, the posters are visual cues to the social construction of race in our society as revealed by that most potent dream merchant, the Hollywood film industry. Designed to catch the eye, they also offer a window into the history of race relations in the 20th-century U.S. In his foreword to the collection, filmmaker Melvin Van Peebles notes the evolution of how blacks were portrayed in the posters. Ever so slowly, he writes, "you begin to see a few black faces minus the shovels and trays." These incremental changes are notable because they show the long, slow, and continuing struggle of blacks to alter racial perceptions?as well as reality?in the film industry.

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