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A Rhetorical Analysis of Childish Gambino’s “This Is America”

In the wake of the Black Lives Matter Movement, Donald Glover, more popularly known as Childish Gambino, released the music video for his newest single “This Is America,” a video that shocked the nation. Released on May 5th of this year, the video portrays stunning and horrific images that closely resemble topics of controversial racial content that had been swirling through the media. With his career at its peak, Gambino uses his time in the spotlight to bring attention to the preventable problems that plague his fans, who are primarily 15-30-year-old African Americans. While conducting a catchy tune, Gambino juxtaposes disturbing and gory images and uses his own reputation as a successful black musician to shed light on the increasing amount of gun violence present in the country, specifically targeted at the black community.

In his video, Gambino represents two instances of random gun violence, showing how these acts too often go unnoticed, thus eliciting his viewers’ emotional feelings. At the beginning of the music video, Gambino is seen dancing while a black man who resembles Trayvon Martin’s father walks into view with a guitar in hand and takes a seat. The angle changes and the man is no longer in sight but once brought back into view he is now seen empty handed with a bag over his head. Suddenly, Gambino takes out a gun and shoots him from behind. He then casually hands off the gun to an unknown man holding a red cloth while the body of the murdered man is quickly dragged away. A horrific murder has just occurred and yet the gun is handled more delicately than the deceased body, which sends the message that guns are seen as more valuable than a black man’s life.

 In the second depiction of gun violence, an entire black choir is gunned down in similar fashion to the black man’s execution. At first, the choir joyfully sings and dances with Gambino. As the camera closes in on Gambino, his face loses his smile and a machine gun is thrown into his arms. Quickly he turns toward the choir and massacres the singers. Again, the gun is swiftly handed off and removed from the shot, carefully wrapped in a scarlet cloth. This scene alludes to a white terroristic act that occurred in 2015 when a white male, identified as Dylann Roof, opened fire on a black church wounding and killing nine church members, the same number of choir members in Gambino’s video (Chalasani). So many lives have been taken because of senseless gun violence, specifically among the black community, and yet Gambino paints America as fighting more for the right to bear arms than for the rights of those who lost their lives. The tribute Gambino pays to those murdered in the church shooting of 2015 provokes mournful feelings for those affected and shows that these deaths could have a larger impact on the movement to end gun violence than they might realize.

Donald Glover, who won his first Grammy Award earlier this year for his 2016 song “Redbone,” uses his success as an opportunity to bring much-needed attention to the hypocrisy in the American legal system. The beat, lyrics, and detailed music video create a very catchy tune that attracted enough attention to score Gambino number one on the Billboard Hot 100 Chart in just over 24 hours after its release (Trust). Rather than using his title for his own gain, he recognizes how much of a difference he can make and took this as his opportunity to enlighten the American people to the true danger of gun violence and the toll it has taken on the black community. Despite the apparent privilege that he enjoys from his successful music career, he places himself as the lead role in his video to emphasize the fact that he, too, is still a member of the black community and still faces the effects of racism because of the color of his skin. He illustrates his vulnerability by being shirtless throughout the entire video. At the end of the video Gambino, who had been representing America itself, is now cast as a black man who is seen running away from what appears to be a mob of non-African Americans shortly after he had smoked marijuana. Despite the many people he guns down throughout the video, Gambino is being sought only after he is found in possession of marijuana. Instead of hunting him down because of all the innocent lives he took, he is wanted because he smoked what in some states is now a legal substance. The message sent is that it is more of a crime to smoke marijuana than to kill black people.

“This Is America” stands as a tribute to the victims of law and to those who lost their lives to gunfire negligence. The graphic images are not just used as a means to incite Gambino’s fans but to symbolize the real-life tragedies that have occurred and continue to occur across the nation. As a result of carelessness and ignorance, so many lives have been needlessly taken at the hands of those in possession of firearms. Gambino uses his fame to call for gun law reform. It is easy for citizens to be oblivious to the real dangers that surround them, but through Gambino’s work with the help of the Black Lives Matter Movement, this illusion of safety within the streets is swept away and the existence of gun violence is brought to the forefront.

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