

Introduction

Hollywood has long been fascinated by Asia, Asians, and Asian themes. Mysterious and exotic, Hollywood's Asia promises adventure and forbidden pleasures. Whether in a Chinatown opium den, a geisha house in Japan, or a café in Saigon, romantic involvements and sexual liaisons unacceptable in mainstream Anglo-American society become possible. Erotic fantasies can be indulged, sexual taboos broken. However, any radical deviation from the mainstream is unlikely to be voiced openly because of the possibility of a poor box-office showing. Therefore, Hollywood's romance with Asia tends to be a flirtation with the exotic rather than an attempt at any genuine intercultural understanding.

This book dissects Hollywood's Asia by examining the cinematic depiction of interracial sexuality. Rather than look at individual characters or survey the history of Asians in film, the focus here is on the way in which narratives featuring Asian-Caucasian sexual liaisons work ideologically to uphold and sometimes subvert culturally accepted notions of nation, class, race, ethnicity, gender, and sexual orientation.

The seventeen mainstream, fictional films and television movies produced between 1915 and 1986 and discussed here do not fit into any specific popular genre but, rather, range from romantic melodramas and comedies to action-adventure and war films. Although many of the films have been popular or critical successes, others are infrequently studied, more obscure titles. Because Hollywood has favored narratives dealing with Japan, China, and Vietnam, the focus here is on texts dealing with those three nations.

With the exception of Eugene Franklin Wong's *On Visual Media Racism* and Dorothy B. Jones's *The Portrayal of China and India on the American Screen, 1896–1958*,¹ no book-length scholarly study of the representation of Asians, Pacific Islanders, and Asian Americans in Hollywood exists in English. Although this is not primarily a discussion of representations of Asians on the screen, the research conducted by Wong and Jones forms the bedrock of this study. Jones, for example, identifies themes involving interracial sexual relations as a key part of Hollywood's depiction of Asia. In addition to the representation of miscegenation as a threat, she notes that Hollywood also produced narratives featuring tragic love affairs and cases of mistaken identity.

Wong also notes Hollywood's interest in the theme of miscegenation. He observes that Hollywood favors romances involving white males and Asian females, while Asian men tend to be depicted either as rapists or asexual eunuch figures. By contrast, Asian females are often depicted as sexually available to the white hero. Although both Jones and Wong take important steps in analyzing the historical, social, political, and cultural importance of Hollywood's depiction of interracial sexuality involving Asian characters, neither takes up this issue exclusively. Rather, sexuality is discussed as part of the broader tapestry of Hollywood's portrayal of Asia. Here, the exclusive focus is on the construction of interracial sex and romance in the Hollywood narrative.

For the most part, Hollywood's depiction of Asia has been inextricably linked to the threat of the so-called "yellow peril." Rooted in medieval fears of Genghis Khan and Mongolian invasions of Europe, the yellow peril combines racist terror of alien cultures, sexual anxieties, and the belief that the West will be overpowered and enveloped by the irresistible, dark, occult forces of the East. Given that knowledge about Asia and Asians has been limited in Europe and America, much of this formulation necessarily rests on a fantasy that projects Euroamerican desires and dreads onto the alien other. Thus, as Western nations began to carve up Asia into colonies, their own imperialist expansion was in part rationalized by the notion that a militarily powerful Asia posed a threat to "Christian civilization."

As slavery ended and immigration to the United States increased in the latter half of the nineteenth century, the yellow peril became a flood of cheap labor threatening to diminish the earning power of white European immigrants, thereby deflecting criticism of the brutal exploitation of an expansionist capitalist economy onto the issue of race. Within the context of America's consistently ambivalent attitudes toward Native Americans, Hispanics, African Americans, and other peoples of color, the yellow peril has contributed to the notion that all

nonwhite people are by nature physically and intellectually inferior, morally suspect, heathen, licentious, disease-ridden, feral, violent, uncivilized, infantile, and in need of the guidance of white, Anglo-Saxon Protestants. This concept has been ingrained in the popular imagination since the late nineteenth and early twentieth century in mass media creations like Sax Rohmer's insidious villain Fu Manchu, in the Hearst newspapers' anti-Asian editorial policies, and in Homer Lea's *The Valor of Innocence*, a 1909 treatise on Japan as an evil military giant.²

One of the most potent aspects of these yellow peril discourses is the sexual danger of contact between the races. Although the power of the lascivious Asian woman to seduce the white male has long been part of this fantasy, a far more common scenario involves the threat posed by the Asian male to white women. As Gary Hoppenstand points out in his essay, "Yellow Devil Doctors and Opium Dens: A Survey of the Yellow Peril Stereotypes in Mass Media Entertainment," these fantasies tend to link together national-cultural and personal fears, so that the rape of the white woman becomes a metaphor for the threat posed to Western culture as well as a rationalization for Euroamerican imperial ventures in Asia. Moreover, as Hoppenstand notes, race becomes tied to religion as a spiritual play between good and evil, sin and salvation.

The threat of rape, the rape of white society, dominated the action of the yellow formula. The British or American hero, during the course of his battle against the yellow peril, overcame numerous traps and obstacles in order to save his civilization, and the primary symbol of that civilization: the white woman. Stories featuring the yellow peril were arguments for racial purity. Certainly, the potential union of the Oriental and white implied, at best, a form of beastly sodomy, and, at worst, a Satanic marriage. The yellow peril stereotype easily became incorporated into Christian mythology, and the Oriental assumed the role of the devil or demon. The Oriental rape of the white woman signified a spiritual damnation for the woman, and at the larger level, white society.³

This aspect of the yellow peril fantasy found its way into the American silent cinema through heroines threatened by villainous Asians in popular serials like *Patria* (1919), *The Yellow Menace* (1916), *The Exploits of Elaine* (1916), and *The Perils of Pauline* (1919), as well as in the numerous serials and films based on the character of Dr. Fu Manchu throughout the 1920s and 1930s.⁴ Jones cites *Crooked Streets* (1920) and *Tell It to the Marines* (1926) as typical of early films that feature "the fascination of the 'Yellow Man' for the 'White Woman.'"⁵ Many of these films linked the yellow peril to white slavery and the various

social ills surrounding the Hollywood image of Chinatown as a world peopled by opium addicts, pimps, and fallen women. *Old San Francisco* (1927), which features a white woman saved from a life of prostitution by the San Francisco earthquake, is typical.

Along with the yellow peril fantasies of Asian rapists, there are other scenarios involving Asian-Caucasian sexual liaisons. In addition to the celebrated platonic romance featured in D. W. Griffith's *Broken Blossoms* (1919), many other silent films deal sympathetically with tragic interracial love affairs. For example, *The Red Lantern*, also produced in 1919, features the love of an illegitimate Eurasian woman (Alla Nazimova) and an American missionary. When he does not return her affection, she becomes bitter toward hypocritical Westerners who educate but still harbor racist sentiments against the Chinese. She joins the Boxer Rebellion, the 1900 uprising against foreigners in China first supported and later condemned by the Imperial court, and meets with a tragic end. Similarly, in *City of Dim Faces* (1918) Jang Lung (Sessue Hayakawa in one of his many Chinese roles) falls in love with a white woman, is shunned, becomes bitter, and finally repents before his tragic demise. The various versions of *Madame Butterfly*, including Mary Pickford's in 1915, Anna May Wong's *Toll of the Sea* (1922), and Sessue Hayakawa's "sequel" to *Madame Butterfly*, *His Birthright* (1918), also confer a certain sympathy to those involved in interracial romances.⁶

Occasionally, too, these interracial romances end "happily" with the union of the couple at the film's conclusion. Often, however, these narratives rationalize their endings with a plot twist that involves the revelation that the Asian partner in the romance was in reality white, for example, *Broken Fetters* (also known as *Yellow and White*, 1916), *Son of the Gods* (1929), and *East Is West* (1922, 1930). *Wrath of the Gods* (1914) is one of the few films that allowed its interracial couple to enjoy an implied future together as husband and wife (even though this bright future emerges after the total destruction of the Japanese heroine's native village).⁷

In light of the prevalence of yellow peril images springing from the press, the American government's imperialistic foreign policy and exclusionary immigration laws, organized religion's tendency to treat race allegorically, labor's fear of cheap labor, and reformers' horrific association of Asians with dirt, disease, opium, and prostitution, it seems amazing that any remotely sympathetic treatment of interracial love affairs could exist at all in Hollywood. Moreover, throughout the history of the existence of the Motion Picture Association of America (MPAA), which sought to stave off government censorship of the movie industry through self-regulation, the depiction of miscegenation was, indeed, forbidden.⁸

If Michel Foucault is correct in *The History of Sexuality* that within Western discourses on sexuality there is no dearth of material on matters that are considered the most taboo, then perhaps Hollywood's official censure and actual interest in the representation of interracial sexuality can be better understood. As Foucault points out, during the Victorian era, a time generally considered to be particularly repressive, materials dealing with sexuality—including medical, legal, and other documents—proliferated. Foucault presents many complex reasons for this *supposed* suppression that was coupled with an active interest, including the emergence of the bourgeoisie and a crisis in the legitimation of rule by blood of the aristocracy, the growth of the modern state and its interest in the regulation of the citizenry, the rise of an ideology of individualism and the challenge it presented to notions of normalcy.⁹

Similarly, Hollywood's interest in all types of taboo sexuality—in this case, miscegenation—cannot be traced to a single root “cause.” Rather, Hollywood returns to this theme for complex reasons that seem to be related to economic, social, and cultural issues that have been part of the fabric of American history since well before the birth of the motion picture industry. On the most obvious and superficial level, Hollywood returns to miscegenation narratives because they sell. Beyond their commercial appeal, however, these films very efficiently use classical Hollywood narrative patterns to deal with issues ranging from racism to changing attitudes toward gender and class relations.

Perhaps most important, however, these narratives deal with that fundamental contradiction within the American psyche between the liberal ideology of the “melting pot” and the conservative insistence on a homogeneous, white, Anglo-Saxon, American identity. Although this division is usually a false one since the liberal call to “melt” presupposes a white, English-speaking “pot,” Hollywood's treatment of this fundamental identity crisis featuring interracial sexuality underscores profound contradictions within American culture's conception and representation of race and sexuality. By looking at these narratives critically, a picture can begin to emerge of the way in which Hollywood sets norms and breaks taboos, offers forbidden pleasures, and maintains existing, unequal racial, gender, and class hierarchies.

Although Hollywood films have dealt with a range of interracial relationships between Caucasians and African Americans, Native Americans, and Hispanics, the industry throughout its history seems to have taken a special interest in narratives dealing with Asians, Pacific Islanders, and Asian Americans. At first, this may seem surprising because of the small population of people of Asian descent in America until well after World War II.¹⁰ Hollywood, then, did not create these films to draw in a large and potentially profitable Asian ethnic minority

audience. Nor could Hollywood be accused of making films because a growing Asian domestic population was seen as a threat (although many of these narratives certainly helped to rationalize exclusionary immigration policies). In addition, although Hollywood does export its films to Asia, a serious attempt to appeal directly to the tastes of any specific national audience in Asia never seems to have been a significant part of the industry's marketing strategy. Rather, Hollywood used Asians, Asian Americans, and Pacific Islanders as signifiers of racial otherness to avoid the far more immediate racial tensions between blacks and whites or the ambivalent mixture of guilt and enduring hatred toward Native American and Hispanics.

Moreover, Asia and the Pacific were not so far removed from the white mainstream media to be beyond topicality. In the early days of the industry, the Spanish-American War led to the acquisition of the Philippines, the only official U.S. colony. The American presence in Asia, of course, had been growing throughout the nineteenth century, after the forced opening of Japan, the annexation of Hawaii, and increased U.S. involvement in Chinese commercial and political affairs. Though strict laws virtually prohibiting Chinese immigration were enacted in the nineteenth century, immigration continued to be an issue since these laws did not as strictly limit the immigration of other Asians—specifically Filipinos, Koreans, and Japanese. With the emergence of Japan as a recognized major power during World War I and the political chaos in China and Southeast Asia during the 1920s and 1930s, Asia continued to be in American newspaper headlines. World War II, the Korean War, and the war in Vietnam, coupled with the resumption of Asian immigration into the United States after World War II, kept Asia topical and potentially profitable for the film and television industry. More recently, the popularity of films and television programs about the war in Vietnam and the surprising commercial appeal of Wayne Wang's independently produced *Chan Is Missing* (1981) and *Dim Sum* (1984) attest to the continuing draw of Asian and Asian American stories.¹¹

Broadly speaking, these Hollywood narratives¹² are part of what Edward W. Said has described in *Orientalism* as “a Western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient.”¹³ They create a mythic image of Asia that empowers the West and rationalizes Euroamerican authority over the Asian other. Romance and sexuality provide the metaphoric justification for this domination. However, any act of domination brings with it opposition, guilt, repression, and resistance, which also must be incorporated into these myths and silenced, rationalized, domesticated, or otherwise eliminated. Individual texts become part of a broader narrative and thematic

pattern that, in each incarnation, reproduces and reworks the same ideological problems at its core.

In this book, the classical Hollywood realist film provides the raw material for the examination of the ideology of race and sexuality. Hollywood films are *discourses*, that is, constructed objects of signification rooted in a specific social environment.¹⁴ Their meanings spring from the institutions (both within the film industry and beyond it) and the historical, cultural, and social circumstances surrounding their production. Like all discourses, they are concrete manifestations of the ideological sphere and share in all of the struggles for power, identity, and influence political theorists like Antonio Gramsci saw as part of the construction of hegemony within any given society at any particular historical juncture.¹⁵

As Fredric Jameson points out in *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act*, when the cultural object is grasped as part of the larger social order, “an individual ‘text’ or work in the narrow sense . . . has been reconstituted in the form of the great collective and class discourses of which a text is little more than an individual *parole* or utterance.”¹⁶ Thus, in order to be understood as part of a larger social formation, any given Hollywood text must be understood as linked with other discourses involving race, class, gender, ethnicity, and similar pressing social and political concerns.

The specific type of discourse Hollywood favors is the narrative fiction. As Claude Levi-Strauss points out in his essay, “The Structural Study of Myth,”¹⁷ narratives, in the form of myths, take up actual, often irresolvable, contradictions (e.g., life and death, nature and culture) and, through the aesthetic act of creating a tale, transpose these irreconcilable oppositions into terms that can be reconciled symbolically (e.g., protagonists and antagonists). Jameson takes up Levi-Strauss’s observations and goes on to conclude that the “aesthetic act is itself ideological, and the production of aesthetic or narrative form is to be seen as an ideological act in its own right, with the function of inventing imaginary or formal ‘solutions’ to unresolvable social contradictions.”¹⁸ In this process, as Roland Barthes points out in *Mythologies*, myth (through the narrative process) also denies that actual contradictions existed in the first place.

It abolishes the complexity of human acts, it gives them the simplicity of essences, it does away with all dialectics, with any going back beyond what is immediately visible, it organizes a world which is without contradictions because it is without depth, a world wide open and wallowing in the evident, it establishes a blissful clarity: things appear to mean something by themselves.¹⁹

Hollywood films operate mythically. They take up, aestheticize, and symbolically resolve social contradictions, then deny the process by masking their ideological operations behind an apparently seamless, "invisible style."²⁰

Not surprisingly, the narrative patterns that Hollywood has developed to depict interracial sexual relations have a great deal in common with more arcane mythic patterns found within the Judeo-Christian tradition and, more specifically, within American popular literature. Stories involving rape, captivity, seduction, salvation, sacrifice, assimilation, tragic and transcendent love all have deep roots within Western culture. All these narrative patterns involve questions of identity and the maintenance of that identity against threats from the outside. The development of that identity, then, is relational, not absolute. In other words, these narratives help Christians to understand why they are not pagans, Americans to understand why they are neither Europeans nor Native Americans, whites to understand why they are unlike people of color. Because sexual relations and taboos fundamentally define individual, family, clan, ethnic, and ultimately national identities, sexual liaisons with people of color pose a threat to the maintenance of white male hegemony within American society.

Rape narratives pose the danger that the "pure" but hopelessly fragile and childlike white woman will be "ruined" by contact with the dark villain. Captivity stories go a step further and threaten to make the white heroine a permanent part of an alien culture. Seduction tales offer the possibility that either the Caucasian woman or man will be tempted by the eroticism of Asia and will turn her or his back on Western Christendom. Salvation stories posit the white hero or heroine as an irresistible moral force that "saves" the Asian lover from the evils or excesses of his or her decadent culture. Sacrifice narratives justify white domination by depicting the Asian lover as willing to sacrifice his or her own culture and nation, and often to die, to maintain white American domination. Tragic love stories maintain racial divisions by forcing the lovers to separate. Transcendent romances allow the lovers to "spiritually" overcome social barriers through their love, which forces the suppression of any "aberrant" ethnic or racial characteristics. In assimilation narratives, the nonwhite lover completely relinquishes his or her own culture in order to be accepted into the American bourgeois mainstream, usually represented by the creation of a "typical" nuclear family.

Although each narrative highlights different social tensions involving race and sexuality, taken as a whole these formulas all use the interracial romance to pose certain key issues related to American identity. Since women and people of color have consistently disturbed any

image of America as a harmonious melting pot of Protestant values, white bosses, capitalist enterprises, and the patriarchal family, these narratives have an enduring force within the popular media. Each chapter that follows takes up one of these narrative patterns and uses a sampling of one, two, or three films to look closely at the discursive strategies Hollywood employs in these tales of interracial romance. After analyzing each narrative pattern in more detail, a clearer picture may begin to emerge of the ideological workings of Hollywood discourses involving race, sex, and American identity.

In chapter 2, DeMille's *The Cheat* and Griffith's *Broken Blossoms* illustrate Hollywood's early interest in interracial sexuality. In both films the threat of rape forms the backdrop for the exploration of other issues involving not only racial differences but also questions of class, consumption, morality, and aesthetics. Chapter 3 looks at both the threatening and utopic aspects of miscegenation in the captivity tale by using the depression era films, *The Bitter Tea of General Yen* and *Shanghai Express*, as examples. *Lady of the Tropics* illustrates Hollywood's ambivalence toward the Eurasian seductress in chapter 4. Chapter 5 looks at cinematic interpretations of *Madame Butterfly* beginning with an in-depth look at Mary Pickford's silent version of the classic tale. Fuller's *China Gate* and the made-for-television drama, "The Lady from Yesterday," show how narratives involving Vietnam make use of the self-effacing Butterfly as a metaphor for an Asia willing to sacrifice itself for the benefit of the West.

An exploration of the themes of sacrifice and salvation continues in chapter 6 with a discussion of two films set in Hong Kong, *Love Is a Many-Splendored Thing* and *The World of Suzie Wong*. Chapter 7 focuses on pairs of star-crossed lovers in *Sayonara* and *The Crimson Kimono*. Both films applaud their protagonists' ability to transcend racial barriers, while still maintaining that tragedy necessarily follows any attempt to break with social norms. In chapter 8, the domestic melodrama, in which race is viewed as a social, political, and historical problem, is examined using two films dealing with World War II and its aftermath, *Japanese War Bride* and *A Bridge to the Sun*. Chapter 9 returns to the exploration of Hollywood's fascination with *Madame Butterfly* by looking at a film and television movie that deal with Caucasian women who masquerade as geisha, *My Geisha* and "An American Geisha." Finally, the discussion of *Year of the Dragon*, in chapter 10, illustrates Hollywood's recent tendency to use the spectacle of interracial sexuality as part of a postmodern pastiche of contemporary culture.