

Trotter Review

Volume 1

Issue 2 *Trotter Institute Review*

Article 6

6-21-1987

Reel Blacks: Blacks in Disguise

Patricia A. Turner

University of Massachusetts Boston

Follow this and additional works at: http://scholarworks.umb.edu/trotter_review

 Part of the [African American Studies Commons](#), [American Film Studies Commons](#), and the [Film and Media Studies Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Turner, Patricia A. (1987) "Reel Blacks: Blacks in Disguise," *Trotter Review*: Vol. 1: Iss. 2, Article 6.

Available at: http://scholarworks.umb.edu/trotter_review/vol1/iss2/6

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the William Monroe Trotter Institute at ScholarWorks at UMass Boston. It has been accepted for inclusion in Trotter Review by an authorized administrator of ScholarWorks at UMass Boston. For more information, please contact library.uasc@umb.edu.

5. Blacks in EVERY area, at EVERY level, ought to involve themselves more in “networking”—sharing with each other their knowledge and experiences and how they can have an influence on news, media employment, and advertising.

This “networking” should not be the preserve of black journalists. For examples, black doctors, lawyers, advertisers, engineers, and community religious leaders must work more closely with black bricklayers, carpenters, beauticians, teachers, barbers, bartenders, police, janitors, and unskilled workers to gain a better knowledge of how the media impacts all of us.

6. White media owners and other executives must look within themselves to find a long-entrenched source of the news media’s problem with hiring and pro-

moting blacks. They must learn to be as fair with blacks as they are with whites. They must give them, as they do whites, not only a chance for success, but the right to make mistakes, a right to fail, a right to another chance.

7. Adding “color” at all levels is a vital step. But our white corporate leaders in the news media must add MUCH MORE COLOR from top to bottom before they can truly say that race no longer is an issue in the workplace.

8. Use access to editorial review boards of newspapers, large and small, as this contact will definitely open up communications for both sides. Use consistent, organized letters to the editor (and publisher) and the op-ed pages as platforms.

Reel Blacks

by

Patricia A. Turner



Blacks in Disguise

Negative ethnic stereotypes frequently emerge in films that ostensibly lack racial themes. Two popularly-styled science fiction films, the 1984 release *Gremlins* and the 1986 movie *Little Shop of Horrors*, exemplify this fact. In the former, a charmingly inept white father purchases a furry little “Mogwi” from a mysterious Chinese gentleman. As his reluctant vendor has demanded, the father warns his teen-aged son not to 1) expose the Mogwi to light, 2) get the Mogwi wet or 3) feed the Mogwi after dark. Inadvertently, Billy, the befuddled teenager, preoccupied with thoughts of his job, his dog and his pretty co-worker, breaks the interdictions. The Mogwi, named Gizmo by Billy, miraculously reproduces itself. These offspring bear little resemblance to their benevolent parent.

They gleefully begin to destroy the idyllic town of Kingston Falls and the humans that they encounter. Together with the girl and Gizmo, the hero manages to rescue the town from the clutches of the evil gremlins. The film concludes when the mysterious Chinese gentleman reclaims the original Mogwi and removes him from the household.

The musical *Little Shop of Horrors* is somewhat more difficult to summarize. The time is the early sixties, the setting is Skid Row and the primary characters are a pair of poor, young, white, well-meaning employees of an unsuccessful Jewish flower store owner. Unnoticed by any of the players, a trio of talented black singers (Krystal, Chiffon and Ronette) comment on the action throughout the film. Seymour Krelborn, the male hero, is anxious to help his employer and unofficial adoptive father, Mr. Mushnik, to save his unpopular flower shop. Why Mushnik

ever thought the impoverished alcoholic Skid Row community would support a florist shop is a question left unanswered. Mushnik's other employee is the voluptuous blond Audrey, whose misguided affections are directed at a malicious dentist rather than the bespectacled Seymour, who worships her from his corner of the dilapidated florist shop. Seymour is plant shopping near the establishment of an old Chinese wholesale flower vendor when a total eclipse of the sun occurs. Following the eclipse Seymour discovers a benign looking plant in front of the Chinese vendor's storefront. Paying the merchant \$1.95 for a product that obviously wasn't there prior to the eclipse, Seymour cheerfully takes the flytrap shaped plant back to Mushnik's. This action sets off a chain of events that changes the lives of all of the characters.

The plant (named Audrey II), of course, is more than just a little "strange and interesting." If fed with human blood, or better yet human parts, it thrives and attracts multitudes of customers to Mushnik's. In order to sate Audrey II's unorthodox appetite, Seymour is forced to personal anemia as well as to body-snatching and finally homicide. The film climaxes as Seymour rescues Audrey I from the protruding lips of Audrey II and fights the now-procreating plant to the finish. In the final scene the camera follows Seymour and Audrey as they walk into the yard of a model suburban home and then pans from their happy faces to the garden where a seemingly nondescript little Audrey II is nestled in among the blooming flowers.

Sounds like a couple of bizarre little horror flicks, right? Well, the seemingly innocuous plots of both *Gremlins* and *Little Shop* reinforce controversial ethnic stereotypes. Let's start with the exotic elderly Chinese men who are the sources of the plant in *Little Shop* and the equally vicious Mogwi in *Gremlins*. Both films remove responsibility for the havoc wreaked by their respective creatures by originating them in the mysterious hands of a non-white character. The innocent white heroes have laudable motives for doing business with the Chinese gentlemen. In *Gremlins* a benevolent father is merely looking for a special Christmas gift for his teen-aged son. In *Little Shop* Seymour seeks plants that will attract customers to Mushnik's, his surrogate father's enterprise. In both films the Chinese gentlemen seem reluctant to part with their other-worldly commodities, but allow the white man's hard-earned money to convince them.

Kingston Falls, the setting of *Gremlins*, is just the kind of pristine, upper-middle-class suburban community that *Little Shop's* Audrey daydreams about while reading "Better Homes and Gardens" in her dingy Skid Row apartment. Audrey and Seymour long to escape the turgid atmosphere of Skid Row, which implicitly means escaping the melting pot racial and ethnic mix that characterizes the ghetto. When Audrey dreams of her Tupperware party, her guests are all white women; Krystal, Ronette and Chiffon, who have tried to encourage her to part from her abusive boyfriend, have no place in her ideal future. The first real victim of the man-eating Audrey II is the previously benevolent Mr. Mushnik. Content to support Audrey and Seymour when his business was dying, the Jewish merchant becomes unexpectedly greedy when he realizes how much money can be made from Audrey II. While trying to run Seymour out of Skid Row, Mushnik

unwittingly becomes fodder for the now mammoth Audrey II. In *Gremlins* the first victim of Gizmo's malicious off-spring is also an ethnic minority, the only one prominent in the entire movie. Determined to learn all he can about the mysterious gremlins, the black high school science teacher prods and pokes until the gremlin in his laboratory destroys the meddlesome scientist. On the surface level the teacher is being punished for pursuing matters he had no business pursuing; on a deeper level the punishment may be for pursuing a place in a predominantly white society.

Nowhere are the negative ethnic messages clearer than in the actual depiction of the unearthly beings in the two films. Audrey II and Gizmo's offsprings embody the full range of negative stereotypes associated with blacks. Audrey II is supposed to resemble a flytrap-styled plant. Another way of describing the plant would be to say that it is a watermelon with over-sized lips. As it grows, the lips become larger and more exaggerated. Audrey II's voice is conspicuously black in inflection, tonal quality and vocabulary. Indeed, Audrey II's words are spoken and sung by Levi Stubbs, a member of the popular Four Tops singing group. Audrey II tries to sway Seymour with promises of a "Cadillac car." Its grammar is typified by comments such as "don't do me no favors" and "you sho' do drive a hard bargain." Audrey II's songs include lines such as, "Feed me Seymour/Feed me all night long/Feed me Seymour/Feed me all night long/cause if you feed me Seymour/I'll grow up big and strong;" and from a tune nominated for an Academy Award, "I'm a mean, green mother from outer space and I'm bad." Audrey II also yearns for white women, as can be seen in an early scene where a still-small plant pursues the well-rounded derriere of a radio station secretary, or in the climactic scene where it lures the blond Audrey, dressed in a white wedding gown, into the booby-trapped florist shop. Both Audrey II and the gremlins "punish" their victims by procreating in abundance. Miniature Audrey II's burst out from every corner of the humongous plant. When Gizmo is mistreated, he also spawns countless off-spring. It is these malevolent off-spring that are the most destructive and that reflect negative Afro-American stereotypes. Not long after their unexpected birth, the gremlins are eating fried chicken with their hands. Their first target is the woman of the house, the quintessential kind mother, and they are soon pursuing the hero's girlfriend at Dorry's Tavern. In some unexplained way, several of them have managed to acquire shades and caps that cover their eyes. Cigarettes droop from the corners of their mouths. They cannot get enough to drink. They love music and can even breakdance!

Plots in which an unassuming male protagonist must "slay a dragon" in order to save his village and win the pretty girl are as old as taxes. What is interesting about these 1980s releases is that the "dragon" is a thinly disguised black male. In both films the climax pits the soulfully destructive creatures against marginally pubescent white males. Before they can consummate their relationships with their respective love interests, Seymour and Billy must best their unwanted intruders. Saving their women and their communities from the threat posed by Audrey II and the gremlins becomes a rite of passage for the white heroes. Before they reach genuine maturity they must prove their mettle by destroying the "dark" forces that threaten their place in the world.

While this analysis may explain *what* is happening in these two films, it does not tell us *why* the intruders are blacks in disguise. These two films were produced over sixty years after the notoriously anti-black *Birth of a Nation*. In the 1910s the white movie-making community and its audiences could easily rationalize and applaud a film in which white heroes aggressively pursue a supposedly undeserving but doggedly usurping black population. In the 1980s the white film-making community and its audiences ostensibly accept the black man's right to share in America's wealth. Perhaps the impulse to assign black characteristics to other worldly creatures reflects a subconscious belief that blacks are still intruders whose demands for equality have escalated into a desire for dominance. Seymour and Billy start out trying to treat Audrey II and the gremlins fairly, but the ungrateful creatures don't want to stay in their place — they want control over their former masters and their women. Until they have rid their worlds of these menaces, the white heroes cannot truly be men.

Gremlins and *Little Shop of Horrors* are very likeable films. The former is rather charming, and the latter is one of the most originally-rendered musicals ever produced. Indeed, it is the positive surface of the films that makes their underlying message so insidious. Fortunately, the final twist common to both films can give solace to the viewer who would like to see the disguised blacks triumph. At the end of *Gremlins* the original Mogwi is still alive, albeit back in the capable hands of the mysterious Chinese man, and *Little Shop* closes as the camera follows Seymour and Audrey into the yard of a model suburban home and then pans from their happy faces to the garden where a seemingly nondescript little Audrey II is nestled in among the blooming flowers. Temporarily subdued by the white heroes, the blacks in disguise might triumph in the future.

Patricia A. Turner, Ph.D., is Assistant Professor of Black Studies at the University of Massachusetts at Boston. She is a specialist in African American Folklore.

Television Images: Some Observations on *Street Cop*

Printed below are two commentaries on a "Frontline" documentary, "Street Cop," which was shown on national television in the Spring of 1987. Both were written for publication in the major Boston daily press; however, neither was accepted and printed. They are printed here to illustrate the concern that many blacks have for potential stereotyping by the media.

"Street Cop" is not Street-Smart

by

Kirk A. Johnson

The next time a person of color falls victim to a racially motivated assault, do not be surprised. Tonight at 9:00, Boston's struggle for racial harmony will be set back a notch. And it will come at the hands of one of the most celebrated television programs in the history of broadcasting.

"Frontline," the award-winning WGBH-TV series, is airing a nationally televised special on the war against street drugs. The show, called "Street Cop," takes viewers to Boston's inner city for fifty minutes of heart-pumping violence. We see the police take a sledgehammer to an apartment door in search of drugs as the women and children inside scream in wide-eyed terror. We watch police officers wrestle a young man to the pavement over a suspected drug deal, and we feel the tension mount during a domestic argument until in the confusion a woman is arrested for throwing what an officer thought was a stone. Later, it turns out to have been a shoe. If war is hell, "Street Cop" says that life in Roxbury cannot be far behind.

As a documentary, "Street Cop" is riveting. But underneath the action lie troubling unspoken messages and sins of omission:

- The premise of the show — that to find drug abuse, one must go to the inner city — is flawed. Drug abuse is widespread, though it is often perceived — and portrayed by the news media — as an exclusively inner-city problem.
- Virtually every black and Hispanic face on the show,

with the exception of a handful of police officers, is caught up in drugs or domestic violence. "Street Cop" feeds the stereotype that all inner-city residents fit this description — a stereotype as false as the notion that all suburbs are placid enclaves of domestic bliss.

- Little of what we see is put in a meaningful context. The racism and elitism that contribute to poverty and drug use go virtually unmentioned. Drug abuse is portrayed as a problem of minorities, while in reality, the people who use drugs are merely the most visible manifestation of a huge, white-controlled industry that reaches to the rain forests of South America and the poppy fields of the Near East.

- Though the scenes in "Street Cop" are undeniably real, they are a reality as seen from a single perspective: a police unit. Roxbury has its own equally valid perspective on drugs. Had an effort been made to tell the community's story, viewers might have learned about ongoing efforts to cooperate with police, to help addicts give up drugs, and to encourage youngsters to stay straight.

The show's most distressing message is that minorities deserve to be abused. "Street Cop" shows police officers dealing with Roxbury residents in ways that would be inconceivable in Newton or Ipswich. For those white Bostonians who are already fixated on hateful stereotypes, the show sends the tacit message that abusing minorities is okay. After all, the police do it.