

FLOW CONFERENCE 2012

Roundtable Title: Just Satire? Minority Television Culture and Post-Racial Ideologies

Response: To Satirize or Not to Satirize? Actually, That's Not Really the Question

"I am in no way, shape, or form involved in any niggerdom!"

—Clayton Bigsby, (Black) White Supremacist

Racial satire must inherently rely on the very images, depictions, and beliefs that it is trying to refute; therefore, shows like *Chappelle's Show*, which use black face and white face to engage in such social commentary, cannot escape the potential for misinterpretation. For audience members who miss the point entirely and see the sketches as just plain funny, the show actually ends up reinforcing the very stereotypes it is meant to overcome (mirroring the cautionary tale of Spike Lee's 2000 film *Bamboozled*). From the beginning, writers Chappelle and Brennan were well aware of the dangers inherent in misinterpretation. Unfortunately, though, *Chappelle's Show* still ran into this problem and many people often blamed the issue on lack of audience sophistication, as Dave Chappelle did during a stand-up performance in Sacramento, California, in June 2004. Tired of trying to perform for an audience constantly haranguing him with a line from the show (specifically, the ever-popular, "I'm Rick James, bitch!"), Chappelle lashed out, saying to the crowd "You know why my show is good? Because the network officials say you're not smart enough to get what I'm doing, and everyday [sic] I fight for you. I tell them how smart you are. Turns out, I was wrong. You people are stupid" (as quoted in the *Sacramento Bee* by Jim Carnes, 2004). It seems that Dave Chappelle was not only frustrated with his audience's lack of understanding, but also with himself for writing and performing in sketches that he later referred to as "socially irresponsible" because he started to feel that though some people were getting the message he was trying to send, others most certainly were not (as stated on *The Oprah Winfrey Show*, 2006).

Significantly, this sort of racial satire is only "permitted" on television today due to the recent prevalence of a post-racial ideology; those who subscribe to this view maintain that racism and prejudice no longer exist, so, naturally, there is no harm in poking fun at racial stereotypes because there is no chance of an oppositional reading of this material—i.e., it's just comedy, and if you can't relax and just laugh at it, then there's something wrong with you. However, this line of thought blatantly ignores such telling signs as the endless parade of racial slurs on *Chappelle's Show's* internet message boards, the shock expressed by Dave Chappelle himself at hearing young white males address him (and each other) as "nigga/er," and, perhaps most significantly, Chappelle's ultimate decision to walk away from his multi-million-dollar show at the height of its popularity due to the prevalence of the very sort of misreading that post-racialists deem unimaginable in today's society.

Now, engaging in this sort of discourse usually results in discussions about the inherent value of such satire versus the potential harm done, but I believe that we as academics are not asking the right questions. Rather than jumping immediately into the standard line of questioning and debating whether or not we should "complicate the conventional scholarly argument that television satire merely smuggles racial stereotypes back into television in a manner that is difficult to challenge because the images are, after all, 'just satire'" (as stated in the FLOW 2012 Call for Responses), I believe that we should instead be looking to the actual audience to tell us not only *how* they are actually reading/interpreting the portrayal of racial

stereotypes on the show, but, more importantly, *why* they interpret it as they do. One need only look at comments left in response to various *Chappelle's Show* clips posted on YouTube to see that the text can be read and/or understood in many different ways; what we need to be examining instead are the various factors that motivate one individual or group to recognize and accept the use of racial stereotypes on the show as satire while another merely relishes the stereotypes and takes them at face value (and a potential third group just laughs). To engage in such an analysis, one must recognize *Chappelle's Show's* potential for delivering real social commentary, rather than simply aiming to play up stereotypes for cheap laughs, and turn to the viewers themselves to truly understand the issues and contexts surrounding their readings of the show, as well as the implications of these diverse readings.

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