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As summer began in 2015, the American news media were abuzz, deconstructing Rachel Dolezal. NBC’s *The Today Show* scored a scoop by landing the first interview with the former president of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) chapter in Spokane, Washington. It followed a week of bemusement, trips through the political press’s partisan spin cycle, and reflection by prominent black voices. The controversy ignited when Dolezal was outed as a white woman passing as African American with the aid of dark foundation make-up and creative hairstyling. The utter originality of this affair confounded many, and yet no more than a fortnight earlier, the movies were the setting for an analogous brouhaha. Film director Cameron Crowe struggled to answer questions about his choice to cast the phenotypically unambiguous white actress Emma Stone for the romantic comedy, *Aloha* (2015), in the lead role of “Allison Ng,” a character who is quarter Hawaiian and quarter Chinese (Jung 2015; Lee 2015). These two news items force us to address some crucial issues of racial epistemology related to essentialism, representation, and history. Is race biologically defined or socially constructed? Rejecting biological essentialism on political and intellectual grounds is strategically understandable, but defining race in purely discursive terms renders Dolezal and Crowe’s decisions unproblematic, when according to many, they are plainly not. More importantly, these cases demonstrate how uncannily and often cinema, of all the arts, presents us with a parallel cultural realm to work through social and political dilemmas.

Hollywood was sensitive to the critiques associated with *Aloha’s* casting controversy, which occurred not long after the 2015 Academy Awards, where nominees of color were controversially absent in the major categories (Bakare 2015). The practice of “whitewashing” possesses a long tradition among the industry’s most successful and venerated productions. Film history is replete with ignominious examples of white actors portraying characters of color. Cases that seem especially absurd and distasteful these days are the most memorable, including practices of blackface (*The Birth of a Nation*, 1915), brownface (*West Side Story*, 1961), redface (*The Searchers*, 1956) and yellowface (*Breakfast at Tiffany’s*, 1958). Questions about “whitewashing” almost always turn on the issue of representation, which can be examined in two respects: participation and accuracy. Casting becomes politicized when hiring decisions discriminate, deny economic opportunity, and
impinge on minorities’ rights to self-representation (Leab 1975; Shohat and Stam 2014). The phenomenon of white actors playing minority roles also recapitulates whiteness as the hegemonic, race-less norm (Dyer 1997)—the feature of white privilege that emboldened Dolezal’s attempt to pass.

We can also understand the need for a more inclusive mode of production as a means to ensure verisimilitude. Another recent controversy suggests that having a say behind the camera is inextricable from ensuring proper representation in front of the lens. Approximately 12 Native American actors walked off the set of a Western, *The Ridiculous Six*, alleging that the script affronted Native women and elders, used make-up to darken Native actors, and misrepresented Apache culture (Schilling 2015; Gardner 2015). While the producers in this case chose not to apologize, Crowe defended himself from the furor surrounding *Aloha* by stating that the project had “employed many Asian-American, Native-Hawaiian and Pacific-Islanders, both before and behind the camera . . . and many other locals who worked closely in our crew and with our script to help ensure authenticity” (Crowe 2015). His claims of cultural realism were an attempt to assuage critics piqued at how a story set in Hawaii features a paucity of ethnic faces. Crowe’s public statement and the outcry itself correspond with the terms of public discourse about race, for which the most pressing objectives remain social equality and cultural diversity.

Those political parameters circumscribe cinema as an economic enterprise and cultural mirror. But although the “cinema” refers literally to a motion picture theater, the expression has taken on figurative and metaphorical value. Cinema is also a technological commodity, spectacle, and social institution. Classical film theorists define the medium by its unique power to realistically and objectively capture the world (Arnheim 1957; Bazin 1960; Kracauer 1960). These adherents of “realism” rest their position on the mechanical nature of the camera and projector, as well as the chemical base of the filmstrip. The most notable, André Bazin, lauds how “an image of the world is formed automatically, without the creative intervention of man” (Bazin 1960: 7). However, at a historical juncture when digital cameras and projection systems are steadily pushing film stock into obsolescence, a period when mobile devices are joining television as acceptable alternatives to theatrical spectatorship, the foundations of what we understand cinema or film to be are rapidly shifting and even disappearing. Francesco Casetti, a theorist charting these changes, believes that the medium is “no longer necessarily tied to a single ‘machine’” (2015: 5). Rather, it is an idea that persists in new venues, on new screens, and through new platforms.

As discourses and definitions of race shift, so do those that delineate cinema. Within the irresistible gusts of technological development, we are more than ever before cognizant of cinema’s multiple and contingent identities, which provide different cultural or social contact points with race. This chapter surveys how each facet of cinema—base and apparatus; stereotypes; textual form; genre; and spectator—has been scrutinized by critical race film studies scholars. Casetti argues that parts of the cinematic “machine,” such as the theater, screen, audience, and film, are breaking down and being reassembled elsewhere (68–9). In other words, instead of presenting itself in traditional form, cinema increasingly reincarnates itself partially, psychologically, everywhere, and on all types of screens. If Casetti is right, if our current and future experience of cinema involves only portions of cinema as we still know it, then it would be vital to understand how racial ideology infuses itself into each heterogeneous element.
Base and Apparatus

“Film,” of course, refers to the medium’s material base, a celluloid strip of sequential images, and optical soundtracks that run along the edge. In spite of the value Bazin placed in cinema’s mechanical and chemical make-up, the technology is never free from human subjectivity. Richard Dyer (1997) explains that cinema is an aesthetic technology, which at key moments of innovation, variation, and refinement assumed whiteness as a norm. Developments in the chemical composition of film stock, processing, aperture adjustments, lighting methods, and make-up practices used the white face as a touchstone. As Dyer observed, “Getting the right image meant getting the one which conformed to the prevalent ideas of humanity . . . of what colour—what range of hue—white people wanted white people to be” (90–1). Dark complexions hence require departures from standard practices deemed as “problems,” especially in shots containing both black and white faces (97). It has always been possible to shoot dark faces “properly,” as it were, but it only underlines the hierarchy of illumination that allows some people into culture more readily than others (103). The digital transition promises to break that hegemony, however. The ubiquitous use of digital intermediates—a post-production process where color and other image characteristics are digitally adjusted—provides flexibility. Cinematographers working with diverse casts are also discovering that sensors in digital cameras are better able to hold contrasting skin tones simultaneously (Hornaday 2013).

Presumptions carried over from photographic portraiture are not the only part of cinema that conforms to Eurocentric conceptions of humanity. The Renaissance perspective of the camera’s image may also be considered ideological. An eminent essay by Jean-Louis Baudry traces the perspective and aspect ratio of the film image back to the camera obscura and Western painting (Baudry 1974/5). He argues that the single vanishing point sets up the viewer as a transcendental subject, an “active center and origin of meaning” (40). Reinforced through centuries of artistic practice over the style of, say, Chinese and Japanese painting, the interpellation has normalized vision and perspective in animated films and videogames. Baudry adds that subjectivity is specifically strengthened in cinema by the illusion of movement created by projection, and classical continuity editing that prioritizes narrative unity and cohesion (42–4). Baudry’s critique is not directly concerned with race, and to interpret the essay as such requires us to lasso together the Renaissance, the Enlightenment, Eurocentrism, and white supremacy. But that conflation is not uncommon in critical race film theory, namely those rooted in postcolonial studies such as Homi Bhabha’s (1983) that values split or mixed subjectivity over the unified subject of the Enlightenment.

Stereotypes

Studying race through each constitutive part of cinema inverts the more familiar strategy with which Anglo-American film studies navigates the relationship between race and films. The field usually approaches the question through race, and subdivides the inquiry into sections devoted to different social groups’ encounters with movies, to wit, “according to the formation of race and ethnicity in U.S. culture more widely, . . . the discrete histories and political projects of specific identity sites: African American, Asian American, Chicano-Latino American, Native American, Jewish American, Italian American, and
Irish American” (Wiegman 1998: 158). The limits of this methodology come from how it complies with identity politics and strengthens ethnic disciplinary boundaries at the expense of cultivating collective consciousness and action (Sim 2014: 44–56). Some see multiculturalism as an antidote to the drawbacks to identity-driven criticism (Wiegman 1998: 166–7; Shohat and Stam 2014), but I contend that the ideology actually facilitates sectarian divisions. In any event, despite the occasional exception, identitarian studies also tend to treat cinema too simplistically. Their focus dwells on how films reinforce stereotypes—when they depict racial minorities in negative, regressive, disrespectful ways. The importance of “image studies” remains undiminished because stereotypes evolve and ideology finds new ways to perpetuate prejudice and vice versa. And the widespread readiness by the public to condemn derogatory characterizations is without question a credit to that fruitful and longstanding mode of racially conscious film criticism. Following this chapter, I direct interested readers to a useful selection of such work for “Further Reading.” But there is much more to think about than how a race is represented in one film or another.

Perhaps the earliest and most lucid declaration of film studies’ need to develop more sophisticated methods for race comes from a 1979 essay in Screen Education, where Steve Neale lays out a case on theoretical, practical, political, and textual grounds. Negative stereotypes are most commonly criticized for being reductive and not matching up with the complexities of reality. But Neale points out that critiques of inaccuracy presume, against the theoretical trends in the humanities, that reality is empirically knowable. One could easily, for instance, take exception to the Black Panthers caricatured in Forrest Gump (1994), but we must also be prepared to offer a different history and more progressive account without insisting on definitiveness. Paradoxically, stereotype analysis usually implies that films should replace negative images with positive ones that are equally reductive, in effect thrusting onto cinema a responsibility to depict reality not as it is, but as it should be (Neale 1979). Moreover, positive images are usually influenced by bourgeois ideals or capitalist ideology (Neale 1979; Shohat and Stam 2014). For example, Sidney Poitier’s iconic role as Dr. John Prentice in Guess Who’s Coming to Dinner (1967) embodies those values. Finally, Neale finds that image analysis expends too much “concentration on character and characterization at the expense of attention to textual systems and modes of address” (35). That is to say, it may examine specific images in isolation when film meaning invariably emerges from many formal elements interacting with each other in a textual assembly of images and sounds.

Simplistic image analysis becomes less useful to critics more familiar with the complexity in film language. Consider the difference between two seminal works in the field, Edward Said’s Orientalism (1978) and Ella Shohat and Robert Stam’s Unthinking Eurocentrism (1994). Orientalism, a foundational book in postcolonial studies, is a product of Michel Foucault’s intellectual influence on ideas about power and discourse. When Said links colonial projects to the racially inflected art and literature produced by colonizing powers, his textual readings evince sensitivity to discursive nuance as well as his background in comparative literature. But when discussing cinema, Said does not interpret films with the depth that Neale believes is necessary. Shohat and Stam, who draw direct connections between racial ideology in cinema, the function of Otherness in colonial narratives, and the economic and political base of imperial rule, agree with Said on the material context for racism. But as film scholars, they complement an extensive global survey of postcolonial media culture with an impetus to expand Said’s premise, and succeed in accommodating “the multiplicity of [film] systems and operations” (Neale 1979: 33).
Characters in film function in a visual and narrative context. They are framed with other characters and within the “diegesis,” an analytical term used in film studies to refer to the world of the film. Multiple images are edited together, then layered with sound and music, to advance a plot. Through these means, filmmakers manufacture a film’s intellectual or emotional tone, which can shift rapidly from one moment to the next. Each of these aspects of film form—shot composition, shot relations, sound, and music—follows a rather distinct discursive structure. The narrative text that results from their intermingling produces what Shohat and Stam summarize as “point-of-view”—how spectators grasp a character. They describe these variables contributing to the film’s ideological message as “the question of perspective and the social positioning both of the filmmakers and the audience” (Shohat and Stam 2014: 205).

As a hermeneutic component, film music is ideologically tinged. Scoring conventions that establish location frequently borrow from cultural associations. But while rhythmic, harmonic, tonal, and instrumentalational differences exist between cultures, musical codes are often simplistic and stereotypical. Few among us would “misinterpret” mariachi music or Oriental riffs even if we recognize their crudeness as narrative devices. Race is further implicated in film music’s emotional significations. Jazz, for instance, represents “the urban, the sexual, and the decadent in a musical idiom perceived in the culture at large as an indigenous black form” (Kalinak 1992: 167). Hugo Friedhofer’s music for The Young Lions (1958) illustrates this racial coding lucidly. The jazzy waltz associated with actor Marlon Brando’s encounter with a provocative seductress contrasts with the fuller, more harmonic music signifying deeper emotions for his scenes with a woman he loves (Burt 1994: 18–21).

Music and montage (or editing) position spectators within the narrative geographically and socially. The camera’s location and point of view places audiences in specific spots in the diegesis. When the Comanches raid the Edwards homestead in the introductory act of The Searchers (1956), the camera is within the house. As a result, we view the attack as a member of the Edwards family. The audience only sees the Comanches at a great distance, from inside the home and alongside the people under attack. Viewers also take on an emotional perspective. Atonal musical notes convey fear of the unknown. We witness panic start to grip the family, and are cued to feel their terror. Spectators thus develop a clear rooting interest in the situation. By the time we finally see the villainous chief Scar at the end of the scene, it is difficult to come away from his visage without feeling the Edwards family’s visceral fear of the violent, sexual threat presented by the Other.

This is the sort of social positioning that Gillo Pontecorvo contravenes in his famous anti-colonial film about the French-Algerian war, The Battle of Algiers (1967). The director, according to Engelhardt (1971), inverts an “imagery of encirclement” and, as Stam and Spence have observed, “the identificatory mechanisms of cinema on behalf of the colonised rather than the coloniser” (1983: 12–13). He relocates the camera to take a socially opposite viewpoint. Shohat and Stam spotlight a key scene where a group of Algerian women, colonized racial Others, are framed in close-up as they prepare a terrorist action. Underneath, images that install our point of view with them through spatial proximity, off-screen voices of French soldiers uttering sexist slurs impose a point of audition. Even without political context, the sequence is constructed to engender sympathy with killers and a reverse-Eurocentric perspective. As Shohat and Stam write, “It makes us want the women to complete their task” (2014: 253).
Mode of Address: Genre

Cinema also affects perspective and positioning through its mode of address, a term derived from semiotics for the relationship that a film constructs for spectators. A powerful and noteworthy determinant of mode of address is genre, a bone of contention in a few recent controversies. In comedies and science fiction, for example, generic adjustments to normal expectations of realism can serve to defend against racism accusations. Netflix, the company that released the controversial *The Ridiculous Six*, defended the 2015 film in a news release: “The movie has ‘ridiculous’ in the title for a reason—because it’s ridiculous. It is a broad satire of western movies and the stereotypes they popularized, featuring a diverse cast that is not only part of—but in on—the joke” (Gardner 2015: n.p.). Indeed, comedy theory broadly accepts the wisdom that critical if not emotional distance is a prerequisite condition for humor. The racial stereotyping in a satirical film such as *Blazing Saddles* (1974) is clearly not supposed to be taken literally. A film can also modify its address abruptly. In Spike Lee’s drama, *Bamboozled* (2000), the commercial spoofs for “Da Bomb” malt liquor and “Timmy Hilnigger” clothes wield a sharp satirical edge, but the jokes require viewers to reset the terms of their narrative engagement with very little warning. In short, mode of address is an important determinant of what constitutes satire, but its subjectivity can absolve filmmakers of ideological responsibility.

Science fiction imposes a similar effect on cinematic realism. Spectatorial willingness to suspend disbelief abets the genre’s reliance on fantasy. It liberates writers wishing to explore contemporary dilemmas from the limits of earthly reality, including those constraining open racial discourse. According to Ed Guerrero, race is a matter of “ongoing construction and contestation” that science fiction often works through “in many symbolic, cinematic forms of expression, but particularly in . . . abundant racialized metaphors and allegories” (1993: 41, 55–6). However, critics also point out that bodies of color are often mined in films “as a nexus of difference and danger.” The eponymous monster in *Predator* (1987), for example, wears dreadlocks, evokes colonial ethnographic imagery, and is accompanied by African drumming on the soundtrack (Nama 2008: 75–6). At the same time, sci-fi realism affords creators plausible deniability. More than one installment of *Star Wars*, arguably the most profitable film series in history, has been charged with racial stereotyping. The customary defense mounted by both creator George Lucas and his production company Lucasfilm is that the fantasy films have no basis in reality (Okwu 1999; Hodges 2002).

That rhetorical parry does not nullify criticism, but it enjoys traction among skeptical publics. Indeed, commercial cinema itself has economic and institutional reasons to resist change. It will always be more tempting and convenient not to challenge ideological status quo because film productions are risk-averse business ventures that rely on institutions with great inertia. It is therefore understandable that radical material finds refuge in alternative genres such as avant-garde and independent cinema. Non-narrative films, experimental documentaries in particular, are often the most welcoming venues for filmmakers to question racial assumptions and epistemologies. Poststructuralist redefinitions of race’s political, discursive, and performative contingencies inform the work of Marlon Riggs, Tracy Moffatt, Trinh T. Minh-Ha, and others (see Nichols 1993; Morris 2006; Trinh 1989). And in between mainstream cinema and experimental film sit the independent work of Julie Dash and Wayne Wang.
**Spectators**

Regardless of how a film crafts its mode of address, in the end it can only provide interpretive cues because meaning is ultimately generated by spectators in the act of reading. Although ideology most insidiously interpellates subalterns into accepting the underpinnings of their own subjugation, audiences of color inevitably bring to their film experiences knowledge and awareness of their own Otherness. Reception studies posit that socially marginalized groups with life experiences incongruent with the ideal spectator’s do not passively accept racist or colonialist representations of the world. Uncommon cultural awareness alienates spectators from the text, and lead to “a complex process of negotiation” (Bobo 1995: 3), whereby they generate “aberrant” (Shohat and Stam 1983: 352; Stam and Spence 1983: 18), “oppositional” (Reid 1995: 25), or resistive (Diawara 1988: 66) readings. These studies’ conclusions are either hypothetical (based on a scholar’s own analysis of film texts) or empirically driven (using audience surveys and interviews). The latter was motivated by the need to explore “how nonacademic readers actually make sense of texts” (Bobo 1995: 23), beyond merely assuming how readers use the cultural product (Shively 1992: 726).

Real readers invariably reveal that they respond to racial ideology ambivalently, and often in surprising and counterintuitive ways. For example, sociologist JoEllen Shively’s research discovers that Native Americans, a group whose embodiment of uncivilized savagery in the Western originates from the genre’s roots in Frederick Jackson Turner’s “frontier thesis,” in fact identify with the films’ fantasy of freedom, independence, and affinity with the land (1992: 733). Donald Bogle similarly believes that African-American spectators appreciated the skill and subversive nous that black performers brought to denigrating roles (Bogle 1973). And while curiosity toward African-American reception of African-American films seems somewhat natural, it is equally productive to think about why black audiences gravitated to the martial arts genre in the 1970s (Desser 2000; Cha-Jua 2008).

As a whole, reception studies attempt in one form or other to establish cultural or political agency within a media landscape marked by Eurocentrism and white supremacy. The impetus drives the narrative of Jacqueline Stewart’s *Migrating to the Movies* (2005), an account of early twentieth-century black film culture that shows how African-American audiences politicized their experiences in all-black movie theaters and translated that engagement into film production. The conditions of film spectatorship are, of course, currently in a radical phase of transformation. For now, theatrical exhibition is still far from extinct and remains a vital part of most films’ economic life, but audiences are becoming increasingly accustomed to watching movies at home or on mobile platforms. The trend is reflected in recent work on virtual communities of film viewers, who gather online to discuss topics such as the Asian identities of biracial actors (Nishime 2005). Desire for agency unites audience research and historical work about minority film production.

The digital era offers optimism to those who believe that controlling the creative process is a critical precondition of agency, or that filmmakers’ relationships to the mode of production define their creative identity (Reid 1993; Feng 2002: 7–8). In the minds of many, digital cinema democratizes film culture, since it makes all phases of cinema—production, distribution, and exhibition—cheaper and more accessible. The mournful eulogies emanating from traditionalists for the death of film are often overwhelmed by the celebratory discourse of others who embrace digital cinema and new media. Consider
the criticism of the whitewashed casting in *Aloha*, which was amplified by the Internet and drew the filmmaker to respond online. Those frustrations were alleviated, somewhat ironically, through the idealistic promises of posthumous cinema.

**References**


**Further Reading**


(As their titles suggest, these four books offer overviews of racial stereotypes in film.)