

## Assuming White Identities: Racial and Gendered Looking Across the Literature / Media Divide

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This essay explores and problematises the category of 'white women', examining the developing dialogue between feminist and postcolonial discourses across the literature / media divide.<sup>1</sup> Our focus is on representation which, as Richard Dyer acknowledges, is 'one of the prime means by which we have any knowledge of reality' (Dyer, 1997: xiii). Two interconnecting strands are suggested by the title: on the one hand we examine the often invisible cultural 'assumptions' underpinning the representation of whiteness and, on the other, we explore the implications of the visible 'assumption' of whiteness in relation to notions of performativity and passing.

Within a culture which privileges the visible, looking and being looked at have become of central importance both to feminist theory and to the discussion of racial power relations. Whilst feminist critique of the 'specular economy' has focussed primarily on sexual difference (see Irigaray, 1977; Gallop, 1982: 58; Berry, 1994: 231), this dominant ideology of the visible clearly (re)produces racial as well as gendered configurations of the Other. As Mary Ann Doane argues 'Otherness, whether sexual or racial, is usually articulated as a problem of the limits of knowledge and hence of visibility, recognition, differentiation' (Doane, 1991: 212). The representation of both race and gender intersect in the context of a predominantly visual culture which, as Dyer argues, gives 'primacy to the visible as source of knowledge, control and contact with the world' (Dyer, 1997: 44-5). Given that both gendered and racial power relations are so intimately connected with the act of looking, it is becoming increasingly strategic to use a multidisciplinary approach, combining the analysis of literary and filmic texts and utilising feminist discourses across film, fiction and visual culture.<sup>2</sup> This 'multiperspectival' approach (Kellner, 1995) informs our methodology throughout this essay, where we place texts in parallel to explore the dynamics of looking across disciplines. Our choice of texts is therefore deliberately eclectic, ranging over a number of filmic and literary extracts rather than presenting a detailed reading of any one text.<sup>3</sup>

Whilst film is clearly an important site for feminism, feminist film theory has, until recently, failed to adequately address the issue of race. hooks has been vocal in drawing attention to both feminist film theory's centrality in debates around 'woman's identity, representation and subjectivity' and its silence 'on the subject of blackness and specifically representations of black womanhood' (hooks, 1992: 3). This has partly been the result of the enormous influence of Laura Mulvey's theory of the sexually differentiated structure of looks at work in dominant narrative film in her seminal essay, 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema' (Mulvey, 1975). hooks critiques the subsequent and ongoing emphasis in (white) feminist theory on a psychoanalytic theory based on the Freudian and Lacanian privileging of sexual difference as the 'primary and / or exclusive signifier of difference', one which ignores racial (and other) axes of identification (hooks, 1992: 124). Recently there has been an increasing critique of the hegemony, within feminist film theory in particular, of theories of the 'male gaze', as well as an 'outing' of this gaze as predominantly white (See Davy, 1997: 204-25; Gaines, 1986: 59-79).<sup>4</sup>

Claire Johnston's Oedipal reading of Billy Wilder's *Double Indemnity* (1944), offers an example of a psychoanalytically-based feminist approach which effectively effaces the issue of race in its emphasis on castration anxiety and sexual difference (Johnston, 1978).

Johnston ignores the dynamics of race in her analysis of a sexually charged scene at the beginning of the film. Insurance salesman Walter Neff (Fred MacMurray) gazes up at the half-clad Phyllis Dietrichson (Barbara Stanwyck) at the top of the stairs, joking about her not being 'fully covered'. As Phyllis descends the stairs the camera frames her legs, fetishising her ankle chain. Neff looks on voyeuristically as she adjusts her makeup in the mirror. Whilst male and female bodies are undoubtedly situated within different representational economies (Phyllis' hair and shoulders are back lit, creating a halo effect and making her skin glow in contrast with the gritty shadows of Neff's face), it is important to recognise the racial, as well as the gender, dynamics of this scene. Not only is the narrative racialised through the exoticism of the Spanish-style mansion, but both white and class privilege are further implicated in the relationship of power between the leisured white woman and her Hispanic maid who is marginalised in the scene. Significantly, Phyllis has been sunbathing and, as Eric Lott points out, 'this relatively new white interest in fashionable self-othering - together with the redoubtable signifier of Phyllis's anklet or "slave bracelet" - makes even more necessary her cosmetic masquerade to get her "face on straight"' (Lott, 1997: 85).

The quest for the ideal of white femininity is the explicit subject of John Ford's canonical western *The Searchers* (1956), in which Nathan (John Wayne) spends years tracking down his kidnapped niece, Debbie (Natalie Wood), across the Arizona desert. In a scene towards the end of the film, Wayne and his half-nephew Martin impatiently scrutinise a group of white women rescued from their Native American captors. Showing them Debbie's rag doll in the hope of a glimmer of recognition, the men recoil in disgust as the women seize on the doll in an irrational frenzy. The women's overdetermined attachment to the doll, itself a symbol of white femininity, signals the film's preoccupation with, and fears of, miscegenation and foregrounds the trope of the maternal in reproducing white privilege. Dyer illustrates the importance of focusing specifically on femininity in a discussion of the representation of whiteness, acknowledging that 'white women's role in reproduction makes them at once privileged and subordinated in relation to the operation of white power in the world' (Dyer, 1997: 29). To this end, they are often awarded a 'positional superiority' within the colonial narratives where they function as the text's 'civilising centre' (Shohat, 1991: 63). In the topography of this film these women have been irrevocably defiled by their association with Native Americans: 'Hard to believe they're white' the captain proffers, 'They ain't white anymore' Wayne retorts. The scene ends with an extended close up shot of Wayne's scowling glower at degenerate white femininity.

Alfred Hitchcock's *Marnie* (1964), sets up a similar dynamic between the male gaze and female aberration. At the beginning of the film Mark (Sean Connery) joins in the male evaluation of female sexuality and transgression, describing kleptomaniac Marnie's disruption of the expected social codes of white femininity as 'resourceful'. We immediately cut to a scene in which Marnie (Tippi Hedren) discards her previous identity. Shot from behind, we watch as she packs a suitcase full of new clothes, including a pair of spotless white gloves, the ultimate symbol of white womanly virtue. She takes out a new social security card from a selection hidden in her pocketbook, the names on which are all distinctly Anglo-Saxon. Hedren's face is revealed for the first time when she washes the black dye from her hair and resurfaces as the typical Hitchcock blonde, emphasised by dramatic backlighting and melodramatically surging violins.

An analysis of these diverse extracts, from Wayne's repudiation of the mad women's status as white to Marnie's transgressive assumption of the trappings of white femininity, demonstrates that whiteness is clearly not a fixed or stable category. Whether or not these texts consciously deconstruct it, white femininity is revealed to be a fragile construct which needs to be constantly supported or ratified. Yet, attempts to analyse the ideal of white femininity can often also result in a reinscription of its privilege. Toni Morrison's novel *The*

*Bluest Eye* (1970) opens with the description of the childhood of a young black girl, Claudia, who is scathing about the ideal 'big, blue-eyed Baby Doll' which was considered a special gift at Christmas (Morrison, 1970: 22). Whilst the narrative attempts to undermine the idealisation of white femininity, the doll simultaneously functions, like the iconic image of Shirley Temple, as a visual signifier for its valorised position within society. By focussing on the representation of white femininity, Morrison therefore underscores the paradox of an invisible white privilege operating through the visible sign:

the doll represented what they thought was my fondest wish...I had only one desire: to dismember it. To see of what it was made...to find the beauty, the desirability that had escaped me, but apparently only me. Adults, older girls, shops, magazines, newspapers, window signs - all the world had agreed that a blue-eyed, yellow-haired, pink-skinned doll was what every girl child treasured. (Morrison, 1970: 22)

The references to Shirley Temple throughout the novel not only pinpoint the influence of film and other visual media on society but also suggest an entrenched relationship between white femininity and purity. Claudia states: 'I learned to worship her, just as I learned to delight in cleanliness' (Morrison, 1970: 25). The notion of the white woman as symbolic of (racial) purity operates through the vehicle of the beautiful, white and often blonde female star in mainstream Hollywood cinema, as illustrated by Howard Hawkes' casting of Marilyn Monroe in *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* (1953). In the musical sequence, 'Diamonds Are a Girl's Best Friend', Monroe's platinum blonde hair and dazzling complexion become analogous with the diamonds she celebrates, signifying white femininity as commodity. The other (mostly brunette) women in the scene support this ideal, literally, as human pillars holding the candelabras on the set and with their veiled faces which accentuate the whiteness of Monroe's skin.

As Doane asserts, and as these texts illustrate, it is crucial to examine 'the white woman's pivotal role in a racist representational economy': 'When a white patriarchal culture requires a symbol of racial purity to organize and control its relations with blacks...the white woman represents whiteness in itself, as racial identity and as the stake of a semiotics of power' (Doane, 1991: 244-45). Citing bell hooks, Doane goes on to argue, however, that the white woman also 'has the "luxury of dismissing racial identity" ...she becomes the norm rather than a limited, racially defined being' (Doane, 1991: 244). Dyer points out that when it comes to the representation of whiteness in visual culture there is a central paradox in operation: 'whites must be seen to be white, yet whiteness as a race resides in invisible properties and whiteness as power is maintained by being unseen' (Dyer, 1997: 45). Ironically, as he argues further, it is the very 'paradoxes and instabilities of whiteness [which] also constitute its flexibility and productivity, in short, its representable power' (Dyer, 1997: 40). If we accept hooks' assertion that 'representations colonize the mind and the imagination', then these paradoxes might be the starting point for the decolonialization of white privilege (hooks, 1996: 88).

Whiteness, then, offers a visibly recognisable and representable passport to privilege. But also, paradoxically, it is the very invisibility of white privilege, what Laura Donaldson terms 'white solipsism', which is at stake in these debates (Donaldson, 1991: 1). This paradox is effectively illustrated in Nella Larsen's *Passing* (1929). The novel is underpinned by a visual economy which both critiques and reinforces the power relationships between the characters in the novel, whilst simultaneously challenging the operation and analysis of the gaze itself. In a scene half way through, Clare Kendry is visited by two old school friends - Irene, the main protagonist of the novel, and Gertrude. All three women are

of mixed race but are attempting to 'pass' as white women. Clare, however, has managed to deceive even her (white) husband, John Bellew. John's comment on Clare's skin colour both reinforces the constructed nature of identity as performance and underscores the invisible privilege of whiteness: 'When we were first married, she was as white - as - well as white as a lily. But I declare she's gettin' darker and darker. I tell her if she don't look out she'll wake up one of these days and find she's turned into a nigger' (Larsen, 1929: 171). Identity and its concealment become recurrent tropes in the passing novel where the narrative circulates around the trauma of recognition. This generally takes the shape either of an accidental meeting with someone from the characters' past or with the danger of 'throwback', in which the character has a child with obvious black characteristics (Doane, 1991: 234; see also Fauset, 1924, 1928). In this context the mulatta woman represents a 'potential confusion of racial categories and the epistemological impotency of vision' (Doane, 1991: 234). On one hand, then, passing could be seen to constitute a practice which subverts the systems of knowledge and vision upholding the categories of 'subjectivity' and 'identity'. It could also be seen to question the very existence of discrete and homogenising categories which constitute totalising power.

The dynamics of visibility and race at work in *Passing* have resonances with Dyer's argument that whiteness, far from being a singular category, is heterogeneous: 'the relative fluidity of white as a skin colour functions in relation to the notion of whiteness as coalition, with a border and an internal hierarchy. Whiteness can determine who is to be included and excluded from the category and also discriminate among those who are deemed to be in it' (Dyer, 1997: 51). Larsen's novel illustrates how the assumption of the trappings of white femininity can operate as a transgressive strategy which resists the classification of identity. The sexual dynamics between Irene and Clare throughout the novel further complicate the matrix of white femininity, where their coded lesbian desire, like their 'black' identity, is invisible. Whilst it is important not to conflate sexual and racial differences in a reading of *Passing*, in suggesting a lesbian sub-text, the two female characters trouble the dynamic of the male gaze even whilst they are 'scrutinised' by the reader in relation to their racial characteristics. A similar tension is set up within the very different context of Ridley Scott's *Blade Runner* (1991), when Deckard (Harrison Ford) examines the retina of femme fatale Rachel (Sean Young). Ford's scientific gaze seemingly re-enacts Mulvey's trope of 'woman as image, man as bearer of the look', but Young's ambivalent status as possible replicant and her acknowledgement of lesbian desire can also be seen to unsettle the assumptions of stable, masculine subjectivity.

By concentrating on the dynamics of the visual in such a disparate range of extracts, from Hollywood films to literary texts, we have demonstrated how the representation of white femininity needs to be considered across disciplinary boundaries. This strategy is essential to the consideration of whiteness, since any refusal to acknowledge its diversity risks a reinscription of its singularity and therefore of its unspoken privilege. As such, our approach counteracts what Dyer regards as a growing hegemony within media representation:

media, politics [and] education are still in the hands of white people, still speak for whites while claiming...to speak for humanity. Against the flowering of a myriad postmodern voices, we must also see the counterveiling tendency towards a homogenisation of world culture, in the continued dominance of US news dissemination, popular TV programmes and Hollywood movies. (Dyer, 1997: 3)

Whilst the filmic texts we have discussed are largely mainstream and have white male directors, our selection of literary pieces by black women authors is both an attempt to

counteract this 'homogenisation' and to illustrate how writers like Morrison and Larsen have deconstructed whiteness from their specific cultural perspectives.

Whereas 'white studies' has developed initially from white, male-authored texts which have tended to overlook the issue of gender (see Roediger, 1991; Allen, 1994), the critique of white femininity has largely been precipitated by black feminist critics such as hooks and Hazel Carby. hooks articulates a crucial question for white feminism: 'Are we really to imagine that feminist theorists writing only about images of white women, who subsume this specific historical subject under the totalizing category "woman", do not "see" the whiteness of the image?' (hooks, 1996: 3). Carby similarly challenges white feminist myopia in her article 'White Woman Listen!' (Carby, 1997). It is vital for feminist critical practice to heed black feminism's call to "see" the whiteness of the image'. By looking at the assumptions surrounding white identity we hope to have contributed to this process.

## Notes

1 The essay developed out of an interdisciplinary workshop which we facilitated at the White?Women conference at the University of York, April 1999.

2 bell hooks, for example, situates films as 'the perfect cultural texts' to 'talk about the convergence of race, sex and class' (hooks, 1996: 5). Maggie Humm claims that 'Films' powerful misfiguring of the female is what feminism seeks to disempower. The visual is therefore a crucial visible part of any feminist theory' (Humm, 1997: 3), whilst, in literature, the 'passing' narrative demonstrates the correlation between 'visibility, knowledge, power and masquerade' (Doane, 1991: 223).

3 Interestingly, as was pointed out in the workshop, the texts chosen are all American, reflecting the fact that, whilst the discussion of whiteness has been underway for several years in the United States, there remains more to be said about it in a specifically European cultural context.

4 This has occurred overwhelmingly as an engaged response to the black feminist critique of hooks and others. In *Feminism and Film*, Maggie Humm calls for the analysis of 'a wider range of filmic desires and representations than those sighted by a singular white "spectator"' (Humm, 1997: 195). Sue Thornham outlines the way in which representations of black femininity have operated as the 'ideological Other to "controlling images" of white femininity' (Thornham, 1997: 141). E. Ann Kaplan explores the 'imperial gaze' in *Looking for the Other* (Kaplan, 1997) and Mary Ann Doane problematises Freud's racialised account of feminine sexuality in the 'Dark Continents' (Doane, 1991).

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### **Filmography**

- Blade Runner* (1982/91), Ridley Scott.
- Double Indemnity* (1944), Billy Wilder.
- Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* (1953), Howard Hawkes.
- Marnie* (1964), Alfred Hitchcock.
- The Searchers* (1956), John Ford.