

Paul Bowman

6 Sex and Race go Pop

Abstract: This chapter examines the question of the relations between media representations, their interpretations, and popular cultural practices and attitudes in relation to them. It begins by stating the centrality of filmic representations to popular culture today, and moves on to analyse, first, the gendered and sexualised images as seen in a large proportion of music videos by way of a reading of ‘Ayo Technology’ by 50 Cent and Justin Timberlake, a reading that uses Laura Mulvey’s hugely influential feminist account of ‘visual pleasure’. Secondly, the chapter opens its frames of reference to include a consideration of the place of masculinity and ethnicity in popular cultural discourses, drawing on the work of Rey Chow and her concept of ‘coercive mimeticism’. Mulvey’s approach was constructed in film theory and Chow’s notion of coercive mimeticism was constructed in postcolonial studies, but this chapter shows their usefulness and applicability in any analysis of the visual aspects of popular culture.

1 Introduction: cinema as a cultural technology

The connections between mass-mediated forms of popular culture, such as film or pop music, and matters that could be called political are often difficult to discern. This is so even though they can be said to be overwhelmingly “visual” matters. More precisely, they are matters of “representation”, and more specifically still, matters of representation, which are ineradicably wedded to particular types of media technology. To elucidate these propositions, this chapter first shows some of the ways in which cinema and film in general can be shown to be significant “cultural technologies”, and some of the ways in which they have complex effects on culture and identity. It then goes on to analyse two music videos in terms of what they could be said to show us about gender, sexuality, race and ethnicity in the contemporary media-saturated world.

More and more of the world can be said to be media-saturated. And this is not a particularly new thing. It is rather that the types of media that are dominant in different times and places change. The 19th Century was arguably the century of the dominance of literature and of the British Empire. Literature was the dominant cultural form; Britain the dominant national force. To the extent that this is the case, it can also be said that the 20th Century can be regarded as the century of the United States of America and cinema. The USA emerged as the dominant (or hegemonic) cultural and economic force and presence, with the cinema as the dominant cultural form or technology. The complex processes involved are often distilled into the word “Hollywood”, a term which evokes the global ideological

hold of the USA and the channelling of that ideology through the film form and the cinematic apparatus.

We might ask, what then is the 21st Century? Historians of all areas of life – from culture to economics, from military to market, from language to technology – have proposed that the 21st Century seems likely to be the century of China and the internet. We will have to defer a sustained consideration of the question of “China”, at this point – although the effects of the changing status of China is a fascinating question (Chow 1993; Park 2010). Instead, let’s begin our visual cultural analysis from the question: what kind of cultural form or technology is the internet? As I write these words in 2012 – over 20 years after the birth of the World Wide Web – the jury is, in fact, still out. Rather than trying to predict the future by trying to anticipate the cultural significance and development of the Internet, let us first consider the fate of the older 20th Century cultural technology of film in the context of the emergence of the Internet.

Some cultural theorists have recently started talking of the transition from a “cinematic” age to a “post-cinematic” age. Such an idea will doubtless undergo further revision and elaboration and find a much more precise formulation as time goes on. But for now, Steven Shaviro’s “Post-Cinematic Affect” (Shaviro 2010) leads the way in this regard, by engaging with the effects of post-cinematic technologies on our experiences, orientations, emotions, feelings and lives.

“Post-cinematic” technologies include all that is associated with the rise of interactivity, gaming, multimedia, and the proliferation of different internet platforms, as well as various new types of text, such as the music video, the new ways, modes and contexts of experiencing and consuming them and the effects they have on consciousness and perception. Shaviro considers the rise to dominance of these “post-cinematic” technologies in terms of a transformation of “affects”: mutations of experiential landscapes, emotional geographies, and perceptual and sensorial ecosystems. Using a famous term developed by the pioneer of cultural studies, Raymond Williams, (yet developing this term in ways informed more by the French philosopher Gilles Deleuze), Shaviro characterises this as an epochal transformation in dominant “structures of feeling”. In other words, the rise of the post-cinematic context has transformed our lives in ways related to our day-to-day and moment-to-moment experience.

If such post-cinematic technologies have transformed structures of feeling, this is not the first time this has happened. For instance, we might consider the emergence of cinema itself. Rey Chow opens her 1995 book *Primitive Passions* (Chow 1995) with a reconsideration of the famous story of the turn towards a writing career of the monumental figure of Chinese literature, Lu Xun. Whilst he was a medical student at the very beginning of the 20th Century, Lu Xun watched with horror the cinema newsreels depicting atrocities committed in the Russo-Japanese War in Manchuria, including the executions of Chinese people. Lu Xun’s account of his response to these sights is complex and provocative. Indeed, his response

to these first cinematic newsreels actually prefigures many of the dominant questions that have arisen in the face of cinema and other forms of viewing or “passive consumption” of mass media messages. For instance, Lu Xun asked, how could the witnesses to executions be so “passive”; how could audiences, of any kind, “do nothing”; and, more to the point, what could he himself do here and now to address such wrongs and escape the incapacity and passivity of being nothing but a viewer?

These first problems, arising very early on in response to the first cinematic experiences of news reports, arguably set out many of the entrenched problems associated with the cinema, especially the problem of a sense of incapacity, castration, helplessness and passivity. Rey Chow’s analysis of Lu Xun’s emotional and intellectual response is far reaching and immensely important (Chow 1995). But the point I want to single out and draw attention to here is one that Chow emphasises about the significance of the fact that this new technology (the “cinematic” apparatus) precipitated a peculiar response from Lu Xun: in response to the media images, he turned away from his chosen career path of medicine and towards “literature”, believing that he could do more to improve the health of China by cultural or ideological intervention than by medical intervention.

Central to Chow’s reading of this famous narrative is the following: Xun’s response to the new cultural technology (cinema) sends him into a relationship with an “older” technology (literature). From this, Chow proposes that it is possible to perceive the effects of “cinema” in (and on) Xun’s “literature”. From this point, one may broaden the perspective and begin to explore the significance of the emergence of “cinema” within subsequent developments in “literature”. Indeed, we might even be tempted to regard the majority of 20th Century literature as “post-cinematic”, in that it is literature produced in a cultural world that the cinematic apparatus has intervened into – and has in fact dominated and transformed.

In other words, this is the same as to say that after the birth of cinema, literature could never be the same again. In this sense, Lu Xun’s story is exemplary of the epochal mutation entailed in the shocks and jolts that are such a central part of life in modernity. The shock of the new attendant to the emergence of cinema had effects in untold ways in untold numbers and kinds of context – so much so that literature itself, in modernity, since the birth of cinema, might best be regarded as post-cinematic. Of course, this reverses the chronological periodization and emphasis that organizes Shaviro’s book. For, the idea of the “post-cinematic” that Shaviro uses in his book is one which points to all that new stuff that comes “after” cinema: computers, the Internet, the dynamism and interactivity of gaming or web 2.0; before that, cable and satellite TV, multiple (indeed myriad) television and radio channels, video, DVD, and all the rest. Nevertheless, as was implicit even in the very first theorisations of the word “postmodern” by such philosophers as Jean-François Lyotard, one of the key points about the postmodern is that everything you can say about the features of the “post” are actually already there, at

the outset, before the emergence of the period of “the post” as such (Lyotard 1984): so you can see elements of “postmodernity” at the origins (and throughout) the historical period called “modernity”. Postmodern thinkers such as Lyotard have long pointed out that the postmodern is implied in and active in the very emergence of the modern, right from the start.

Rey Chow’s reading of Lu Xun’s affective response to these early experiences of (or encounters with) cinema demonstrates this explicitly. The new technology intervenes into, informs and thereby transforms the cultural landscape in ways which have knock on (albeit unpredictable) effects on other forms of cultural production and reception. To see this at a basic level, one need merely consider the extent to which so many literary best-sellers today have clearly been written with the production requirements of the standard Hollywood film form firmly in mind. This is but one register of the hegemony or dominance of the cinematic form and its “hegemonization” even of other cultural realms, such as literature.

In any case, Shaviro argues that contemporary cultural conditions are such that the cinematic epoch is coming to a close. We are now at the end(s) of the cinematic. This is being registered “within” cinema, even though cinema remains strongly influential across all of its inheritors – all of the new technologies that are taking cinematic technologies forward in new directions. This is why the times are to be regarded as “post-cinematic” and not “anti” or “non-cinematic”. Cinema is on the wane while other technological forms are on the rise, just as the USA is on the wane in terms of its global hegemony, while China is on the rise in terms of economic and military strength. Thus, gaming, all things interactive, the music video, and other new arrivals on the audio-visual technological scene, all remain hugely informed by cinematography, but they move away from its technological limitations.

Meanwhile, cinema attempts to incorporate the new technological advancements within itself: from DVD menus, extras, commentaries, outtakes, integrated marketing strategies with other realms (gaming, animation, toys and merchandise, spin off series) and other supplements, all the way to the inclusion of forms of interactivity that ultimately signal the demise of the older form. According to this perspective, films like *Blade Runner* (1982) or *StmOne* (2002) are not post-cinematic, whilst *The Matrix* (1999) or even the Korean film *Old Boy* (2003) are. The former are films “about” future technologies, whilst the latter “incorporate” future technologies into themselves, insofar as both films famously affect the styles of computer simulated choreographies in their most famous fight scenes, albeit in different ways: *The Matrix* employs the sharpness and precision of arcade game fights, whilst *Old Boy* incorporates the two-dimensional plane of older forms of computer game, but it counterbalances this with the inclusion of all of the scrappiness, imprecision, stumbling, gasping, moaning and, indeed, “messy brawling” that almost all action films exclude or repress (as exemplified by the ultra-precise choreography of *The Matrix* or *The Bourne Identity* trilogy (2002, 2004, 2007)).

2 What's the big deal about cinema? Or: what does cinema "do"?

2.1 Case study 1: activity, passivity, gender and sexuality

Now, whether post-cinematic or classically cinematic, one important question is that of what the cinema "does", or what the cinematic apparatus "does": what effects this type of media has on people, what difference it makes to culture and society. As already indicated, one abiding argument made especially by Marxist thinkers is that the cinema makes us "passive" (Adorno and Horkheimer 1986). Some thinkers have been concerned that societies dominated primarily by the imposition of viewing relations, in which we're all spectators, not only make us passive but actually make us acquiescent to or even enthusiastic for the worst kinds of political power. In the worst cases we can become enthusiastic for populist or fascist dictators who exploit the cinematic apparatus to make us think that they are charismatic, wise, authoritative, avuncular or loveable father figures or suchlike. (The film theorist Bazin argued that this manipulation of cinematic effects was the root of Stalin's success in the Soviet Union.) At the very least, it is clear that we can have our heart-strings plucked by formulaic and clichéd devices of emotional or affective manipulation.

The cover of Guy Debord's classic, *The Society of the Spectacle* – one of the most influentially pessimistic Marxist texts about the effects of a media saturated society – has an image of rows of transfixed viewers sitting in a cinema, all facing towards the screen, all equally and identically enthralled. This has become one of the defining images of the positions which see a media saturated society as one which produces passivity, not only in audiences but effectively in everyone (Debord 1994).

But this argument about passivity, docility or plasticity is not the end of the story about cinematic effects. One of the most influential analyses of the ideological effects of the cinematic apparatus was set out by Laura Mulvey in 1975. In an essay entitled *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema* (Mulvey 1975), Mulvey uses psychoanalytic (not Marxist) theory to argue that "the unconscious of patriarchal society has structured film form". Specifically, she argues, the regular repeated "image of the castrated woman [is used by Hollywood film] to give order and meaning to its world". The men fight for the woman. They fight over the woman. The drama circles around the woman. So, "woman" is "tied to her place as bearer of meaning", but she is not the "maker of meaning". The woman is objectified. She is the motive force of the action, but she is essentially excluded from it. Specifically, argues Mulvey, in classic Hollywood, woman is the object of the gaze. She is there "to be looked at". And this has significant implications, she argues. For it clarifies the extent to which filmic and other media images work to reinforce patriarchal, sexist or misogynistic ideologies.



Fig. 1: Woman “to-be-looked-at”, in the music video for “Ayo Technology” by Justin Timberlake and Fifty Cent”.¹

A clear example of what Mulvey calls the classic effect of such a style can be seen in many pop music videos. Perhaps the best, to my knowledge, is that of the video for the song “Ayo Technology”, performed by Justin Timberlake and Fifty Cent. In this video, set in London, we see the male performers play ersatz James Bond characters. However, although they are slick-suited and sporting various forms of weaponry and technological gadgets, like Bond, they are not spying on villains, criminals, terrorists, or other stock kinds of antihero; rather they are spying on various female characters. Early shots in the video see them looking through night vision goggles and peering through the sights of large guns at women who are scantily clad and, in unusual locations, performing strangely incongruous erotic dances. An early moment sees Fifty Cent spying through a gun-sight from a rooftop, looking down at a girl dressed only in her underwear and high heels as she gets into a sports car.

Other scenes see Timberlake spying through binoculars from a chauffeur-driven car at a woman who is writhing in underwear, back-lit, in silhouette, in the window of a city flat or apartment. Later on in the video, Timberlake and Fifty Cent also appear to command futuristic sci-fi-like technologies, which can evidently act on women at a distance: Fifty Cent controls a virtual computer akin to the device

¹ <http://music.yahoo.com/blogs/framed/archive/22.html>.

that Tom Cruise uses to see events with omniscience in *Minority Report* (2002). For Tom Cruise's police officer character in the movie, the computer functions to help him master imponderable amounts of data and to perform calculations that attempt to predict the future. Fifty Cent, however, uses a similar-looking device in such a way as to make women become sexually aroused.

Eventually, the video devolves down to the protagonists entering a private or luxury and exclusive lap-dancing club. This has all the hallmarks of a traditional upper-class London "gentleman's club", plus strippers. At this point, we see the male protagonists enjoy lap-dances whilst they themselves are blindfolded, as if inverting the original form of pleasure: at the start of the video, the men enjoy the scopophilia of looking and desiring. By the end, in contrast to the common understanding of the etiquette of lap-dancing establishments, in which customers can typically look but not touch, the males, in being blindfolded, are evidently now allowed to touch. Apparently, being blindfold will enhance this experience for them. (This scene is intercut with other scenes in which Timberlake also appears elsewhere: erotic scenes on the stairways, in the doorways and on the landings of a residential apartment building.)

There is much that could be said about such a video, and many others like it. From the perspective offered by Laura Mulvey, the video first illustrates the desiring, objectifying, controlling aspirations of "the male gaze". The male gaze is a voyeuristic, "scopophilic", controlling gaze, she argues. It is a sexualised and sexualising gaze. It literally "targets" the female form and objectifies it. In this case, the gun-sight through which Fifty Cent spies is clearly a phallic image. The gun targets the woman, and the act of sighting the women is in itself an enactment of power. He could easily "shoot". He could easily "take" her. He feels in control. The decision is in his hands. In a sense, therefore, he is already in control, by virtue of his viewing position.

Similarly, the night-vision binoculars used by Timberlake confer upon the screen the green tint that has been associated (in film and television, in news, fact and fiction) not only with security cameras and military weapons, but also with the visual look of various much-publicised celebrities' private/personal pornographic sex tapes. Many of these came to light at around the same time as this music video. The Paris Hilton sex tapes are perhaps the most famous (and perhaps most cruel) example of a rash of "private" sex videos to emerge around that time. Moreover, at these points, the camera angle changes to that of a hand-held private or amateur video, which emphasises the pornographic allusions. (This song, "Ayo Technology", was reputedly first titled "Ayo Pornography", but the decision was taken to rename it and change the lyrics accordingly because the word "pornography" would damage its ability to receive prime time TV and radio airplay, and hence maximise sales and revenues.)

2 <http://www.wired.com/underwire/2007/08/50-cent-and-jus/>.



Fig. 2: Fifty Cent strangely blindfolded in a lap-dance club – as if the women who are employed to be looked at are not desirable to him, or need not be looked at; implying that “the most” desirable women are those who have to be spied on.²

So, the video performs a certain male fantasy of desire, control and sexualising objectification. At the same time as this, and in a way that is entirely consistent with Mulvey’s argument, the video depicts women as reciprocally (or perhaps even primarily) performing for a male gaze – and, crucially, even when a literal male gaze is not normally assumed to be present. The case of the female figure writhing at the window is the clearest example. For, via this scenario, the video seems to suggest, this is precisely the way that beautiful women will behave when they undress; that even when they believe themselves to be home alone and even when they are simply changing their clothes, they are still basically “asking for it”.

The idea of identity as “performance” – that is, as something that is not simply natural or inevitable, but is rather a culturally obligatory performance – was perhaps most widely popularized in the arguments of the early work of Judith Butler. Butler’s arguments have since become widely accepted – to a greater or lesser extent – in cultural and media studies (as well as the humanities more widely). It is a perspective that has significant implications for what we might call the politics of media and culture – for part of the argument is that we learn how to “perform”, how to “be”, from what we “see”.



Fig. 3: The male gaze is controlling, patriarchal, objectifying and “targeting”.³

There are many implications and ramifications here. The video reiterates a version of masculinity as gaze and femininity as “to-be-looked-at-ness” – or male as controlling and female as controlled. With the lyrical repetition of “oh, she wants it, oh, I’m gonna give it to her”, and similar sentiments, it repeats the misogynistic perspective that women are “asking for it”. But, the question then becomes one of “our agency” in front of the text. Or in other words: once we see that the text is patriarchal, misogynistic and sexist, the question is, does that mean that the viewer will be or become patriarchal, misogynistic and sexist? Is the viewer “passive”? Does the filmic text manipulate us the way that the virtual technology used by Fifty Cent in the video manipulates the woman?

I am reluctant to propose that the watching of videos, films, TV or other media, is going to generate a case of “monkey see, monkey do”. In other words, I am not proposing that such videos in and of themselves cause or deepen misogyny or patriarchy. However, this is certainly a possibility that needs to be entertained. For, according to the implications of Mulvey’s approach, what such texts do is that they “normalise” these patriarchal viewing relations: we – male and female – become “used to” (habituated, acclimatised) viewing the world this way, to apprehending the female as body, as object, as sex, and to regarding the male as power-

³ <http://music.yahoo.com/blogs/framed/archive/22.html>.

ful, controlling, gazing; we get used to regarding the woman as “wanting” to masquerade and “perform” her femininity as her sexuality for the male gaze, etc.

Another clear example of this can be seen in many Beyoncé songs and videos, in which apparently “feminist” sentiments are uttered – declarations about “independence” and “strength”, for instance, which might at first glance seem to be feminist. But the problem is that these sentiments emerge within songs which are otherwise entirely organised by the performance of desire for a man. One song, which claims to celebrate strong independent femininity, nevertheless repeats the phrase “if you like[d] it then you should have put a ring on it”. In other words, the song is organised by a kind of bitterness – a bitterness about and a desire for male commitment. Such resentment hardly seems to be a feminist sentiment, or even the sentiment of a truly “free” and “independent” person. Rather, in this performance, we see a combination of contradictory sentiments which show that the celebration of independence is in fact a grudging resentful response to the disappointment elicited when the (absent) male refused to “put a ring on it” – i.e., to commit, to get engaged or married. To this extent, all the words about “feminism” or “strength” in the song are a mere replaying of the most patriarchal of assumptions or stereotypes about males and females: that men will not commit, and that all women really want is a man.

Many other of Beyoncé’s “feminist” or “post-feminist” songs replay this logic: the character who frantically performs her desire through myriad costume changes and insanely energetic erotic performances in front of an entirely stationary and unresponsive “cool” male character; or the woman who ditches her partner because he is not up to scratch, singing about how she will be “over you in a minute” and that she will have “another [one of] you in a minute” – all of which confirm that ultimately what is desired is standard patriarchal heterosexual domesticity.

But just because these popular cultural media texts are evidently patriarchal, sexist and “heteronormative” (in that they reiterate the message that heterosexual norms are both the standard and the objective), does this mean “either” that we are passive before such texts “or” that we ourselves will “become” patriarchal, sexist and heteronormative ourselves by virtue of our exposure to them?

There are many approaches to culture and identity which propose that we may “become” what we are exposed to. However, many of these are simplistic (or indeed what is termed “essentialist”), in that they propose a kind of “monkey see, monkey do” relationship between what (certain types of) people are exposed to and what they will do – especially if they “enjoy” what they see. And, it is important to note, we may well enjoy Beyoncé’s or Timberlake’s videos, and for any number of reasons: we may find the beat irresistible; we may be enthralled by the faces and bodies in the videos; or the sheer complexity and rapidity of the flashing and changing scenes in a music video may be compelling. But does our enjoyment make us a prisoner or a puppet? The situation is surely more complex.

2.2 Segue: the commodification of sex and ethnicity

Bell hooks once provided an interesting account of the problems of rap, hip hop music and black youth identity in the 1980s and early 90s. Hip hop was arguably one of the main contexts in which black youth culture gained anything like cultural visibility and prominence. During the 1990s and up to the early 2000s, hip hop and rap could actually be said to have utterly transformed mainstream popular music and global popular culture in myriad ways. But there was a problem at the heart of it. According to hooks, the black rapper *character* and the hip hop music video *style* became entangled with a damaging image of blackness.

The logic, according to hooks, is that of a vicious circle. The circle is this: first, hip hop gains prominence as a nominally black musical genre. It is associated with poor black youth and also with anger and protest. It is organised by a connection with “the street”. This all gives hip hop and rap a strong identity. But it also becomes a cliché, a stereotype, a cheap commodity. It becomes another way of defining the black: angry, dangerous, poor, politicized, apparently aggressive, often violent. Over time, sexuality comes to the fore too. Black rap and hip hop videos (along with white spin offs and related enterprises) increasingly involve the tried and tested marketing device of always including sexy female “eye candy”. So what becomes produced is a genre which can all too easily act as a stand in for black culture per se. This genre – and this interpretation of what black culture “is” – becomes reduced to violence, guns, money and girls.

Now, what hooks proposes is not that “people” (viewers, listeners) simply “change” and “become” more violent or more sexist. Rather, it is that certain generic and formulaic rules, certain sorts of lyrics, types of imagery and styles of video (involving guns, girls and money) gain a dominance and act as a kind of stranglehold. To be a success, artists perceive that the easy – or the only – route is to produce texts and performances that now conform to this new norm. In other words, what Adorno and Horkheimer called “the culture industry” produces cultural and media effects, effects which play themselves out in people’s daily lives, fantasies and desires.

Nevertheless, despite the importance of bell hooks’ arguments and insights, the media are not simply “external” to us. The audiovisual media texts that permeate everyday popular culture are not simply fictional or fake, with no relation to our hearts and minds, our actions and inactions. As all of the foregoing discussions have implied, audiovisual media texts are potentially hugely important vis-à-vis individual and collective identity-formation. To see this, let us turn to another concise media text – a text which, so to speak, dramatizes in a hyperbolic and comic way the effects on identity of attractive media images. What the text lacks in seriousness, it more than makes up for in providing a thought-provoking scenario about identity.

2.3 Case study 2: ethnicity, sexuality, identity and coercive mimeticism

The text I want to focus on here is the music video for the song “Pretty Fly for a White Guy” (Offspring 1998). It is a comic and frivolous text – both in the lyrical content and in the video. But what it explores and dramatizes is both recognizable and serious, and raises some fundamental questions about identity, desire and phantasy.

The song is structured by the refrain “all the girlies say I’m pretty fly for a white guy”. In the video, these words are uttered by a white “wannabe”. The lyrics narrate the tale – or rather, the situation – the plight – of an apparently affluent, suburban white American teenager, a teenager who nevertheless fantasizes about and evidently fetishizes edgy nonwhite ethnicity. In the video, we see several of the scenarios which define his phantasy. Whether black African-American or Latino, our eponymous “white guy” wannabe wants-to-be “that”: he identifies “with”, he fantasizes “as” that. He wants to be one of “them”. Unfortunately, what is absolutely clear here is that the one thing he is not is “pretty fly”. Rather, he is presented as ridiculous, a fool, utterly lacking in self-awareness or self-knowledge – living, as the lyrics put it, “in denial”.

So, the song is all about getting it wrong, wanting the impossible, and denying that impossibility. The reason for wanting the impossible boils down to a phantasy.⁵ This is dramatized in the call-and-response (and commentary) that opens and permeates the song. The song opens with it: a female chorus chant “Give it to me baby”. In the video, our hapless hero responds in the affirmative. This call and response is repeated. It is a chant of female call and male response that dramatizes what is evidently a male sexual phantasy about specifically ethnic female desire. It is followed by the gravelly-voiced claim: “And all the girlies say I’m pretty fly for a white guy”, whereupon the song “proper” begins. This, it soon becomes clear, is the structuring fantasy (or “phantasy”) of our misrecognizing, fantasising white guy. This is what he wants. This is what he thinks it would be like if only he were the ethnic he wants to be. This is what he wants to see and hear. He imagines the call. He “performs” a response. So, in the video representation, the song runs: repeated female chant (“Give it to me baby”); he answers (“uh huh, uh huh”). This is followed by the voice of his phantasy, which asserts his conviction that “all the girlies say I’m pretty fly for a white guy”.

⁴ <http://uk.viva.tv/musik/artists/the-offspring-209023/videos>.

⁵ I use the “ph” spelling here to highlight the psychoanalytic/cultural theoretical specificity of this usage. The “ph” spelling is more likely to be used in British-English rather than American-English academic contexts in any case. However, elsewhere I use the “f” spelling, usually where the “ph” spelling would appear awkward, but also where psychoanalytic specificity is not necessary.



Fig. 4: Opening moments of the video for “Pretty Fly for a White Guy”.⁴

After this intro, we are “counted-in” in incorrect Spanish (“Uno, dos, tres, cuatro, cinco, cinco, seis”). If we had been in any doubt up until now, this *miscount* – this moment of getting it just a bit but fundamentally wrong – not quite getting the Spanish right – clarifies things for us. This is a joke. This is about misrecognition, getting it wrong. Moreover, the girls in the video are clearly non-existent fantasy constructions: there never were girls thronging around him on the way to his car, by the side of the road, or covered in glittering paint by the pool. They are entirely his phantasy.

An initial assessment of the song, taking into account any mirth it might produce – and the extent to which we might share, understand, or “get” the joke – suggests that this popular cultural text is saying something quite precise about identity, about “cultural” identity, “identity performativity” and ethnicity. And this appears to be something quite different from what is widely supposed to be held by many thinkers, from Judith Butler to Homi Bhabha and beyond. For, the text is saying at least one, or perhaps all, of the following: 1.) that a white ethnic cannot – or should not – try to “perform” another ethnic identity; 2.) that trying to be other than white for the white is ridiculous; 3.) that trying to do or to be so is premised on “not getting it”, on “denial”; 4.) that white ethnicity is not like other ethnicities – not porous, not dilutable, not “hybridisable” or “fragile;” and 5.) that the only compensation for the sadness and disappointment that this might cause for our wannabe is the contemporary Confessional: “At least you know you

can always go on Ricki Lake”, say the lyrics. Indeed, don’t worry, be happy, add The Offspring: “the world needs wannabes”. So, “hey, hey, do the brand new thing”.

The song is very clear on this. After staging the fantasy scenario, after being miscounted-in, the narrative voice begins to tell us all about it. The lyrics begin by addressing us in terms of a shared lot, a common problem that we all recognise: “You know it’s kinda hard just to get along today”. “We all know this”, right? Furthermore: “Our subject isn’t cool, but he thinks it anyway”. Isn’t this a familiar story? How many of us are guilty of it ourselves? We may recall Lacan’s contention that, in love, “You never look at me from the place from which I see you”. Conversely, “what I look at is never what I wish to see” (Lacan quoted in Chow 1998: 81). Moreover, as Rey Chow points out, this “dialectic of eye and gaze” need not be “literally” intersubjective; a man may fall “in love, not with a woman or even with another man, not with a human being at all but with a thing, a reified form of his own fantasy” (1998: 78). As The Offspring put it: “He may not have a clue, and he may not have style / But everything he lacks, well he makes up in denial”.

Is this his problem: “denial”? “Denial” is surely the most abused, misused, bandied-about psychobabble term ever. Everyone, it seems risks living in denial. Overcoming denial is indeed an abiding concern of an enormous range of popular cultural texts and discourses. But, if denial is deemed to be the problem, what is deemed to be the solution? The popular answer is: come to terms, recognize, accept. But how? By talking about yourself; by “confessing”. Go on Ricki Lake. Even if you are “fake”, you “can” have a moment of real-world, recognized, “authentic” success (“fame”), by coming clean, by confessing, publicly: the only authentic redemption in a world which thrives on the production of fakes and wannabes, say The Offspring.

If we can laugh at all of this it is also because we can recognize all of this. According to the implications of the argument of Michel Foucault in *The History of Sexuality, Volume 1* (Foucault 1978), this familiarity and recognisability comes from the fact that The Offspring song plays with the material thrown up by and circulating in and as a discursive constellation – a very old discursive constellation, says Foucault, which came together in the 18th Century. In this discursive formation, the terms ethnicity, identity, authenticity and autobiography – or confession – encounter each other in an overdetermined chiasmus. In it, whenever issues of identity and ethnicity arise as a (self-reflexive, “personal”) problem, this discursive constellation proposes that the route out is via the self-reflexive side-door of autobiographical (self) confession.

There is more to this than observing that engaging with ethnicity requires an engagement with one’s own identity, one that ought to lead into a searching self-interrogation and ideally a deconstruction of questions of authenticity and autobiography – although this is certainly a part of it. For the Foucauldian point is that precisely such discourses of the self, especially in terms of the brands of self-

referentiality that nowadays feed chat shows like Ricki Lake, can be seen to have emerged decisively in modernity. And they emerged with an attending argument about self-referentiality's subversive relation to power and its emancipatory relation to truth. That is, it refers us to the implications of Foucault's argument about what he called "the repressive hypothesis" – namely, that almost irresistible belief that power tries to silence us and demands our silence (Foucault 1978: 18; Chow 2002: 114). As Foucault argued, however, almost the exact opposite is the case. Or rather, even if there are places where power demands silence or discipline, these are more than matched by an exponential explosion and proliferation of discourses – in this case, discourses about the self.

These discourses include arguments about self-referentiality's subversive relation to power and its emancipatory relation to truth, which relates to the Enlightenment idea that an introspective turn to the self is emancipatory: the ingrained idea (whose prehistory is the Catholic Confessional, and whose contemporary ministers Foucault finds in the psychiatrist and psychoanalyst) that seeking to speak the truth of oneself is the best method of getting at our essential truth "and" the best way to resist power. Similarly, modern literary self-referentiality emerged with an attending discourse of resistance – a discourse which regarded literature "as such" as resistance to the instrumentalization of technical and bureaucratic language, first and foremost. And, by the same token, self-referentiality emerged as an apparently ideal solution to the knotty problem of representing others. For, how do you represent others truthfully, adequately, ethically? The answer given here is: "you" don't. "They" should represent themselves. Here, the self-reflexivity of self-referentiality is regarded not as apartheid but as *the* way to bypass the problems of representing others – by throwing the option open for everyone to speak the truth of themselves.

However, in Foucault's phrase: "the "Enlightenment", which discovered the liberties, also invented the disciplines" (Foucault 1977: 222; see also Chow 2002: 113). In other words, the desire to refer to the self, to discuss the self, to produce the self discursively, the impulse to indulge in autobiography and confession, can be regarded as a consequence of disciplinarity. Psychiatry demands that we reveal our selves. As does psychoanalysis, as do ethnographic focus groups, as do corporate marketing focus groups, not to mention the Confessional, the criminologist and Ricki Lake. And so on. Autobiography and confession are only resistance if power truly tries to repress the production of discourse. Which it doesn't – at least not everywhere.

The point is, autobiography and confession are genealogically wedded – if not welded – to recognisable disciplinary protocols and – perhaps most significantly – proceed according to the terms of recognisable metanarratives. Thus, says Chow:

When minority individuals think that, by referring to themselves, they are liberating themselves from the powers that subordinate them, they may actually be allowing such powers to work in the most intimate fashion – from within their hearts and souls, in a kind of voluntary

surrender that is, in the end, fully complicit with the guilty verdict that has been declared on them socially long before they speak. (Chow 2002: 115)

Of course, in thinking about postcoloniality, ethnicity, social semiotics and cultural politics, it is very difficult “not” to think about oneself. Indeed, even in full knowledge of Foucault, there remains something of a complex “imperative” to do so, even (perhaps especially) if, like me, one does not have a blatantly postcolonial ethnicity in the classic sense – even if, that is, like me, one has an entirely hegemonic socio-cultural identity: an ethnicity without ethnicity, as it were; the “hegemon” of a hegemony; that is, the “norm”. For, surely one must factor oneself into whatever picture one is painting, in terms of the “institutional investments that shape [our own] enunciation” (Chow 1993: 2). Indeed, suggests Chow:

the most difficult questions surrounding the demarcation of boundaries implied by ‘seeing’ have to do not with positivistic taxonomic juxtapositions of self-contained identities and traditions in the manner of ‘this is you’ and ‘that is us’, but rather, who is ‘seeing’ whom, and how? What are the power relationships between the ‘subject’ and ‘object’ of the culturally overdetermined ‘eye’? (Chow 1991: 3)

Might acknowledging as much make “me” pretty fly for a white guy? As thinkers like Robyn Wiegman and Rey Chow have pointed out:

the white subject who nowadays endeavors to compensate for the historical ‘wrong’ of being white by taking on politically correct agendas (such as desegregation) and thus distancing himself from his own ethnic history, is seldom if ever accused of being disloyal to his culture; more often than not, he tends to be applauded for being politically progressive and morally superior. (Chow 2002: 116–117)

Chow proposes that we compare and contrast this with nonwhite ethnic subjects – or rather, in her discussion, with nonwhite ethnic critics, scholars and academics. These subjects, she argues are pressured directly and indirectly to behave “properly” – to act and think and “be” the way “they” are supposed to act and think and be, “as” nonwhite ethnic academic subjects. If they forget their ethnicity, or their nationalistically or geographically – and hence essentialistically and positivistically – defined “cultures” and “heritages”, such subjects are deemed to be sell-outs, traitors – “inauthentic”. But, says Chow, if such an ethnic scholar “should [...] choose, instead, to mimic and perform her own ethnicity” – that is, to respond or perform in terms of the implicit and explicit hailing or interpellation of her as an ethnic subject as such, by playing along with the “mimetic enactment of the automatized stereotypes that are dangled out there in public, hailing the ethnic” (2002: 110) – “she would still be considered a turncoat, this time because she is too eagerly pandering to the orientalist tastes of Westerners” (2002: 117), and this time most likely by other nonwhite ethnic subjects.

Thus, the ethnic subject seems damned if she does and damned if she doesn’t “be” an ethnic subject. Of course, this damnation comes from different parties,

and with different implications. But, in any eventuality, Chow's point is that, in sharp contradistinction, "however far he chooses to go, a white person sympathetic to or identifying with a nonwhite culture does not in any way become less white" (2002: 117). Indeed, she claims:

When it comes to nonwhite peoples doing exactly the same thing [...] – that is, becoming sympathetic to or identified with cultures other than their own – we get a drastically different kind of evaluation. If an ethnic critic should simply ignore her own ethnic history and become immersed in white culture, she would, needless to say, be deemed a turncoat (one that forgets her origins). (Chow 2002: 117)

It is important to be aware that it is not just whites who pressure the nonwhite ethnic to conform. Chow gives many examples of the ways that scholars of Chinese culture and literature, for instance, relentlessly produce an essentialist notion of China, which is used to berate modern diasporic Chinese (and their cultural productions). This essentialism takes the form of evoking an essence "that none can live up to", precisely because "they are alive" and as such contaminated, diluted, tainted or corrupted by non-Chinese influences.

At least one side of this key difference between the white and the nonwhite is dramatized in the Offspring song. Whilst postcolonial critics often recount cases in which nonwhite ethnic subjects are pressured directly and indirectly to start to behave "properly" – to act and think and be the way "they" are supposed to act and think and be as nonwhite ethnic subjects – in other words, to be both "interpellated", in Althusser's sense, and *disciplined*, in Foucault's sense – I think that the very intelligibility of the Offspring song and its fairly unequivocal condemnation of the white-wannabe-nonwhite suggests that the white guy who shows too much interest in nonwhite culture, rather than being "applauded for being politically progressive and morally superior", can quite easily and will quite frequently be deemed not only "disloyal to his culture" but ridiculous. "Yet, he remains no less white". In fact, it seems, "he can become no less white". But he is still a traitor. Thus, corroborating Chow's thesis, white ethnicity is here presented as absolutely immovable and essentially (or wholly/holy) incorruptible.

All of this, Rey Chow calls "coercive mimeticism" (2002: 107). Coercive mimeticism designates the way in which the interpellating, disciplining forces of all different kinds of discourses and institutions "call" us into place, "tell" us our place, and work to "keep" us in our place. As Chow writes of the ethnic academic subject:

Her only viable option seems to be that of reproducing a specific version of herself – and her ethnicity – that has, somehow, already been endorsed and approved by the specialists of her culture (Chow 2002: 117)

Accordingly, coercive mimeticism ultimately works as "an institutionalized mechanism of knowledge production and dissemination, the point of which is to manage a non-Western ethnicity through the disciplinary promulgation of the supposed difference". (2002: 117)

As we see through the Offspring song, this disciplinary mechanism extends far beyond the disciplines proper, far beyond the university. In Chow's words:

unlike the white man, who does not have to worry about impairing his identity even when he is touched by a foreign culture, the ethnic must work hard to keep hers; yet the harder she works at being bona fide, the more of an inferior representation she will appear to be. (Chow 2002: 124)

Reciprocally, we might add, the harder the white guy tries to be nonwhite, the "more" white he will appear. In trying to be other – so say the interpellating voices, tropes, discourses and institutions – he is of course, just being "silly". Whether this means that the white attempt to be like the other is silly, or that the other is silly – or both – is debatable. What is not debatable is that in all cases "authenticity" ultimately translates as a hypothetical state of non-self-conscious and non-constructed essential "being". The fact that this is an essentialism that is essentially impossible does not mean that it does not "happen;" rather it means that "ethnicity" becomes an infinitely supple rhetorical tool. It is available (to anyone and everyone) as a way to disparage both anyone who is not being the way they are supposed to be and anyone who "is" being the way they "are" supposed to be.

As Chow explains, "ethnicity can be used as a means of attacking others, of shaming, belittling, and reducing them to the condition of inauthenticity, disloyalty, and deceit" (2002: 124). Ironically, such attacks are "frequently issued by ethnics themselves against fellow ethnics, that is, the people who are closest to, who are most *like* them ethnically in this fraught trajectory of coercive mimeticism" (2002: 124). What this means is that the most contempt, from all quarters, will always be reserved for he or she who does not stay in their place, play their proper ethnicity. All too often, criticism is levelled "individually", as if it is a "personal" issue, "despite the fact that this historically charged, alienating situation is a collectively experienced one" (2002: 124). Such is the disciplining, streaming, classifying force of coercive mimeticism. Such are the "uses of ethnicity".

In the words of Etienne Balibar: "the problem is to keep 'in their place', from generation to generation, those who have no fixed place; and for this, it is necessary that they have a genealogy" (Balibar quoted in Chow 2002: 95). As such, even the work of sensitive, caring, deeply invested specialists, and expert ethnic scholars – even ethnic experts in ethnicity – themselves can function to reinforce ethnicized hierarchies, structured in dominance, simply by insisting on producing their field or object in its difference. What is at stake here is the surely significant fact that even the honest and principled or declared aim of studying others otherwise can actually amount to a positive working for the very forces one avowedly opposes or seeks to resist.

3 Conclusion: Visible space and/as power

The two case studies discussed above may seem very different. One focused on gender performativity and the force of “the male gaze”. The other focused on issues around the performance of ethnicity. But both are unified in what they reveal about the visual field’s relation to power. If these case studies indicate anything, it is the extent to which the space of visual media is steeped in power relations. There are codes of propriety in gender and ethnic performance – and even where one might least expect it, such as in the supposedly irreverent (con)texts of popular music videos. In other words, although our case studies took us far and wide – from Hollywood to the Internet, from 19th Century British colonialism and imperialism to 20th Century Chinese literature, from the semi-pornographic codes of a contemporary pop video to the irony of some late 20th Century rock/pop, via complex poststructuralist theory – each reading pointed to the conclusion that the visual and performative space of popular culture is saturated with power, power that cajoles and coerces us to identify with this and to disidentify with that, and to “perform” ourselves according to the dictates of dominant cultural discourses about gender and ethnicity.

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