

The White Ideal in *L.A. Confidential*

Although not entirely uncritical in its portrayal of race, *L.A. Confidential* further cements white as the “invisible norm” in film. The film makes a few points about police racism and white—specifically Anglo—dominance in the LAPD, but the few critical points the film makes are limited to the institutions portrayed in the film; the primacy of whiteness throughout the film itself goes unquestioned. Furthermore, its stereotypical representations of minorities sabotage any chance the film had to offer criticism of white hegemony in either its historical setting, 1950s Los Angeles, the late '90s world in which it was made, or the universe of noir film. In this essay, I will show how *L.A. Confidential* builds up whiteness as the ideal through its treatment of the three protagonists, the femme fatale Lynn, blacks and Latinos, and whites belonging to minority ethnic groups.

When discussing race and ethnicity in *L.A. Confidential*, it is important to first discuss the historical context of the film. Made in 1997, the film takes place in 1950s Los Angeles, a time and place where police racism was extremely prevalent, as evidenced by the 1951 “Bloody Christmas” incident dramatized in the film. On “Bloody Christmas,” seven young prisoners, five of whom were Mexican, were savagely beaten by some fifty (mostly drunk) Los Angeles police officers in response to false rumors of injuries sustained by other officers at the hands of the youths. (Escobar, 171.) The incident was indicative of widespread racism within the all-white police force and is just one of a number of historical incidents that have caused tension between the LAPD and minority communities. Although it takes place in the time of “Bloody Christmas,” it is important that the film be seen within the context of the time it was made, 1997. This places the film six years after the infamous Rodney King incident and directly in the time period of

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Comment: The assignment specifies 1” margins, rather than 1.25”.

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Comment: “Builds up” is too vague and non-descriptive. You need a more specific term so your thesis will be as clear as possible. Also, I’m not sure what “whites belonging to minority ethnic groups” means. Other than that, this is a very good introduction and thesis.

the Rampart Scandal, when the LAPD's anti-gang unit was found to be massively corrupt, and only one year after one of the most famous incidents from that scandal, the 1996 shooting and subsequent framing of Javier Ovando by LAPD officers (this finds a rough parallel in the film when Bud White shoots a suspect and then plants a gun on him.) Could the film, with its portrayal of an endemically racist LAPD subjugating minorities, actually be seen as a progressive critique of institutional police racism in the 1990s? Could *L.A. Confidential* be drawing a parallel between race relations in the early 1950s and the time in which it was made? This interpretation could be plausible at first glance based on the plot alone, but it is unviable because of the film's strongly negative representation of blacks and Latinos. Instead, *L.A. Confidential* treats minorities of all kinds as stereotypes and marginalizes them, places them in the role of criminals, and, specifically with blacks, represents them in a derogatory manner to a degree entirely beyond the requirements of the plot. As a criticism by analogy of police racism in the 1990s, *L.A. Confidential* is best seen as a litany of botched opportunities.

One of the few aspects where *L.A. Confidential* does succeed in being critical of race relations is in showing the de facto segregation that existed in 1950s Los Angeles and showing the corresponding economic disparities between whites and non-whites. The same kind of division between upscale white neighborhoods and poor black and Latino neighborhoods exists to this day, and even in the 1990s, when the film was made, police forces in minority-heavy areas aimed more to contain crime in those neighborhoods than truly fight it, thus protecting outlying middle-class white communities (Grant 391.) This bears a direct parallel to the LAPD's image as the defender of the white middle class in the 1950s (Escobedo 173), and in drawing attention to the lack of progress made in race

relations between the time *L.A. Confidential* is set and the time it was made, the film does offer some criticism of a white-dominated society. The irony is that in *L.A. Confidential*, as in many noir films, it is the polar opposite of the poor minorities, the wealthy whites, who are the true “criminal element.”

However, the opportunity for critique provided by the film’s portrayal of L.A.’s socioeconomic climate is squandered once we actually see the people living there. Every time the white cops descend into these ghettos, the black inhabitants are represented with the worst of racial stereotypes. There are a few key scenes that show this: Exley and Vincennes’ questioning of a black informant, the killings of the Nite Owl suspects, and White’s aforementioned killing of the rape victim’s captor. In the first scene, we see the age-old stereotype of blacks as gullible, a stereotype in film that dates back as far as *Birth of a Nation* (Cripps, 20.) Vincennes, smooth-talking, smarmy, and intelligent (played by, of course, Kevin Spacey), quickly outwits the black man, tricking him into giving up information on the whereabouts of certain suspects by suggesting he could get the man’s brother out of prison sooner. The scene is even more derogatory toward blacks because Vincennes, along with Exley and White, is one of the film’s sympathetic characters; we in the audience are invited to laugh along with him at the gullible black character.

The Nite Owl suspects are represented in a far more derogatory manner. They use urbanized dialects and poor grammar and wear dirty clothes. They are violent, impulsive, lazy, and dependent on drugs. Innocent of murder, they turn out to be guilty of a brutal rape anyway. After “escaping” from the police station (we can assume they were set free by corrupt cops so they could be killed), the hoodlums go directly to their predicted hideout and are found lying about drinking and smoking as if nothing had ever happened.

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Comment: Good use of examples.

The film's most unforgivable representation of race happens when Bud White goes to the house where the rape victim is being held captive. The man White shoots is wearing no pants and laughing to himself while watching cartoons. Here, the black character is not merely shown as a criminal, he is humiliated and infantilized. The problem in *L.A. Confidential* is not merely that blacks are shown doing bad things; it would be absurd to insist that films cannot portray any minority characters as bad people without being labeled racist. The problem with the representation of blacks in *L.A. Confidential* is how closely their criminality corresponds with derogatory stereotypes, primarily laziness, impulsiveness, and stupidity. Crime in *L.A. Confidential* crosses the racial spectrum—the difference is in the types of crimes and the motivations for them. Whites in the film commit crimes for profit and they go about it in a cold, calculating manner as part of a grand conspiracy; they act in rational self-interest. Blacks in *L.A. Confidential*, on the other hand, are portrayed as giving no thought to their actions and commit crimes motivated by a desire for immediate gratification.

The problem with representation of minorities in *L.A. Confidential* is that it seems to justify the same police racism the film is critical of on its surface (it is the awareness of police racism that allows the framing of the Nite Owl suspects to almost work.) In addition to problems with black representation, another example of this is seen in the “Bloody Christmas” sequence. The majority of the police officers are shown as drunken and misinformed fools, and the characters that make up the film's moral center, Vincennes, Exley, and White, head downstairs to stop them from beating the Mexicans. However, all but Exley are quickly drawn into the brawl by the Mexicans, who are portrayed as confrontational and violent counterparts to the white peacekeepers.

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Comment: With no other kinds of black characters to even balance them out.

Although *L.A. Confidential* does degrade minorities, its reinforcement of whiteness as the norm is perhaps the most crucial aspect of the film's ideology on race—white characters completely dominate the film, and the world of the film is therefore shown from a white point of view. In reference to whites, the absence of racial imagery is much more significant than the negative racial imagery regarding minorities. Whites are not thought of as white in white-dominated Hollywood. Rather, they are seen simply as people and they are defined through traits other than their race: “White people in their whiteness, however, are imaged as individual and/or endlessly diverse, complex, and changing.” (Dyer 12.) This phenomenon is shown through the film's three protagonists. Ed Exley, Bud White, and Jack Vincennes, all white, are described in terms of their personal histories, their values, their personality traits, but not their ethnic or racial backgrounds. They exemplify the idea that white is the one neutral color and that white characters in film can therefore be portrayed as completely free of ethnic identity.

The root of this common trope is simple: Hollywood filmmakers are generally white. As Dyer writes: “White people create the dominant images of the world and don't quite see that they thus construct the world in their image.” (Dyer 9.) It is a recurring problem in film that minorities are usually seen as being inexorably tied to their racial identity; black characters are seen as *black characters* whereas whites are simply characters. With American films, the filmmakers and the audience are primarily white and, as part of the majority, generally do not give much thought to the assumed whiteness of the culture that surrounds them. *L.A. Confidential* does little to nothing to question this assumption of whiteness, and instead reinforces it: like the white members of the audience, the protagonists of *L.A. Confidential* are merely individuals (as opposed to

white individuals) moving through a world populated by blacks, Latinos, and even whites with clear ethnic backgrounds, such as the Italian Sid Hudgens and the Irish Dudley Smith, both of whom are revealed to be villains. It is important to note that in *L.A. Confidential*, most of the criminals and villains are characters who, unlike the protagonists, have “roots”—they have all been tainted in some way by the touch of ethnic identity. (Pierce Patchett would be the only exception.)

If the characters of Exley, Vincennes, and White establish whiteness as neutral, the character of Lynn Bracken establishes it as ideal. This neutrality and superiority are the two major aspects of whiteness Dyer describes in *White*: “Though the power value of whiteness resides above all in its instabilities and apparent neutrality, the colour does carry the more explicit symbolic sense of moral and aesthetic superiority.” (Dyer, 70.) Lynn, the object of desire for both Bud White and Ed Exley, embodies whiteness as an ideal form; she is a paragon of whiteness as something to be sought after. Her whiteness is exaggerated almost to the point of parody. She is exceptionally pale, (fake) blonde, often dressed in white, and usually lit with a kind of angelic glow. She is seen as the epitome of purity—ironic for a prostitute, especially given the color white’s traditional association with virginity (Ibid). However, it is not Lynn’s moral purity that the filmmakers imply through this representation, but her racial purity. It is her very whiteness that makes her so desirable. The film does take one step to pierce her façade of Aryan perfection when it is revealed that Lynn is naturally a brunette and that her perfect whiteness—or at least her proximity to the unattainable “ideal” whiteness (Dyer 78)—is in fact an illusion. However, the filmmakers go nowhere with this revelation. Lynn remains platinum blonde for the duration of the movie and remains a prize to be won, as

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Comment: Don't forget that the three leads are all given character arcs that allow them to change into moral people.

she ultimately is by Bud White at the end of the film. This serves to further solidify her symbolism as a stand-in for the white ideal.

Lynn's function as the embodiment of ideal whiteness, or at least the closest possible approximation of it, the protagonists' lack of racial identity, and Hudgens' and Smith's white but still non-normal ethnicity show that in *L.A. Confidential*, whiteness is gradational. Characters cannot be categorized simply as "white" or "not white." As Dyer notes, "Latins, the Irish, and Jews are less securely white than Anglos, Teutons, or Nordics." (Dyer 12.) These varying degrees of whiteness further build up the white ideal in *L.A. Confidential*; the protagonists desire the whiter Lynn while opposing the comparatively "darker" Irish police captain, Dudley Smith. The film does offer one clever and subtle comment on this idea of varying degrees of whiteness: Smith clearly sheds his usual Irish accent when speaking publicly. This builds on the concept of the 1950s LAPD as defender of the white middle class—in its public image, the LAPD was strictly Anglo.

L.A. Confidential, like the classic noirs it is so heavily and self-consciously indebted to, takes place against a backdrop of whiteness. The film is critical of white hegemony on one level, showing the corruption of the white-dominated police force and featuring villains from the white upper class, but its representation of minorities, especially blacks, the unquestioned centrality of "neutral" white protagonists, and the idealized spectacle that is Lynn all serve to reinforce the dominance of white imagery in Hollywood movies.

Works Cited

Michael Green 4/8/09 6:56 PM

Comment: This is an excellent essay that asserts a strong clear argument throughout, includes a great deal of incisive analysis, and is backed up with great examples. Good job!
98/100

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