

Race, ethnicity, and film

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It is rare to find a film studies scholar today who would assert that the study of race and ethnicity has little or no bearing on the discipline. Who can talk about the western, for instance, without some attention to the ideological construction of a mythic American past predicated on the wholesale binary arrangement of good white men and bad, bloodthirsty Indians? What account of the silent film era can proceed without commentary on its language of stereotype, from the Italian American gangster to the Latino greaser to the African American rapist? And how can we discuss the Hollywood industry without analysis of its workplace segregations or Motion Picture morality codes? From genre to spectator, from directorship to narration, in the ideological as well as the material realm, race and ethnicity have a foundational effect on the study of Hollywood film industry, representational practices, and spectatorial cultures.

And yet, it is difficult to speak of the study of race and ethnicity as constituting a fully formed field within film studies, at least not one definable along the lines set forth by Patricia White in 'Feminism and Film' for this volume. In that chapter, White convincingly offers a history and theoretical agenda that constitutes feminist film criticism as a coherent field within the broader disciplinary area of Anglo-American film studies. Citing the women's movement as genesis for investigations into images of women, White surveys several decades of feminist scholarship which have fundamentally

altered the way film is studied and, arguably, produced. No such overarching narrative or shared body of primary scholarship exists for the study of race and ethnicity in film.

This does not mean that political activism has not been crucial to the development of race and ethnicity in film criticism, or that the diverse categories of analysis and production organized under the rubrics of race and ethnicity bear no political or critical affinities to one another. Chicano film history, for instance, cannot be adequately discussed apart from Chicano political activity in the 1960s (Fregoso 1993), and much of the new black cinema is formed in the context of the political complexities of diasporic identities (Martin 1995). The point is simply that the study of race and ethnicity in film has taken shape according to the formation of race and ethnicity in US culture more widely, reflecting not a cross-ethnic political agenda geared to white supremacy's massive deployment, but the discrete histories and political projects of specific identity sites: African American, Asian American, Chicano-Latino, Native American, Jewish American, Italian American, and Irish American (see, respectively, Bogle 1989; Wong 1978; Garcia Berumen 1995; Bataille and Silet 1980; Friedman 1982; Lourdeaux 1990; and Curran 1989).

Focused on specific identities, and the characters, actors, writers, or directors who embody them, the large majority of film studies scholarship traces the

history of representation (the images' school) and documents the discriminatory employment practices of the industry. While such analyses have been important, critics in the late 1980s began to question the implicit segregation of race and ethnicity to non-white and non-WASP others. What would it mean to think of race and ethnicity in ways that both critique and exceed the 'minority' rubric? What aspects of formal cinematic analysis might be affected by considering race and ethnicity as critical categories irreducible to bodies? And what theoretical frameworks best articulate the historical differences and schematic overlap between the two terms? These are only some of the questions being posed by film studies scholars as the twentieth century draws to a close.

In such a context, the task of defining race and ethnicity as key themes in film studies is rather daunting. Not only must we account for the cinematic histories of specific groups, but we must also address how and why the thematic approach is an inadequate critical framework for understanding the relationships of power embedded in race and ethnicity as both socio-political and critical terms. To begin to meet these needs, this chapter examines the way the study of race and ethnicity has taken shape, first as a critical concern with the stereotype and later as a conversation about the stereotype's production in the context of post-structuralism and global image cultures. The final section looks to cross-ethnic and interethnic analysis, alongside an interrogation into the racialization of whiteness, as the new directions through which race and ethnicity might coalesce as a collective critical endeavour and organized field. But first, what do scholars mean when we talk about race and ethnicity?

Defining terms

The answer to this question varies, in part because the definitions of terms are historically mobile. As Lester Friedman points out in *Unspeakable Images* (1991), 'ethnicity' is a derivative of the Greek *ethnos*, meaning nation or race. In its earliest usage, ethnicity referred to pagans, those who were not Christian or Jewish, and only later became attached to political, national, linguistic and/or physical differences. To contemporary race theorists, this mobility demonstrates that race and ethnicity are social constructions linked to the specific discursive spheres within which they are used (Goldberg 1990). In the transformation of natural history into

the human sciences, for instance, race undergoes a radical rearticulation, losing its primary tie to national identity to become a biological distinction evinced by skin, hair, and cranial shape (Wiegman 1995). In the United States, these changes were crucial to white supremacy in the aftermath of the Civil War, making possible a continued subjugation of African Americans as racially different in the context of their official entrance into a shared national identity. So powerful has the racialization of 'blackness' been in the United States that film scholarship today concerning African Americans overwhelmingly uses race and not ethnicity as its central term (see Bobo 1995; Boyd 1996; Reid 1993; Snead 1994).

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Scholarship examining Jewish American filmic representation and industry participation, on the other hand, is decidedly organized under the rubric of ethnicity (Erens 1984; Friedman 1982). This is the case even though early cinematic representations of Jews were predicated on nineteenth-century racialized notions of Jewish identity, notions which culminated in the genocidal catastrophe of the Second World War. In the cinematic classic, *The Jazz Singer* (USA, 1927), in which a cantor's son seeks assimilation into the American 'mainstream' through vaudeville, Jakie Rabinowitz erases his Jewishness only to put on blackface and participate in the miming of African American musical traditions (Rogin 1996). In blackface, the protagonist demonstrates his assimilable whiteness, and it is this demonstration that inaugurates the necessary compromise between a racialized difference and ethnic life in a new world.

The transformation of Jewish identity from a primarily racial to ethnic discourse is the most extreme example of a process that, in far more subtle ways, has affected other European immigrant groups, most notably the Italian and Irish. In silent film and the early talkies, images of these groups relied on certain characteristics of race discourse, featuring—through the representation of the body, its skin, hair, and facial

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shape—physiognomic assertions of innate and inferior differences. Edward G. Robinson's stereotype-setting role of an Italian gangster in *Little Caesar* (USA, 1930), for instance, indexes ethnic identity via the characteristics of racial physical deficiencies such as his 'swarthy' skin, and it does so in the context of an emergent generic form, the gangster film, that would criminalize Italian American identity (see Golden 1980). But while race discourse influenced the early images of immigrants from Europe and promoted certain essentializing notions of difference, their representation throughout the twentieth century has been part of an expanding whiteness. Ethnic variations within white racial identity reference, often stereotypically (but without the institutional force of national discrimination and exclusion), customs, languages, and artefacts drawn from a group's past cultural or national milieu.

Other immigrant groups in the United States have not fared as well in the popular imaginary as have those of European descent. Asians, for instance, have long sought the kind of differentiation within race categorization which would recognize specific ethnicities, but instead the popular conception melds together the disparate histories, cultures, and languages of those from East Asia (Korea, China, and Japan) and South-east Asia (Vietnam, Cambodia, Laos, Thailand, the Philippines, and the Indonesian archipelago). In Charlie Chan, Kung Fu, the Dragon Lady, and other staple Asian figures of US film (such as the Vietcong), ethnicity is powerfully overridden by an emphasis on physical difference. Richard Feng's 'In Search of Asian American Cinema' reads the lack of specificity informing the film industry's approach to, and conversation about, Asian American ethnicities in the context of the contemporary commodification of identity. As he puts it, 'there is a market for Asian American Cinema—the problem is, it's a market that looks for Asian faces and looks no further' (Feng 1995: 34).

The illegibility of ethnic differentiations is the norm as well for those groups pre-existing the arrival of European colonialists in the Americas. Film scholarship on Native Americans, like the movies themselves, have rarely paid attention to the specificities of tribal cultures (Friar and Friar 1972). Instead the 'Indian' is represented as a homogenized figure whose cultural and highly racialized physical differences serve as background for the ideological production of the 'American' as of white European descent. Rarely are tribal languages part of the Hollywood text. *Little Big Man* (USA, 1970)

begins with Cheyenne but fails to carry it through; *Windwalker* (USA, 1980) and *Dances with Wolves* (USA, 1990) both use Lakota, but the former stars Trevor Howard in redface while the latter continues to centre the sensitive white man (Castillo 1991).

In a similar way, but with a somewhat more complicated political genealogy, scholarship on what Allen Woll (1980) first called the 'Latin image' in cinema foregrounds the complexities of immigration and colonization as the primary ways (in addition to slavery) that we organize groups within the critical terrain of race and ethnicity. While contemporary debates about immigration often highlight a 'crisis' at the Mexican–American border, the history of this border is inextricable from US colonialism, making Mexican Americans the products of two overlapping historical formations: colonialism (in the US military acquisition of the South-west and California in the mid-nineteenth century) and immigration (in the economic exploitation of Mexico in the twentieth). It is no doubt because of this tense and lengthy relationship that Hollywood films have been far more interested in Mexicans and their US descendants (Chicanos) than in any other group from the whole of Latin America. It is also the case that some of the most politicized counter-cinema in the United States has been produced under the banner of Chicano–Latino (Noriega 1992; Noriega and Lopez 1996), and much of this film production and its critical analysis stresses ethnic and not racial difference. Edward James Olmos's *American Me* (USA, 1992), for instance, makes this point through its representation of the white Chicano JD (William Forsythe).

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What this brief, and albeit condensed, history of the deployment of race and ethnicity as critical terms in the

study of US cinema indicates is twofold. First, the terms are differentially mobile. Where ethnicity provides the means for differentiations based on culture, language, and national origins, race renders the reduction of human differences to innate, biological phenomena, phenomena that circulate culturally as the visible ledger for defining and justifying economic and political hierarchies between white and non-white groups. Only when we are dealing with European immigrants and their descendants does ethnicity become the sole operative term, whether in the complex language of specific films or the critical archive. In all other instances, a racial fetishism of the corporeal is at least covertly, if not overtly, staged. Therefore (and this is the second point), race and ethnicity as terms in film criticism are themselves products of a broader and highly political discourse about power and privilege in the United States.

The stereotype

To the extent that all stereotypes of human groups are predicated on the reduction of complex cultural codes to easily consumable visual and verbal cues, the film stereotype is paradigmatically linked to racial discourse. This does not mean that all stereotypes are raced, but rather that the logic of race as visually discernible underwrites the production and circulation of the stereotype. For film studies scholars concerned with the way cinema shapes the cultural imaginary, this 'fact' has generated a large body of scholarship dedicated to cataloguing and critiquing stereotypical images (Hilger 1986; Leab 1975; Miller 1980; Pettit 1980; O'Connor 1980; Richard 1992, 1993, 1994; Woll and Miller 1987). Across the three decades that now constitute the history of the study of stereotypes, we can trace the emergence of important issues about representation and difference, the political economy of the industry, spectatorship and identification, and, most importantly, the relationship between film and culture.

Eugene Franklin Wong's *On Visual Media Racism* (1978) remains one of the earliest and best studies of the function and production of the stereotype in Hollywood film. In his specific concern with the reduction of the diverse histories and cultures of Asians in US media, Wong's analysis exemplifies the way the stereotype has been critically approached for other racialized cultural identities (African American, Chicano-Latino, and Native American) by focusing on the stereotype's rela-

tionship to (1) broad historical and political processes, (2) labour practices in the industry, (3) ideologies concerning race, sexuality, and gender, and (4) film characterization, narrative, setting, costume, and cosmetics. He thus provides a materialist analysis of the stereotype, its ideological production, and its function as an element of the symbolic structure of the filmic text.

For Wong, the stereotype is a form of representation in film that produces non-white cultures and characters as static and one-dimensional. Acting is therefore more gestural than performatively complex; more about the cliché than emotional range. For this reason, a group's stereotyped image tends to oscillate between two simple poles: good and bad, noble and savage, loyal and traitorous, kind-hearted and villainous. It is by virtue of this condensation that an image becomes a stereotype; its racialization is achieved by an implicit or explicit moral assessment concerning the group's inherent 'essence'. Silent-film images of Asians, for instance, relied on a small range of signifiers to evoke Asian difference, such as the pigtail, the slanted eye, nodding, and laundry work. The titles alone tell the story of subordinate difference: *Heathen Chinese and the Sunday School Teachers* (USA, 1904), *The Chinese Rubbernecks* (USA, 1903), and *The Yellow Peril* (USA, 1908).

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Many of the stereotypes of non-white men that film critics have analysed—the Mexican 'greaser', the Native savage, the African American beast—can be found in the silent era, which coincides historically with widespread political conversation about immigration, racial equality, and the meaning of being 'American'. These stereotypes most often functioned to shape popular memory about slavery, the Civil War, and Anglo-American acquisition of both Native and Mexican land. The violent Mexican, for instance, justified US aggression and spawned a series of films whose titles foreground their type: *The Greaser's Gauntlet* (USA, 1908), *Tony the Greaser* (USA, 1911), *Bronco*

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The Ku Klux Klan mete out their version of justice in Griffith's controversial *Birth of a Nation* (1915)

Billy and the Greaser (USA, 1914), *The Greaser's Revenge* (USA, 1914), *Guns and Greasers* (USA, 1918). When the Mexican government threatened to ban all Hollywood imports in the 1920s (Delpar 1984), the 'greaser' disappeared from the screen, only to return with a vengeance in the second half of the century in *The Wild Bunch* (USA, 1969) and *Bring me the Head of Alfredo García* (USA, 1974). A new genre form, what critics call 'gang exploitation', is the latest rendition of the theme: *Boulevard Nights* (USA, 1979), *Walk Proud* (USA, 1979), *Defiance* (USA, 1980), and *Bound by Honor* (USA, 1993).

Violent Native Americans are likewise a long-running stereotype, making their 'savage' debut in such films as *The Massacre* (USA, 1912) and D. W. Griffith's *The Battle of Elderbush Gulch* (USA, 1913), before

becoming enshrined in the western. The narrative formula is now familiar: Native tribal cultures are homogenized as bloodthirsty hordes that attack, rape, and mercilessly pillage well-meaning Anglos who are trying to bring civilization to the continent. Late-century updates of the battle for territory have fared well at the box-office with *Dances with Wolves* (USA, 1990) and *Last of the Mohicans* (USA, 1992) (Edgerton 1994).

No single film in the silent era is more important to the critical history of the stereotype than is D. W. Griffith's *The Birth of a Nation* (USA, 1915). Here, the late nineteenth-century image of the African American male as rapist turns to pure spectacle in the ideologically weighted aesthetics of black-and-white film. In Gus, played in blackface by Walter Long, we have the filmic birth of what Donald Bogle

(1989) calls the 'brutal black buck', a sexually uncontrollable figure who lusts after white women. As the repository for a host of white anger and fear in the aftermath of the Civil War, the rapist image was part of a public discourse that 'explained' lynching; it is this replication of the justification of hate crimes against blacks that spurred the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) to seek complete censorship of the film. It was banned in five states and nineteen cities (Bogle 1989), but, according to Cripps (1977), white liberals were so overpowered by the film's aesthetic splendour that on the whole they failed to protest against the film's rendition of black equality as a national crisis (just as film scholarship has often seen the film's discourse on race as a surface aspect of narrative and not central to its aesthetic success; see Rogin 1985).

The African American male is not the only figure for whom racial difference becomes sexualized in the repetitious logic of the stereotype, nor is violence the only formulation of racialized sexuality in the cinema. As Wong (1978) discusses in his analysis of the industry's institutional forms of racism, a double standard governs sexuality, affecting both narrative structures and casting practices. This standard, which enables white men alone to transgress the social injunction against miscegenation and all interracial sexual desire, has produced two gendered sets of stereotypes, each one containing an opposed symbolic pair. For non-white males, the image is either of a sexually aggressive masculinity that threatens white womanhood or of an effeminate and symbolically castrated male—the difference between, say, Gus and Mr Bojangles from the Shirley Temple films—or, in terms of Asian representation, Tori of *The Cheat* (USA, 1915) and Song Liling of *M. Butterfly* (USA, 1993). For non-white females, the stereotype oscillates between a nurturing, de-sexualized, loyal figure and a woman of exotic, loose, and dangerous sexuality: from O-Lan in *The Good Earth* (USA, 1937) to Hue Fei in *Shanghai Express* (USA, 1932) or from Mammy in *Gone With the Wind* (USA, 1939) to Epiphany Proudfoot in *Angel Heart* (USA, 1987).

Film studies scholars have interpreted the sexualization of race in Hollywood film as evidence of a much larger anxiety in American culture concerning interracial sexuality. After all, the democratic ideal of the 'melting-pot' brings into crisis the relationship between separatist cultures, languages, and sexual activity and the full force of integration which would

reconfigure the family and romance along with national identity. Since their beginning, film narratives have been obsessively drawn to this crisis, rehearsing a variety of interracial configurations and concluding, almost always, that the cost of interracial sex is much too high (*The Savage*, USA, 1953; *Imitation of Life*, USA, 1959; *A Man Called Horse*, USA, 1970; *West Side Story*, USA, 1961; and *Jungle Fever*, USA, 1991) or likely to result in tragedy. Thus, in *The Indian Squaw's Sacrifice* (USA, 1910), the title character, Noweeta, nurses a wounded white man back to health and marries him. Later he meets a white woman he had loved before, so Noweeta kills herself to allow her husband to return to the woman he loves. The same pattern occurs with minor variations in other films representing Native Americans as in *The Kentuckian* (USA, 1908) and Cecil DeMille's *The Squaw Man* (USA, 1914). Often, one of the lovers is killed at the end, thereby undoing the interracial liaison, as in *Broken Arrow* (USA, 1950) and *A Man Called Horse*.

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Reflected in many of these narratives are industry labour practices, or what Wong (1978) calls role segregation and role stratification. Role segregation refers to the ways in which non-white actors are, by virtue of their race, ineligible for certain kinds of roles, while white actors are able to move 'horizontally' into even those roles racially defined as black, Asian, Native American, or Chicano. In the study of stereotypes, 'breakthrough' films are those in which lead roles designated as non-white are actually played by non-white actors, as in *Salt of the Earth* (USA, 1954), *The World of Suzie Wong* (USA, 1960), and *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (USA, 1927). Until the mid-1960s role segregation facilitated the anxiety around miscegenation by enabling white actors to play roles of non-white characters in stories of interracial sexuality, thereby skirting the Motion Picture Production Code (called the Hays Code), which forbade representations of miscegenation (Cortés 1993). In *Pinky* (USA, 1949), for instance, the title character, who has been passing for white,

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returns home, where she comes to terms with her 'blackness' and rejects the white man who loves her. Here, the scenes between Pinky and her beau, while narratively interracial, are none the less white, thereby avoiding a realist depiction of black and white sexual desire. The larger the role, the more likely it is—think of *Bordertown* (USA, 1935), *Down Argentine Way* (USA, 1940), *Viva Zapata!* (USA, 1952), *The Searchers* (USA, 1956), *Windwalker* (USA, 1980), and *Evita* (USA, 1996)—that a white actor will get the part, especially if the story entails an interracial sexual encounter (Wong 1978).

The industry's use of role segregation is part of the history of the stereotype for a number of reasons. First, it enables white actors to occupy and signify the full range of humanity in film as a body of cultural representation, which has the powerful effect of locking non-white actors into minor roles, or what Wong (1987) calls role stratification. In minor roles, character development and complexity are even harder to achieve as narrative combines with the ideology of the camera to reiterate the secondary or background nature of non-white groups and cultures. In the western, for instance, most Native Americans will be confined to minor roles, often shot in groups from long distance, and rarely individualized through spoken lines (Hilger 1995). Other genres, such as the war story, assemble groups of non-white actors as the enemy, thereby reiterating stereotyped notions of a group's inherent violence (*Full Metal Jacket*, USA, 1987; *Sands of Iwo Jima*, USA, 1949). Second, the practice of horizontal movement of whites into non-white roles has necessitated certain kinds of development in film cosmetology that are part of the stereotype's performance. In *My Geisha* (USA, 1962), make-up artists created a new procedure for actress Shirley MacLaine's transformation from Anglo to Asian by using dental plaster, clay, and wax to fashion rubber eyepieces as her epicanthic fold. This, combined with dark brown contact lenses, a black wig, and certain habits of halting speech, perform Asian racial difference for the big screen (Wong, 1978).

What scholarly analysis of the stereotype most powerfully reveals, then, is the pervasiveness of racism as an institutionalized element of Hollywood film. In filmic structure and forms of visual pleasure (narrative, setting, cosmetology, and camera technique) as well as in industry labour practices and 'morality' codes, we witness the full arsenal of the stereotype's production. Add to this other elements—the ethnicity of directors and producers, or the specificities of English-language

use—and one can begin to explore how the seeming simplicity of stereotypes is the effect of complex histories and representational forms. This is not to say, however, that the scholarly archive on the stereotype has gone uncritiqued. In light of independent cinematic production and post-structuralist theorizations of both 'representation' and subjectivity, critical understandings of the stereotype have been transformed.

Textuality, spectatorship, and the 'real'

Perhaps the most important early critique of the stereotype is Steve Neale's 'The Same Old Story: Stereotypes and Difference' (1979). Neale defines four primary critical problems. First, the emphasis on stereotypes constrains critical analysis by remaining too tied to the level of character and characterization, thereby obscuring other features of a text or ignoring altogether the textual specificities of individual films. Second, the identification of a stereotype does not illuminate racism as either a representational or a social practice; it merely points to it. In doing so it relies, third, on an empirically based notion of the 'real' that both precedes and measures the accuracy of the image. And, fourth, such an approach promotes the idea that artistic production is inherently progressive when it offers positive images to counter the negativity of the stereotype. Because of these critical fallacies, Neale proposes a shift in attention from repetition (the citing of the 'same old story' in text after text) to difference (a focus on how texts construct racial meanings).

In defining what he understands as the weakness of ideological criticism, Neale draws on the theoretical traditions of formalism, psychoanalysis, and post-structuralism to foreground the text as a specific and discrete cultural production, question the forms of identification involved in spectatorship, and retrieve representation from its reduction to the 'real'. All these issues have remained central to critical conversations in the 1980s and 1990s, but Neale's emphasis on the stereotype as inherently problematic, perhaps even useless, has not been retained (Snead 1994; Shohat and Stam 1994). Instead, the impulse has been to deepen the theorization of the stereotype by elaborating its textual production—its circulation as a sign—and by exploring its function in the construction of social subjectivities and psychic identifications and disavowals.

In their editorial introduction to *Screen's* first special issue devoted to questions of race, Robert Stam and

Louise Spence (1983) begin to elaborate a comprehensive methodology to account for the textual practices and intertextual contexts through which 'difference is transformed into "other"-ness and exploited or penalized by and for power' (1983: 3). This emphasis on power directs attention both to the use of the camera as a representational practice and to cinema as an economic and political apparatus that circulates ways of interpreting and consuming the world. Framing the concept of voyeurism around race, and tying it both to the diegesis and to the political economy of cinema (i.e. the international market), Stam and Spence cite the camera as a crucial element in the global construction of the First World as 'subject'.

In the western's repeated motif of the encircled wagon, for instance, the camera transforms Native American difference into hierarchical otherness by locating the primary point of view behind or at the level of the wagon, with sound in the ensuing battle isolating Anglo pain and death (and most often collectivizing Indian utterance in the war 'whoop'). Shot scale and duration—close-ups focusing down upon white women and children, for instance, or the wide-angle long shot taking in a horizon filled by hostile figures—wed the technical features of filmic production to ideologies of race. The racism of a text is thus an effect of its aesthetic language and formal features of production and not simply a matter of narrative or characterization. As such, 'positive images' can be as pernicious as degrading ones, depending on the comprehensive racial discourse of a text (as in *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner*, USA, 1968).

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In demonstrating that racial discourse is more than a citation of historically racialized bodies, Stam and Spence theoretically identify a 'structuring absence' fundamental to the segregationist logic of much pre-1960s Hollywood film. For instance, Alfred Hitchcock's *The Wrong Man* (USA, 1957), in which scenes of New York City are devoid of people of colour, offers a racial discourse keyed to white visual pleasure. Critically to

analyse the structuring absence of this film does not mean decrying its lack of realism in depicting New York City, but examining instead how its racial fantasy and visual pleasure are connected. In doing so, the critic will locate the question of realism within (and not outside) the text by explicating the film's mechanisms of suture—its construction of an internal 'reality'. For Stam and Spence, a comprehensive methodology for studying the stereotype thus entails an analysis of the narrative structures, genre conventions, and cinematic styles through which a discourse of race achieves its reality effect in a given film. In the analysis of dominant Hollywood cinema, this critical move has shifted the burden of the charge of racism from individuals (e.g. Hitchcock) to the broader practices of filmic production.

But what about the spectator? For Stam and Spence, the audience is not fully constituted by the film text, nor is the filmic experience limited to its individualized visual consumption. Spectators are shaped simultaneously by the ideologies of the wider culture and their specific gender, race, and class locations. Because of this, 'aberrant readings' are both possible and plausible. 'Black Americans, presumably, never took *Stepin Fetchit* to be an accurate representation of their race as a whole' (Stam and Spence 1983: 19). Note 'presumably'. Here, the stereotype that fixes the black image on the screen is transparent in its distortion, thereby enabling black audiences to reject and rewrite the stereotype. Homi Bhabha's essay on the stereotype, published later in the same year, begins to complicate this picture of resistant readers and their identifications, and on two counts. One, knowledge of the inaccuracy of the stereotype, he argues, does not forestall the political effect of the stereotype; indeed, the stereotype is effective on a colonized subject precisely through its distortion. Two, spectator identifications are far more complex and ambivalent than their reduction to social identity asserts; therefore, 'the' black audience takes shape in contradictory and disparate ways (Bhabha 1983). More recently, Stuart Hall captures these issues in his title 'What is this "Black" in Black Popular Culture?' (1992).

In film studies, the critique of identity that is now nearly synonymous with post-structuralist analysis owes a great deal to the conversations about realism in the early 1980s. From these conversations the assumption that one 'reads' a film according to one's social identity, which is itself produced by one's positioning in hierarchies of power, is reframed; identity is

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rather an effect of discursive and material practices, not the essentialist ground for their explanations (Lubiano 1991; Snead 1994). And further, counter-reading is about historical and political oppositionality, and not essentialized difference (Fregoso 1993). This last point is forcefully made in a 1988 *Screen* volume titled *The Last 'Special Issue' on Race*. Here, guest editors Isaac Julien and Kobena Mercer assert that 'Screen theory' has marginalized race and ethnicity not only through the 'special', segregated volume, but in its popularization of the notion of difference as 'Otherness'. Declaring this the 'last special issue', they hope to move the conversation of race and ethnicity from margin to centre by foregrounding the politics of both critical discourse and cinematic practices. In doing so, the volume sets the stage for three of the most important critical emphases in the 1990s: independent film, whiteness, and ethnicity in the context of global media culture.

The present tense

The issue of independent cinema has always gone hand in hand with the analysis of the stereotype, leading to a general assumption in the 1960s and 1970s that once those from stereotyped groups controlled the means of production, new film cultures would be born. *Zoot Suit* (USA, 1981), *Chan is Missing* (USA, 1982), *El Norte* (USA, 1983), *She's Gotta Have It* (USA, 1986), *Born in East LA* (USA, 1987), and *Pow Wow Highway* (USA, 1988) each gained recognition for their self-conscious counter to Hollywood formulations. A number of these directors—Luis Valdez, Wayne Wang, and Spike Lee—have made the 'cross-over' move, with big budgets and mainstream critical acclaim (*La Bamba*, USA, 1987; *The Joy Luck Club*, USA, 1993; *Do the Right Thing*, USA, 1989).

With Hollywood seemingly willing to cash in on 'ethnic' markets, media critics and activists find themselves in the 1990s debating the 'burden of representation' that attends such widely circulated texts (Diawara 1993; Leong 1991). In a complicated analysis of Spike Lee's own claims to tell the truth of African American culture and experience, Wahneema Lubiano, for instance, emphasizes the scarcity of diverse representations within ethnic groups as part of her broader critique of Lee's political retreat into homophobic and sexist interpretations of black masculinity (Lubiano 1991). At issue in Lubiano's analysis is

the relationship between representative blackness and the proliferate whiteness of US image industries.

Whiteness, of course, has long been the context and subtext of the study of stereotypes, but until Richard Dyer's 'White' in the 'last special' *Screen* issue (1988), it has lacked any careful critical analysis. Dyer's essay begins by noting how whiteness as an ethnic category seems to lack specificity, coming into focus only as emptiness, absence, denial, or death, as is the case in *Night of the Living Dead* (USA, 1968, 1990). The resistance of whiteness to specification is an effect of its construction as the unmarked category in US racial discourse. For this reason, new work in the field is geared toward explicating both the socio-historical relationship between white identity forms and cinema and the representational practices within specific films that produce and circulate whiteness as sign (Bernardi 1996). The critical project of rendering whiteness tangible in the filmic text as one of film's most powerful and reliable narrative, characterological, and signifying systems entails a methodology that attends to textuality, on the one hand, and to Hollywood film's pedagogic function in the construction of a national imaginary, on the other (Carby 1993).

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: **margin and centre, but as a de-centred,**
: **polyvocal multiculturalism.**

It is this emphasis on the pedagogic that underwrites Ella Shohat and Robert Stam's important book *Unthinking Eurocentrism* (1994). Situating filmic production in the histories and formations of nations, and paying attention to the international economy of film, this text implicitly argues against the Eurocentric formulation of difference as physiological and racial. Instead, the authors want a critical analysis that examines 'ethnicities-in-relation', which means rethinking 'official national histories in order to link communities, histories, and identities formed across the borders of formalized nation-states. They read film culture in the context of the 'Americas' and not simply the United States, in the regions of Britain's imperial reach and not simply Europe, in the Third World, and not simply the First. In so doing, *Unthinking Eurocentrism* elaborates

an interethnic and cross-ethnic critical agenda for the study of film, one that situates difference not in a paradigm of margin and centre, but as a de-centred, polyvocal multiculturalism. This text thus offers a model for the study of race, ethnicity, and film in contemporary transnational economies of production and consumption. But more than this, it stakes out a comprehensive theoretical agenda that links diverse US populations—African Americans, Asian Americans, Chicano-Latinos, Native Americans, Jews, and Anglo-Americans—to global image cultures, independent cinemas, and Third World productions. In short, it defines a new disciplinary agenda for the study of race, ethnicity, and film.

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