

SAMPLE PAPER

(THIS IS NOT NECESSARILY AN "A" PAPER. IT IS ONLY A SAMPLE)

A Critical Review of *American History X*

Although *American History X*'s narrative is racially progressive, its aesthetic portrayal of racial minorities and whiteness is quite traditional. In this essay I will analyze how *American History X*, through its use of color scheme, cinematography, and mise en scene, depicts the white male as normal, superior, and more powerful than racial minorities. In contrast, I will also analyze how these same aesthetic elements are used to depict racial minorities as marginalized, insignificant, and powerless against the superior white male.

In chapter two of *American History X*, entitled "That Night", the color scheme becomes black and white through the use of high-contrast black and white film. Although this aesthetic choice denotes a flashback within its narrative, it also emphasizes and exaggerates the phenotype differences between the white protagonist and African American antagonists. For instance, the protagonist's skin appears even whiter and more luminous because of the high-contrast black and white color scheme. On the contrary, the antagonists' black skin is weakened and less visible through this color scheme because of the surrounding darkness of the night. As a result, the lead protagonist's bright white skin dominates the screen and visually overpowers the less visible antagonists' black skin. Overall, the color scheme within this scene highlights whiteness while subduing

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As we discussed, an ambitious thesis for a short paper, even after removing the last bit, but still strong and well-articulated.

blackness. Other implicit representations of the superior white male are also implied within “That Night” through its use of camera work and mise en scene. For example, in the beginning of this scene when the lead white protagonist is shown in his bedroom making love to his girlfriend, props such as an American flag and a Crucifix are clearly placed within the frame. This use of mise en scene implies divinity, patriotism, and purity of whiteness. Also, when the white protagonist is shown outside confronting the African American antagonists he is primarily depicted through the use of low-angle cinematography. In one particular shot within this scene, he is not only shown in a low-angle, but shown in slow-motion as well. As a result, the white protagonist appears bigger and more powerful than the African American antagonists. In contrast, the African American antagonists are never shown within this scene though the use of low-angle camera shots. In fact, they are often shown through the use of high-angle shots. Consequently, they appear smaller and weaker than the white protagonist. In addition, these cinematography techniques are continuously repeated in order to normalize its racial stereotyping. As a result, *American History X* adds to what Ramirez Berg calls, “A ‘vicious cycle’ aspect to repeated stereotyping...” Overall, all these aesthetic elements combine to serve as an implicit representation of the racial minorities’ powerlessness against the superior white male.

In chapter twelve of *American History X*, entitled “The Vinyards”, many of the previous aesthetic elements of “That Night” are repeated and serve once again to empower whiteness and weaken racial minorities. For instance, the lead white protagonist is strategically ranked by placing him seated at the head of the diner table. In addition, he is lit brighter than all the other characters including the Jewish character. His whiteness is

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Great analysis, though you’ve stuffed too much into one paragraph. Keep your essay organized, so that you stay clear and don’t make too much work for your reader. Also you don’t convince me that the flag and crucifix are evidence of a racist agenda on the part of the film. They are there to establish Derek’s character.

even further implied by his clean-white-collared shirt and the bright-white-window curtain backdrop. In contrast, the Jewish character is dimly lit and sits far from the head of the table. He wears a black suit jacket and remains in the shadows. As a result, these mise en scene elements are used as signifiers to create signified mental images of the cleanliness, authority, and supremacy of whiteness. Quite the opposite, is true for the Jewish character that visually appears mysterious, powerless, and unimportant. Another mise en scene element within “The Vinyards” that empowers whiteness while marginalizing racial minorities is its setting. For example, when the Jewish character is kicked out of the Vinyards’ home and left outside, this creates a dynamic visual motif similar to the previous scene when the African American antagonists breaks into the protagonist’s car outside his home. In both instances whiteness is represented within the home and the “other” is represented outside the home. This use of settings is reminiscent to the visual motif representations within John Ford’s *The Searchers*. Whereby the inside represents civilization and the outside represents the wilderness. Hence, whiteness is shown as civilized and the “other” is shown as wild.

In chapter twenty-three of *American History X*, entitled “You Don’t Get Six Years for Stealing a TV”, the color scheme once again becomes black and white through the use black and white cinematography. However, this scene’s color scheme is made predominantly white through its use of props and setting. For example, the entire room is painted white and filled with white linens. This overall white color scheme is further created through the use of wide-angle cinematography. Consequently, the only black color within the scene is created by the skin of the white antagonist’s “black buddy”. This white color scheme visually alienates the African American from his clean white

surroundings and the white protagonist. This creates a visual metaphor representing whiteness as the in-group and blackness as the out-group. Such strong “white” visuals support Richard dryer’s statement, “As long as race is something only applied to non-white peoples, as long as white people are not racially seen and named, they/we function as a human norm.”

In conclusion, *American History X*, through its use of color scheme, cinematography, and mise en scene, empowers the white male while weakening racial minorities. Racial minorities are shown secondary and their depiction is often distorted by a “white” view. Overall, *American History X* visually depicts the white male as being superior to the weaker racial minority.

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Good use of a supporting source.

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Well done. You do a great job of using evidence to support your thesis. Your writing is strong and clear. Just make sure to stay organized and disciplined about paragraph length. 95/100