

Learning to Be White through the Movies

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Watching a film may seem like a purely innocent leisure activity, but Vera and Gordon show how films, like other forms of popular culture, produce cultural narratives with specific, even if implicit, racialized themes, thus shaping the social construction of race and racism.

Why does Gone with the Wind touch such deep chords inside me? Maybe because it put those chords there in the first place. This is the movie that taught me and three generations how to be Southerners. It doesn't move us because we are Southern; we are Southern because we have taken this movie to heart.

—Susan Stewart¹

I was the only Negro in the theater, and when Butterfly McQueen went into her act, I felt like crawling under the rug.—Makohl N²

We need to study movies because ordinarily we do not want to think about the influence that they have on us and on our society. We tend to dismiss the cinema as mere entertainment; yet it has profound effects, shaping our thinking and our behavior....Movies can teach us who we are: what our identity is and what it should be. "Radio, television, film and the other products of the culture industries," Douglas Kellner argues, "provide the models of what it means to be male or female, successful or a failure, powerful or powerless. Media culture also provides the materials out of which many people construct their sense of class, of ethnicity and race, of nationality, of sexuality, of "us" and "them." Movies manufacture the way we see, think of, feel, and act towards others."³

We need to study movies not only because of what they tell us about the world we live in but also, and most importantly, because movies are a crucial part of that world. In the simulations of the moving pictures we learn who has

the power and who is powerless, who is good and who is evil. "Media spectacles," Kellner writes, "dramatize and legitimate the power of the forces that be and demonstrate to the powerless that if they fail to conform, they risk incarceration or death."⁴

We live in a cinematic society, one that presents and represents itself through movie and television screens. By 1930 the movies had become a weekly pastime for a majority of Americans. After 1950, with the advent of television, watching moving pictures became a daily activity, even an addiction, in the United States and other countries in the industrialized world. One report projected that for the year 2001, the average American spent 1577 hours in front of the TV set, 13 hours in movie theaters, and 55 hours watching prerecorded videos at home.⁵ This represents 28 percent of our waking time. It is also five times the number of hours the average American spent in 2001 reading books, newspapers, and magazines.

In the same way that literate societies are dramatically different from illiterate societies, the social organization of cinematic societies is dramatically different from that of noncinematic ones. Without taking into account the impact that the moving pictures in television and cinema screens have on the people of a country, we could no more understand contemporary society than we could understand it without realizing the impact of literacy. The daily rhythms of our lives, what we know and what we ignore, are set by the rhythm of and the information contained in the screens of cinema and television. Countries without a film industry can be considered colonies for foreign filmmakers. Within countries, one can, of course, speak of diversely cinematized segments of the population because the time, energy, and money spent on media consumption vary greatly by age, class, religion, income, race, geography, and other such sociodemographic variables.

The Hollywood film industry does not portray all the segments of society and the world populations equally, with the same frequency, accuracy, or with the same respect. Consider that Latinos, who according to the 2000 U.S. Census constitute one of the largest U.S. minority groups, have seldom been represented as the protagonist of Hollywood films. The *Video Hound Golden Movie Retriever* Index, for example, lists only 17 films under the category of "Hispanic America," roughly half of which are Hollywood main releases. In contrast, the same index lists 69 films in the category "Ireland," 151 under "Judaism," 45 under "British Royalty," and even 119 under "Zombies!"⁶

Allan G. Johnson notes that of the films that have won the Academy Award in the category Best Picture from 1965 through 1999, "none set in the United States places people of color at the center of the story without their having to share it with white characters of equal importance" (e.g., *In the Heat of the Night* [1967] or *Driving Miss Daisy* [1989]). "Anglo, heterosexual males, even though they are less than twenty percent of the U.S. population," he proposes, "represent ninety percent of the characters in the most important movies ever made."⁷ Until recently, most minority characters in Hollywood movies have usually been caricatured and portrayed with disrespect.

Much of what we know about people we consider to be "others" we learn through the movies. The moving pictures allow access to private spaces, scenes that would normally be out of the reach of our eyes. Through the film media we learn what life supposedly is like or used to be like and what it is in distant lands and in private places.

Films also represent us, the spectators, who find enjoyment and solace in them. The streets we walk; the landmarks in our cities we go by; the appliances, furniture, and gadgets we use every day; the cars and buses we ride; and the music we listen to all appear in the movies. The social roles we play—as children, parents, workers, and lovers—are also recognizable in films. The words and the jargon the characters use in the movies are part of the language we speak. In this sense, we, the audience, watch ourselves. Much of the attraction and power of film, its ability to make us laugh or cry and to teach us about the world and about ourselves, rests on our being, simultaneously, spectators and subjects being gazed on.

The cinematic viewing experience, in our opinion, is one of recognizing and mis-recognizing ourselves in the moving pictures. Watching a movie is the experience of sharing—or sometimes, of resisting—the way of seeing, the ideology, and the values of the filmmakers, their gaze, and their imagination. Through their technology and their language, films implement ways of looking at class, gender, and race differences. Filmmakers can make us see these differences, but they can also hide them from our sight by creating pleasing fictions. This way of seeing carries the individual and social biases of the filmmakers but also the biases and standpoints of the culture of the people for which films are produced, the culture to which the film belongs....

DIALECTICS OF RACE IN FILM

... We regard film in a dialectical fashion, considering them in two opposed ways. First, we consider them as a means to celebrate whiteness, to teach what it is like to be white and to enjoy the privilege of being white. Second, we consider movies as social therapeutic devices to help us cope with the unjust racial divide by denying or obscuring white privilege and the practices on which it depends.... We believe that unless we capture the tension and contradictions between these two intentions and the central need of Hollywood to entertain and to be profitable, we would miss critical elements of the role films play in the production and reproduction of racism in the United States and around the world.

Consider that in Susan Stewart's earlier remark about *Gone with the Wind*, although she recognizes that the film taught her how to be "Southern," she fails to recognize that it only taught her how to be a white Southerner: white becomes so normative and universal a category that she does not even need to mention it. She does not notice the ways the film forces African Americans into the background and occludes their story. Recall Malcolm X's humiliation, when he was the sole black patron in a white theater, at seeing how blacks were

portrayed in *Gone with the Wind*. Lorraine Hansberry, the black playwright, confirms Malcolm X's response when she writes that *Gone with the Wind* did not teach blacks to be blacks. The fact that in the United States white "goes without saying" in statements such as Susan Stewart's is an important trait of what ... we call "the white self." ...

The concept of self, of the white self—the portrayal of which we will be examining—is used by scholars to designate who and what we are. The self is the human person, the place in which all experience—our memories, our pain and pleasure, our emotions—is organized. By self, we mean the sense of being a person, the experience of existing as an individual contained in the space of a body over time. As universal as this notion might be, it is highly culture specific. In the United States, the fundamental entries on our birth certificates are name, birth date, gender, and race. These constitute our legal sense of self. Race is also crucial to our psychological sense of self. Without it we would be fatally disoriented, like Joe Christmas in *Faulkner's Light in August*, who goes mad and is destroyed because he never knows whether he is white or black.

WHITENESS

The key element to understanding racial thinking in the United States and in much of the world today is white supremacy. The modern concept of race and the notion of whiteness were invented during the period of European colonization of the Americas and Africa. The stock of knowledge we call racism has been developed in the past five hundred years precisely to establish the superiority of whites and to contribute a veneer of legitimacy to colonial domination, exploitation, or extermination of people of color, both domestically and internationally, by whites.

One difficulty in studying "whiteness" is that, until recently, it was an empty or invisible category, not perceived as a distinctive racial identity. Richard Dyer writes, "As long as race is something only applied to non-white peoples, as long as white people are not racially seen and named, they/we function as a human norm. Other people are raced, we are just people."⁸ Thus, most white Americans either do not think of their "whiteness" or think of it as neutral. The power of whiteness rests in its apparent universality and invisibility, in the way it has gone unexamined. Nevertheless, the images of film, especially of films in which whites interact with persons of another color, offer a way to study white self-representation across the twentieth century. As has often been said, "Whites don't have a color until a person of color enters the room."

Until recently, sociologists and culture critics concentrated on prejudice, that is, on the distorted images that we construct of others we perceive as different. For example, Bogle (1997), Cripps (1997), Snead (1994), and Guerrero (1993), among others, have studied the prejudicial images of African Americans in American films.⁹ We want to shift the focus to the representation of the white self-concept.

Whiteness as we understand it today in the United States is a construct, a public fiction that has evolved throughout American history in response to changing political and economic needs and conditions. Whiteness has always been a shifting category used to police class and sexual privilege. At the beginning, only "free white persons" could become American citizens. White privilege depended on the exclusion of "others," but the definition of who was non-white constantly changed. Thus, previous historic categories such as Celt, Slav, Alpine, Hebrew, Iberic, Anglo-Saxon, and Nordic have been incorporated into the contemporary concept of "white" or "Caucasian." "Caucasians are made and not born."¹⁰ We argue that the notion of whiteness has become so integral to the American identity that it is embedded in the national unconscious.

RACE

In practice, the term "race" designates one or more biological traits (e.g., skin color) from which a sociopolitical hierarchy is derived and the assumption that some races are superior and therefore deserve to be more powerful than others. In spite of the concentrated efforts by scientists over the past one hundred years, the concept of "race" has become progressively more elusive, to the extent that today we can say that race is an illusion, a fiction that no longer leads to a meaningful classification of humans in the biological or social sciences. It is not an objective or fixed category. Race, according to Omi and Winant, is "an unstable and 'decentered' complex of social meanings constantly being transformed by political struggle." Although the concept of race may be a fiction, we cannot simply jettison it because it "continues to be central to everyone's identity and understanding of the social world."¹¹

Today the vast majority of humans across the globe still think, feel, and act as if "race" were real, as if it pointed to true, useful differences among people. Furthermore, no one alive today has lived in a world in which race did not matter. In the United States, race matters in the chance each of us had of being born alive and healthy. Race matters in the neighborhoods where we grow up, the quality of the education we obtain, the persons we choose as friends, spouses, or lovers, the careers we pursue, the health and opportunities of the children we are going to have, and the churches we attend. Race matters in the length of our life span. Finally, race matters even in the cemetery where we lie after death.

At the beginning of the twenty-first century, the memories of the horrors in which race was the operative concept are still fresh. Among others, the horror of racial segregation and lynching in the United States, of the Nazi Holocaust in Europe, of apartheid in South Africa, and of the "ethnic cleansing" in Bosnia and Kosovo cannot be ignored. One can also not deny that members of oppressed groups find identity, self-expression, and solidarity in racial and ethnic categories. Historically and today, race and the violent or subtle practices we call racism shape both the structures of our societies and the daily rhythms of our lives.

We cannot begin to explain the contradiction between the scientific uselessness of the concept of race and the real consequences the application of racial categories bring about. At the interpersonal level, the biological trait or set of traits thought to reveal "race" are used as assumptions about other physical, intellectual, emotional, or spiritual traits of persons with those characteristics. In the United States, for example, those who are not considered white are often automatically assumed to be smelly, "greasy," less intelligent, lazy, dirty, not in control of their emotions, unreliable, and so on. The category of race, however fictional, is taken for real and is real in its consequences.

Today, white supremacy still dominates America. Consider that the Constitution of the United States of 1789, the fundamental document of the first democratic society, accepted the slavery of Africans and African Americans within its borders and gave Congress the authority to suppress slave insurrections. For tax distribution purposes, a slave was counted as three-fifths of a person. In 1861, both houses of the U.S. Congress passed a bill that would have made slavery a permanent feature of the American legal system. Today, decades after the Civil Rights revolution of the 1960s, the enforcement of civil rights laws is very weak, at best. Film production is one of the resources through which power is wielded by the classes that benefit from the racial status quo.

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