Seeing White

From:

America on Film: Representing Race, Class, Gender at Sexuality in the Movies

by Harry Benshoff and Sean Griffin

It may seem odd to begin an exploration of the representations of racial and ethnic minorities with a chapter on the images of white people in American cinema. However, to fully understand how certain people and communities are considered to be racial minorities, it is also necessary to examine how the empowered majority group conceives of and represents itself. Doing so places white communities under a microscope, and reveals that the concept of whiteness (the characteristics that identify an individual or a group as belong to the Caucasian race) is not as stable as is commonly supposed.

Under white patriarchal capitalism, ideas about race and ethnicity are constructed and circulated in ways that tend to keep white privilege and power in place. Yet surveying representations of whiteness in American film raises fundamental questions about the very nature of race and/or ethnicity. Although it may surprise generations of the twenty-first century, some people who are now commonly considered to be white were notconsidered so in the past. The most common designation of whiteness in the United States is the term WASP, which stands for White Anglo-Saxon Protestant. People of non-Anglo-Saxon European ancestry have historically had to negotiate their relation to whiteness. If American culture had different ideas about who was considered white at different times over the past centuries, then claims about race and ethnicity as absolute markers of identity become highly problematic.

One of the hardest aspects of discussing how white people are represented in American cinema (and in Western culture-at-large) is the effort it takes for individuals even to see that racial/ethnic issues are involved with white characters or stories. By and large, the average moviegoer thinks about issues of race only when seeing a movie about a racial or ethnic minority group. For example, most romantic comedies find humor in how male and female characters each try to hold the upper hand in a relationship. Yet *Two Can Play That Game* (2001), starring two African American actors (Morris Chestnut and Vivica A. Fox), is often regarded as a "black" film, whereas *You've Got Mail* (1998), starring two white actors (Tom Hanks and Meg Ryan), is usually regarded as simply a romantic comedy, and not as a "white" film. Similarly, audiences, critics, and filmmakers considered *Spawn* (1997) to be a film about an African American superhero, whereas *Batman* (1991) was simply a film about a superhero – period.

These points underscore the Hollywood assumption that all viewers, whatever their racial identification, should be able to identify with white characters, but that the reverse is seldom true. Even today many white viewers choose not to see films starring non-white actors or films set in minority ethnic environments, allegedly because they feel they cannot identify with the characters. Because of that fact, Hollywood tends to spend more money on white stars in white movies, and far less money on non-white actors in overtly racial or ethnic properties.

The very structure of **classical Hollywood narrative form** encourages all spectators, regardless of their actual color, to identify with white protagonists. This may result in highly conflicted viewing positions, as when Native American spectators are encouraged by Hollywood Westerns to root for white cowboys battling evil Indians. This situation was especially prevalent in previous decades, when nonwhite actors were rarely permitted to play leading roles in Hollywood films, and when racialized stereotypes in movies were more obvious and prevalent. However, in an acknowledgement of our population's diversity, over the last several decades an ever-increasing number of non-white characters have been appearing in Hollywood movies. More and more films each year now feature non-white leads, and even more regularly, non-white actors in supporting roles.

Sometimes this practice is referred to as **tokenism** – the placing of a non-white character into a film in order to deflate any potential charge of racism. **Token** characters can often be found in small supporting roles that are peripheral to the white leads and their stories. For example, in war movies featuring mixed race battalions, minor black and Hispanic characters frequently get killed off as the film progresses, leaving a white hero to save the day. This phenomenon has become so prevalent that some audience members consider it a racist cliché. For many others, however, the phenomenon goes unnoticed, and the dominance of whiteness remains unquestioned.