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## Susan Courtney: Hollywood Fantasies of Miscegenation: Spectacular Narratives of Gender and Race, 1903-1967

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**Susan Courtney: Hollywood Fantasies of Miscegenation: Spectacular Narratives of Gender and Race, 1903-1967**

Princeton/Oxford: Princeton University Press 2005, 373 S., ISBN 0-691-11305-X, € 23,50

With *Hollywood Fantasies of Miscegenation: Spectacular Narratives of Gender and Race, 1903-1967*, Susan Courtney offers an important work that should serve as the starting point for any analysis of the depiction of race and gender in film. Through a felicitous and exhaustive combination of theory, archival work, and close readings, the author demonstrates how Hollywood from the beginning has used “cinematic mechanisms for producing sexual difference” to undergird “visual

discourses of skin, color, and cinema itself" (p.15). In three parts of two chapters each she traces shifts in these discursive practices from the early days of 'Biograph' shorts to the most famous depiction of miscegenation in the twentieth century, *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner* (Stanley Kramer, 1967).

Courtney begins the first part with analyses of D.W. Griffith's short films depicting "Indians" (1908-11) and trapped, pursued white women (1908-12). She argues that the spectatorial 'agony' induced by these films proceeds from their invitation to the spectator to identify with either the white women in peril or the white and nonwhite men placed in emasculating states of illness, dishonor, and fear. The author then identifies a "representational pivot" (p.23) in Griffith's later Civil War shorts (1911-13), which culminates in *The Birth of a Nation* (1925). With this film, white male agony is displaced onto white women, thus restoring the traditional hierarchy to gendered relations. Courtney then ingeniously locates a parallel arc in the contemporaneous public fascination with the rise and fall of African American boxer Jack Johnson, who began his career pummeling white men and ended falsely accused of abducting white women.

In the second part, the author surveys Production Code Administration (PCA) files to reveal their often-contradictory language regarding the ban on representing sexual relations between 'white and black races'. She contends that the ambiguity and selective application of criteria for depicting race in film resulted not in an expansive spectrum of "color," but rather in a reduction of "articulated notions of race to binary 'black' and 'white'" and to the definition of "those ostensible identities in increasingly visual terms" (p.107). She shows how *Imitation of Life* (John Stahl, 1934) and *Pinky* (Elia Kazan, 1949) articulate this shift from the bodily marking of race to a strategy that deploys the characteristics of cinema itself.

Courtney pulls out all the stops in the third part by analyzing three seemingly different texts dealing with the miscegenation taboo: Eldridge Cleaver's *Soul on Ice* (1968), the Supreme Court decision in *Loving v. Virginia* (1967), and *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner* (1967). She observes that each divested itself of "conventional commitments to racial hierarchy secured through the miscegenation taboo only by reasserting rigid conventions of gender and sex" (p.251). However progressive the racial economics of the immensely popular *Guess* may appear, the author's analysis compels reevaluation of the film in light of the same gender arguments she uses in her examination of the earlier 'Biograph' films.

Though Courtney concentrates on Hollywood cinema, her methods and findings would prove fruitful in analyzing isolated fantasies of miscegenation in other cinemas and cultural outlets lacking such a long, well-known tradition. She observes, for example, that costume, mise-en-scène, and dialog render women of color highly visible when paired with white men during the fifties. Such women are often depicted as spontaneous performers and the men, as spectators. Yet, this

scenario obtained even earlier in German cinema with Pola Negri's performance in *Die Augen der Mumie Ma* (Ernst Lubitsch, 1918) and in German high-society itself (see Count Harry Kessler's diary entry of 13th February 1926 describing the private performance of an erotic dance by the African American Josephine Baker).

Courtney's volume has no filmography, but this is a quibble given the over 130 stills and 69 pages of extensive footnotes included. Indeed, the latter provide not only bibliographic information but often serve as miniature essays in themselves. Simply put, *Hollywood Fantasies of Miscegenation* belongs on the bookshelf of every serious scholar and student of film.

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