Editorial: ‘Black is Beautiful’ in European Perspective

In 1992, the US feminist scholar bell hooks wrote the now-classic essay ‘Eating the Other’, in which she challenged the ways that differences are represented in cultural displays of ‘blackness’. In her view, white supremacy is not simply a matter of overtly racist practices, but often occurs through what, at first glance, appears to be the opposite – a celebration of the racial Other. White people are preoccupied with their admiration for the (body) of the Other, a fervent yearning for contact, and a fantasy of inclusion where all differences are reconciled. In hooks’ view, this fantasy is integral to progressive ideals of multiracial multiculturalism. However, far from being straightforwardly progressive, the celebration of differences can all too easily become the offering up of the Other to be ‘eaten, consumed, and forgotten’ (hooks, 1992: 39).

Since its appearance, this essay has continued to be used as a critical tool for understanding representations of race in popular culture in the US. For example, US feminist scholars inspired by hooks have analysed this ‘eating of the Other’ in the commodification of black women’s bodies in advertising (black skin selling white clothes), in the supposedly unambiguous display of white teenagers with dreadlocks and, last but not least, the ubiquitous Hollywood ‘black buddy’ movies, which delight in their portrayals of ‘interracial friendship’ while keeping power hierarchies firmly intact. In the European context, these analyses may seem typically American with their references to the US legacy of slavery and racism. Indeed, I might have wondered whether hooks’ metaphor of ‘eating the Other’ was really appropriate for the European context. After all, Europe has had a different history and most contemporary European societies do not have a discourse of race as found in the US, or have subsumed it under discussions about ‘ethnicity’ or ‘culture’. However, I have had reason to revise my opinion recently when I visited an exhibition in Amsterdam on images of black people in Dutch culture, ranging from Rembrandt to popular contemporary culture – an exhibit that the reader may visit online at: www.blackisbeautifulamsterdam.nl/

The title of the exhibition, ‘Black is Beautiful’, is borrowed from the famous slogan of the Black Power movements of the 1960s in the US and South Africa, with their powerful critiques of the negative effects of racism on the
bodies and body images of people of colour. This slogan was launched as a critical rejoinder to racist standards that denigrated black bodies while promoting a white, Anglo-American model of beauty. But it also launched a new aesthetic celebrating African features, the most well-known example being perhaps the iconic poster of the Black Panther activist Angela Davis sporting a magnificent Afro hairstyle. This poster was widely distributed within and outside the US, inspiring generations of women of colour to shed the baggage of ‘internalized racism’ and love their bodies. On a more ambivalent note, it has been taken up, and some would argue, co-opted, by the media and popular culture to sell anything from cars to running shoes.

One might expect, given the origin and history of this slogan, that an exhibition with the same name would also explore the racialized underpinnings of Dutch colonialism, drawing upon representations of black bodies in art history and contemporary culture. In actual fact, the exhibition moved straight to the aesthetic of blackness, arguing in the video-taped introduction that Dutch artists had long recognized the ‘allure of black skin’. Instead of focusing on ‘negative’ things (?), this exhibit intended to ‘break new ground’. It would be focusing exclusively on the ‘positive’ and celebrating the ‘beauty of black folks’. Hovering just below the surface was the message that the multiculturalism as mainstay of the Dutch national imaginary had already been in existence for a long time. In this way, the long and fraught history of Dutch colonialism and its participation in the international slave trade became little more than an unpleasant footnote.

Perhaps one shouldn’t be shocked, but I must admit that I was. As I strolled through the exhibit with its ‘pure models of physical beauty’ – from slaves working on plantations in Surinam to Marlene Dumas’s haunting images of the top model Naomi Campbell – I was uncomfortably reminded of bell hooks’ words. The white viewer is allowed to wallow in her desire for the body of the Other, while at the same time an image of Dutch history is offered that denies all the unpleasantries of the past – indeed, demands that we deny them – providing instead a much more palatable picture. This is a history of smiling beautiful faces, a ‘pretty, happy perspective’, or, as two less-than-pleased reviewers of the exhibition sarcastically noted, ‘They are Beautiful and We are all Friends’ (Gebhardt and Aurough, 2008: 7); one that allows the white Dutch visitor to forget the past and sustain the myth of the national identity as ‘tolerant’ and the Dutch as the invariable ‘good guys’.

All of this, of course, resonates eerily with the contemporary politics of assimilation in the Netherlands (and elsewhere in Europe), which have allowed a smooth transition from multiculturalism to a more punitive, do-or-die policy of integration or deportation. For those visitors who have been the objects of colonial power – people of colour, former colonial subjects, immigrants and other newcomers – the experiences of strolling through this exhibition could only feel like another chapter in the long history of violation, of white folks trying to possess and dominate the Other. As bell hooks
would say, eating the Other is just one of many ways for the powerful to assert their privilege.

While the exhibition was less ‘pleasurable’ than it had been cracked up to be, it does, I believe, provide a timely warning for us as critical European feminists. The yearning for the Other expressed here is part and parcel of the imperial nostalgia that is part of the very fabric of Europe. Race is intimately connected to European modernity – its racial projects (slavery, colonialism, eugenics, genocide) are constitutive of the European Self and the non-European Other. It is deeply embedded in the very idea of Europe. At the same time, Europe has – for complicated reasons – been notably silent about race, tending to locate it outside Europe. Europeans assume a commitment to anti-racism which leads, at best, to denial, and, at worst, to a refusal to take a critical look at the ubiquitous forms of othering and the practices of exclusion that are part and parcel of the contemporary European landscape.

With this in mind, it seems to me that our task is clear. First, we need to acknowledge that ‘race’ – however constructed, multifaceted and ideologically loaded – has been and continues to be constitutive of both the idea of Europe and its present realities. ‘Race’ and racialization are ubiquitous – in Europe also – and, therefore, need to be integral to any critical feminist analysis.

Second, we need to be wary of any attempts to bracket out the more unfortunate aspects of European history. The example of the exhibition – and there are many more examples like this throughout Europe – shows how the past invariably returns, shaping the present in ways that need to be acknowledged, explicated and discussed.

And, finally, we need to acknowledge the ambivalences inherent in the desire for the Other. While the recognition and celebration of difference has been extremely important within feminist scholarship, we should also be wary when differences are mobilized as new dishes to enhance the white palate. Critical vigilance is in order.

Sad but true, dear reader: there is no such thing as ‘just enjoying’ the pictures; we have to criticize them.

REFERENCES


Kathy Davis