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Whose Crying Game? One Woman of Color's Reflection on Representations of Men of Color in Contemporary Film

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This film review of *The Crying Game* critically interrogates the politics of representation and domination which "spectacle-ize" Black male bodies. Working out of her location as an Asian American woman who is sensitive to the cinematic and everyday politics of exoticization, this cultural critic provides an analysis of the dynamic relations of power at work in the racial and heterosexual production and exploitation of Black gays in contemporary film. Drawing on the work of such critics as bell hooks, Robert Reid-Pharr, Kobena Mercer, and Judith Butler, she challenges us not to simply perpetuate the imperial gaze.

In the spring of 1993, a small independent Irish film began receiving rave reviews in the U.S. and around the world. This film eventually garnered six Academy Award nominations for Best Picture, Best Actor, and Best Supporting Actor, to name but a few. *The Crying Game*, directed by Irishman Neil Jordan, focuses on a small band of Irish Republican Army terrorists (IRA), or counter-terrorists, depending upon your point of view, who are a part of an armed struggle that has been ongoing in Northern Ireland for nearly a quarter of a century. Most of the entertainment media industry—*Siskel & Ebert, Charlie Rose, Entertainment Tonight*, and even the ABC and CBS news programs—have given *The Crying Game* a "thumbs up." Contrary to popular as well as academic opinion, these reviews have not concentrated on how this film

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helps us, as U.S. viewers, to gain any better understanding of either the IRA, the longstanding Irish-English crisis, or the impact of colonialism and civil war on North Ireland's communities. On the contrary, these concerns merely underly the surface of the film—they serve as intriguing, though superficial, backdrops to the actual plot. If film viewers were to begin seriously thinking through the complexities of nationalism, colonialism, war and terrorism, much of *The Crying Game's* plot would appear pretty simplistic—even nonsensical.

The media and even the film's leading Irish actor, Stephen Rea, have commented that *The Crying Game's* acclaim has been due in large part to its surprising, even shocking, conclusion—a conclusion which has been kept very much underwraps by industry watchers, film reviewers, and film goers. And though all the industry's"hush-hushness" has been exciting and seductive, at the same time, it is crucial to critically interrogate just exactly why and how "this secret" excites and seduces audiences. As one conference attendee correctly pointed out to me, "When the dominant culture likes something, it's suspect—and you've got to wonder why?"

I would like to briefly reflect on watching *The Crying Game* from a woman of color's standpoint, and my being shocked not so much by the film's conclusion, but by the film's representations of race, gender, sexuality, and to a certain extent, class. More specifically, I want to raise what I see are crucial questions: "How do the men of color in this film get represented or positioned?" and "What are some of the implications, or critical alternatives, for women of color as well as others who view this film?"

In the introduction to bell hooks' most recent collection of critical essays, entitled *Black Looks: Race and Representation*, she observes that,

> The emphasis on film is so central because it, more than any other media experience, determines how blackness and black people are seen and how other groups will respond to us based on their relation to these constructed and consumed images.[1]

Like most folks, I like to take in an occasional film , relax, eat hot buttered pop-corn, and just plain escape from my everyday worries about finances, teaching, and figuring out what's for dinner. However, as I have become increasingly aware of how images—film images—play a role in determining "not only how other people think about us but how we think about ourselves,"[2] I can no longer just look at a film—particularly a film featuring peoples of color—without being effected. When I think about it, I now feel ashamed and angry sometimes for having consumed countless films like the futuristic thriller *Blade Runner*, the colonial epic *A Passage*

to India, an American western fantasy like *Dances With Wolves,* or say, a more recent feminist film like *The Piano*—and either "not seen" that there were peoples of color--even entire communities of color in the film—or only half-realized how men, women, and children of color were being depicted or marginalized. This is all the more troubling to me when I think about my unconscious participation in the consumption of these cinematic images. As a woman who is married to a man of color and who acknowledges that "the reconstruction and transformation of male behavior, masculinity, is [also] a necessary and essential part of [feminist struggle],"[3] I am very uncomfortable and deeply pained when I see film representations which either trivialize, ignore, brutalize, or exoticize men of color in terms of their looks, speech, habits, physical and intellectual abilities, beliefs (cultural, spiritual, or political), class, or sexual differences.

As my husband and I sat waiting for *The Crying Game* to begin, I could sense that the theatre was going to be packed with people. At least two of their staff members paraded up and down the aisle counting how many seats were still available and asking folks if those seats next to them were taken. Ironically, perhaps, just as the movie was about to begin, a young couple with a baby took the seats right in front of us. I could not help smiling to myself that there might be two crying games to contend with tonight. For the most part the audience was predominantly white, college-educated, middle-to-upper middle class, in their late twenties, thirties, and up.

Because I am a biracial woman of color in her thirties, I tend to be extra sensitive about my cultural and racial identity—my speech, my body, my intellect—how others are perceiving me. And in spite of being born and raised in the U.S., I have had many curious strangers ask me "what nationality I am" or "what country I am from." They are usually surprised to hear than I am half-Italian. It is not what they are expecting me to say. Even as a small child I can distinctly remember strangers being considerably more curious about my "other half"—my Japanese half. I am now beginning to understand why it is that my Japanese half is so intriguing—so exotic to many European Americans. I share this bit of history and memory with you precisely because they are apart of my struggle to understand how I am constantly being positioned—by the gaze of strangers, by institutions, by media such as film, television, and theatre. Even as I speak about this, I am aware that everything in my cultural and gendered upbringing tells me to remain silent—invisible. Reflecting on my lived experiences from the stand-point of a biracial Asian American woman has caused me to gradually realize that, in fact, I do share a great deal in common with men of color and their struggles.

Now, I would like to focus on a few of the disturbing film images which forced me to ask these questions: "Whose Crying Game is being played at the expense of what 'Others'?" If this film's success is because,

as lead actor Stephen Rea says, "It's a modern love story, and there are few enough of those around,"[4] then I wonder, "How far have men of color come in terms of either transforming their images or achieving any real power when it comes to gender, race, class, or (hetero)sexual relations?"

The first third of *The Crying Game* centers on the small band of IRA terrorists, two men and one woman, who take a young, Black British soldier—called Jody—as their hostage. They hold him captive—as well as hooded and restrained throughout most of his confinement in a remote greenhouse. From the beginning of Jody's capture, I was disturbed by the IRA's strategy of using sexual seduction as the means of luring him into a vulnerable position where he could be seized as a hostage. While this may be a common ploy in many action film narratives, what most alarmed me as I was watching this opening scene with a predominantly white audience, was that the violent act of taking this Black man as a hostage became secondary to the "spectacle" of a Black man seduced by a white woman-—the exoticization of Jody's large black body—his sexuality and masculinity. As cultural critic Robert Reid-Pharr observes, there has been " this tendency to spectacleize Black bodies, to read race as a type of ephemeral surface narrative which need not be understood in the context of American history or culture."[5] It has been just as much an aspect of mainstream heterosexual cultural politics as it has been of "lesbian and gay identity politics."[6] While the image of the "woman as seductress," utilized in the opening scene as a sexual object by the IRA to trap Jody, goes way back to biblical and classical times, it is more important to understand that in the context of U.S. history and culture, African American men were often falsely accused of raping white women and routinely lynched by white male vigilante groups such as the Ku Klux Klan.[7]

Not only is Jody's large Black body exoticized within the first few minutes of the film, but a pattern of exoticization and violence emerges. Just as soon as the IRA nab Jody in a compromising position, they shove a burlap hood over his head and tie his wrists up. As I watch these images, other images flashed in my mind—haunting images of lynchings and beatings I have seen repeated on television news. Throughout Jody's captivity, I am acutely aware of how hot, confined, and uncomfortable he is. Jody sweats profusely and has difficulty breathing under the hood. And although the film shifts its emphasis here to Fergis, the white Irishman (Stephen Rae) who is Jody's caretaker/guard, and the most empathetic of the three IRA soldiers, I find myself identifying, on some level, with Jody's silent outrage and confusion over being taken as a hostage. And though Fergis is responsible for partially raising the hood so Jody can breathe and speak more easily, it is Jody's soft-spoken voice, congenial banter, and humanity that I concentrate on. In spite of his being held as an IRA hostage, Jody shows surprising humor and even sympathy towards Fergis' IRA cause. To a certain extent, I acknowledge the

complexity of subjective positions these two men occupy—one Irish and one British, one white and one Black, who have complicated histories, subjectivities, and relations not only in terms of each other, but in terms of their relations to Ireland and England—and those discourses of power. How have each of these men been positioned within their respective countries? How is the film's director and screenwriter, Neil Jordan, positioning them? And what about us, as North American viewers who know very little about the complexities of the Irish-English conflict, let alone about race relations in Ireland and England, how are we participating in maintaining and perpetuating certain racial and cultural stereotypes? As a Black British soldier who has been sent on a "peacekeeping mission" to Northern Ireland, how in fact is Jody being positioned by those in power?

At one point in *The Crying Game*, Jody's face is brutually beaten by one of the IRA members, almost as if he were a wild animal that needed taming. I recall being very uncomfortable as the camera shot zoomed in for a close-up of Jody's swollen, bruised, and bleeding lips, particularly as he tried to speak. Once again I ask, "Whose Crying Game is being played at the expense of what Others?" Cultural Critic John Fiske, in his analysis of Michel Foucault's *Discipline and Punish,*[8] reminds us that,

> Foucault has revealed in detail the ways in which western societies have made the body into the site where social power is most compellingly exerted. The body is where the power-bearing definitions of social and sexual normality are, literally, embodied, and is consequently the site of discipline and punishment for deviation from those norms.[9]

The curious thing about this spectacle of "discipline and punishment" is that it has little to do with the actual plot. The image of Jody's capture and beating occur within the first fifteen minutes or so of the film. Meanwhile, there are a continual string of "o/Other" images in this film which spectacle-ize and exoticize Black male sexuality, the body, and Black culture—images which cause the audience to gaze and gape, and even laugh. Despite insistence by some that this film is actually about a "hostage crisis," how a low-ranking Black British soldier could serve as a serious political bargaining chip in gaining concessions from the British is more a point of absurdity, than mystery.

Still others insist that *The Crying Game* is an important film because it sympathetically portrays, at least at the level of friendship between Fergis and Jody and later between Fergis and Jody's Black gay lover, how the white Irish minority have much in common with British Blacks, even Black gays, and need to be protected as such. While this point should not be ignored or dismissed, there is also concern that an

important critique involving race and power relations should not be so easily overlooked. There is no question that we should understand the Irish-English conflict and protect Irish as a minority group; however, in the context of U.S. racial politics and recent events such as the Rodney King beating, verdict, and ensuing L.A. rebellion, it is just as important to advance critical interrogations of media and cinematic uses of the Black body as a site where social, cultural, economic, and heterosexual forces are being exerted.[10] How then is Jody's body utilized as a titillating lead in to a supposedly "modern romance" for a mainstream, and most likely, heterosexual audience?

Perhaps this film should be re-titled "The Crying Shame" because what it succeeds in doing is directing our gaze to a more exotic or fetishized image of Blacks[11]—an image which is hardly "modern" for the nineties. *The Crying Game* is a shame because it really does nothing more than re-create the heterosexual gaze/voyeurism of another kind of body portrayed in this film—the Black body of Jody's lover, Dil. After Jody tells Fergis of his lover Dil and soon after dies in a truck accident/escape, the film's focus shifts and ends up exoticizing Dil as well as Fergis' new fascination (and ours) with Dil. It is now Dil's Black body, which on one level is the body of a Black woman made "other" by race and gender, and on another, the body of a Black transvestite made "other" by race and sexuality. For many mainstream film goers, who are most likely heterosexual, the cinematic voyeurism of watching Fergis' attraction to an "image" of a seductive Black woman who turns out to be a transvestite cannot and should not be mistaken or dismissed by serious critics. It is perhaps too easy and convenient to focus on Fergis' brotherly compassion towards Jody and now this transference of his new love (interracial and homoerotic desire?) for Dil. As a heterosexual, though I feel the tension and limitations of my cultural critique here, I am still very much aware that this film depicts a complex power dynamic enmeshed with race, culture, and sexual politics. bell hooks, in her critique of the film *Paris is Burning,* makes this helpful and pointed observation about heterosexual politics of domination:

> Within white supremacist, capitalist patriarchy the experience of men dressing as women, appearing in drag, has always been regarded by the dominant heterosexist cultural gaze as a sign that one is symbolically crossing over from a realm of power into a realm of powerlessness.[12]

For Neil Jordan, a white heterosexual screenwriter/director, to focus on Dil, the Black transvestite, reasserts the perogative of the white, male colonizer quite literally through the character of Fergis. The politics of heterosexual phallocentric domination at work here is even more com-

plex and enmeshed given the fact that in the U.S. "[h]eterosexuality as a form of oppression has also been shaped by the history of racism."[13] Historically "[r]acist stereotypes of Black people [women and men] as primordially sexual have provided white men with a way of deflecting responsibility for racial sexual abuse and exploitation . . . "[14] Although Fergis is perceived as the kind caretaker/peacekeeper, it is his heterosexual gaze which constructs Dil as an object of his (and our) desire; Dil's body becomes the site of sexual and colonial domination. She is not only positioned as exotic and erotic, but is even further marginalized as a Black gay who has no agency. At the end of the film, it is ironically Dil who has the gun in her hand, not Fergis. It is Dil who must commit an act of violence towards a white woman who is Fergis' former IRA comrade. And yet, in the finale, it is Fergis—the great white Irish hero/savior—who takes the murder rap for Dil. While on one level it appears that Dil exercises power because she wields the gun—an instrument of power usually held by heterosexual men—on another, there is something very disturbing about this role reversal here. From her first encounter with Fergis, Dil is actually in a very powerless position. She has no idea who Fergis is or what his associations are. Dil certainly does not have the faintest idea of Fergis' relationship to Jody even until the end. Fergis actually withholds this information. Just as he cannot bring himself to tell Dil of Jody's death or his complicity, he also cannot acknowledge his homoerotic desires and accept the fact that Dil is gay. Upon realizing the shocking truth, Fergis' reaction is a physical one: he vomits. By complying with the film industry's request "not to tell"—not to reveal the shocking conclusion [shocking to whom?]—we, as heterosexuals, participate in and perpetuate the exoticization of Black gays. It is critical to understand that whether we are watching *The Crying Game*, repeated images of Rodney King's beating, or the 1991 L.A. rebellion, "[t]his is not a simple seeing, an act of direct perception, but the racial production of the visible, the workings of racial con-straints on what it means to 'see'[15] Transforming images and creating critical alternatives means we must take the risk of breaking the silence —a silence imposed by a dominant cultural discourse which inscribes, commodifies, and consumes "the Other."

Similarly, bell hooks challenges us to "transform images of blackness, of black people, our ways of looking and our ways of being seen."[16] She argues that:

> It is not an issue of 'us' and 'them." The issue is really one of standpoint. From what political perspective do we dream, look, create, and take action? For those of us who dare to desire differently, who seek to look away from the conventional ways of seeking blackness and ourselves, the issue of race and representation is not just a question of critiquing the "status quo". It is also

> about transforming the image, creating alternatives, asking ourselves questions about what types of images subvert, pose critical alternatives, and transform our worldviews and move us away from dualistic thinking about good and bad.[17]

Unless we become critical citizens who see our task as questioning these images, these narratives and perspectives, we are bound, as hooks concludes, to "simply re-create the imperial gaze—the look that seeks to dominate, subjugate, and colonize."[18] This is obviously a challenge which involves us all—whether we are film-makers or film goers, teachers or students, community workers or residents, heterosexuals or gays/ lesbians/ bisexuals—we can transform these images of men and women of color by how we look, how we think, how we talk, and hopefully, by how we feel.

NOTES

[1]bell hooks, *Black Looks: Race and Representation* (Boston: South End Press, 1992), 5.

[2]Pratibha Parmar, *Black Looks*, 5.

[3]bell hooks, *Talking Back: Thinking Feminist, Thinking Black* (Boston: South End Press, 1989), 127.

[4]*USA Today,* 18 February 1993.

[5]Robert F. Reid-Pharr, "The Spectacle of Blackness," *Radical America* 24 (April 1993): 60.

[6]Reid-Pharr.

[7]See Paula Giddings, *When and Where I Enter: The Impact of Black Women on Race and Sex in America* (New York: Bantam, 1984), 26-31.

[8]Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (New York: Vintage Books, 1979).

[9]John Fiske, *Television Culture* (London: Routledge, 1987), 248.

[10]For a powerful analysis of how Rodney King's body became "reduced to a phantasm of white racist aggression," see Judith Butler's "Endangered/Endangering: Schematic Racism and White Paranoia," in *Reading Rodney King/Reading Urban Uprising*, ed. by Robert Gooding-Williams (New York: Routledge, 1993), 20.

[11]For an excellent analysis of the fetishism of Black bodies and the construction of white identity, see Kobena Mercer's "Skin Head Sex Thing: Racial Difference and the Homoerotic Imaginary," in *How Do I Look?*, ed. by Bad Object-Choices (Seattle: Bay Press, 1991), 171-175, 189-206.

[12]hooks, *Black Looks*, 146.

[13]Diane Richardson, "Sexuality and Male Dominance," in *Thinking Feminist: Key Concepts in Women's Studies,* edited by Diane Richardson and Victoria Robinson (New York: The Guilford Press, 1993), 92. See also Barbara Omolade's "Hearts of Darkness," in *Desire: The Politics of Sexuality*, edited by Ann Snitow, Christine Stansell, and Sharon Thompson (London: Virago, 1984).

[14]Richardson, and Omolade. See also Kobena Mercer, "Skin Head Sex Thing," 206, and especially Frantz Fanon's *Black Skin, White Masks*, translated by Charles Lam Markmann (New York: Grove Weidenfeld, 1967), 170; 177-180.

[15]Butler, "Endangered/Endangering," 16.

[16]hooks, *Black Looks*, 7.

[17]hooks.

[18]hooks.