

GENOLOGOPHOBIA

William Brown, University of Roehampton, London

I enjoyed two excellent conferences this year, including the 2019 NECS Conference, which is the conference of the European Network for Cinema and Media Studies, and the 2019 Film-Philosophy Conference. The former had as its central theme ‘Structures and Voices: Storytelling in Post-Digital Times,’ and was held at the University of Gdańsk in Poland, while the latter was unthemed and took place at the University of Brighton in the UK.

There were many wonderful papers at each conference, as is perhaps to be expected, and so what follows may come across as an unnecessary criticism, in that I am going to discuss something that did not take place with any great regularity at either conference—even as I make mention of various papers that did take place at each conference.

What I am going to critique these conferences for is a relatively persistent absence of discussions of race, which for this essay I am going to define as *genologophobia*, meaning fear (φόβος/phóbos) of discussing (λόγος/logos) race (γένος/genos).

This assertion already/alone may provoke a roll of the eyes in some readers. And I can enumerate various of the excuses that easily can be rattled off in order to explain why people are (still) not talking about race—or at least not very much—at conferences such as these. For example, the majority demographic at each of these conferences is white Europeans, North Americans and Australasians, with this high level of white participation itself reflecting the demographics of advanced higher education in those regions, which in turn might reflect quite simply (if problematically) the demographics of those regions, especially the demographics of those with reasonable/realistic access to higher education within those regions. Not that white scholars cannot talk about race, and not that scholars of colour are obliged to talk about race; but in some senses it is perhaps an inevitability that predominantly white scholars will predominantly talk about cinema and its attendant media as if there were no need to address race as part of its being—even as conferences possibly/actually attempt to take ‘affirmative action’ in terms of ensuring a diversity of participants.

What is more, I am of course guilty of being a single person who cannot attend every paper at conferences that have more than one panel running at any given moment in time. It is quite possible, therefore, that I simply missed a bunch of race-themed papers, or at least panels at which race was raised as an issue (in spite of the descriptions of the papers in the conference programs?), meaning that the ‘white bias’ that I am delineating is in fact my own, as I unconsciously err away from race-themed panels and papers for the purposes of sticking to an ‘easier,’ white agenda. In this sense, perhaps I am an unburnt kettle calling a bunch of pots white—not least because I myself do not perhaps talk about race as much as I could or

should do. While I acknowledge this possibility, though, I hope that this was not a strong factor in my perception of genologophobia. Indeed, in spite of both conferences hosting scholars from various continents, and with various scholars also talking about cinema and media from a wider range of continents still, it seemed clear to me that 2019 was a(nother) year in which race seemed not to be discussed at these two recent and relatively large-scale film studies conferences.

But why am I making this interjection, even at the risk of redundancy, rejection and hypocrisy? For perhaps the whiteness of film and media studies is a long-standing problem and one that cannot and will not change overnight. And yet, as we live in an increasingly globalised world, in which people who identify as white account for only about one fifth of the population, it can at times seem odd that white cinema dominates our discussions of the medium, and that the medium thus inevitably comes in some senses to be defined as white, with the expectation of whiteness in turn coming unthinkingly or otherwise to obviate for many the need to talk about race.

I am not alone in this perception. From a broader, cultural perspective, Reni Eddo-Lodge has recently and passionately articulated her frustrations at the difficulty she encounters when trying to talk with white people about how ‘not everyone experiences the world in the way that they do.’¹ With regard specifically to film studies, the aim here is not to overlook a rich history of critical race theorists, nor classic texts like Richard Dyer’s *White*, nor the ongoing work of scholars who do bring discussions of race to the table.² Indeed, Greg de Cuir Jr is on the editorial board for NECS’s journal, *NECSUS: European Journal of Media Studies*, and he is actively invested in promoting black cinema, as per the recent *Black Light*, a selection of 47 films that he curated for the 2019 Locarno Film Festival—even if he did not discuss this experience directly at NECS at the workshop entitled ‘It’s All About Telling a Story. Artistic, Curatorial, Scholarly Perspectives in Dialogue.’³

In a fashion that echoes Eddo-Lodge’s argument, Celine Parreñas Shimizu has also written a series of provocations in which she outlines the ongoing and overwhelming whiteness of film studies, including an exhortation for scholars to stop watching and talking about white media.⁴ This sits alongside Racquel J. Gates and Michael Boyce Gillespie, who while acknowledging that ‘[d]iscussion about black film and media is booming in academic programs [in the USA],’ nonetheless have felt compelled to write a manifesto ‘reclaiming black film and media studies.’⁵ Meanwhile, if these examples focus exclusively on North America, Noah Tsika has also argued that African media are marginalised within the contemporary and supposedly global academy, with Lindiwe Dovey adding that when African film is discussed, it is more often factual rather than fictional media that receive critical attention, a tendency that in turn might lead to a renewed emphasis on African bodies as opposed to African minds and imaginations.⁶ Dovey further contends that Africa should

not be ‘treated as an exceptional space to the rest of the globe,’ and that African examples should be brought to people’s attention ‘within broader studies of narrative, genre, and media institutions.’⁷ With this in mind, while conferences such as Black Film British Cinema, which was organised by Clive James Nwonka at the University of Greenwich in 2017, and which was timed to commemorate the thirtieth anniversary of the 1988 conference of the same name, are indeed significant contributions to rectifying the genologophobia of (British) film studies, it does seem that race—much like the African continent with which issues of race are perhaps indelibly linked—should also not be treated as an ‘exceptional theme’ but systematically included within film studies more broadly. If Achille Mbembe suggests that the contemporary moment is defined by the ‘Becoming-Black-of-the-World’ (if to quote Mbembe is not merely to quote the fashionable *philosophe du jour*), then it does indeed seem telling that there is such seeming genologophobia in contemporary western film studies. To mention only African-American filmmakers, remarkable recent work by the likes of Khalik Allah, Beyoncé, Ryan Coogler, Ava DuVernay, Kevin Jerome Everson, F. Gary Gray, Christopher Harris, Barry Jenkins, Spike Lee, Kasi Lemmons, Julius Onah, Jordan Peele, Dee Rees, Boots Riley, RaMell Ross, Justin Simien, George Tillman Jr, Billy Woodberry and Phillip Youmans only makes this occlusion more surprising. Which is not to mention work dealing with race by American filmmakers from other ethnicities (Kathryn Bigelow, Justin Chon, John M. Chu, Kogonada, Carlos López Estrada, Joe Talbot, Lulu Wang have all, for example, enjoyed wide releases with their work) and non-American filmmakers working within the American system and also engaging with histories and actualities of race, notable examples being Chris Morris, Steve McQueen and Roberto Minervini. In the light of such prominent work, it seems odd that race seems so little discussed. Or, as Denise Ferreira da Silva might put it, it seems odd that we are not prepared to look at cinema under a blacklight—especially since such a blacklight can create *the possibility of considering thinking in some other way*.⁸

But in spite of my suggestion that it is a critical necessity to think and to talk about race, across 324 papers and keynotes at NECS (i.e. excluding workshops), zero included race in their title, while there was one panel dedicated to Chinese cinema (featuring talks by Mila Zuo, Victor Fan, Jessica Yeung and Ruby Cheung), one to North African cinema (Samar Abdel-Rahman, Matthew Croombs, Elizabeth Miller, Marion Hallet), and one panel on Feminist and Video Aesthetics that included Lidia Kniaź talking on ‘Afrofuturism as a Storytelling Mode in Selected American Music Videos,’ Rosanna Maule on ‘Postcolonial Archives and Feminist Digital Art Practices,’ and Agnieszka Piotrowska on ‘*Neria* – the first feminist black movie in Southern Africa or an example of opportunistic neo-colonial venture?’ There were also one-off papers on Ousmane Sembène (Anna Warchało), *Black Panther* (Niels Niessen) and Whitney Houston (Jaap Kooijman). And while there were

various papers that focused on examples from African (Raul Alvarez), American indigenous (Monika Siebert), Chilean (María Paz Peirano), Egyptian (Terri Ginsberg), Indian (Catherine Bernier, Grazia Ingravalle), Iranian (Sammaneh Assadi), Korean (Aleksander Koren, Kyoung Sung), Kurdish (Murat Akser), Mexican (Begoña González-Cuesta), Nepali (Dishyia Karki) and Turkish (Melis Behlil, Ece Vitrinel) cinemas, together with a panel on migration (Alice Cati, Irene Gutierrez Torres, Silvia Murillo), this still amounts only to 29 papers out of 324—or less than nine per cent of papers presented.

Meanwhile, across 106 papers and keynotes at Film-Philosophy (i.e. also excluding workshops), again zero mentioned race in their title—or in their abstracts. There were papers on films from Chile (Matthew Holtmeier), China (Bruno Lessard), Iran (Kaveh Abbasian, Maryam Tafakory, David Deamer), Japan (Joff Bradley), South Korea (Hee-seung Lee), Mexico (Hui-Han Chan), Palestine (Samira Makki), South Africa (Finn Daniels-Yeomans) and (at least in principle) Thailand (Xiao Cai—although this scholar did not in fact make it to the conference), while Thomas Austin spoke about ‘Benefaction, processing, exclusion: documentary representations of refugees and migrants in Fortress Europe.’ Hannah Paveck discussed ‘Sounding Colonial Encounters: Strategies of Subtitle Translation,’ while Mila Zuo engaged with the representation of Asian women as sexbots in her paper ‘The Girlfriend Experience: Virtual Beauty and Love in Post-Cinematic Times.’ Finally, Mark Cauchi did discuss Jim Jarmusch as a filmmaker who regularly works with actors of colour in ‘*Paterson* and the Renewal of American Secularity in the Age of Trump.’ But this again only amounts to 15 per cent of the papers presented—with race not even featuring explicitly in a few of these papers that I managed to see. I should mention that Victor Fan did present a specifically non-western theory of cinema when in his keynote he discussed ‘Time and Nothingness: Image and Temporality through the Lens of Buddhism’—an expansion on the work that he outlines towards the end of his important book, *Cinema Approaching Reality: Locating Chinese Film Theory*.⁹

As I began over the course of these conferences to consider the way in which race was repeatedly absent from papers and/or discussions, it struck me that many could easily place the term ‘white’ in front of numerous of the claims being made about cinema, or indeed that the claims being made about cinema could in fact equally be claims about whiteness, without any substantial change to the argument being put forward. Even as we all in principle know that whiteness goes unmentioned as it passes for normality, this mechanism is still (un)clearly at work—unclearly because it is not explicitly recognised and thus becomes invisible, but also clearly precisely because we all are supposedly aware of its ubiquity.

Lest I be guilty of trying to seem ‘more woke than thou,’ I wish to end by emphasising that I contribute to this problem of genologophobia, including during a paper on darkness at NECS that only obliquely refers/referred to race (with a video-essay at Film-Philosophy that

also only obliquely alludes to race through its use of a couple of Bollywood films set in San Francisco). And there remain problems even in this short conference report of sorts ('of sorts' because it is, as mentioned, focused on what was not discussed more than on what was): why is it that I specifically reference Dyer's *White* rather than the numerous other volumes on (non-white) race and cinema (from foundational work within film and media studies by the likes of Manthia Diawara, bell hooks, Michele Wallace and Lola Young, onwards), and is it equally leukocentric/white-focused to talk about unspoken whiteness when, as Parreñas Shimizu suggests, it might be best simply to leave white cinema and white film studies behind?¹⁰

Nonetheless, I hope here to have addressed in part my own genologophobia and to encourage my (white) colleagues to ask if they have a fear of talking about race, even as we are nearly all trained and thus encouraged to have the issue of race on our radars/as part of our scholarly work. But even if we in some senses all think about and perhaps make mention of race, perhaps it is something that we really need to talk about specifically, always and for the rest of our lives, from now and going forward, even if we have not done so (enough) up until this point.

¹Reni Eddo-Lodge, *Why I'm No Longer Talking to White People about Race* (London: Bloomsbury, 2018): ix-x.

²See Richard Dyer, *White: Essays on Race and Culture* (Abingdon: Routledge, 1997).

³For an interview with De Cuir Jr on his experience at Locarno, see Sean Nam, 'Locarno Curator Calls Out the Politics of Film Festival Programming,' *Hyperallergic*, 28 August 2019, <https://hyperallergic.com/513897/greg-de-cuir-locarno-black-light-interview/> (accessed 14 October 2019). Meanwhile, the workshop also included contributions from Miriam De Rosa, Daniel Kulle, Paula Albuquerque, Elizabeth Cadena Sandoval, James Snazell, Catherine Grant, Jeroen Sondervan and Victoria Pastor-Gonzalez.

⁴See Celine Parreñas Shimizu, 'Gnawing at the Whiteness of Cinema Studies: On Asian American Media Now,' *Cinema Journal*, 56:3 (Spring 2017): 119-124; and J. Reid Miller, Richard T. Rodríguez and Celine Parreñas Shimizu, 'The Unwatchability of Whiteness: A New Imperative of Representation,' *Asian Diasporic Visual Cultures and the Americas*, 4 (2018): 235-243.

⁵See Racquel J. Gates and Michael Boyce Gillespie, 'Reclaiming Black Film and Media Studies,' *Film Quarterly*, 72:3 (2019), 13-15.

⁶See Noah Tsika, 'Close-Up: The Marginalization of African Media Studies: Introduction: Teaching African Media in the Global Academy,' *Black Camera: An International Film Journal*, 7:2 (Spring 2016): 94-124; and Lindiwe Dovey, 'Close-Up: The Marginalization of African Media Studies: On the Matter of Fiction: An Approach to the Marginalization of African Film Studies in the Global Academy,' *Black Camera: An International Film Journal*, 7:2 (Spring 2016): 159-173.

⁷Tsika, 'Close-Up', 159.

⁸See Denise Ferreira da Silva, 'In the Raw,' *e-flux*, 93 (September 2018), <https://www.e-flux.com/journal/93/215795/in-the-raw/>. Accessed 4 June 2019.

⁹Victor Fan, *Cinema Approaching Reality: Locating Chinese Film Theory* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2015).

¹⁰A footnote that in fact contains the most important aspect of this essay: in the context of events like Ferguson, it would seem more urgent still that we discuss race, even if to say as much could imply that we can only, or only begin to, talk about race during what Giorgio Agamben might describe as 'states of exception'—as if race were not worth discussing at all times. However, not only is the state of exception becoming the norm (which is essentially Agamben's argument), such that it should also be the norm to discuss race, but, lest this be seen as a defence of 'the state of exception' as a political reality (states of exception are 'good' because they allow us to feel 'progressive' in talking about race),

we should also point out that the world outwith the state of exception, or what we might call ‘the state of normality,’ was built upon the exceptionalisation and exclusion of non-white bodies. That is, if the state of exception is becoming normal, ‘normal’ was always already a state of exception for non-white bodies. ‘Normality’ was always, then, white normality (as well as being a normality based upon exceptions of class, gender, sexuality and so on). In this way, Agamben’s state of exception is revealed as a state of exception *for white people*, with the upshot being that white people are feted as exceptional (endless films celebrating the most basic exploits of white people, including a continued celebration of an embittered white masculinity that suddenly feels threatened for not being able to take all that it wants from the world), while people of colour continue to be marginalised in spite of the heroic efforts of filmmakers like those mentioned above (and with attendant issues about the possible ‘becoming white’ of anyone who is featured at length in a form as white as cinema). From the perspective of race, then, the state of exception is simply business as usual; *it is the same white normality as the white normality that preceded it*. From the perspective of race, then, there is no state of exception except yet further attempts to marginalise a numerical majority and to consolidate power and wealth amidst a white minority—as a scholar like Alexander G. Weheliye has argued in relation specifically to Agamben. The state of exception is not the new normal; from the perspective of race, it was always normal. If we are to acknowledge and/or to critique the history, the present and the would-be future of white power, then, we need to talk about race. Indeed, if modernity as a whole is built upon the racial state of exception outlined above, then critical race theory is not at the periphery of, but is in fact central to all theory about modernity. See Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life* (trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen, Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1998); see also Alexander G. Weheliye, *Habeas Viscus: Racializing Assemblages, Biopolitics, and Black Feminist Theories of the Human* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2014).

Finally, I would like to engage briefly with the wonderful keynote paper delivered at Film-Philosophy by Janet Harbord, who has herself discussed at length Agamben’s importance to film theory/film-philosophy. In Brighton, Harbord considered ‘Film as a Training for Neurotypical Life,’ without explicitly engaging with how ‘neurotypicality,’ in the spirit of Sylvia Wynter, equally involves a racial/racialised component. This has nothing to do with any abhorrent claims that the non-white brain is biologically different from the white brain. But if Donald Hebb suggested with regard to the neurons in our brains that ‘what fires together wires together,’ and if the neurons that fire together fire together as a result of experiences and intra-actions with the world, and if that world is not only white but also in some senses racist, then it stands to reason that (or at the very least must be tested whether) to be trained to be ‘neurotypical’ is to be trained to be white. And yet, if one is not white, then to be trained to be white (whiteness as normality/whiteness as neurotypical) while also being made aware of one’s non-whiteness (deviations from whiteness are abnormal or alien) is by definition profoundly alienating—with this alienation functioning perhaps as yet another mechanism of white supremacy. In this sense, neurotypicality becomes a technology of white power. See Janet Harbord, *Ex-Centric Cinema: Giorgio Agamben and Film Archaeology* (London: Bloomsbury, 2016); and Sylvia Wynter, ‘Towards the sociogenic principle: Fanon, identity, the puzzle of conscious experience, and what it is like to be “Black,”’ in Mercedes F. Durán-Cogan and Antonio Gómez-Moriana (eds.), *National Identities and Sociopolitical Changes in Latin America* (New York: Routledge, 2001): 30-66.

Some evidence to at the very least suggest that this claim might be worth investigating: black Caribbeans in the UK are nine times more likely to be diagnosed as schizophrenic than the white population, with the incidence *increasing* across younger generations, whose black lives are more fully ‘formed’ in the white UK, rather than decreasing as a result of ‘colour-blind’ socialisation. Read in this blacklight, film is a training for white life and a tool for enacting brain damage on non-whites. Small wonder that the white academy, including white film studies, has trouble attracting non-white scholars when we live in a world in which the colour of bodies is burdened with so much meaning that it surely has enormous effects on those otherwise ‘colourless’ brains (the creation of non-white bodies, or bodies that are marked as different by virtue of the utterly contingent factor of colour, involves the simultaneous creation of non-white brains, which by virtue of their non-whiteness do not fit into the white academy). Or, to evoke a formulation of Gilles Deleuze, if the brain is the screen and if the screen is white, then the brain of cinema and brains in the cinematic society are also white. See Rebecca Pinto, Mark Ashworth and Roger Jones, ‘Schizophrenia in black Caribbeans living in the UK: an exploration of underlying causes of the high incidence rate,’ *British Journal of General Practice*, 58:551 (June 2008): 429–434; and Gilles Deleuze, Deleuze, Gilles (2000) ‘The Brain is the Screen: An Interview with Gilles Deleuze,’ in Gregory Flaxman (ed.), *The Brain is the Screen: Deleuze and the Philosophy of Cinema* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press): 365–373. (It is also notable that the authors of the former paper seek to locate the causes of the increased rate of schizophrenia within the afro-Caribbean community and not in wider, white society as a whole.)