

Showcasing a Black Stereotype That Slaps Back

By KAREN GRIGSBY BATES

If you're seeing pickaninnies floating before your eyes these days, you're not having a retro flashback; director Spike Lee is yanking your chain. Again.

The stereotype image in question is guaranteed to provoke heated discussion as the posters go up around town. Stereotypes are, by their nature, loaded with the freight of cultural tension, and the grinning minstrel characters that advertise Lee's new movie, "Bamboozled," are no exception.

The decision to use them was deliberate. As Art Sims, the (black) art director for Lee's poster pointed out, "the poster is the essence of the film. The film speaks to a [kind of] very degrading, insulting television programming."

The plot line of "Bamboozled" is something like this: A bright, young, black television writer is hired by a fledgling network to produce something "hip" and "urban" (and what are those words code for, I wonder?) for prime time. His boss envisions something with black actors and mostly white writers who, he feels, know better than anyone what Real Black Life looks like. Black writers and producers who have had their Hollywood initiation will recognize this as art imitating life.

Presented with the ultimatum to produce the sought-after urban hit or hit the road, the young black writer, in a fit of frustration, suggests an idea so over the top it would have made Stepin Fetchit blush. Although he never intended for his proposal to be taken seriously, it is. The bigwigs at his network just love it. Production begins, and soon this modern minstrel show, despite or because it's done in black-

face, is the talk of the town, as hot as "Friends" in its first season. Eventually, of course, the writer receives his come-uppance.

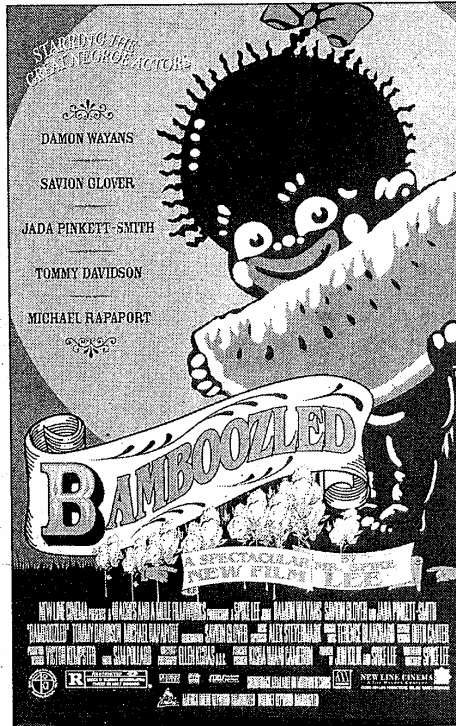
Posters for "Bamboozled" refer to the minstrel-like images pouring out of a lot of the programming aimed at black viewers on network television, a situation that seems to be feast or famine. Major networks have virtually no black prime-time shows while the second-tier networks offer an entire smorgasbord of updated buffoonery. In an online interview, Lee said, "I think that one of my main points about 'Bamboozled' is that minstrel shows are still with us today. It's just that there's no black-face."

Well, thank God for small favors. And thank God for cable, which is fragmented enough and small-budget enough to allow some black actors to appear as real people, good and bad.

When the protests against the "Bamboozled" imagery arose here, before the posters were out, I had to sign onto the movie's Web site (www.bamboozledmovie.com) to see what all the fuss was

about. Some community activists have said that they will boycott the movie because the poster art is so offensive. Lee is sympathetic to that reaction: "The pain,"

he allowed, "comes from looking at the images. How people of color, in this case, specifically African Americans, have been portrayed since the inception of film and



A poster for Spike Lee's film "Bamboozled."

also with radio." He cites the craze for black collectibles—"the dolls and the toothpaste and all the other things. You know, we're viewed as less than human, and that stuff is painful."

His art director thinks there will be a generation divide: People 40 and under, Sims says, will not view the poster in the same way their elders do, since their personal history is somewhat removed from the hurtful stereotypes older black folks remember all too clearly.

By Sims' reckoning, I'm old enough to be offended. I'm not, though. I confess to liking the idea of taking a stereotype and turning it inside out or appropriating it for subversive political purposes so that the person who thought he was brandishing the image as a weapon against you is instead being beaten about the shoulders with it. That, I think, was Lee's purpose in agreeing to use the image of the grinning little multi-braided girl gleefully clutching a huge slice of watermelon. Whether you like or loathe how Lee has chosen to advertise the movie is almost beside the point. The movie will be here for a few weeks and then it will disappear, taking its provocative artwork with it. It's a temporary thing.

The Jim Crow programming we're faced with on some network television, however, will be around lots longer—forever, in the case of those silly shows that go into syndication. And for some reason I find pickaninny programming a lot more disturbing and pernicious than pickaninny art.

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