



# Looking into the light. Whiteness, racism and regimes of representation

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## **Looking into the light: Whiteness, racism and regimes of representation**

Maxime Cervulle

The eye muscles that surround the lens allow light to be focused onto the retina, where images form; our vision adjusts with these muscular contractions.<sup>1</sup> But what happens when *we ourselves* do not adjust to the image that forms there? What happens when, as Frantz Fanon (2015 [1949]) would have put it, 'the eye drowns'? This anatomical metaphor should not of course be taken literally: it only serves to translate our complex relationships with the visible, conveying the extent to which, when the image deforms (us), the eye may well up and spill over, overwhelmed by a flood of tears, drowned in the violence of representation. Of course it is not only the image which provokes this type of violence: all technologies of representation may have this effect. Representation can sometimes be understood as an opacification that presents itself as transparency. According to this perspective, the represented object preexists its representation; the representation therefore alters the immediate relationship with the object. Seen in this light, representation seems to be the opposite of objectivity; it assumes that total transparency and direct access to the truth of the object are possible. However representation can also be understood otherwise, as a mediation which creates and organises a (way of thinking the) world. Here the focus is on the process by which an object emerges in the field of perception, in a specific form, by means of its inclusion in the domain of the representable. These two conceptions of representation lead to two understandings of ideology as negative or neutral. In the first case, at the heart of orthodox Marxist traditions, ideology acts as a veil in front of the gaze, an alteration of the perception of real social relations. In the second case, which can be found in the work of Antonio Gramsci or Louis Althusser for example, ideology mediates our experience. Working with this latter understanding, as a number of British Cultural Studies authors have done<sup>2</sup>, entails addressing representation head-on, to conceive of it not as a blindfold covering our eyes but as a way into the world, a socialisation of the gaze. Richard Dyer's work fits with this understanding of representation in at least two ways.

<sup>1</sup> Thanks to the CERA at Université Paris 8, particularly to Marie-Anne Matard-Bonucci and Emmanuelle Sibeud, who secured funding for the translation of this text. Further thanks to Marco Dell'Omodarme, with whom I have shared valuable discussions on some of the points addressed in this preface.

<sup>2</sup> Here I am referring particularly to the work that was developed in the 1970s in the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies at the University of Birmingham (see Sparks, 1992).

On the one hand, Richard Dyer understands cinema as not 'only entertainment' (Dyer, 2005 [1992]), but as a cultural site where the perception of reality is reconfigured. Our relationships with films – such ordinary, everyday objects – are in fact quite complex. Films open a space of projection and identification, but they also generate specific ways of perceiving reality, through particular constructions of different viewpoints. Film culture produces and proliferates connections between particular social groups and specific attributes that then come to stand out to the degree that the viewer cannot take their eyes off them. I am of course referring here to Dyer's analyses on the function of stereotypes (2002 [1993], 11-17) as structuring social hierarchies through an ordering of perception. On the other hand, in the understanding of research that runs through Dyer's writings, research is invested with the particular quality of participating in the discursive struggle that surrounds the definition of reality itself. Although it does not exhaust the multiple levels of the political, this struggle plays a key role, since it permits us to direct our gaze towards issues that visual culture may obscure, or that conventional cinema criticism sometimes buries under an interpretation that is presented as stable and unshakable. The political potential of representation however resides precisely – as Stuart Hall showed us (1973, 1996 [1988]) – in its ambivalence, in the fact that representation may be invested with myriad different readings, from those that are firmly rooted in common sense to those that take a distinctly oppositional stance. It is this position of oppositional viewer that Dyer occupies in a number of his works and that he crafts as an epistemological horizon: what is it to see a film, to inhabit its aesthetic and narrative universe, from the marginal position of a gay and lesbian audience, for example? This question underpins a number of his works, notably *Now You See It: Studies on Gay and Lesbian Film* (2003 [1990]). The title of this work speaks volumes about Dyer's political and intellectual endeavour: it is not so much about giving sight to the blind, as the Christian maxim would have it, but rather learning to see differently, decentring and reorienting the gaze. The politics of culture according to Dyer is a politics of the eye, a process of learning to peel back the folds of visibility.

Nowhere in Dyer's work does this endeavour shine out as strongly and brilliantly as in *White*. This work, which was first published in 1997 and has since become a classic of Film and Cultural Studies, is an exploration of the very stuff that cinema is made of – light – which Dyer leads us to perceive in its racial dimension. While *White's* starting point resides in the question of the racial imagery of white people, its scope goes much further than this. A first example of this extended scope is that Dyer focuses on the role that white hegemony plays in the uses of cinematographic technologies. Through analysing films and photography manuals, in addition to exploring the history of lighting technology, he shows the extent to which the 'culture of light' that is at the core of the cinematographic apparatus privileges the white face, while casting the representation of black

characters as a technical challenge. Thus Dyer outlines the process through which a standard is formed, showing that habitual choices of type of film stock, make-up and lighting convey implicitly racialised values. By slipping from racial norm to technical standard, whiteness thus claims to exhaust all possibilities for representation, and occupies the definition of humanity itself as cinema represents it. For if the principle of film lighting is controlled visibility, this visibility nonetheless cuts clearly across racial lines. The racial divide is even further naturalised by the 'automation' of the exclusion of non-whites that is facilitated by this racial bias in the habitual uses of lighting technology<sup>3</sup>. The potency of Dyer's text also lies in the radical methodological gesture it proposes. The impressive corpus of films that he compiles in order to examine representations of whiteness does not solely consist of films where racial dynamics are problematised or constitute a clear narrative and aesthetic issue. He asks us to understand all cinematographic representation as irremediably marked by the history of racialization. Hence race, like a spectral presence alternating between insidious manifestations and violent materialisations, can be seen as 'the deadly ghost in the [representational] machine' (Cervulle and Freitas, 2015, 10). This gesture is of course the same which underpins postcolonial and decolonial studies, as in the work of those who understand racial division – this 'caesura within the biological continuum' (Foucault, 2003, 255) – as a rupture which inaugurates and so haunts modernity (Dell'Omodarme, 2016). The importation of this gesture in the field of film analysis sheds new light on the cinematic object, leaving none of its dimensions in the shade: the entire technical, aesthetic and semiotic chain of film production is shown to be caught up in racial mechanics. From thence, the relevance of race can no longer be consigned to films where it features in an obvious way: a new kind of antiracist cinema critique can begin to show its true colours.

Paul Gilroy posited (1997, 185) that the category of race itself can be understood as a 'persistent image', a semiotic and material trace of the colonial and imperial cultures that have left their imprint on the ways that we see and perceive the world. Race here is a medium; as in W. J. T. Mitchell's formulation, it is 'something we see through, like a frame, a window, a screen or a lens, rather than something we look at. It is a repertoire of cognitive and conceptual filters through which forms of human otherness are mediated' (2012, xii). The reach of an antiracist critique of cinema therefore depends upon its ability to oscillate between the study of the racialisation of perception (whether mediated by technology or not) and the study of its effects on cultural representation. In *White*,

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<sup>3</sup> This problematic is extended today in a number of ways; one could think, for example, of the issue of face recognition software that is installed in digital cameras – some types of software have been known to fail to recognise non-white faces as human faces. Moreover, the issue of how race plays out in relation to technology arises in the questions surrounding biometrics. On the white subject (and blue eyes) as the privileged subjects of facial and visual recognition techniques, see Magnet (2011).

Dyer works with flair at both levels: initially he focuses on historical and geographical variations of the definition of whiteness as a racial norm, by examining the changing cultural values which are attributed to skin colour and to phenotypic traits. Following this, he unpacks the technical processes by which cinema incorporates the racial medium. Finally, he analyses the conversion of racial norms into cinematographic representations, where the aesthetic and narrative levels intermingle. *White* thus highlights some of the cultural mechanisms by which white hegemony is formed and reproduced, mechanisms under which whites have come to represent what is ordinary, neutral, even universal. By way of critiquing the socio-political hegemony that cinema technologically supports and visually extends, Dyer's book invites the reader into a process of defamiliarisation; he reveals the making of the representations of whiteness that fill our imaginary.

The starting point of *White's* project can be situated in an earlier article, also entitled 'White' and published in 1988 in *Screen* (and republished in Dyer, 2002), in which Dyer undertook a study of representations of white identity, based on three films: *Jezebel* (William Wyler, 1938), *Simba* (Brian Desmond Hurst, 1955) and *Night of the Living Dead* (George Romero, 1969). The displacement manoeuvre that Dyer enacted in this article consisted in reversing the identity politics lens, by studying not the representational production of the minority subject, but that of the hegemonic subject. This project seems to resonate with Stuart Hall's redefinition of representation that he formalised in 'New ethnicities' (1996). In this text, Hall insists on the fact that 'how things are represented and the "machineries" and regimes of representation in a culture do play a constitutive, and not merely a reflexive, after-the-event, role' (1996, 444). Hall then distances himself from a politics of black visibility which has focused on the critique of the cultural marginalisation of black people, and of the stereotypes and essentialism which constrain their representation. As essential as this political moment was in the emergence of an antiracist critique of representation, Dyer asserts, in a similar vein to Hall<sup>4</sup>, that this approach tends to conceal the organisation of the field of representation as a racialised field, thus overshadowing the question of racial norms and their cultural manifestations. He states as follows:

'Looking, with such passion and single-mindedness, at non-dominant groups has had the effect of reproducing the sense of the oddness, differentness, exceptionality of these groups, the feeling that they are departures from the norm. Meanwhile the norm has

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<sup>4</sup> See also Hall's article entitled 'The local and the global' (1991), in which he proposes a reversal of this kind by subjecting 'the identity of Englishness' to critical scrutiny.

carried on as it is the natural, inevitable, ordinary way of being human' (Dyer, 2002, 126).

We can consider that the end of the 1980s marked a turning point in the understanding of racism in Cultural Studies; with Paul Gilroy's attack (1987) on the racialising of 'the people' and 'the nation' (as white), Hazel Carby's (1982) reworking of feminist sisterhood beyond the frontiers of whiteness, or Kobena Mercer's (1986) analysis of the racial dynamics of visual eroticism and of the crisis of the aesthetic authority of European modernity (Mercer, 1989). Such studies interrogated the tacit norms, the unsaid and the silences of racial processes; they worked to 'mak[e] whiteness strange' (Dyer, 2006 [1997], 4). Dyer's own work played a key role in this turning point; indeed his reflections on whiteness feature prominently in the critical scholarship which has developed on both sides of the Atlantic since the 1990s on this theme. Between the publication of the article 'White' and the book *White*, a whole body of literature – sociological, philosophical, historical – developed around this issue. Among these works, and this is to name but a few important texts of which Dyer makes use, we might cite Peggy McIntosh's work (1988) on 'white privilege', Ruth Frankenberg's book (1993) on white women's complex identity constructions in Great Britain, or David Roediger's study (1991) of the role that race played in the formation of the working class in the United States. In that moment where some scholars were trying to understand the mechanisms by which white hegemony is reproduced as set of embodied racial norms, Dyer however wrote:

'My blood runs cold at the thought that talking about whiteness could lead to the development of something called "White Studies", that studying whiteness might become part of what Mike Phillips suspects is a "new assertiveness... amounting to a statement of 'white ethnicity', the acceptable face of white nationalism" (1993, 30) [...]. I dread to think that paying attention to whiteness might lead to white people saying they need to get in touch with their whiteness [...]. The point of looking at whiteness is to dislodge it from its centrality and authority, not to reinstate it' (2006 [1997], 10).

If these words are in part prophetic, given the important development that Critical Whiteness Studies experienced throughout the 1990s and 2000s, it is however necessary to note that most of these works did not lead to a white ethnicity serving a dubious political purpose being established in the university. Far from this, they have in fact led to a significant renewal of the academic

conversation on racism<sup>5</sup>. By shining a spotlight on the benefits that the hegemonic group could draw from social inequality, these works have paved the way for studies on the logics of white identity formation, in order to disrupt the well-oiled machine of white racial identification. In a certain sense, critical works on whiteness have participated in the institutionalisation of black standpoints on whiteness, such as those of James Baldwin (2010 [1984]) and W. E. B. DuBois (2003 [1920]), as well as numerous authors of the 19th century and onwards who have engaged in this critical task (see Roediger, 1998). From thence in Anglophone academia it is no longer possible to understand whiteness as other than the cultural façade of structural racism. This understanding of whiteness has also allowed for new ways of looking at the distribution of the visible and the invisible.

The critique of the manner in which the dialectic of the visible and the invisible organises perception according to a racialised logic also has a long history, which particularly emerged out of African-American literature (Ellison 1952) and decolonial theory (Fanon, 2008 [1952]). Dyer echoes this history by interrogating the position of whiteness in the order of visibility, which seems to him to be mainly based on maintaining the invisibility of whites as a racial group. Inasmuch as the term 'white' refers less to a colour than to a lack of colour, here racialisation resides in a somewhat paradoxical definition (Dyer, 2006, 45): where white people are understood as a social group which occupies a 'neutral' position in race relations. 'White' in this case denotes the norm from which deviations can be assessed; hence the polarisation of the visible between, on the one hand a group whose members embody universality, and on the other hand a multitude of other groups which are relegated to the particular. I have tried to convey this paradox in my own work by highlighting the *hyper(in)visibility* of whiteness (Cervulle, 2013, 119). I coined this term to convey the idea that the unremarkable – and unremarked – invisibility of white people, the fact that they are not perceived as standing out in their whiteness, underpins white hegemony in audiovisual and cinematographic representation. I also wanted to incorporate in the same term different perspectives on whiteness that vary according to the extent of identification or disidentification with white identity. As suggested by bell hooks (1992) and Ruth Frankenberg (2001), this white hegemony is indeed only invisible to those who do not experience racism and the normalised violence of representation on a daily basis. Conveying the polarisation of the visible therefore also involves

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<sup>5</sup> Academic works on whiteness have since developed in myriad ways. In the fields of Media and Film Studies alone, authors have for example examined the narrative patterns through which whiteness is constructed in film (Foster 2003, Bernardi 2007), the role of whiteness in media framing (Garner 2015), the racial dimension of reception for white audiences (Berger 2005, Weaver 2011, Cervulle 2013), or the discursive racializing of the 'digital divide' enacted through the association of whiteness with 'progress' and 'technology' (Hobson 2008).

analysing the distribution of the positions of subject and object of the gaze: who has the right to look, at whom, and how? Who has the right to say what they see and how they see it? These questions are central to a number of works in the field of Visual Culture Studies, including the work of Nicholas Mirzoeff (2011). In opposition to what he calls 'visuality' – a technique of shoring up authority based on an ordering of the visible and an aestheticisation of the elements which are singled out in this ordering process – he proclaims a 'right to look'. Mirzoeff sets out three types of historical hegemonic visuality: the plantation, the imperial complex and the military-industrial complex. The right to look that he asserts, which thus has various historical manifestations, demonstrates a refusal of authority through the reversal of the object/subject relationship and the formation of 'counter-visualities', i.e. new regimes of representation. Indeed this preface takes regimes of representation as its central focus. However, rather than interrogating the visual production of racism, I seek to provide a counterpoint to Dyer's analyses by analysing the conditions of racism's exposure in a different regime of representation.

### Seeing and showing racism

One possible reading of Dyer's work involves understanding his study of representations of whiteness as tracing out the contours of a veritable racialised regime of representation. Dyer explains at length this regime's historical specificity in relation to art history as well as to the history of the racialisation of human groups – it is a regime that seems quite ordinary, in that it forms the basic discursive frame in which cinematic fiction unfolds. I would like to interrogate how racism can be *shown*, in spite of all the constraints posed by this racialisation of representation. In order to pursue this analysis, it is necessary to look towards extreme forms of racism, and how they are depicted, in order to uncover the violence that is hidden within the ordinary. The shadow of this violence falls on *White*; colonialism (184-206) and the Shoah<sup>6</sup> (12, 209-210) are evoked in several places. However the book more often refers indirectly to the most extreme forms of violence and explicit forms of racial affirmation, such as white supremacy and Aryanism. As an extension of Dyer's analysis, I now move on to interrogate the representation of two extreme (even paroxysmal) forms of racism: the current wave of crimes committed by the US police against African-American men, and the Nazi project of 'racial purification' during the Second World War by the 'destruction of the European Jews' (to adopt the well-known expression of Raul Hilberg, 1961). In the final pages of *White*, Dyer dissects representations of whiteness as death, in which the characteristics that are

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<sup>6</sup> I prefer the term 'Shoah' to 'Holocaust'; as Jean-Pierre Azéma and François Bédarida (1995) explain: 'After the war, the Nuremberg trial defined the extermination of the Jews as a genocide. Almost immediately, American writers named this genocide the "Holocaust". But this creates a problem because of its signification of sacrifice. Besides the Anglo-saxon world that still uses the word "Holocaust", European Jews increasingly use the word "Shoah" which means "catastrophe"'.



usually associated with whiteness – stiffness, straightness, self-control, and so on – take a literal form, for example the zombies of George Romero's films or the Aryan-like androids (the 'replicants') in *Blade Runner* (Ridley Scott, 1982). If at first sight we might take these representations as a tacit critique of whiteness, evoking bell hooks' (1992, 165-178) analysis of whiteness as 'terror' or 'terrorizing' in the black imaginary, Dyer rather shows that these excessive representations of whiteness place white viewers in a position of relative comfort. For by placing a certain distance between the viewer and these images of whiteness which contrasts with more conventional depictions of white identity, these representations participate in the reproduction of white hegemony.

‘[T]he extreme, very white white image is functional in relation to the ordinary, is even perhaps a condition of establishing whiteness as ordinary [...]. Extreme whiteness thus leaves a residue, a way of being that is not marked as white, in which white people can see themselves. This residue is non-particularity, the space of ordinariness’ (Dyer, 2006 [1997], 222-223).

It is important to comprehend the conditions of an oppositional representation of racist violence, so that this representation does not itself become an insidious reaffirmation of ordinary whiteness cloaked, by contrast to its excessive manifestations, in the garb of respectability.

The racist crimes committed by US police took on new visibility in 2013, with the emergence of the 'Black Lives Matter' movement. 'Black Lives Matter' began in the US as a result of a series of incidents of police violence where black men lost their lives (notably Michael Brown in Ferguson) – and because of the impunity of these crimes. The hashtag #BlackLivesMatter appeared on the social networking site Twitter the day after George Zimmerman, the white policeman who shot the black teenager Trayvon Martin in Sanford, Florida, was acquitted. It has since become progressively recognised as the rallying cry for the struggle against police crime, racial profiling, and more broadly the racial inequalities that are manifest in the US media, justice and prison systems<sup>7</sup>. Despite having no formal organisational structure – and no apparent hierarchy – the movement has spread rapidly in public spaces, in the form of demonstrations and performances. The power of the Black Lives Matter movement stems in part from its capacity to undermine the violence of the images of police crimes. I am thinking, for example, of the video of Eric Garner's

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<sup>7</sup> The movement was initiated by Alicia Garza, Patrisse Cullors and Opal Tometi. On the founding of Black Lives Matter, see the article by Elizabeth Day (2015) in *The Guardian*.

death, filmed on a smartphone, or of the CCTV camera footage where the police intervention which led to the death of Tamir Rice can be seen. These images have been widely distributed online and on both US and international television channels. The viral circulation of these images may seem justified by their function as documentary evidence, which would in theory prove the illegitimacy of the types of force used by the police, however at the judiciary level they failed in this task. Eric Garner, a 44 year-old black man, was strangled by a police officer, despite being unarmed, in New York on 17 July 2014. Tamir Rice, a 12 year-old black boy, was killed by a police officer in Cleveland on 22 November 2014, as he played with a plastic pistol. In these two cases, the video recordings did not, in the eyes of either grand jury, constitute proof of the criminal character of the police officers' actions. Neither Daniel Pantaleo, who suffocated Garner, nor Timothy Loehmann, who shot Rice, were charged. So what are we to think of these images that do not manage to attain the status of legal proof (Mirzoeff, 2016)? Considering the way in which the images are distributed<sup>8</sup>, we can undoubtedly consider that they form part of a long history of the spectacularisation of black people's deaths. Photographs of lynchings perpetrated in the US (Allen, 2000), predominantly from the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century until the 1950s, occupy a central place in this history. Images of hanged men and women, photographed against the backdrop of an ecstatic white crowd, were sold as souvenirs, or made into post-cards. Seen through the prism of this visual history, the images of Garner's and Rice's deaths reveal a deep ambivalence. Beyond the status of proof that one would wish to be able to grant them, they also participate in the trivialisation of black lives, by turning the deaths of African-Americans into a source of entertainment and media consumption. Black Lives Matter succeeds in de-spectacularising these deaths, in extracting them from the realm of entertainment and media fascination, so as to constitute them as symbols of a struggle for social justice. This is achieved, for example, through the reiteration of Garner's last words, uttered as Pantaleo tightened his arm around his neck: 'I can't breathe'; his last words have been widely repeated to give resonance to the black voice that the police officer pretended not to hear, and that is now consigned forever to silence. These last words became a slogan, cited on protest banners: 'When we breathe, we breathe together'; physical suffocation becomes symbolic suffocation in a society that devalorises these lives, and where gasping for air can only happen in the context of a collective mobilisation. I must also allude to the 'die-ins' that were organised in St. Louis in November 2014, where a reenactment of Michael Brown's death was staged, or indeed the action of 'hands up' that Brown was said to have performed before being shot and that activists have taken up all over the country, accompanied by the refrain, 'Hands up! Don't shoot!'. The

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<sup>8</sup> The fact, for example, that certain media corporations buy these images to ensure their exclusivity (such as the *Daily News* with the images of Garner's death), and that these are exploited as commercial products, preceded by advertisements on newspaper websites, television channels, or Youtube.

strength of Black Lives Matter resides in this repertoire of public gestures which, through their repeated citation, permit the reenactment of the violent deaths of Garner and Brown, thus operating as a mediation of images that would otherwise be unbearable to look at. These repeated gestures thus serve to simultaneously screen off the morbid spectacle and reveal the acts of police violence. The spectacle is thus no longer that of the suffering and death of black people, it is the spectacle of the power of collective protest, where voices and gestures synchronise to the same breathing rhythm.

Among the questions that Black Lives Matter inevitably raises is the question of the visibility of racism. As Sara Ahmed has noted in relation to the situation in the UK, in the contemporary context racism seems at times to have slipped out of social consciousness, to the extent that those who highlight its presence may be accused of getting in the way of its total disappearance<sup>9</sup>:

‘Given that racism recedes from social consciousness, it appears as if the ones who "bring it up" are bringing it into existence. [...] People of color are often asked to concede to the recession of racism: we are asked to "give way" by letting it "go back." Not only that: more than that. We are often asked to embody a commitment to diversity. We are asked to smile in their brochures. The smile of diversity is a way of not allowing racism to surface; it is a form of political recession’ (Ahmed, 2010, n.p.).

Beyond the issue of the *visibility* of racism, Black Lives Matter also raises the question of the *representation* of racism, and indeed the ethical conditions of its *representability*. Which representational strategies to adopt? What to show? And, given the two sides of the occultation of structural racism – the spectacle of black suffering and the ‘smile of diversity’ – how to go about showing it? This question takes on particular pertinence in relation to representations of the Shoah, which has to a certain extent become the epitome of what is ‘unsayable, unthinkable, unrepresentable’ (Bougnoux, 2006). We may recall, for instance, the clear-cut position taken up by Jacques Rivette in relation to Gillo Pontecorvo’s *Kapò* (1960), the first fictional film on the Nazi concentration camps, which Rivette declared ‘abject’ less because of what was depicted than for ‘the way in which it was shown’. In his critique of *Kapò*, Rivette notoriously characterised tracking shots as a ‘moral issue’, as in Godard’s expression, which was popularised by this text (Rivette, 1961). In contrast with this film, seen to be euphemising horror, was the dry filmic writing of

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<sup>9</sup> This tendency, which is strongly linked to ‘colour-blind racism’, is common to the US, the UK and the French contexts (my own context), in spite of some important differences in the ways in which racism is conceived by the media, in politics, or in general society. See Bonilla-Silva (2006) and Cervulle (2014).

Claude Lanzmann's long documentary, *Shoah* (1985), a *mise-en-scène* of oral history, which traces out a topography of desolation without archival images or commentary. Claude Lanzmann has expressed a total refusal, whether through fictionalised enactment or the use of archival sources, to visually represent the extermination process. When *Schindler's List* (Steven Spielberg, 1994) was released in France, Lanzmann (1994) wrote, 'Absolute horror is incommunicable; to claim to do so is to be guilty of the most serious transgression. [...] I am deeply convinced that in this case representation is completely off limits'. Interestingly, for Lanzmann it is the image that bears the ethical burden, and is thus 'off limits'; the audible dimension – the curation of verbal expression and sounds of paroxysmal violence – do not seem to pose the same problem for Lanzmann. George Didi-Huberman (2008) has refuted this rather iconoclastic position in his work on the four photographs that were 'snatched from the hell' of Auschwitz-Birkenau by members of the 'Sonderkommando'<sup>10</sup> in August 1944. Didi-Huberman reminds us that, historically and anthropologically, the very notion of 'image' signifies the effort to show that which the naked eye can't see (2008, 133); he insists on the necessity of *imagining* – in the literal sense of creating an image – to enable us to know, and to remember. This 'act of imagination' (Ibid.) that was the action of taking photographs within the extermination camp refutes the idea that 'the Holocaust was, and remains, without image' (Wajcman, 1998, 21). Moreover, these photographs go against the representational void that the Nazis tried to manufacture, and against this negationism that was 'an integral part of the genocide itself' (Bensoussan, 2005, 17): namely, the assassins' will to eradicate any trace of their crimes.

The opposition to *Schindler's List* marked a radicalisation of certain critics' stances. Lanzmann and others who took up his stance condemned the film's aesthetic, its enunciative apparatus, even its attempt to fictionalise the Shoah at all. However, in Miriam Bratu Hansen's (2001, 134) perspective, '[t]he critique of *Schindler's List* in high-modernist terms, [...] especially in Lanzmann's version, reduces the dialectics of the problem of representing the unrepresentable to a binary opposition of showing or not showing – rather than casting it, as one might, as an issue of competing representations and competing modes of representation.' Steven Spielberg opted for a fictionalised storyline that was based on the classic Hollywood style, and that aimed for a degree of

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<sup>10</sup> The term 'Sonderkommando', which literally means 'special units', is the Nazi term for the work units in the Treblinka and Auschwitz-Birkenau camps, in which prisoners were forced to take part in the tasks relating to extermination (for example, accompanying prisoners to the gas chamber, collecting their personal belongings, valuables and hair, incinerating the bodies in the crematorium ovens, and so on), before they themselves were exterminated. Some *Sonderkommando* members who worked in Auschwitz-Birkenau described their living and working conditions from inside the camp; these writings, known as the 'The Scrolls of Auschwitz', have been edited into a collection by historian Ber Mark (1985).

‘realism’ – or even, if we believe the promotional material, a certain ‘authenticity’ and ‘representativeness’ (cf. Bratu Hansen, 2001). We can contrast this approach with Hungarian director László Nemes’ film *Son of Saul* (2015), whose international success has been crowned with the Cannes Festival’s *Grand Prix* and an Academy Award for best foreign language film. Nemes’ film tells the story of a member of the ‘*Sonderkommandos*’ of Auschwitz-Birkenau, a Hungarian Jewish man who engages in a desperate struggle to achieve the burial of a dead boy whom he sees as his son. Interestingly, Lanzmann and Didi-Huberman are in agreement as to the quality of this film. Lanzmann views *Son of Saul* as a depiction not of ‘death, but of the lives of those who were forced to lead their own to their deaths’ (Lanzmann and Blottière, 2015), while Didi-Huberman understands the film as a sort of ‘tale’, and considers that the story of this man who invents a son for himself demonstrates the necessity of narrative for the transmission of memory (Didi-Huberman, 2015). If both of these authors agree on the relevance and evocative force of this film, their respective analyses then part ways. For Lanzmann, *Son of Saul* is about showing life in a death factory, while for Didi-Huberman the film is rather about unfolding a narrative from the point of view of a dead – or at least half-dead – person (Didi-Huberman, 2015, 39, 53-54). If the question of representability is no longer at the heart of these debates, the question of the points of view from which films allow us to see, and of the political dimension of filmic enunciation, remain central issues.

### **Impossible testimonies and representations of the unrepresentable**

Bringing together the two examples that I dwelt on in the previous section (the Black Lives Matter movement and filmic representations of the Shoah) allows us to consider the question of the representational regimes of racism in a new light. Both of these cases, it seems to me, invoke in their respective ways the issue of unrepresentability. At the heart of the ethical debates surrounding the representation of the actions involved in carrying out the ‘Final Solution’, certain prominent perspectives explicitly proclaim the unrepresentability of the Shoah, owing to the incommunicability of the horror of the camps. However it is also possible to argue that consigning Auschwitz-Birkenau to the domain of the unspeakable could, as Giorgio Agamben notes, ‘confer on extermination the prestige of the mystical’ (1999, 32), or even ‘unconsciously repeat the Nazis’ gesture’ (157) of effacing the traces to prevent the survivor, who is thus imprisoned in silence, from acting as witness. We might however consider that this assertion of unrepresentability is not so much a refusal of representation as a regime of representation in its own right, in the same way as the Nazis’ operations to destroy the traces of their crimes constitute – in and of themselves, and beyond the claim of negation – an archive (in the sense that material traces of the will to

systematically remove all proof do remain)<sup>11</sup>. What therefore does it mean to *speak* unspeakability? To develop a narrative whose potency lies in the fact that it gives an account of the unaccountable, that it represents something which cannot be represented? The example of the documentary film *Shoah* is a perfect illustration of this particular type of representation which is presented under the banner of unrepresentability. Although *Shoah* focuses on oral communication, the witness accounts in the film appear somewhat lacking, as if they had been hollowed out along with the now ghostly landscapes of this epoch of European history. The vestiges of the German occupation that Lanzmann films on Polish territory resonate with the spectral nature of the testimonies that he collects; these testimonies are in themselves *vestiges* that the film archives<sup>12</sup>. Witnesses of the Shoah hold a paradoxical status in the regime of representation that is unrepresentability: the Shoah could only be recounted from the inside, from the bowels of the ‘corpse factory’ – the gas chamber. This paradox leads Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub (1992, 80) to say that the Shoah was in a sense an ‘event without a witness’.

In the case of Black Lives Matter, the repertoire of public gestures used for the reenactments of police crimes could be seen as an oppositional representation, which counters the visual genealogy that is evoked by the media representations of the murders of black men – their tacit but inimical connection to lynching images. It is as if the Black Lives Matter activists are trying to assume the role of witness, by conferring a performative testimonial value to their actions, which compensates the failure in this regard of the film footage of police crimes. For where the judicial system did not recognise the film footage as legal evidence, these activists use their symbolic gestures to express their status as collective witnesses, whilst publicly showing the inability of the media representations of these black men’s deaths to attest to the culpability of their assassins. The actions they perform (bringing their hands to their necks and crying out, ‘I can’t breathe’, or raising their hands and shouting, ‘Hands up, don’t shoot!’) constitute micro-archives in their own right; they thus record the actions of police violence that, because of its systemic pervasiveness, appears as almost imperceptible. Here a second level of unrepresentability comes to light: in this context, the hegemonic discourse that lays claim to the achievement of a post-racial society in fact obstructs the full representation of structural forms of racism and the residual traces of slavery. Black Lives Matter therefore generates a living archive not only of black lives and their destruction, crimes and the responsibilities for those crimes, but also of the political logic which labours for forgetting and denial. By recording violent actions, joining stories that some would want to keep apart (the stories

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<sup>11</sup> We could also add, in the wake of Jacques Derrida (1996), that all archives rest upon a process of controlling traces, in which forgetting and destruction are implicated.

<sup>12</sup> On vestiges and archives, see Schneider (2011, 87-110).

of Trayvon Martin, Michael Brown, Eric Garner, and so many more), we could even say that these activists are building up a type of ‘montage’. Filmmaker Eyal Sivan’s conception of montage supports this claim<sup>13</sup>; according to Sivan, archives may be put to use in cinema in order to facilitate a rearticulation, the passage from one narrative to another, specifically from the institutional narrative which presided over the constitution of the archive to an alternative narrative:

‘I say “re-archive”, [but] I could have used a different word: ‘montage’. Montage must be thought of in terms of depth as well as the cut: behind each image, there is another which is not shown; one is therefore obliged to enter into the realm of the forbidden. And, in order to articulate the archive in a non-linear manner, this entails establishing improbable connections which until then could not be made visible (Sivan and Boggio-Éwanjé-Épée, 2012, 38)<sup>14</sup>.

Black Lives Matter’s story-altering strategy is to link life stories and lethal actions which would otherwise be perceived separately from each other; this strategy makes visible the out-of-shot action of each of the videos that document police crimes. This ‘montage’ of course implies, as with any operation of rearticulation, a change of point of view, an intervention in the relations of looking; the historical white gaze, from which and for which the scenography of black suffering is organised, here finds itself blocked. The contemplation of this scene of suffering is obstructed by the public reenactments that lend an embodied dimension to this suffering and depict the vitality of those whose lives are in the clutches of death – in the form of the threat to their existence, but also in that their existence is populated with deaths<sup>15</sup>. The performances of Black Lives Matter thus make the presence of slavery palpable, by invoking the symbolic figure of the slave<sup>16</sup> – this form of ‘death-in-

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<sup>13</sup> Eyal Sivan has directed a number of documentaries, notably on the trial of Adolf Eichmann (*The Specialist*, 1999) and on the colonisation of Palestine (*Jaffa, the Orange’s Clockwork*, 2010).

<sup>14</sup> Sivan illustrates this by proposing to ‘articulate, for example, the colonisation of Algeria and Vietnam. Today, these archives are separated off from each other because there are no archives as such of colonialism or colonisation’ (Sivan and Boggio-Éwanjé-Épée, 2012, 38). We can take the film by Göran Hugo Olsson, *Concerning Violence* (2014), as an example of this type of rearticulation; the film is an audiovisual evocation of Frantz Fanon’s (2001 [1961]) *The Wretched of the Earth*, created from a montage – and a recontextualisation – of Swedish television archives on the decolonial struggles in various contexts (including Liberia, Tanzania and Mozambique).

<sup>15</sup> On race as a dividing force between who must live and who must die, see Foucault (2003 [1997]). On the conditions of exercise of this ‘necropolitics’, see Mbembe (2003).

<sup>16</sup> It would also be interesting, within the frame of this avenue of inquiry on the modes of representation of racism, to study the corpus of recent films on the subject of slavery, by focusing on the type(s) of point of view that they create, and, on the basis of these, the model of whiteness that they construct: from the moral condemnation of a whiteness whose humanism would be equivalent to a form of ‘well-meaning’ racism (the character of Grace in Lars Von Trier’s *Manderlay* [2005] or the judges of the royal court in Abdellatif Kechiche’s *Vénus noire* [2010]), to the more or less pastiche-esque evocation of the symbol of the ‘white

life' (Mbembe, 2003, 21) – by expressing the paradox at the heart of the utterance 'Black Lives Matter'. The performative nature of this utterance resides in a realm of undecidability, insofar as the very necessity of this statement being uttered contradicts its meaning, and implies an enunciative position that is, in its nature, not far from the position of the witness in the extermination camp: a position that is characterised by its spectral nature, not as dead *per se* but almost-dead, such as Saul in László Nemes' film. This particular point of view turns a particularly acerbic gaze back on whiteness, as in the photograph of Eric Garner's look on protest placards, which was created by the artist J.R. for the front of the 'Millions March' procession in New York in December 2014. The gaze condemns not only those who kill, but also those who *let people die*. Beyond the exceptional whiteness of a police, judicial and penitentiary system that is riven through and through with racism, it is also ordinary forms of whiteness that these eyes fix upon. The same gaze is undeniably also evident in *Shoah*: to be persuaded of this, we only need to think of the sequences in the 'first period' of the film, where the ordinary, unremarkable whiteness of the Polish people who lived near the Treblinka or Auschwitz-Birkenau camps during the extermination appears in its full ambivalence. Lanzmann films these men, peasants working in the fields that are adjacent to the camps or to the train tracks where the deportation trains pass by, reproducing the hand gesture that they addressed to the deported Jews, who looked on from the trains. The different narratives that resituate this gesture – the hand that slides across the neck to simulate hanging or the throat being cut – show its ambiguity; claimed by several Polish people as a way of warning the Jews of what was awaiting them in the camps, the gesture also sparked fear in the survivors that Lanzmann interviewed. For looking on from the train, they had perceived the gesture as a sign of hostility towards them, the expression of a form of antisemitic rejoicing. The semiotics of the Polish peasants' gesture that Lanzmann stages denotes complicity with the Nazis' racial project. Regardless of the underlying intention of the gesture, it acts as the sign of the *knowledge* of the deadly purpose of the camps; it proclaims, in one sense, an epistemic supremacy that mirrors racial supremacy. This epistemic advantage is key, given that the Nazis tried to keep the deportees in ignorance – ignorance of their destination, of the functionings of the camp, and of extermination itself. That is without considering that, beyond the innumerable ruses of dissimulation that the Nazis put in place (such as, for example, the fact that Zyklon B was transported to Birkenau in trucks bearing the symbol of the Red Cross), genocide is itself the bearer of a project of epistemicide (de Sousa Santos, 2010), the will to destroy the Jewish people being accompanied by the will to destroy their knowledge – and their means of creating knowledge.

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saviour' (from the character played by Brad Pitt in Steve McQueen's *12 Years a Slave* [2013] to Christoph Waltz's character in Quentin Tarantino's *Django Unchained* [2012]).



This brings to light an epistemological question, concerning the place of the power/knowledge dyad in race relations. As I have just highlighted, race relations are marked by a differential distribution of access to knowledge, as well as lack of recognition of – even a determination to destroy – the knowledge constituted by subjugated social groups. The reproduction of white hegemony reposes, at least in part, on this epistemic control. However another dynamic runs through whiteness: the constitutive role of ignorance in the formation of white identities. If we read between the lines of *White*, this question appears as a central concern of the intellectual project that the book sets out. From the first page, for example, Dyer writes that his core objective, to study the representation of whites, ‘is not merely to fill a gap in the analytic literature, but because there is something at stake in looking at, *or continuing to ignore*, white racial imagery’ (2006 [1997], 1, emphasis added). What exactly is at play in this ignorance? Posing this question amounts to asserting that ignorance is less a state of powerlessness, a lack of knowledge (as per the common understanding of ignorance), but rather an active site. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, claiming that ‘ignorance is as potent and as multiple a thing [...] as is knowledge’ (1990, 4), brilliantly showed to what extent ignorance may, in certain cases, constitute a privilege rather than a vulnerability: the privilege of not knowing resides in the capacity to claim ignorance of relations of domination, and their effects. There must be, then, in counterpoint to ‘situated knowledges’ (Haraway, 1988), *situated ignorances*, which are constitutive of a certain way of being in the world – in harmony with existing relations of domination. The ignorant subject seems to say, ‘I cannot see racism – indeed how could I see it, since I am such an anti-racist that I do not see colour?’ Whiteness and ignorance are intrinsically linked, for who could declare ignorance of the numerous, powerful, omnipresent manifestations of racism but the very subjects who are not subjected to it? It thus seems that, in order to think whiteness, we need an ‘epistemology of ignorance’ (Sullivan et Tuana, 2007)<sup>17</sup>. For, as I have stated elsewhere, ‘the ignorance of domination simultaneously constitutes one of the modes of subjectification of the white subject, and one of the cornerstones of systemic racism’ (Cervulle, 2012, 99).

### **Incandescent white faces**

So what role does ignorance play in the representational regimes of racism? How is it that representation, as a way of knowing (Dyer, 2006 [1997], xiii, 44), can in fact act as a vehicle of ignorance? In which conditions does *showing* become *concealing*? Of course there is already a substantial literature which highlights the constitutive dimension of the cinematographic *hors-*

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<sup>17</sup> On this question, see also the work of Mills (1997).

*champ* – for example its function as regulating viewers’ successive identifications (Metz, 1986 [1977]). However, this is not precisely the question that I want to pose here. Instead, the question that interests me concerns the way in which the visual production of racism can at times participate in the subjectification of whiteness as ignorance. And it seems to me that this is precisely one of the questions that is centrally addressed in *White*, and which in a certain manner runs through the book. In which ways do the ‘incandescent white faces of the movies’ (Dyer, 2006 [1997], 7) participate in the creation of white identities in the form of an active ignorance of manifestations of racism? This is an extremely important question, not only for the understanding of the cultural effects of cinema, but also in comprehending the very reproduction of race as a medium. In laying out a means of answering this question, Dyer makes a major contribution to the study of contemporary regimes of representation, which allows us to open our eyes wide and unblinkingly stare at the blinding light of white hegemony.

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