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Martin A. Berger: Sight Unseen. Whiteness and American Visual Culture, Berkeley: University of California Press 2005, xiv + 236 S., ISBN 0-520-24459-1, GBP 32,50

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The analysis offered in Martin A. Berger's *Sight Unseen. Whiteness and American Visual Culture* adds a further dimension to the expanding field of art historical and critical examination focussing on the interpretation of images of race and racial types. Martin A. Berger's study is restricted to a half century in American cultural life, roughly from the 1850s to 1910s, and thus can make reasonable claims about a contiguous and wide-ranging dominant visual culture for that time. Berger elaborates his concept of 'whiteness' in visual culture through a succession of synoptic case-studies ranging from examples of genre painting and landscape depiction at mid-century through to public architecture in the 1870s and 80s and ending with cinematic films in the early years of the twentieth century.

In its wide scope and careful, detailed examination of each case of visualizing 'whiteness', Berger has developed a captivating and quite convincing means by which a theory of visuality in this period could be elaborated. Although he is careful not to suggest a unifying theory for this phenomenon of the 'white' view, it is intriguing to consider whether in fact his analysis might hold for a number of other visual instances even outside of the American examples he chooses. The rigour of his approach lies however in his contextual and historical understanding of the period in question where he is able to show precise cultural trends mapping closely onto shifts in racial thinking and ideology.

Berger's text engages readers in a new and original approach to Anglo-American visual culture by concentrating on the pervasive nature of the discourses on race and racial ideologies. In his analysis these discourses not only invested images overtly concerned with 'race', such as minstrelsy or slavery, but even those supposedly unconcerned with it. In borrowing the term *whiteness*, taken from a text by Toni Morrison, he does not wish to imply simple biological or essentialist understandings but rather wishes to theorize a dominant and over-arching racial position founded upon societal and experiential structures. This is not particularly new thinking in terms of analyses of race ideology but Berger's intelligent and clear exposition lends his particular approach much weight and force. As he states, identity is 'performative' (170) and is based on an individual's actions and personal strategies rather than on any close identification through skin colour, an attitude that was amplified towards

the end of the nineteenth century according to his analysis.

In the introductory chapter to his book, Berger proposes that previous readings of racism in nineteenth century American visual culture have limited their scope to overtly racial topics and thus have failed to find the more pervasive and overarching visuality of 'whiteness' that has permeated most forms of visual culture in this period. Insisting that his work will concentrate on the analysis of 'cultural products most removed from racial concerns', thereby revealing the *unseen* ideological structures both 'expressed by and impressed on' such visual works he avoids the pitfalls of previous studies that were limited by their emphasis on overt misrepresentation and were in danger of romanticising their subjects for a white academic audience (2, 1). For much of his book, his claims hold true as he moves from interpreting paintings and photographs of tourist sites like the Yosemite Valley in California to the impersonal and unpopulated museum spaces found in public buildings such as Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts.

However, some of this strict exclusion of overtly racist representation is loosened towards the end of the book and derogatory images of African Americans as well as American Indians enter into the analysis. In his discussion of the Biographic film, titled *Hard Wash* (also known as the *Pickaninny's Bath*) c. 1896, Berger states that in its context the film's importance lies in its power to promote a politics of race, confirming a 'natural hierarchy' then broadly accepted by cinema audiences at the time. Contemporary spectators would have interpreted *Hard Wash* as being close to the 'good old minstrelsy scheme', but this association invokes more explicitly racist imagery avoided for the most part in Berger's analysis. Images like this, as well as those of 'skulking' American Indians and a lithograph, *The Fruits of Amalgamation*, by Edward W. Clay, showing upwardly mobile African-American men in the company of white women, cast the reader's thoughts back to culturally entrenched stereotypes and the inseparability of racism and colour as manifested in the essentialist racist imagery of the period. But this is only a minor consideration in what is otherwise a highly cogent and persuasive argument regarding a broad set of visual materials and media.

Berger takes his main cues from those forms of expression that seem most embedded in the visualising of dominant identities in American culture: genre painting, landscape depiction, museum and religious architecture and film. In the chapters of his book each visual medium is examined in turn, the issue of 'whiteness' is addressed in each case and worked through to reveal the instability of racial concepts as they formalised themselves within a single visual representation. A compelling example is the author's comparison of two filmic images, stills from two films of troops of soldiers, one Anglo-American, the other African-American. In using the most up to date visual media, film, to depict troops moving from ship to shore or marching away from a train, these representations worked to naturalize the unfair comparisons that audiences would already be inclined to make. Berger demonstrates that a

contemporary audience would have responded to techniques of ideological persuasion here that may not now be apparent to twenty-first century readers.

Berger's general analysis and main conclusions are drawn from an extensive research into the factors that helped create a general racialised vision permeating through both 'high' and 'low' culture for the period. His work offers a means by which all visual culture at this time might be evaluated as regards its 'whiteness' of vision and raises the possibility that current visual culture and the institutions underpinning it may yet still contain such unseen and misunderstood racialised visions requiring further analyses and critical evaluation.

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