Chapter 3

THE CONCEPT OF WHITENESS AND AMERICAN FILM

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 not considered 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.

This chapter explores the differing socio-historical and cinematic constructions of whiteness throughout the history of American film. It examines the representations of several (but not all) of the communities that were not originally welcomed into American society as white, but which have been more recently assumed to belong to this racial category. The following discussion examines how these groups were represented with certain stereotypes, how these communities developed strategies for acceptance by white society, and how cinema functioned as part of this cultural negotiation. We also discuss a population group, Arab Americans, that many currently consider unable to blend into white society, even though a number of Arab American individuals have done so. But first, the chapter begins with a discussion
of how film works within dominant hegemonic culture to subtly – and almost invisibly – speak about the centrality of whiteness.

**Seeing White**

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 non-white 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.

Film scholar Richard Dyer’s work on how cinema represents whiteness ties this unthinking (or unremarked-upon) white centrism to larger ideological issues of race. As pointed out in chapter 1, a society’s dominant ideology functions optimally when individuals are so imbued with its concepts that they do not realize that a social construct has been formed or is being reinforced. The relative cultural invisibility of whiteness within the United States serves as a perfect example of this idea: the white power base maintains its dominant position precisely by being consistently overlooked, or at least unexamined in most mainstream texts. Unless whiteness is somehow pointed out or overemphasized, its dominance is taken for granted. A rare Hollywood film such as Pleasantville (1998) calls attention to whiteness, even down to its black-and-white visual design, in which characters are literally devoid of color. (The film is a satire of 1950s nostalgia as represented by that era’s all-white television sitcoms.) More regularly, however, Hollywood films that are just as white as 1950s television – from E.T. The Extra-Terrestrial (1982) to Stepmom (1998) – fail to point out their whiteness and therefore work to naturalize it as a universal state of representation.

When it goes unmentioned, whiteness is positioned as a default category, the center or the assumed norm on which everything else is based. Under this conception, white is then often defined more through what it is not than what it is. If whiteness must remain relatively invisible, then it can only be recognized when placed in comparison to something (or someone) that is considered not white. For example, in the romantic comedy You’ve Got Mail, Joe (Tom Hanks) interacts with Kevin, an African American co-worker (David Chappelle). The presence of a token African American character allegedly negates any potential accusation of Hollywood racism, but his presence may also make viewers aware of racial difference – that Joe is white because he is not black. Some of Kevin’s lines also point out Joe’s whiteness. Up until that point, however, viewers have not been encouraged to see anything racial about Joe. The subtle ideas about whiteness that are present in the film may go unnoticed by most viewers, or if they are noted during Kevin’s scene, they may be forgotten the moment he is no longer on screen.

Kevin’s friendly put-downs of Joe also reveal that whiteness is most often invisible to people who consider themselves to be white. However, many non-white individuals are often painfully aware of the dominance of whiteness, precisely because they are repeatedly excluded from its privileges. Sometimes racialized stereotypes get inverted to characterize whiteness. Thus, if people of color are stereotyped as physical and passionate, whiteness is sometimes satirized as bland and sterile, represented by processed white bread, mayonnaise, and elevator music. The stereotypes that white people lack rhythm, can’t dance, or can’t play basketball (as the title of the film White Men Can’t Jump [1992] would have it) are simply reversals of racist stereotypes that assert that people of color are “naturally” more in touch with their physicality than are white people. Many of these stereotypes seem to
invoke (and probably evolved from) the racist beliefs of earlier eras. One such belief was the assumption that white people were a more evolved type of human being – and thus suited for mental and intellectual tasks – while non-white people were thought of as being more basely physical and even animalistic.

This process of defining one group against another is sometimes referred to as Othering. More specifically, Othering refers to the way a dominant culture ascribes an undesirable trait (one shared by all humans) onto one specific group of people. Psychologically, Othering depends on the defense mechanism of displacement, in which a person or group sees something about itself that it doesn’t like, and instead of accepting that fault or shortcoming, projects it onto another person or group. For example, white culture (with its Puritan and Protestant taboos against sex) has repeatedly constructed and exploited stereotypes of non-white people as being overly sexualized. Throughout US history, fear and hysteria about “rampant and animalistic” non-white sexualities (as opposed to “regulated and healthy” white sexualities) have been used to justify both institutional and individual violence against non-white people. Other character traits common to all human groups – such as laziness, greed, or criminality – are regularly denied as white traits and projected by dominant white culture onto racial or ethnic Others. In this way, and simultaneously, whiteness represents itself as moral and good, while non-white groups are frequently characterized as immoral or inferior.

The process of Othering reveals more about white frames of mind than about the various minority cultures being represented. This was often embodied within classical Hollywood filmmaking, when racial or ethnic minority characters were played by white actors. This common practice allowed white producers to construct images of non-white people according to how they (the white producers) thought non-white people acted and spoke. How non-white Others helped to define whiteness can also be seen in the silent and classical Hollywood practice of using minority-group performers to play a variety of racial or ethnic characters. For example, African Americans and Latinos were often hired to play Native American characters, and Hispanic, Italian, and Jewish actors played everything from Eskimos to Swedes. Such casting practices again reinforce the notion that people are either white or non-white, and Hollywood did not take much care to distinguish among non-white peoples, often treating them as interchangeable Others.

In socially constructing this concept of whiteness, Western culture had to define who got to be considered white. Many attempts were made over the past centuries to “measure” a person’s whiteness. In the United States, laws were passed defining who was and who was not to be considered white. People claimed that “one drop of blood” from a non-white lineage excluded an individual from being “truly” white. Marriages were carefully arranged to keep a family lineage “pure,” and laws prohibiting interracial marriage were common in most states. If there were non-white relationships within a family tree, they would frequently be hidden or denied. Throughout much of American history, lynching – the illegal mob torture and murder of a suspected individual – was a white community crime commonly spurred by fears over interracial sex. All these measures to “protect” whiteness indicate a
serious cultural anxiety about the permeable borders between white and non-white races. In reality, the sexual commingling of different racial and ethnic groups was common in the United States almost from the moment European settlers landed on the continent. On the Western frontier, white men often took up relations with Native American women. In the Eastern United States, many white slave owners regularly forced sex upon their female slaves. Even President Thomas Jefferson fathered children by his slave, Sally Hemings. Needless to say, these incidents have rarely been represented in Hollywood cinema.

Struggles over the definition of whiteness were especially pronounced during the 1800s and the early 1900s, when film was in its infancy. The idea of the American melting pot arose during this period. The metaphor expressed the way various immigrant cultures and traditions were to be forged or melted together into an overall sense of American identity. Obviously, the American melting pot most readily accepted those groups that could successfully blend into or assimilate into the ideals and assumptions of white patriarchal capitalism. Assimilation was (and is) easier for some groups than for others, and the reason for that was (and is) based on longstanding notions about racial difference. European immigrants, although from different national and ethnic cultures, were more readily assimilated into mainstream white American culture than were people of African, Asian, or Native American backgrounds. Partly this was because European immigrants had a certain amount of cultural, racial, and religious overlap with white America; people from other areas of the globe were (and still are) more likely to be considered as racially and culturally Other. Nonetheless, even European immigrants had to struggle for acceptance in the United States, and a history of those struggles can be found in that era's cinematic record.

Assimilation remains a contested issue to this day. While many people (of all racial, ethnic, and national backgrounds) support the idea that Americans should strive to assimilate into the dominant (white) way of life, others find that proposition disturbing. Some people feel that racial and ethnic cultures should be celebrated and not phased out of existence, arguing that one of the basic strengths of America is its very diversity of cultures, and — hopefully — cinematic representations. Another controversial issue related to assimilation is the phenomenon of passing, wherein some people of color deny their racial or ethnic backgrounds in order to be accepted as white. People who pass are sometimes accused of “selling out” their racial or ethnic heritages. However, people who can pass often choose to do so precisely because whites are still afforded more privilege and power in our national culture, and those who pass often want to share in those opportunities. It is this social reality that led many European immigrants to work toward assimilation and acceptance as being white. That process can be seen occurring in American films made throughout the twentieth century, especially in regard to changing representations of Irish, Italian, and Jewish Americans. In film and culture-at-large, the shift to whiteness occurred for these groups of people when they were no longer regarded as separate races, but rather as ethnicities or nationalities that could then be assimilated into the American concept of whiteness.