



BEYOND THE VEIL
Redefining Minority Space in American Film
of the Fifties and Early Sixties.*

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In recent years, film criticism has widened its scope to encompass analysis of the representation of minorities in American film. This paper concentrates on the intermediary, post-war period that marks a transition from classical Hollywood's refusal of otherness to the recognition and visibility of minorities as of the late sixties. Film history cannot be separated from technical and aesthetic developments, and it is within this frame that an attempt is made to assess the reconstruction of minority presence in film space through the emergence of widescreen narrative.

Are not the fine mixtures of red and white, the expression of every passion by greater or less suffusions of color in the one, preferable to that eternal monotony, which reigns in the countenances, that immovable veil of black which covers all the emotions of the other race? [Thomas Jefferson, *Notes on the State of Virginia*, 1787]

Then it dawned upon me with a certain suddenness that I was different from the others; or like, mayhap, in heart and life and longing, but shut out from their world by a vast veil. [W.E.B. DuBois, *The Souls of Black Folk*, 1903]

Two differing representations of African Americans are crystallized around the image of the veil as expressed at a distance of more than a century by Thomas Jefferson and W.E.B. DuBois. Whereas Jefferson's 'veil of black' relates to external, stereotypical definitions concerning African Americans at the time, DuBois' veil is a vision from *within*, confirming the dividing line between the white and black worlds. In films of the fifties, the Duboisian conception of the veil tends to occur in contexts featuring other minority groups and appears as a physical boundary between two separate spaces or territories, as shall be seen in the western *The Garden of Evil* (Henry Hathaway, 1954), and the musical *The King and I* (Walter Lang, 1956). Simultaneously, roles and narratives for African Americans reverse many of the traditional stereotypes (the Jeffersonian veil), liberating them from the constraints of the Duboisian veil. In *Lilies of the Field* (Ralph Nelson, 1963), Homer Smith (Sidney Poitier) finds himself *alongside* the veil, helping some East German nuns build a chapel in the Arizona desert. Yet, while the

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metaphor of the veil allows for a hint of sexuality across the 'color line' for other minority groups, the metonymical redefinition of the concept confines African Americans further to asexuality, a dominant stereotype for this minority since the inception of American film till today.

Jefferson's discussion on slavery in *Notes on the State of Virginia* is constructed in two parts. The first, entitled 'Manners', details the harmful effects of slavery and the perpetuation of the system from master to child; the second part, 'Laws', ascribes character traits to black people based on biological theories of eighteenth-century natural scientists concerning the origins of blackness (Starfield 2006: 198). From these purported bodily functions, Jefferson extrapolates traits and habits. Although seemingly objective, he establishes a hierarchy between white and black, with any positive qualities for the latter rapidly countered by negative ones: they have reasonable memory but inferior intelligence, a natural propensity for music, but lack other artistic or literary talents. An economic interest is implied: African Americans are physically disposed to manual labor since they need little sleep, allowing them to work long hours, despite their inherent laziness. Their excessive perspiration – which gives rise to unpleasant bodily odors – makes them more suited to hard work in a hot climate than white people. They act instinctively and not rationally: their apparent courage is due to a lack of forethought and they do not remain sad for long. Similarly, they are stimulated by sexual passion and not love, an argument that is particularly decisive for Jefferson since his greatest fear is intermixture which he sees as 'staining the blood' (Rogin: 11-2; Starfield 2000a: 47). Indeed, his professed aversion to slavery tends to apply more to Antiquity and European slaves. Were African Americans to be emancipated they would have to be kept separate from whites or sent back to Africa. The surface condemnation of slavery in 'Manners' thus seems to be countered by the more circumspect approach set out in 'Laws'.

Jefferson's description provides an insight into the beliefs and contradictions of one individual, as well as the prevailing image concerning black people as the Enlightenment drew to a close. These little-questioned stereotypes found their way into minstrelsy and other cultural representations of the nineteenth century and a good part of the twentieth century, and are closely linked to the fear of what was to become known as miscegenation following the Emancipation Act of 1863 (Starfield 2000a: 47-8). Indeed, Jefferson's 'veil of black' was to manifest itself literally in blackface which became the chief way for black actors to perform or for black characters to be portrayed, thereby creating a uniform image of a face set in a fixed smile, exaggerated by red lipstick (Rogin; Starfield 2006: 199-200). In the passage quoted above, white superiority is shown through a Eurocentric vision of physical attractiveness which connotes words associated with white complexion positively. In contrast, the physical appearance of black people is reduced to a single, unchanging entity. This is the epitome of otherness: to white peoples' suggested natural expressiveness, is opposed the supposed *unfathomable* features of the black face.¹

¹ Jefferson's remarks can be traced back to discussions on the passions begun in the seventeenth century and developed during the Enlightenment (see Kessler and Lenk).

Formulated on the eve of the twentieth century, W.E.B. DuBois' concept of double consciousness was given its definitive form in the opening chapter to *The Souls of Black Folk*. Seeing himself through the eyes of a small girl, the young DuBois became aware of his difference, and developed the concept of a veil or transparent curtain separating blacks from whites. The second conception of the veil may appear to contradict the first, but this is due to the varying meanings associated with the word. A veil is at times an almost translucent piece of material; at others it erects a barrier (a veil of mist, for example), going from various degrees of dissimulation (a veil of secrecy, to draw a veil over something), to total masking, as in the image used by Jefferson. In Biblical times, it referred to the drape separating the sanctuary from the temple and the violation of this place was often marked by the tearing of this veil. For Christians, the veil serves to protect sacred objects. Freud points out the association between the veil and the hymen (Freud: 101) and indeed the veil is linked symbolically to virginal womanhood: the innocent young virgin, the veiled bride at the altar, the nun who takes the veil as a sign of renouncing earthly marriage for a heavenly one, the black widow's veil which returns a woman to celibacy. The latter, however, as illustrated by *The Merry Widow*, allows a woman to display sexuality in a way that would be unacceptable for either unmarried or married women without transforming them into vamps or loose women. *The Garden of Evil* and *The King and I* both feature future or current widows: firstly, Leah Fuller (Susan Hayward) whose husband will die and secondly, Anna Leonowens (Deborah Kerr), a young British widow who has been invited to Siam by King Mongkut (Yul Brynner) to teach English to his numerous children.

DuBois also alludes to the mystical significance accorded to the veil as synonym for 'caul', which by popular belief gave special powers to the person born with one. It allows the dual vision DuBois refers to – which is the state of minorities or colonized people (see Fanon, Naipul, Bhabha) – and which for DuBois is essentially a source of self-preservation and retaliation.² Indeed, women as foremost bearers of the veil use it frequently not just as a repressive garment, but as a means of perpetuating their mystique. This veil of seduction, with suggestions of the *femme fatale*, combines both the erotic and the exotic. In *The Scarlet Empress* (Joseph von Sternberg, 1934) for example, a white net curtain over Catherine's (Marlene Dietrich) face indicates her progression from innocent princess to secret manipulator after the birth of her son. In her later revenge on Count Alexis, she pretends to seduce him, playing with the transparent drape over her bed.

Despite the dominance of Protestantism in post-war United States, a number of films feature Roman Catholic nuns, several of whom are also

However, his refusal to recognize expressiveness in black people may be understood here as part of the hierarchical distinctions becoming entrenched towards the end of the eighteenth century, via notably Blumenbach's theory of degeneration: J. F. Blumenbach, *On the Natural Varieties of Mankind*, 1776, New York: Bergman Publishers, 1969.

² Freud's Wolf Man was also born with a caul and has the impression of living within a veil which, as Freud sums up, hides him from the world and hides the world from him (Freud: 99). Freud links the veil to the patient's repressed homosexuality, which in the context of his latent fears of castration accord with the feminizing, asexualizing properties of the term, as discussed below.

Irish, thus representing two types of minority: *The Bells of St Mary's* (Leo McCarty, 1945) with Bing Crosby as a priest and Ingrid Bergman a nun, *Heaven Alone Knows, Mr. Allyson* (John Huston, 1957) in which Sister Angela (Deborah Kerr) finds herself alone on an island with Allyson (Robert Mitchum), or *The Nun's Story* with Audrey Hepburn (Fred Zinnemann, 1958). The nuns in *Lilies of the Field* belong to another minority: they have escaped across the iron curtain from East Germany to the freedom of the United States. In the popular musical *The Sound of Music* (adapted for the cinema by Robert Wise, 1965), Maria (Julie Andrews) is a novice who, unlike Sister Angela, realizes her vocation is elsewhere. A further veil is present in the choice of actress, all of whom are European, which seems to allow them to play Roman Catholics and adds prestige to their roles. Nuns, who work and travel all over the world, experiencing sometimes dangerous adventures, provide the possibility for women to be shown as 'liberated' during a period in which marriage and motherhood were being promoted (French: 124). The same could be said of virtuous schoolmistresses like Anna in the *King and I*, a female character frequently found in westerns.

Through the accumulated layers of meaning, it can be seen how association with the veil results in the feminization and asexualization of black people. By integrating the femineness suggested in the concept, Jefferson is able to contain the threat posed by the sexuality of the Other. Although differing in point of view, the two veils have in common the idea of the body as conquered territory and consequently a denial of sexuality. In both cases, black people are physically overdetermined (Fanon: 123). Whether conceived of as opaque or transparent, the image of the veil implies the existence of a barrier between black and white world, excluding the former and leaving them with the awareness of their dual identity. They are always both African and American and therefore never fully American (Bhabha isolates a similar phenomenon for the colonized, who even if nationalized, are Anglicized before being English).

Thomas Cripps has analyzed Oscar Micheaux's films in the light of DuBois' double consciousness, suggesting that the black society represented in these films is a mirror image of the white world (Cripps 1977). The idea of African American film in the first half of the twentieth century as creating an exact replica of white society has given rise to debate firstly regarding Micheaux's cinema and secondly concerning Cripps' assumption that from the mid-forties onward this split was replaced by assimilation (Green; Cripps 1993). It is indeed questionable as to whether twoness contains the idea of a mirror image. Furthermore, while this narrative structure may apply to later Micheaux films, it cannot encompass the earlier ones such as *Within Our Gates* (1919) or *Body and Soul* (1924) which deal essentially with preoccupations of African Americans and depict a world pertaining only to them. Later blackcast films under white direction such as *Stormy Weather* (Andrew Stone, 1943) and *Cabin in the Sky* (Vincent Minnelli, 1943) are situated on one side of the veil, although they are intended for audiences on the other side. In the Micheaux films, the other side of the veil remains 'off-screen', since the situation could not exist without the external socio-economic repression created by whites. In Hollywood, blackface dominated during the silent era and was subsequently transmuted into stereotyped characters who conform to the Jeffersonian character traits and those

developed through minstrelsy, vaudeville and silent films, such as the mothering but asexual Mammy (Hatty McDaniel in *Judge Priest*, John Ford, 1934 or *Gone with the Wind*, Victor Fleming, 1939), the silly young woman (Butterfly McQueen's Prissy in the latter film or maid in *Duel in the Sun*, King Vidor, 1946), the lazy, thieving young man (Stephen Fetchit's Pointdexter in *Judge Priest*), and innumerable self-effacing Uncle Toms who discreetly tend the needs of whites (from *Gabriel over the Whitehouse*, Gregory LaCava, 1933 to *Party Girl*, Nicholas Ray, 1958).³

In the post-war era, the off-screen began to creep onto the screen, as can be seen in the almost entirely black-cast *Bright Road* (Gerald Mayer, 1953), not so much through the presence of the single white character – a doctor – as through the rebellious schoolboy, CT (Philip Hepburn). He alone expresses his distaste for school as the result of external oppression. Generally, however, blackcast films gave way to conflictual narratives involving one or more black character in a white-dominated world (see for example *Intruder in the Dust*, Clarence Brown, 1949; *The Blackboard Jungle*, Richard Brooks, 1955; *The Defiant Ones*, Stanley Kramer, 1958 or *Imitations of Life*, Douglas Sirk, 1959). The veil became invisible or increasingly disappeared, as shown in *The Defiant Ones* by the hands outstretched between the two antagonistic escaped convicts, John Jackson (Tony Curtis) and Noah Cullen (Sidney Poitier), culminating in John's assuming the veil of black when he darkens his face so as not to be seen at night.

Crossing the Veil

As suggested by the title, *The Garden of Evil* presents a parallel world, an obvious reversal of the Biblical garden. Three Americans, Hooker (Gary Cooper), Fiske (Richard Widmark) and Daly (Cameron Mitchell), who are on their way to join the Gold Rush in California, are forced to spend a few days in a small fishing village on the Mexican gulf when their ship stops for repairs. As in the *Odyssey*, they find themselves in a foreign, seemingly paradisiacal country and soon Hooker and Fiske are lured into a bar by the sweet voice of a local singer (Rita Morena). She presents a mixture of virgin and seductress, in a white, low-cut dress which is tied with a red ribbon around the waist. The latter two signs indicate her Latinness and a few years later, Nathalie Wood was to wear a similar dress for Maria in *West Side Story* (Robert Wise, 1961) whereas Morena played an experienced woman, Anita, dressed all in red. Both characters end up wearing a widow's veil after the deaths of their respective lovers. Frequently in films with similar tragic Romeo-and-Juliet overtones, the hymeneal (post-marital) state does not last long (Starfield 1998). In *The King and I*, Morena plays a young Burmese princess, Tuptim, the latest wife for King Mongkut but in love with a young Burmese, a love that is lauded in Anna's song *Hello, Young Lovers*. Like Maria in *West Side Story*, Tuptim experiences three stages of the veil: virgin, bride (rupture of the hymen) and widow (through the death of her lover and the death of the king).

As mentioned above, the eroticism and the exoticness of the veil suggest both unrequited sexuality and illicit relations. The saloon singer

³ For the different stereotypes of African Americans, see Reddick and Bogle.

frequently embodies this type of eroticism, reinforced in *The Garden of Evil* by the character's Latinness. Interestingly, this film and *River of No Return* (Otto Preminger, 1954) were both scripted by Frank Fenton. The latter film offers a variation of the saloon bar sequence: Kay, the singer here is central to the plot and played by Marilyn Monroe. As Edgar Morin points out, the increasingly eroticized image of the star in the forties and fifties implied automatically a negation of love (Morin: 30-5) and Monroe adds the eroticism of her star aura to the character, distancing herself from her audience. The saloon is set in a large tent which gives an oriental air to the scene and patrons enter via a 'veil', the flap of the tent.⁴

In *The Garden of Evil*, the young woman sings to the Mexican clients around the bar, but directs her song to the Americans after they have crossed the room and seated themselves at a table at the far end. The two parts of the cafe are separated from each other by a beaded curtain. The owner comes through to serve them and the singer ogles them from the other side as she moves seductively. At one stage, a client tries to flirt with her and is expediently thrown out by a tall Mexican in a large hat, Vincente (the Mexican actor Victor Manuel Mendoza). Daly arrives and the three Americans watch the singer begin another love song. She is interrupted by the sudden entrance of Leah, a red-haired American woman, who has come to seek help for her husband trapped in a gold mine a long way off. Striding up to the counter and speaking in Spanish, Leah offers the Mexicans money in exchange for help. They decline. She then pushes back the curtain and repeats the offer in English to the Americans. They agree to go with her, as does Vincente.

The presence of a veil or curtain in both *The Garden of Evil* and *The King and I* is also necessitated by scenic and technical imperatives. The films were produced by Twentieth Century Fox and use CinemaScope⁵, promoted by Darryl Zanuck from 1953. Several articles in the *Cahiers du cinéma* of the time bear witness to the hopes placed on the newly-perfected the technology, even by these avant-garde critics, many of whom were the future leaders of French New Wave film⁶. They also reveal their disappointment in the films themselves which were uninspiring at first. Maurice Schérer (the future Eric Rohmer) stresses the limits of the classic rectangular frame, but expresses his apprehension of the demise of certain acquired forms of film aesthetics such as the close-up or the sequence shot (*Cahiers du cinéma* 31). Indeed, the first cinemascope lenses often deformed faces in close-up shots, as noted by Vincent Minnelli who disliked the process (interview with Higham and Greenberg). Early cinemascope preferred the spectacular genre: the epic, the western, or the musical

⁴ There are several thematic similarities between the two films, such as the harmful effects of gold, the distant, but real threat of Indians, the hero as a tough man with a murky past, a woman who needs to be shown her place and finally the garden-like setting of the natural landscape.

⁵ Cinemascope was derived from the hypergonar process invented by Henri Chrétien in France in 1926.

⁶ *Cahiers du cinéma* n°25, juillet 1953 and n° 31, janvier 1954 as well as n° 38, août 1954, which contains a review by François Truffaut of *Prince Valiant* (Hathaway), *River of No Return* and *King of the Khyber Rifles* (Henry King). For the modifications introduced by the widescreen and discussion on its contradiction with the sequence shot favored by André Bazin at the time, see Maltby: 251-4.

(Schérer in *Cahiers du cinéma* 31, p. 38). The trailers for these films insist on the sumptuous decors and sets, like the exotic oriental ones created for *The King and I*. Many of the films were shot on location, like *River of No Return* which was made in Canada. *The Garden of Evil* was filmed in Mexico where the action takes place, the beautiful natural landscapes illustrating the garden of the title.

Widescreen led to certain changes and innovations in the conception of film space. Minnelli complained that what was gained in width with cinemascope was lost in height, but it must be added that more use was also made of the background. Contrary to what some like Jacques Rivette predicted (*Cahiers du cinéma* 31: 47), cinemascope allows for a more graduated depth, the foreground, middle distance and background being clearly distinguished. Variety of scale can thus appear in a single shot. The opening to *River of No Return* features Matt Calder (Robert Mitchum) in the foreground, against a backdrop composed of mountains, trees and the river of the title. Several actions can occur simultaneously, as witness in the following sequence the conversation between Calder and the pastor on the loose morals in the tent-town – compared to Sodom and Gomorrah – while a brawl takes place behind them. Nevertheless, lateral movements give precedence to depth, with camera panning and tracking within the wider rectangular space that is now the scene of the action as during Calder's arrival and his search for his son in the saloon tent while Kay entertains the miners (Starfield 2000b: 46-7). In *The Garden of Evil*, Hooker and Fiske's entrance in the cafe illustrate the use of such graduated depth. A reaction shot presents a view of the room as they gaze over the saloon doors. This medium shot takes in the singer in the center with some Mexican men lounging around the bar to her right. The Americans enter and she is now shown in a close shot in the foreground on the left-hand side of the screen, the bartender center back behind the bar, and Vicente in the right-hand corner in the middle-ground, leaning against the bar. Her face is turned towards the entrance and she stares directly at the Americans as they brush past.

Cinemascope also entailed certain scenic changes, such as lowering light-fittings and raising the furniture on the sound stage (Alfred Hitchcock, in Truffaut: 143). Within this context of changing film space, the beaded curtain described in *The Garden of Evil* could be seen as a physical means of redistributing the now wide rectangular space. The editing of the sequence is nonetheless fairly classical, made up of varying shots, often with alternating shot/ reaction shot, and a general shot of the room is only given once, when Daly enters. Hooker and Fiske are vaguely visible in the background, behind the curtain. Both Americans and Mexicans are simultaneously actors and audience on their respective sides of the curtain, but the view is essentially that of the Americans: the Mexicans are seen via the beaded curtain which crosses the screen lengthwise and at times, they appear as if imprisoned behind the bars of the curtain. The whole space offered by the cinemascope screen is used: the singer takes up her second song in the left-hand corner while moving slowly towards the center,

directly facing the Americans seated on the other side of the curtain.⁷ Her performance behind the screen can be likened to the dance of the seven veils and indeed the recent *Salome* (William Keighley, 1953) starring Rita Hayworth was fresh in spectators' memories. The singer with her sweet enticing song is like the forbidden fruit in the Garden of Eden. Leah's entry causes a break in the scene. Unlike the other characters who keep to their respective side and positions, she dominates the space. The illusion of movement is maintained as she approaches the camera until she is framed in close-up. Although not particular to cinemascope, this device was frequently used by the new process, bypassing the necessity of shot change through editing or camera movement.⁸ The close-up concentrates on Leah's face: unlike her Biblical namesake, she is bare-headed and not shrouded in veils.⁹ The Mexican woman is pushed into the background as Leah moves from the bar, parts the curtain and addresses the Americans.

In both *The Garden of Evil* and *The King and I*, the veil appears as a dividing line between two spaces, between the dominant and minority groups. The curtain creates a barrier between the singer and the men, between the Mexicans and the Americans. Only married women like Leah and, as will be seen, Anna in *The King and I*, can cross the veil. The Mexicans remain on one side of the curtain, whereas the Americans cross to the other side without hesitating, as if they were appropriating Mexican space along the way. The barkeeper and Vicente are the only Mexicans to part the curtain and address the Americans. Vicente can do so because he is a man of honor – a long-standing characteristic of Hispanic characters – and he speaks and acts with dignity, a further possible 'Hispanic' character trait (Starfield 2005). Indeed, Vicente sees himself as the Americans' equal, even if they do not show him the same consideration. Appropriation also characterizes Hooker's translation, or rather transposition, of the Mexican's dialogues into an idiom that will be comprehensible to the Americans, further widening the gap between the two groups. Vicente remains an essentially background character, obscured as it were by a 'veil of black'. He does retain some dignity during the film, although he continues to speak in Spanish, generally without translation. He joins with the disreputable Daly in drinking and searching for gold and dies raging at the pursuing Indians.

The only time that the singer and the Americans are not separated by the veil is when they enter the cafe. At that moment, when they are within Mexican space and she stares directly at them, she can be said to appropriate 'the right to look' (Jameson: 7; Kaplan: xviii). Otherwise, as minority and woman, doubly marked by otherness, she may only return the look via the intervening veil. Leah's bold gaze is further indication of how

⁷ In an early, atypical film, *Downhill* (1927), Alfred Hitchcock explored the metaphoric and scenic possibilities of the beaded curtain, having a man and woman kiss behind the curtain in the back room of a London shop, as if in a shadow play, watched by another man, and of course by the spectator.

⁸ As Georges Sadoul notes, this technique was used from the beginning and can be found in the Lumière brothers' *Arrival of a Train*, 1895.

⁹ In love with Rachel, his master Laban's second daughter, Jacob was tricked into marrying the elder sister Leah as her face was hidden behind the bridal veil (*Genesis*, 29). In *The Garden of Evil*, Leah is the one who ultimately has two spouses, John Fuller and Hooker.

she has transgressed her status as woman¹⁰ and is ultimately responsible for the series of reversals in the order of things implied by the title. She is the real Circe in the film and leads the Americans across the veil into the Mexican world. The Eldorado they are heading for is in reality a dystopia, a garden filled with the evil spirits of its native inhabitants, the Indians (it must be remembered that evil is an anagram of veil). Order will only be re-established when Hooker has returned Leah to the state of obedient womanhood.

In *The King and I*, the veil is used to depict the awakening of love between an English governess and the King of Siam¹¹. As such, it can be considered a diluted 'captivity narrative', defined by Gina Marchetti as 'the abduction of a woman by an alien (and expressly villainous) culture' (Marchetti: 46). Marchetti outlines how the theme of kidnap and sequestration dates back to works such as the Iliad or folk tales, but is also part of intercultural exchange of goods and territories as documented by Claude Lévi-Strauss. During the course of colonization, the domination of one people by another is also characterized by the capture of women. Conjointly, this act is reflected in the colonizers fear of the capture and rape of their own women. Kidnapping colonized women is not seen as forced sequestration; rather Amerindian women or black slaves are regarded as benefiting from contact with the 'civilized' conqueror. As Marchetti notes, fear of capture and rape results firstly in the restricting of woman's independence, a phenomenon which still prevails today, and secondly in the defining of cultural barriers.

The metaphor of the veil lends itself to this type of narrative and defines the space within which women, the minority group in this case, are confined. In film, the captivity narrative is frequently related to Oriental characters, for example *The Cheat* (Cecil B. DeMille, 1915), *Broken Blossoms* (D.W. Griffith, 1919), *The Bitter Tea of General Yen* (Frank Capra, 1933), *Shanghai Express* (Sternberg, 1931) and more recently, *Seven Women* (John Ford, 1966). In *The King and I*, Anna refuses the status of captive by demanding separate living quarters. She reminds the king of this stipulation in her contract by teaching the children to sing *Home Sweet Home*.¹² Although set in 1862, fifties mores prevail and, despite his harem of wives and

¹⁰ For E. Ann Kaplan, the gaze is active and masculine, turning women into its passive receiver. For discussion on various theories on the subject since Laura Mulvey's seminal essay and differences between the concepts 'look' and 'gaze', see Kaplan: xvi-xix. Traditionally in film, the woman's look is confined to reaction shots, expressing love, fear, horror, etc. (Starfield 2005).

¹¹ Based on Anna Leonowens' memoirs, the first film version *Anna and the King of Siam* (John Cromwell, 1946) was also produced by Zanuck for Twentieth Century Fox with Irene Dunne (Anna), Rex Harrison (King Mongkut) and Linda Darnell (Tuptim). The Rogers and Hammerstein musical began its run on Broadway in 1951 with Gertrude Lawrence playing Anna until her death in 1952. The cosmopolitan actor Yul Brynner shaved his head to play Mongkut, a role that brought him fame and which he played for many years. He revived the role for the television series *Anna and the King* in 1972. *The King and I* ran again on Broadway and in London from 1996 and a straight remake – intended to be more realistic regarding both character and historic rendering – was shot in 1999 starring Jodie Forster as Anna.

¹² Composed by John Howard Payne in 1823 for his opera *Cali, the Maid of Milan*, the song was sung by both Unionists and Confederates during the Civil War. It was the title to D.W. Griffith's biographical film of the writer (1914) and among the innumerable filmic references to the song or its lyrics figure Dorothy's last words in *The Wizard of Oz* (Victor Fleming, 1939) on her return to Kansas 'There's no place like home'.

extensive offspring, the king is very much a family man. If he has Anna brought to him in the middle of the night, it is not from sexual lust as in *Raise the Red Lantern* (Yimou Zhang, Chine, 1991), but because he wishes to dictate a letter to Abraham Lincoln, offering him elephants to help fight the Confederate army. Against the Cold War background of the fifties, independent Siam emerges as a bulwark to the spread of communism that the United States saw as threatening South-East Asia at the time. The king is depicted as a ruler torn between tradition and modernity, seeking to learn English and attracted to scientific knowledge. In this context, imperialist Britain of the mid-nineteenth century is a cover for the imperialistic designs of communist Russia and China. Mongkut's solidarity with the American president is thus a sign of his enlightenment.

Despite this identification with the Abolitionist Lincoln, Mongkut's young wife Tuptim sees him more as a slave-holder. Anna has lent her Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852) which she transforms into a play to be performed by the wives at a banquet organized for the visiting British ambassador. (Britain has just colonized Burma, pretexting the uncivilized nature of its king and Mongkut aims to prove that the Siamese have adopted Western manners.) Indeed Tuptim is the captive, not Anna. As *Hamlet* showed, a 'play within a play' is a means for apprising a king of certain home truths and here the wives' condition is likened to that of American slaves. In Tuptim's version, Eliza is the main character, pursued by a wicked Simon of Legree, obviously King Mongkut. The choreography of the sequence was devised by Jerome Robbins with Michiko Iseri as oriental dancing consultant. Yet, in the context of the African American story being related, the traditional white masks of oriental theater worn by the female characters take on a different significance: it is as if they had adopted 'whiteface'. The male characters are all dark-skinned: Legree, Tom and even the dogs that hunt the runaway Eliza. The color white is positively connoted throughout the film. The elements combine with whiteness to save Eliza: the ice that allows her to cross the river, the snow that hides her as if behind a veil (Anna had taught the wives and children about the existence of snow, associated with Swiss mountains and therefore with Europe). This sequence thus presents a reversal of blackface and the whiteface of the female characters expresses their desire for freedom.

Immediately after the banquet, the king leads Anna into his private quarters. Engrossed in their conversation on cultural differences between West and East, they push back a white net drape which served as backdrop in the previous scene. This is the only time that such a decor is used, otherwise the palace is made of doors, walls and corridors. This 'veil' marks the space belonging to the king, as well as the boundaries of the room and that of the frame. As in *The Garden of Evil*, the curtain is placed laterally, foreshortening the extended perspective allowed by cinemascope.¹³ The curtain defines an intimate space, almost a sanctuary, in which Anna and the king begin a discussion on gender difference. For him, men are polygamous by nature; she speaks out in favor of monogamous marriage for love, expressed through the song *Shall We Dance*. She then proceeds to teach

¹³ Similarly, the tent in *River of No Return* forms a backdrop for the singer perched on a table, surrounded by the miners.

Mongkut the polka. First separated by a wide general shot, the camera moves in to show them holding hands. Gradually Mongkut stops counting out the beats ('one, two three and one two three') and takes Anna by the waist. A general shot shows them dancing around the room. They stop for breath, and begin again as the camera moves in more intimately. At that moment, they are interrupted by a messenger, bringing news of the runaway wife's arrest. The entry of Anna into the king's territory had the effect of bridging the gap between their two cultures; now the king returns to his oriental ways. Tuptim is brought in and he removes his jacket to whip her. Anna tries to prevent him from carrying out his act and refuses to leave, stating that she will watch the punishment. She calls him a barbarian. A close-up focuses on the single earring in the king's left ear. The piece of jewelry can be seen as a sign of his orientalness, his foreignness, but the feminine object also intimates weakness and Mongkut drops the whip and runs away, bent double. After this public humiliation, it becomes evident that he is incapable of resolving the contradiction between his authoritarian character and his desire for modernity. He allows himself to die and leaves his twelve-year old son to accomplish what he could not.

The white drapes seem to foreshadow this death and one is reminded of the tomb-like room with oriental furnishings in which the American missionary, Megan (Barbara Stanwyck) is housed by the Chinese general (Nils Asther) in *The Bitter Tea of General Yen*. Megan's love, however, is exteriorized by a growing 'orientalization': she begins to adopt Chinese customs and wear Chinese dress. On the contrary, *The King and I* is based on cultural exchange, as shown by the European polka which contrasts with the preceding oriental dance of the play. This equilibrium is superficial and ultimately European values are superimposed over the oriental ones. Anna's voluminous crinolines are an indication of exported Victorian propriety according to which a woman should keep her distance from a man, and especially a polygamous foreign king. Her stiff skirts act as an extension of the autonomous house she requests and prevent close contact.

In Capra's film, Megan's sexual desires are revealed through a dream in which Yen tries to rape her. He is prevented by a masked man in a suit who fights with him and Yen disappears. The man removes his mask. It is Yen and in this Western attire the dreaming Megan can accept his advances (Marchetti: 52-7). In reality, their relationship is impossible and Yen commits suicide. Likewise, only when King Mongkut is on the point of death can Anna accept the ring which he slips onto the middle finger of her left hand. As he lies on his deathbed, two separate spaces are clearly distinguished in the same frame on the wide screen: the king is on the right-hand side, while on the other side his son proclaims a new decree to his subjects, made up of the other wives and their children. People must no longer bow to the king, they must look him in the eyes, all men, women and children are equal, he says in substance. American democracy has been brought to the kingdom of Siam. Although an amorous relationship has been hinted at, ultimately Anna remains chaste. The space at the end of the film has become homogenized: a space purged of sexuality and occupied only by women and children.

Alongside the Veil

Despite the large Hispanic and Asian communities within the United States, Hollywood gives preferential treatment to these characters when they are depicted in situations across another dividing line, the border, in other words, when they can be located as foreigners rather than as minorities. It is only when they are outside the United States that they can lay claim to some sort of equality. Confusion remains with minorities within the borders, who tend to emerge as foreigners in their own country, isolated in filmic space. The minorities in *Lilies of the Field* – the East German nuns, a Catholic priest of Irish descent, a large number of Mexican immigrants and the African American, Homer Smith – are presented in a remote, isolated area of the United States, the southern Arizona desert. Few of them speak English. The only non-minority character is the owner of a construction company, Mr. Ashton (played by the director, Ralph Nelson). None of these groups cohere until Homer's arrival.

As his contradictory first and last names illustrate, Homer is a stranger in his own land. The split identity of fictional black people is frequently revealed by the names they bear. Isaiah Jenkins, the false priest played by Paul Robeson in *Body and Soul* takes the first name of a biblical prophet, to which his last name is a humorous contrast. Discordant names are to be found frequently in comedy and the low mimetic, often with a bathetic effect as with Isaiah Jenkins. In its serious form, this combination of high and low culture reveals the contrast and contradiction which is part of the African American's lot in the United States: Noah Cullen in *The Defiant Ones*, and later Virgil Tibbs (Poitier) in *In the Heat of the Night* (Norman Jewison, 1967). Not surprisingly, the bigoted Southern policeman, Bill Gillespie (Rod Steiger), gives a mocking snort on hearing his first name.

Like the hero of the Greek epic, Homer Smith is on a journey: 'I'm just passing through,' he insists at the beginning. 'I'll be moving on,' he keeps saying, though he has difficulty in leaving. And like Ulysses he becomes ensnared, but not by Circe or some singing mermaids, not by the seductive veil, but by a group of nuns, the chaste veil. There can be no hint or amorous yearnings here, as in *Heaven Alone Knows*, or romantic love story as in the contemporaneous *Sound of Music*. The formidable Mother Superior is deterrent enough and keeps firm control on the younger nuns who resemble skittish children. Whereas most of his previous roles tend to pit Poitier against a white American male, here he plays the sole male protagonist and the conflictual relationship is between Homer and Mother Superior. It is a battle of wits and willpower: he starts by teaching the nuns English; she uses the scriptures to make him stay and build the chapel. This feat is almost Homeric, without financial resources or skilled workers. Homer proves that he is capable of being the architect and engineer of the enterprise, and at the end even the distrustful Ashton recognizes his value. As the chapel nears completion, Ashton arrives at the building site. The sequence alternates views of Ashton and what he sees: Mexican women cooking, two German nuns, their skirts rolled up making adobe with their bare feet while a Mexican man tells them, 'Boss, wants more adobe'. The surprised Ashton goes to see the 'boss'. He stoops to enter the building sight, peering through the scaffolding. We cut to a shot of Homer above him on a wall that is being

built. Ashton watches Homer descend, a set of plans rolled under his arms. He is fully dressed and gives orders to the sweating workers. Finally, during the fiesta to celebrate the completed church, the Mexican men call Homer *gringo*. Smith muses 'Gringo? I don't know if that's a step up or a step down from some other things I've been called.' Indeed, a dual Americanization process has taken place: that of the nuns and the Mexican Americans, and that of Homer, the black American.

West Side Story had previously portrayed two-minority groups and it was characteristic of films in the early sixties to try to present two or more minorities (see for example *The Pawnbroker*, Sidney Lumet, 1964). If the range of minorities in *Lilies of the Field* seems to illustrate Martin Luther King's dream for a mixed nation pronounced that year at the Lincoln Memorial in Washington, the film is not really representative of the growing radicalization of African American thought at the time. Nevertheless, it must be seen within the context of the depiction of African Americans in film. Unlike the other films described here which make more exotic use of minorities, the films featuring African Americans in the post-war period tend to be simpler productions in black and white. As such, they illustrate the seriousness of their message, but also reveal that the new emergence of African Americans as central characters, in narratives pertaining to their condition, was indeed less assimilationist than is often thought. Firstly, these films had a *parallel* existence to that of mainstream, commercial Hollywood. *Lilies of the Field* for example was made in fourteen days on a low budget, with a star actor like Poitier agreeing to work for a low salary. It is a feature of the period that they reached a fairly wide audience and could aspire to recognition through Academy nominations (Poitier's role as Noah Cullen, Academy Awards 1958) or awards (for his role as Homer Smith in 1964).¹⁴ *Lilies of the Field* is perhaps the culmination of this type of film. Secondly, as mentioned above, the integration of the black character in Poitier's previous films relied on a second white male protagonist. *Lilies of the Field* was a breakthrough on this point as it allowed Poitier to fully occupy the main role. Poitier's subsequent films were to become more mainstream, as witness *In the Heat of the Night* and *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner* (Stanley Kramer, 1967), but then again, they mark a new period, that of the American New Wave and a generally opening up to the presence of minorities in American film (Starfield 1996a). However, as *In the Heat of the Night* reveals, the main role tended to become diluted through a return to the dual male protagonist structure, particularly prominent from the late sixties and now extended to other minorities (Starfield 1996b; Guerrero).

In *Lilies of the Field*, the African American character still finds himself in the presence of the veil. The juxtaposition with the nuns is limiting and reveals how difficult it is for African American characters to display sexuality in film without being defined by extremes. They are either oversexed, which could make them would-be rapists as in *The Birth of a Nation* (D.W. Griffith, 1915) or supersexual beings in the Blaxploitation films of the early Seventies; or they are neutralized as asexual characters, as was

¹⁴ The full impact of this landmark event can be understood in the context of the time: the 1964 Oscar ceremony also marked the first presence of African American musicians in the orchestra, notably jazz musician Buddy Collette. I thank Buddy Collette and Guy DeFazio, President of the Center for Jazz Arts, Los Angeles, for this information.

the case with the Mammy and Uncle Tom stereotypes. Indeed, *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner* and its opening kiss between John Prentice (Poitier) and Joanna Drayton (Kathryn Houghton) seems like an archaic curiosity. Whoopi Goldberg shrouds herself in a nun's habit in the *Sister Act* films (Emile Ardoline, 1992 and Bill Duke, 1993) and generally turns to asexual characters like the sloppy, grumpy businesswoman, Harriet Franklin, in *Bogus* (Norman Jewison, 1996) who partners a small boy rather than the imaginary Bogus (Gerard Depardieu). She acquires motherhood by proxy and in the end is shown transformed into a femininely-dressed woman wearing a summery white dress and broad-brimmed hat. Similarly, Creasy (Denzel Washington) in *Man of Fire* (Tony Scott, 2004) befriends a little blond girl, Pita (Dakota Fanning) who refers to him as 'Creasy-bear'. One is reminded of the relationship between the blond little Eva and Uncle Tom in Stowe's novel. The film is set in Mexico, but unlike *The Garden of Evil*, the Mexicans are all perfidious to the extreme – apart from a couple of slow-witted characters – even Pita's father, who betrays his daughter. Creasy seeks solicitude with the Mother Superior of the parochial school Pita attends and any sexual relationship between her blond widowed mother, Lisa (Radha Mitchell), and Creasy is excluded. This may be due to demands of spectatorship, black and white alike, but it nevertheless reveals that the question of minority presence in films has not totally been resolved.

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