

# Race Interactions: Film, Melodrama, and the Ambiguities of Colorism

*Christof Decker*

In 1900 the African American writer Charles Chesnutt published an essay called “The Future American” in which he described how the American nation would develop in the twentieth century. A light-skinned mulatto, Chesnutt was preoccupied with the cultural meaning of skin color and the legal definitions of whiteness, blackness, and the in-between group of mixed-race individuals. He argued that this group was in a unique position to experience the problem of the color line, and it served as an implicit reference point for his utopian vision of a post-racial society. As he put it, “it ought to be quite clear that the future American race – the future American ethnic type – will be formed of a mingling, in a yet to be ascertained proportion, of the various racial varieties which make up the present population of the United States [...]”<sup>1</sup>

In this process of mingling, which Chesnutt went on to sketch for a number of generations, no perceptible traces of black would be left: “There would be no inferior race to domineer over; there would be no superior race to oppress those who differed from them in racial externals.”<sup>2</sup> Chesnutt’s concept of the “post-racial” envisioned a society in which the mingling and mixing of races would eventually lead to the dissolution of race classifications – which he saw as scientifically dubious in the first place. Crucially, since the mingling would change the skin color of the future American ethnic type, his argument made skin color the decisive visual marker of difference. Yet, expressing the bias of his time, Chesnutt’s concept put blackness at the bottom and whiteness at the top. He proposed a notion of middle-class-ness as well as a form of respectability that was built on the cultural hierarchy of skin color types.<sup>3</sup>

As Chesnutt’s essay showed, the mulatto or mixed-race perspective offered a unique point of view from which to discuss the effects of skin color. Depending on the observer’s position, skin color was perceived as a source of shame, a source of guilt, or a source of pride. Yet these connotations also created a dilemma: a lighter skin color was presented as desirable as a signifier of upward social mobility and cultural capital, but as a marker of identity it made a clear sense of racial belonging more difficult. Viewed

from the position of blackness, skin color therefore had to be overcome *and* affirmed at the same time. Or to put it differently, in a culture that valued individual achievement as well as ethnic or racial identity, the position of blackness was placed *vis-à-vis* the double-bind of simultaneous denial and affirmation of skin color.

In more recent discussions, this dilemma has been viewed as a historical constellation that also shapes contemporary developments. Trina Jones, a legal scholar, points out that skin color is “one device for assigning people to a racial category.”<sup>4</sup> Yet she also argues that race and color are *distinct* phenomena that sometimes, but not always, overlap. As persons of mixed racial heritage increasingly shape American society, race classifications lose their definability and an internal differentiation based on color gains importance. Jones writes: “(1) the more the races mix, the more difficult it becomes to place individuals within specific racial categories; and (2) discrimination may nonetheless occur on the basis of skin color.”<sup>5</sup> Following Alice Walker’s terminology, Jones calls this phenomenon “colorism,” a process of assigning meaning to skin color that can happen within races and across racial boundaries, intra-racially or inter-racially: “With colorism, skin color does not serve as an indicator of race. Rather, it is the social meaning afforded skin color itself that results in differential treatment.”<sup>6</sup>

In the broader context of debates about a post- or multi-racial society, this essay discusses the representation of skin color and race interactions in American cinema, and examines their relation to the discourse on melodrama. Race has been a crucial category for stories of victimization and affect, yet focusing on race *interactions* allows us to treat the notions of whiteness and blackness as relational concepts. I want to argue that in the history of cinema this space of interactions has developed from segregated and racist hierarchies to more open and democratic forms of interaction, culminating in what have most recently come to be called “network narratives.” However, although this historical trajectory might imply a story of gradual progress, it is actually marked by contradictions and anxieties that appear to be unique to American culture and that have surfaced in recent discussions about a post-racial society. With *CRASH* (Paul Haggis, 2004) as my case in point I will address three issues: new forms of interaction in less segregated performance spaces, a new sense of anxiety over the rules and patterns of race interactions, and, finally, the shift from the meaning of race to the meaning of color as a cause for “differential treatment” and as a new paradigm for melodramatic stories of victimization.

## Melodrama, Skin Color and Justice

The central theme of victimization in melodramatic films can be related to two concepts of justice: social equality and the recognition of cultural difference. Being victimized usually means that either of the two paradigms is being violated. Following Nancy Fraser's distinction, this violation may have different causes. Social inequality is often seen to result from economic forms of injustice such as exploitation or material deprivation, while the injustice of nonrecognition is caused by forms of cultural domination. As Fraser argues, nonrecognition is regarded as a symbolic or cultural injustice for which the remedy is the recognition of cultural difference. The remedy for social inequality and economic injustice, on the other hand, is redistribution. A crucial observation in Fraser's argument about social equality and cultural difference as well as the remedies of redistribution and recognition is that both types of injustice may be experienced by an individual at the same time as interrelated forms of injustice.<sup>7</sup> Uncle Tom was not just economically exploited but also culturally despised, indicating that the status of cultural inferiority has often been seen as a justification for economic exploitation. Conversely, the double sense of economic *and* cultural injustice has created the strongest melodramatic archetypes of a double victimization, that is, victims who may not only claim a redistribution of wealth but also a recognition of cultural difference which, historically, has often meant a recognition of their status as human beings.

In the history of film melodrama, many early films focused on the question of social equality, and injustice was a result of different forms of exploitation – from economic exploitation in relations between workers and employers or tenants and landlords in the city slums to sexual exploitation of innocent country girls or freshly arrived immigrants. Often these scenarios of victimization were implicitly linked with the notion of cultural difference, particularly in the case of immigrants or the portrayal of class hierarchies, but the explicit introduction of cultural difference as a major issue of justice became more prominent in the 1940s as the self-definition of American culture and society increasingly shifted toward multiculturalism.<sup>8</sup> The race relations cycle of the late 1940s indicated that the argument for equal treatment was turning away from the specter of poverty and economic exploitation to the recognition of cultural difference which, at that particular historical moment, was actually articulated and presented as a vision of sameness. Films such as *PINKY* (Elia Kazan, 1949), about African Americans passing for white, or

GENTLEMAN'S AGREEMENT (Elia Kazan, 1947), about a Gentile journalist who pretends to be a Jew and experiences discrimination as a result, disguised the topic of cultural difference behind an outward appearance of visual indistinguishability and the humanist plea for equal treatment of all races. Gradually, in the decades to come, the case for the recognition of cultural difference would include visible and audible markers of alterity that changed the underlying melting-pot and assimilationist ideals of the late 1940s.<sup>9</sup>

While this eventually led to a more varied and inclusive representation of ethnic or religious groups such as Italian Americans or Jewish Americans, who had been archetypical melodramatic victims in the silent period, it did not change in quite the same way the basic racial hierarchy between white and black. For the melodramatic imagination, African Americans were still often primary examples of a double victimization suffering from the injustice of both economic exploitation and cultural nonrecognition.<sup>10</sup>

However, as numerous authors have argued, the social parameters in American society are increasingly shifting toward a post-racial or mixed-racial society in which the question of race is superseded by the question of skin color.<sup>11</sup> In this new environment, the problem of belonging either to the black or the white population, which has a uniquely difficult history in the United States,<sup>12</sup> is transformed into the classification of people according to their skin color. One consequence is the increasing fuzziness of the color line between white and non-white groups, while the doctrine of color-blindness has redefined older concepts based on race and is seen to "celebrate" multiculturalism.<sup>13</sup> Yet, as some authors point out, the shift from a rigorous black vs. white scheme to finely tuned shades of skin color does not preclude cases of differential treatment or discrimination. Indeed, in some crucial ways the experience of "colorism," that is, a "skin-color bias,"<sup>14</sup> replicates traditional hierarchies – most importantly, the cultural tradition of attributing virtue, civilization or beauty to whiteness, and sinfulness, savagery or ugliness to blackness.<sup>15</sup> While race relations under these new conditions may thus potentially be more equal, the experience of injustice due to the nonrecognition of difference may persist. As Trina Jones points out, the least fortunate group in a system based on skin color are dark-skinned blacks. She asks: "what happens when Whites (or Blacks) favor lighter-skinned Blacks or lighter-skinned mixed-race individuals to the detriment of darker-skinned Blacks?"<sup>16</sup>

Thus, the recognition of cultural difference as one element of melodrama's concept of justice becomes more complicated and fluid in a multi-racial society. However, while the interaction between whites and light-skinned blacks may be more equal, the position of dark-skinned blacks is more akin to the older notion of a double victimization. *Vis-à-vis* the white population they exist at the lower end of the traditional racist hierarchy of non-white groups, yet *vis-à-vis* light-skinned blacks they also exist in an inferior position of an internal or intraracial hierarchy based on skin tone (see fig. 1).<sup>17</sup> The shift from race to skin color, from racism to colorism, and the concomitant vanishing of a sharp, if arbitrarily defined, color line, therefore affects the core of the melodramatic concept of justice. On the one hand, it destabilizes the sense of solidarity within the victimized group that has become more stratified and heterogeneous.<sup>18</sup> On the other hand, it complicates the process of visually and culturally placing individuals in a group who may rightfully claim the status of being victims.<sup>19</sup> As a result, many competing claims for cultural difference based on shifting professional and class alliances, income and lifestyle, gender attributes, skin color, religious practices or personal aspirations are voiced and hope to gain recognition.

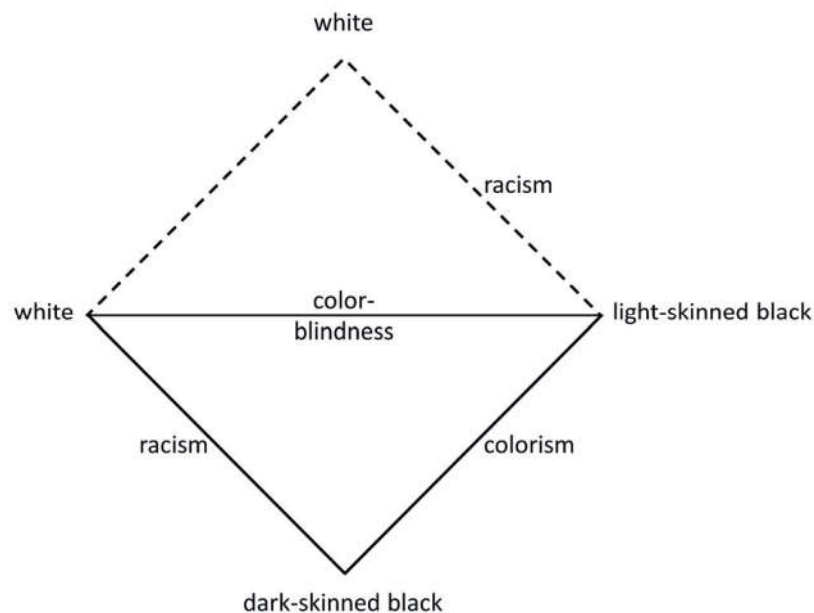


Fig. 20: Cultural hierarchies in a post-racial society based on skin color

## The Performance of Race Interactions

As indicated, Trina Jones argues that issues related to color and race must be seen as distinct phenomena, yet since they often overlap we should shift to a broader view of race interactions and the so-called “performance” of whiteness and blackness. Recent work has emphasized the quality of these performances as cultural constructions.<sup>20</sup> However, drawing on the work of the American sociologist Erving Goffman, it can be seen that performances do not necessarily construct race identities; rather, they define situations and rules of interaction taking place in front of an audience which influence the designation of racial belonging. Goffman understands performances to be “all the activity of an individual which occurs during a period marked by his continuous presence before a particular set of observers [...]”<sup>21</sup> Performances establish who is a performer and who belongs to the audience; they define what kind of situation or event is taking place, and they assign roles as well as behavioral scripts to the participants acting in this situation.

Furthermore, Goffman argues that performances rely on a process of framing in which the participants formulate an answer to the question: “What is it that’s going on here?”<sup>22</sup> And they establish “primary frameworks” that provide the most crucial answer to this question. In Goffman’s model, individuals try to affect their audience, and this can only take place in the process of interaction: “For if the individual’s activity is to become significant to others, he must mobilize his activity so that it will express *during the interaction* what he wishes to convey.”<sup>23</sup> As Richard Wright remembered in his autobiography *Black Boy*, “While standing before a white man I had to figure out how to perform each act and how to say each word.”<sup>24</sup>

As James Naremore has shown, in the cinema performances involve a number of expressive techniques: posture, gesture, speech and voice, clothing and makeup, or facial expressions. All of these techniques are used to present the self to an audience, and they establish “the entire body as an index of gender, age, ethnicity and social class.”<sup>25</sup> They are activated in an attempt to create what Naremore calls “expressive coherence,” a sense that the different ways and elements of behavior add up to a unified and coherent image. Performances thus provide us with body signs that are decoded by the audience as emotions and states of being. From their display we draw conclusions about the interior realm of the individual, which is usually seen to represent the most truthful and authentic side of human beings. If a performance is meant to be convincing, the emotions and actions on display have to be judged as being sincere and truthful, as representing on the body surface what has emerged in the inner life of the psyche or soul. And yet,

as Naremore points out, the constructed quality of social roles in fictional representations makes it clear that the search for an unacted emotional essence is futile. The display of true feelings as a key to the essence of the individual is a cultural ideology that disavows the ubiquitous forms of imitation and mimicry: "Instead of treating performance as an outgrowth of an essential self [...] the self is an outgrowth of performance."<sup>26</sup>

Following Goffman and Naremore, we can thus concede that the fictional representation of race relations is produced in the process of interaction. And yet, as the school of symbolic interactionism makes clear, all of these processes are in flux and implicated in cultural struggles. Primary frameworks that provide a definition of a situation may differ in the assessment of the individuals involved, just as the roles and protocols of behavior that a specific situation requires may be contested. Indeed, this is one of the major points about the historical representation of race interactions in visual culture: although American cinema has gone a long way from the early history of racist depictions, it has also emphasized the increasing difficulties of trying to define the primary framework of situations in which race interactions take place. Thus the more flexible and fluid the cinematic spaces of race interactions become, the more problematic and contested appears to be the process of assigning primary frameworks. Put differently, spaces and performances have been gradually expanded and opened up, yet the position and meaning of race in these interactions – how it affects the situation and how it should be performed – becomes increasingly unclear. Indeed, the vision of a dehierarchized and deterritorialized space in recent films produces fear and anxieties, while the search for its racial connotations turns into an almost obsessive narrative desire.

This historical development culminates in recent films that have been called "network narratives":<sup>27</sup> films such as *SHORT CUTS* (Robert Altman, 1993), *TRAFFIC* (Steven Soderbergh, 2000), *BABEL* (Alejandro González Iñárritu, 2006), or *CRASH* (Paul Haggis, 2004), that interweave and interrelate multiple story-lines to create a complex web of seemingly unrelated events and life-worlds. Meditating on accidents, chance encounters or unforeseeable reversals of "fate" that often draw on conventions of the sensational or sentimental melodrama, these network narratives depict the contradictory forces shaping American culture and society. Often set in Los Angeles as the quintessential city of borderlines as well as ethnic and class differences, these narratives rearrange the space of race interactions and interrogate the experience of colorism. Before focusing on *CRASH* from 2004, three examples from earlier periods shall briefly be introduced to indicate how space and performance have historically been linked. In Hollywood

mainstream genres, the visual organization of space and the codes of performance traditionally supported race segregation and hierarchy.<sup>28</sup> Yet, beginning in the civil rights era, a gradual dehierarchization of race interactions occurred that was based on new arrangements of cinematic space and more fluid and improvisational performance styles such as method acting. Traditional forms of victimization receded in this process, but new anxieties and new economies of melodramatic victimization emerged that gradually acknowledged the experience of colorism in a multicultural context.

### **Race Interactions in the Cinema**

The first example from classical Hollywood is *JEZEBEL*, a film from 1938, directed by William Wyler. Of the ante-bellum plantation fantasies produced in the 1930s, it was among the more “liberal” examples, centering on the headstrong, capricious and ultimately self-sacrificing character of Julie, played by Bette Davis. Yet it also showed that race, performance and space were organized in unmistakably hierarchical terms. In the highly conventionalized spatial system of 1930s Hollywood, unequal forms of interaction dominated. They were shaped by fixed roles, scripts of action, and by clearly assigning the positions of actor and audience. For instance, in one scene, Preston Dillard, played by Henry Fonda, returns to Julie’s plantation home after a long absence. Tasting the mint julep that the “house slave” Cato (Lew Payton) has prepared according to a long-established family tradition, Preston invites Cato to share a glass. Cato is tempted to join him, yet stating that “it ain’t hardly proper,” he takes the glass with him and disappears to the left of the screen space as soon as he, but not the viewer, has noticed Julie’s presence.

In this brief scene, then, Preston’s inclination to interact in a more equal fashion with blacks like Cato is supported by the visual framing of both and the temporary redefinition of a situation which is unmistakable in its hierarchical design of master and slave, servant and guest, or passively waiting onlooker and active participant. Yet as soon as Julie enters the deep performance space, the temporary redefinition is immediately abandoned, both by Preston and by Cato. Indeed, what follows is a scene in which Julie presents herself in a white dress of purity and submission that she had refused to wear in a crucial previous scene of the Olympus Ball. As she is kneeling in front of Preston, not knowing that he had been married in the meantime, the white dress fills the image and virtually obliterates all traces of blackness that Cato had introduced before, and that Julie herself had been



associated with when she had worn a sexually alluring and provocative red dress, coveted by her black maids.<sup>29</sup>

This may serve as a classic example of spatial arrangements that support and maintain race divisions and predefine a very narrow range of performative options for blacks. Yet, as Richard Dyer points out, the notion of whiteness in *JEZEBEL* was ambiguous, resting, as he puts it, on the “belief or suspicion that black people have in some sense more ‘life’ than whites.”<sup>30</sup> Although Julie epitomizes the image of superior white womanhood, she is ultimately a broken character who could not perform her role according to the rules of the imaginary Southern society of the film.

A more fundamental shift of cinematic space and the definition of race interaction became noticeable as the civil rights movement gained prominence in the 1950s. Stanley Kramer’s *THE DEFIANT ONES* from 1958 created a performance space that, again, on the surface presented a racially segregated society, which, at a deeper level, was characterized by race mixing and mingling. The main characters Joker Jackson (Tony Curtis) and Noah Cullen (Sidney Poitier) – escaped convicts and thus melodramatic archetypes of victimization – were not only literally but also symbolically chained to each other as representatives of black and white America.

In the first half of the film, the framing of shots and the lighting emphasizes the equal value of the characters, placing them horizontally in the image space and allowing the viewers to see a full frontal view of their faces. Shadows in Curtis’s face downplay his whiteness, while close-ups of Poitier individualize and emotionalize his character. As they decide to rob a store, Curtis puts on an improvised blackface as Poitier/Cullen shyly tells him to hide his white skin. In the visual framing of the film, black and white are thus initially forced into a common performance space, yet gradually a sense of brotherhood and solidarity is established that is put to the test as soon as they enter a remote farm house, inhabited by a single white woman with her son.

While the woman is making coffee, hesitatingly serving both Jackson and Cullen, an intricate series of shots establishes the domestic interior space of the house. Jackson glances in her direction; off-screen, she returns his gaze, their sexually coded glances seeming to meet. Cullen is shown at first oblivious to the exchange of glances, until he notices the growing desire of Jackson and the woman and begins to sense that she is breaking up the bond between the two male convicts. As the scene continues, it is reframed in the earlier fashion, including both Jackson and Cullen, yet by this time, the white woman has taken the center position and is effectively splitting the frame up in the middle. Just as the presence of Julie had redefined the

encounter between Cato and Preston in *JEZEBEL*, the white woman in *THE DEFIANT ONES* creates a new situational framework for the interaction between white and black characters. For Cullen the primary framework of the situation is still the flight with Jackson, but for Jackson it has begun to shift to the prospect of white heterosexual normalcy.

The presence of the white woman within the performance space therefore has two major implications: On the one hand, her scopical desire is focused exclusively on Jackson, the white character. As an object of sight or erotic desire, Cullen is disavowed, and he switches from active agent to the role of child-like observer. On the other hand, as the following scenes underline, the prospective reconstitution of a white, nuclear family also recreate and reaffirm a system of racist thinking and behavior. However, in the end, the white character Jackson eventually follows Cullen/Poitier and Kramer's film ends with an image, as well as a utopian fantasy, of two racialized bodies, holding and embracing each other in mutual support and dependence.

In the 1980s a young black cinema emerged, creating complementary or counter-narratives to earlier socially-conscious filmmakers such as William Wyler, Stanley Kramer, Martin Ritt, Shirley Clarke or John Cassavetes. Spike Lee's *JUNGLE FEVER* from 1991 illustrates that a major shift of race and color consciousness has happened. The film tells the love story between Flipper, an African American from Harlem, and Angie, an Italian American from Bensonhurst. Visually and narratively it creates a common space for the mixed race relationship, yet the couple are violently rejected by their respective communities and eventually split up in order to return to the security of the more stable and spatially defined neighborhoods of racial belonging.

The inter-racial conflict at the heart of the film triggers an intra-racial discussion about skin color that brings out a keen awareness of colorism, particularly among the women. As they share their experience, a cultural hierarchy from dark skin tones at the bottom to light ones at the top emerges that echoes Chesnutt's essays.<sup>31</sup> Flipper's wife Drew, played by Lonette McKee, has such light skin that she feels particularly humiliated by his affair with a white woman. And yet, just before Flipper and Angie split up, he argues vehemently against mixed children. Reducing their relationship to a case of mere curiosity, he makes clear that he does not want to have mixed children, octoroons or quadroons. Angie, who is not convinced and points out that his family already included "white blood", wants to know how he could tell the difference between his own and mixed children. "They look black and they act black," is Flipper's reply, harking back to a long suspicion over the status and legitimacy of the "buffer class" of mulatto or multiracial

individuals – a view of their being “degenerate” that Chesnutt had been fighting against. Culturally and socially, therefore, the film reflects upon, and tries to transcend, the problem of colorism. Yet at the same time it also firmly makes racial identification dependent on skin color. In Flipper’s passionate argument against racially mixed children, *JUNGLE FEVER* superimposes the violent and blatant racism between African American and Italian American neighborhoods upon the intraracial colorism that, in previous scenes, had reinforced the desire for light skin tones as a marker of upward social mobility.

### Network Narratives and the Post-Racial Imagination

In *JUNGLE FEVER* race interactions are defined primarily as illegitimate sexual relations or as violent encounters. They transgress the boundaries of the neighborhood, which define and delimit areas of belonging. This sense of a coherent cinematic space, of Harlem as a realm of authentic African American-ness, changes in the more fluid and amorphous space of network narratives. Like many recent examples, *CRASH* is set in Los Angeles. Its deterritorialized urban space, dominated by highways and cars, creates an atmosphere of chance encounters that was developed by earlier films such as Robert Altman’s *SHORT CUTS*. In exemplary, almost pedagogical fashion, and embedding the network metaphor in a melodramatic framework with high-intensity vignettes, *CRASH* uses this tradition to investigate how differences of race and ethnicity are produced: language, speech habits, skin color, facial and bodily features, ethnic and family backgrounds, instances of discrimination, institutional procedures, popular culture, neighborhoods, work contexts – all of these elements combine to produce a network of differences that, in everyday encounters, appears to be so complex that it has to be simplified by reducing it to stereotypes.

Some academic critics, who initially welcomed the attempt to tackle questions of race in a new and provocative fashion in *CRASH*, found fault with this use of stereotypes. They saw the film as being only superficially honest in its probing of racist sentiments among different ethnic groups, while at the same time avoiding the topic of white privilege, promoting liberal humanism and glossing over the deeper conflicts at work in American society. As one author put it, *CRASH* was primarily concerned “with making all racisms and prejudices equivalent by creating pathos for all the characters.”<sup>32</sup> Yet, as this reference to the creation of pathos makes clear, in spite of the superficial recourse to a more realistic portrayal of race

relations, the film is firmly rooted in the melodramatic tradition with its unique “dialectic of pathos and action.”<sup>33</sup> Rather than aiming for a new realism, it isolates emotionally intense, culturally instructive moments of abuse and redemption, of injustice and the search for recognition of victimized individuals who are coded as belonging to larger ethnic or racial groups.

Instances of racism are frequent and, when they happen, they take on a similarly symbolic meaning as the chains in *THE DEFIANT ONES*. In one of the crucial scenes indicative of the melodramatic economy at work in the film, a police car with two white policemen stops a light-skinned black couple in their car. In Goffman’s sense, the situation is a ritualized encounter in which both sides should know how to act. Yet the black woman, Elizabeth (Karina Arroyave), protests as they are being searched for weapons, and the white policeman, John Ryan (Matt Dillon), uses his position of power to touch her body in a sexually aggressive way that both molests her and humiliates her male partner Cameron (Terrence Howard), who watches helplessly. In the end, the black couple leave, devastated, and the successful, professionally assimilated television producer must realize that “he is actually black,” as Elizabeth points out. Reproaching him for not having protected her, she emphasizes *her* inability and unwillingness to “shuck and jive,” that is, to use a performative routine that would portray a position of inferiority and feigned submissiveness while interacting with whites.<sup>34</sup> Several scenes later, the white policeman and the black woman will meet again, involuntarily, as he arrives at the scene of an accident and heroically saves her in the nick of time out of her burning and upturned car. Forcing both races into the cramped visual space of the car’s interior, the framing suggests not only their unavoidable physical proximity, but it also allegorizes their mutual dependence on each other and their mutual quest for a better understanding.

Scenes like this certainly partake in the “desire to humanize and redeem protagonists and antagonists within a liberal humanist paradigm,”<sup>35</sup> as Vorris L. Nunley puts it, and they invite the criticism of leveling out the characters by showing “both their racist and their redeeming qualities,”<sup>36</sup> as Christine Farris observes; yet they cannot conceal that, on the whole, *CRASH* presents anxiety-ridden race interactions that affect everyone. All situations and forms of interaction are defined on two levels: on the one hand, the performances establish a professional or social framework for the situation. But on the other hand, they also define a racial framework that guides the patterns and rules of conduct. However, since this second framework no longer rests on a clear definition of racial and cultural hierarchies, as it is embedded in a dehierarchized and fragmented symbolic space, interactions

are haunted by the anxiety that they may be contaminated by the history and persistence of prejudice.

In the melodramatic mode of presenting this “structure of feeling”, all of the major characters can rightfully claim to having been victimized: Graham Waters (Don Cheadle), the dark-skinned African American detective, allows himself to be corrupted and moves up the career ladder by framing a white man in order to save his drug-addicted brother. His mother feels that, by making a career, he has abandoned his family – indeed, at the end of the film he realizes he has been “too late” to save his brother. Ria (Jennifer Esposito), the colleague and partner of Waters, is called a white woman by him, although her parents come from Puerto Rico and El Salvador. Ryan, the white racist cop who molests Elizabeth and later heroically saves her, has to care for his sick father, who does not get the right medical treatment (due to the effects of affirmative action, so Ryan thinks). A shop owner from Iran who is mistaken for an Arab and insulted in the post-9/11 climate is robbed because he does not understand some well-intentioned advice. He goes out to take revenge on the Hispanic locksmith who had given him the advice and almost kills his young daughter.<sup>37</sup> The black television director Cameron is told to make his actors more “black” by his white producer and eventually concedes to this request.<sup>38</sup> Officer Hanson (Ryan Phillippe), a white policeman who is troubled by the racist attitudes of the LAPD and who comes to the rescue of Cameron during a confrontation with other police officers, later kills a young black man (Waters’s brother) because he misinterprets one of his gestures. Even the district attorney’s snobbish and biased white wife complains that she feels constantly unhappy. All of the characters are thus victimized by forces that are real but also imaginary. Indeed, the fantasies and projections, the prejudices and stereotypes that they express while interacting with each other make clear that they are primarily victimized by their own race anxiety: the anxieties and fears of not knowing how to interact properly. The film ends with a scene in which illegal immigrants from Asia, chained to a van, are set free in Chinatown, thus closing with the ambiguous and counterintuitive vision that the US is still a coveted place of freedom and opportunity, and that the reality of race mixing will continue.

Network narratives can thus be seen to evoke and to perform the process of mingling and mixing in a multi-racial culture that Charles Chesnutt had predicted. They achieve this by a more flexible, less segregated concept of visual, narrative and symbolic spaces. And they seem to imply that the meaning of skin color gradually shifts from racial classifications to group affiliations connecting individuals to a profession, a subculture, a class and

so on. And yet they also give expression to a deep-seated feeling of anxiety in race interactions, of being haunted by the inescapable forces of the history of slavery and the challenges of multiculturalism. In this atmosphere of fear and paranoia, some critics of *CRASH* felt that the film was evading the issue of white privilege and paternalism: "Race in this film is never about whiteness, it is always about the other,"<sup>39</sup> wrote Sangeeta Ray, while Joyce Irene Middleton suggested that, despite its focus on race and racism, whiteness was still the "default racial category"<sup>40</sup> in the film.<sup>41</sup>

Given the complicated history of race melodramas, *CRASH* certainly participates in a depiction of race that rests on cultural hierarchies derived from the implicit notion of white privilege.<sup>42</sup> Yet, as Vorris L. Nunley points out, the film "productively registers heterogeneity within African American culture"<sup>43</sup> as well as in other ethnic groups. Indeed, it puts two African American characters at the center of its melodramatic pathos, who illuminate the dilemmas of colorism. Cameron, the light-skinned television director, and Graham Waters, the dark-skinned police detective, experience crucial moments of humiliation and loss. In their professional worlds, both have to give in to the demands of white superiors. Cameron has to reshoot a scene while Waters is forced to frame a man who acted in self-defense. Both characters' actions testify to the reality of white domination where "blacks have agency over their own voices, unless the whites in charge decide otherwise."<sup>44</sup> Yet they not only illustrate hierarchical relationships *vis-à-vis* white institutional power, they also represent positions of cultural difference based on their skin color. Through scenes of humiliation and emasculation, the successful light-skinned television director Cameron, who claims cultural prestige and status, realizes that the doctrine of color-blindness and more equal participation is a myth. The dark-skinned detective Waters, on the other hand, has a final moment of subdued frustration when his mother does not recognize him as the good, caring son and instead fixes his image as an outcast alienated from his racial background and heritage. For dark-skinned blacks, then, the perception of, and belonging to, "race" overrides the more fluid forms of social interaction open to light-skinned blacks. Yet, both characters finally come to realize that recognition as a professional regardless of skin color as well as recognition as an individual regardless of race is resisted by both the white establishment and the black community.

In this sense, a new melodramatic constellation emerges from network narratives such as *CRASH*, with its fluid, deterritorialized space that highlights the interconnectedness of individual claims of recognition without, however, resolving them in classic melodramatic fashion. Rather than

focusing on one individual gaining poetic justice, it expresses a ubiquitous feeling of victimization. Everyday interaction is overshadowed by the anxiety of feeling or expressing racism, of showing preferences based on skin color, or of relying on racial stereotypes. The feeling of injustice, then, persists; but in a multi-racial society that has blurred the color line, the causes and remedies for being victimized have likewise become more ambiguous and fuzzy. In this new constellation, race and skin color are publicly disavowed as reasons for making distinctions, but privately seen to be legitimate as claims for the recognition of cultural difference.

In other words, network narratives of a post-racial age, such as *CRASH*, are trying to balance the competing claims of the underappreciated (light-skinned) black director, the misunderstood Iranian shop-owner, the unloved (dark-skinned) black detective, and so on, without making a final judgment on whose claims are most valid and justified. In contrast to the traditional melodramatic structure of feeling, the metaphor of the network implies that the viewer's affective empathy is drawn away from the plight of the individual and shifted to the group. In the end this shift suggests that the network narrative is not so much concerned with the remedy of poetic justice. Rather, it focuses on the underlying feeling of race anxiety fuelling the characters' actions and their sense of victimization. A paradox appears to make up the core of this feeling: skin color should not be a cause for discriminatory treatment, but it must be acknowledged for the recognition of cultural difference. In the utopian, de-hierarchized space of the post-racial society, the new melodramatic constellation thus addresses, but does not resolve, the ambiguous aspirations of a democratic culture attempting to uphold the ideal of color blindness and tolerance while experiencing the social reality of discrimination.

## Notes

1. Charles W. Chesnutt, "The Future American [1900]," in *Stories, Novels, and Essays* (New York: The Library of America, 2002), 845-63, here 846-47.
2. Chesnutt, "The Future American," 850.
3. For a discussion of similar problems facing W. E. B. DuBois when preparing a section with photographs of African Americans at the 1900 Paris Exposition, see Shawn Michelle Smith, "'Looking at One's Self through the Eyes of Others': W. E. B. Du Bois's Photographs for the 1900 Paris Exposition," *African American Review* 34:4 (Winter 2000), 581-99.
4. Trina Jones, "Shades of Brown: The Law of Skin Color," *Duke Law Journal* 49:6 (April 2000), 1487-1557, here 1497.

5. Jones, "Shades of Brown," 1545.
6. Jones, "Shades of Brown," 1497.
7. As Nancy Fraser points out, this leads to a "redistribution-recognition dilemma," since the remedy of redistribution implies the similarity of individuals to which it applies, while recognition implies their inherent difference: "People who are subject to both cultural injustice and economic injustice need both recognition and redistribution. They need both to claim and to deny their specificity." See Fraser, "From Redistribution to Recognition? Dilemmas of Justice in a 'Post-Socialist' Age," *New Left Review* 212 (1995), 68-93, here 74.
8. For a detailed analysis of this transformation, see Christof Decker, *Hollywoods kritischer Blick: Das soziale Melodrama in der amerikanischen Kultur 1840-1950* (Frankfurt: Campus, 2003), 434-91.
9. There is, however, an ongoing debate about the character of these ethnic markers in the context of Hollywood feature films. Drawing on the work of Werner Sollors, Lester D. Friedman has made a strong case that they are subsumed under a larger concept of American-ness: "Regardless of race, religion, or national origin, most Hollywood movies superimpose American-ness as a self-ascribing category whose value orientation totally dominates any primordial ethnic conditions. In fact, far from delving into cultural distinctions beyond the most superficial, American movies militantly stress cultural uniformity. Thus, value orientations become ideologically rather than ethnically defined. So while Hollywood films show primordialism and descent characteristics, they preach symbolic interactionism and consent values. According to these films, outward ethnic markings may be predetermined, but inner ethnic values are self-ascriptive". See Friedman, "Celluloid Palimpsests: An Overview of Ethnicity and the American Film," in *Unspeakable Images: Ethnicity and the American Cinema*, ed. Lester D. Friedman (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1991), 11-35, here 22.
10. For an elaborate discussion of the "race melodrama," see Linda Williams, *Playing the Race Card: Melodramas of Black and White from Uncle Tom to O. J. Simpson* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001).
11. See Jones, "Shades of Brown," and Angela P. Harris, "Introduction: Economies of Color," in *Shades of Difference: Why Skin Color Matters*, ed. Evelyn Nakano Glenn (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009), 1-5.
12. Sketching the history of race mixing and miscegenation law in the United States, Werner Sollors has provocatively alluded to an "exceptionalist taboo" in American culture: "Could the question of what is American about American culture be answered with 'prohibiting black-white heterosexual couples from forming families and withholding legitimacy from their descendants'?" Sollors, "Introduction," in *Interracialism: Black-White Inter marriage in American History, Literature, and Law*, ed. Werner Sollors (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 3-16, here 5.
13. See Harris, "Economies of Color."



14. Mark E. Hill, "Skin Color and the Perception of Attractiveness Among African Americans: Does Gender Make a Difference?" *Social Psychology Quarterly* 65:1 (2002), 77-91, here 77.
15. See Hill, "Skin Color," and Jones, "Shades of Brown."
16. Jones, "Shades of Brown," 1555.
17. According to Hill, this position is related to socio-economic categories such as occupation, income and cultural status; it appears to be worse for women than for men. The bias against dark skin developed, as Hill argues, in the 1940s when empirical research suggested that "the African American community had internalized a variant of the traditional American bias against dark skin and African features" (Hill, "Skin Color" 78). See also Maxine S. Thompson and Verna M. Keith, "The Blacker the Berry: Gender, Skin Tone, Self-Esteem, and Self-Efficacy," *Gender and Society* 15:3 (June 2001), 336-57.
18. However, as Jennifer L. Hochschild and Vesla Weaver point out, in the social realm the experience of colorism has not yet had major political consequences. They explain this "skin color paradox" by competing commitments to issues of race and skin color: "[...] Blacks' commitment to racial identity overrides the potential for skin color discrimination to have political significance. That is, because most blacks see the fight against racial hierarchy as requiring their primary allegiance, they do not see or do not choose to express concern about the internal hierarchy of skin tone. Thus dark-skinned blacks' widespread experience of harm has no political outlet – which generates the skin color paradox." Hochschild and Weaver, "The Skin Color Paradox and the American Racial Order," *Social Forces* 86:2 (December 2007), 643-70, here 643.
19. Writing about the Holocaust and its importance for the American Jewish community, Peter Novick has alluded to the growth of a "victim culture" where "the assertion of the group's historical victimization – on the basis of race, ethnicity, gender, or sexual orientation – is always central to the group's assertion of its distinctive identity." However, as he points out, the "grounding of group identity and claims to group recognition in victimhood" is not just characteristic of the Jewish community, it has become a common pattern for various groups in American politics. Novick, *The Holocaust and Collective Memory: The American Experience* (London: Bloomsbury, 2001), 8, 9.
20. See Gwendolyn Audrey Foster, *Performing Whiteness: Postmodern Re/Constructions in the Cinema* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2003).
21. Erving Goffman, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (Garden City: Doubleday Anchor Books, 1959), 32.
22. Erving Goffman, *Frame Analysis: An Essay on the Organization of Experience* (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1974), 8.
23. Goffman, *Presentation*, 40.
24. Richard Wright, *Black Boy (American Hunger): A Record of Childhood and Youth* [1945] (New York: Perennial Classics, 1998), 196.

25. James Naremore, *Acting in the Cinema* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988), 4.
26. Naremore, *Acting*, 19.
27. David Bordwell, *Poetics of Cinema* (New York: Routledge, 2008), 29.
28. For an analysis of the complex relationships between the African American minority and Jewish immigrants during the silent and early sound period, see Michael Rogin, *Blackface, White Noise: Jewish Immigrants in the Hollywood Melting Pot* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996).
29. On the history of the "Jezebel" stereotype for black women, see David Pilgrim, "Jezebel Stereotype," *Jim Crow Museum of Racist Memorabilia*, Ferris State University (2002), <http://www.ferris.edu/jimcrow/jezebel.htm>, last accessed 16 October 2012.
30. Richard Dyer, "White," *Screen* 29:4 (1988), 44-64, here 55.
31. In an interview with Henry Louis Gates, Jr. from 1991, Spike Lee stated that "a jury of black males in America today would still think light-skinned women with long hair and light eyes are more attractive than dark-skinned women. That's the way it is." See Spike Lee and Henry Louis Gates, Jr., "Final Cut," *Transition* 52 (1991), 177-204, here 195.
32. Norris L. Nunley, "Crash: Rhetorically Wrecking Discourses of Race, Tolerance, and White Privilege," *College English* 69:4 (March 2007), 335-46, here 342. This issue of *College English* devoted a symposium to the discussion of CRASH as a film that could be used in pedagogical settings. Many contributions suggested that it was a good choice for the classroom, but at the same time pointed to its shortcomings; see David G. Holmes, "The Civil Rights Movement According to *Crash*: Complicating the Pedagogy of Integration," *College English* 69:4 (March 2007), 314-20; Joyce Irene Middleton, "Talking about Race and Whiteness in *Crash*," *College English* 69:4 (March 2007), 321-34; Catherine Prendergast, "Asians: The Present Absence in *Crash*," *College English* 69:4 (March 2007), 347-48; Victor Villanueva, "3D Stereotypes: *Crash*," *College English* 69:4 (March 2007), 348-50; Sangeeta Ray, "Crash or How White Men Save the Day, Again," *College English* 69:4 (March 2007), 350-54; Christine Farris, "Crash Course: Race, Class, and Context," *College English* 69:4 (March 2007), 354-59.
33. Williams, *Playing the Race Card*, 30.
34. Goffman gives a similar example for a "negative idealization" in black-white interactions in his study *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* from 1959: "The ignorant, shiftless, happy-go-lucky manner which Negroes in the Southern states sometimes felt obliged to affect during interaction with whites illustrates how a performance can play up ideal values which accord to the performer a lower position than he covertly accepts for himself." Goffman, *Presentation* 47.
35. Nunley, "Crash: Rhetorically Wrecking Discourses of Race, Tolerance, and White Privilege," 337.
36. Farris, "Crash Course: Race, Class, and Context," 355.

37. The young girl is saved because the shop owner's daughter had put blanks in the revolver. Combining intense music, slow motion and the horrified facial expressions of the Hispanic father, this scene is presented as one of the emotional climaxes in the film. It introduces the topic of the child as "child angel" protecting adults unable to protect themselves, thus functioning as a sign of their feeling of helplessness and vulnerability. On the role of children in melodramatic films, see Christof Decker, "Unusually Compassionate': Melodrama, Film and the Figure of the Child," in *Melodrama! The Mode of Excess from Early America to Hollywood*, eds. Frank Kelleter, Barbara Krahn and Ruth Mayer (Heidelberg: Winter, 2007), 305-28.
38. In the case of the television director, the performative quality of blackness becomes most obvious as his behavioral register shifts dramatically. At work and *vis-à-vis* the police he exhibits a "professional mode": he controls body and voice and moves with restrained gestures. In a later scene that again forces him to face the police, he reacts aggressively and switches into a "street mode." Ostentatiously he waves his hands and arms, drawing on more expressive and overtly emotional gestures. The ostentation of the street mode appears to re-racialize him, to make him more black, yet it also supports the stereotypical assumption that, by default, genuine African American-ness rests on a more expressive body language.
39. Sangeeta Ray, "Crash or How White Men Save the Day, Again," 352.
40. Joyce Irene Middleton, "Talking about Race and Whiteness in *Crash*," 331. She goes on to point out that "*Crash* very effectively equates and replaces the term 'race' with the term 'prejudice,' and then argues that everyone is a little prejudiced" (324).
41. The strongest criticism came from Robert Jensen and Robert Wosnitzer, who called the film 'white supremacist': "So, *Crash* is white-supremacist because it minimizes the reality of white supremacy. Its faux humanism and simplistic message of tolerance directs attention away from a white-supremacist system and undermines white accountability for the maintenance of that system." Jensen and Wosnitzer, "*Crash* and the Self-Indulgence of White America," *Dissident Voice* 21 March 2006, [www.dissidentvoice.org/Mar06/Jensen-Wosnitzer21.htm](http://www.dissidentvoice.org/Mar06/Jensen-Wosnitzer21.htm), last accessed 10 October 2012.
42. In that sense it continues a representational pattern that Mark Winokur identified in the early 1990s: "The 'thought' that contemporary films about race embody is the desire that blackness cease to exist, that it be replaced with at most a white version of who and what blacks are. Blacks should be replaced by humans – as humanity is whitely defined." Winokur, "Black Is White/White Is Black: 'Passing' as a Strategy of Racial Compatibility in Contemporary Hollywood Comedy," in *Unspeakable Images*, 190-211; here 192.
43. Nunley, "*Crash*: Rhetorically Wrecking Discourses of Race, Tolerance, and White Privilege," 337.
44. David G. Holmes, "The Civil Rights Movement According to *Crash*: Complicating the Pedagogy of Integration," 316.

# Melodrama After the Tears

*New Perspectives on the Politics of Victimhood*

*Scott Loren and Jörg Metelmann (eds.)*

Amsterdam University Press

Cover illustration: Man Ray, "The Tears" (c. 1930) © Man Ray Trust / 2015, ProLitteris, Zurich

Cover design: Kok Korpershoek, Amsterdam

Lay-out: Crius Group, Hulshout

Amsterdam University Press English-language titles are distributed in the US and Canada by the University of Chicago Press.

ISBN 978 90 8964 673 6

e-ISBN 978 90 4852 357 3

DOI 10.5117/9789089646736

NUR 670

© The authors / Amsterdam University Press B.V., Amsterdam 2016

All rights reserved. Without limiting the rights under copyright reserved above, no part of this book may be reproduced, stored in or introduced into a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means (electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise) without the written permission of both the copyright owner and the author of the book.

Every effort has been made to obtain permission to use all copyrighted illustrations reproduced in this book. Nonetheless, whosoever believes to have rights to this material is advised to contact the publisher.