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BOOGIE: A Call for Culture

Through the lyrics and images featured in the music video BOOGIE by Brockhampton, rapper Kevin Abstract challenges the current concentration of cultural capitol, sending out an anthem of resistance to encroaching mono-Anglo-culturalism. In the video, the outlandish and at times criminal actions that the band members take represent an alternative model of living and thinking in society, prompting critical thought towards the societal rules that we have now. The lyrics show the struggle that the rappers have faced in expressing their culture and the societal push against their influence, but go on to show that in spite of the prevailing ideologies attempts to preserve the dominant culture, Brockhampton has found massive success. With that success, Brockhampton uses it as a platform to disrupt the dominant cultural narrative around people of color and reclaims their human image through lyrics, satire and an irreverence that defines the core of the groups beliefs.

The video opens with a clip of a Latino man, self-identified as Roberto, introducing himself inside a convenience store, and expressing his love of dance. The music then begins, and the next shot is of a different member of the band, Merlin, eating frozen slushy directly from the machine, getting it all over his grinning face. The lyrics then begin, rapped by Kevin Abstract. The first lines of the song, “What are the rules for breakfast today? What are the words I'm forbidden to say?” can be broken down in the context of the imagery. The majority of the shots from the first half of the video take place in this convenience store, a public space that people of color have traditionally had a different relation too than the white majority of this country. There are no official rules for such interactions, leading for people of color to feel as if they must constantly learn new rules, which further inhibit them from behaving or speaking (note Abstract’s line “What are the words I'm forbidden to say”) in the manner that they would prefer. People of color are often tailed through stores by distrustful employees, their every move watched hawkishly for any hint of misbehavior. Brockhampton highlights these issues early and clearly through these lyrics, which call out the mainstream perceptions of people of color through using satirized versions of these identities.

Merlin’s enthusiastic use of the slushy machine is then a prime example, his actions hyperbolizing the ideas that these public spaces forcibly attach to people of color, of disruption and deviance, disobedience and chaos. This satire is reinforced through the physical mannerisms of Brockhampton, furthering their message. All of the actions that the band members take in this store are done in swaying, flamboyant motions. Some members are flapping their hands about as they jump around, others roll their shoulders as they lean into the camera. For the viewer, it’s silly, it looks dumb to see others do it and let such strange actions take them over. Here, the collective offers a satirized abstract of the ideas they are seeking to challenge: by making their behavior so outlandish and off-putting, people are incapable of calling it along racial lines. Through their lackadaisical movement, the members mock the very beliefs they are challenging.

The next key image in the video is of several of the band members painted blue and wearing orange jumpsuits as they rob a convenience store. The scenes where band members are wearing blue paint spell out the representation of white perception of black people as criminal bodies. As the video continues, the scenes can be divided into two camps: those with paint and those without. The accompanying lyrics “I've been beat up my whole life/ I've been shot down, kicked out twice/ Ain't no stoppin' me tonight/ I'ma get all the things I like,” are an effort to reframe the cultural perception surrounding black men. Rappers often like to subvert classic troupes or narratives by doing what the audience would least expect. So here, when black bodies are being equated with criminals, the lyrics describing the mistreatment of people of color cue the listener in to the deeper meaning behind the visuals.

Yet all the other shots of the same members show them doing nothing more than dancing, singing, and reveling in public spaces. The blue paint scenes hold a mirror up to the way white Americans perceive people of color: as wild, dangerous criminals (complete with orange jumpsuits) who find genuine pleasure from crime. The blue paint itself marks the metaphor, signaling for the viewer to examine the scenes from critical perspective on race. In every scene where the bang members wear their own skin, proudly, they are merely dancing, committing no wrong. They are intervening in white society to cast off their monochrome view of people of color as criminal bodies through humanistic characterization, alongside a satirized abstraction of said view. We see them through their own eyes in the convenience store: as a bunch of guys who love nothing more than music and dancing. In the imposition of a criminal identity, society strips both individuality and agency from people of color, which is demonstrated through the shots containing almost cartoonish depictions of crime. The blue paint alongside the blatant reference to incarceration (orange jumpsuits) gives society a point to view its own beliefs and see them for how ridiculous they are.

The final quarter of the video returns to the opening refrain rapped by Abstract, and the opening subject: Roberto. Here, Roberto is dancing fully clothed, tie included, under a shower, with a grin spread across his face. This shot ends the video, and is only interrupted by a cutaway back to the blue paint narrative, which concludes with the members of Brockhampton under a bridge, eating pizza which they stole. These two final images are the competing ideologies that Brockhampton is seeking to evaluate: casual fun vs. criminal activity, personal fulfillment vs. the prison pipeline. They are giving us a choice: to see the grinning Latino man in a suit taking a shower, or criminals under a bridge reaping their spoils. While the first image is more foreign and therefore harder to process, even accept, it is an image free of any lens placed over a marginalized group in an attempt to make them feel like they don’t belong. Yet the second image isn’t the whole truth. The shot of all the members under the bridge seeks to reconcile the narrative that Brockhampton is challenging with their own. Here we see the abstract characters performing as their humanized counterparts. We see criminals as people, and people of color not as inherently criminals.

Through this examination of how we view people of color in public spaces and the place they occupy in today’s society, Brockhampton is able to reclaim their human image through their pointed lyrics, irreverent and subversive mannerisms, and juxtaposed abstractions of black bodies and real depictions of people of color.