

9 'Race', racism and representation

In this chapter I shall examine the concept of 'race' and the historical development of racism in England. I shall then explore a particular regime of racial representation, Edward Said's analysis of Orientalism. I shall use Hollywood's account of America's war in Vietnam, and its potential impact on recruitment for the first Gulf War as an example of Orientalism in popular culture. The chapter will conclude with a section on 'whiteness' and a discussion of cultural studies and anti-racism.

'Race' and racism

The first thing to insist on in discussions of 'race' is that there is just one 'race', the human race.¹ Human biology does not divide people into different 'races'; it is racism (and sometimes its counter-arguments) that insists on this division. In other words, 'race' is a cultural and historical category, a way of making *difference* signify between people of a variety of skin tones. What is important is not difference as such, but how it is made to signify; how it is made meaningful in terms of a social and political hierarchy (see Chapters 4 and 6). This is not to deny that human beings come in different colours and with different physical features, but it is to insist that these differences do not issue meanings; they have to be made to mean. Moreover, there is no reason why skin colour is more significant than hair colour or the colour of a person's eyes. In other words, 'race' and racism are more about signification than about biology. As Paul Gilroy observes,

Accepting that skin 'colour', however meaningless we know it to be, has a strictly limited basis in biology, opens up the possibility of engaging with theories of signification which can highlight the elasticity and the emptiness of 'racial' signifiers as well as the ideological work which has to be done in order to turn them into signifiers in the first place. This perspective underscores the definition of 'race' as an open political category, for it is struggle that determines which definition of 'race' will prevail and the conditions under which they will endure or wither away (2002: 36).

This should not be mistaken for a form of idealism. Whether or not they are made to signify, physical differences between human beings exist. But how they are made to signify is always a result of politics and power, rather than a question of biology. As Gilroy points out, "Race" has to be socially and politically constructed and elaborate ideological work is done to secure and maintain the different forms of "racialization". Recognizing this makes it all the more important to compare and evaluate the different historical situations in which "race" has become politically pertinent' (35). Similarly, as Hazel Rose Markus and Paula M.L. Moya point out,

race is not something that people or groups *have* or *are*, but rather a set of actions that people do. More specifically, race is a dynamic system of historically derived and institutionalized ideas and practices. Certainly, the process involved in doing race takes different forms in various times and places. But doing race always involves creating groups based on perceived physical and behavioral characteristics, associating differential power and privilege with these characteristics, and then justifying the resulting inequalities (2010: x).

We do race individually and institutionally. We do it every time we reduce a person to an essential, unchanging characteristic that supposedly emanates from their biology. My wife is Chinese. There is a popular stereotype that Chinese people are inscrutable (impossible to understand or interpret). To think, because she is Chinese, that inscrutability is an essential biological part of her character is to 'do race'; that is, to explain an aspect of her character and behaviour as if it were a fixed biological manifestation of her Chinese-ness.

Working from this perspective, analysis of 'race' in popular culture would be the exploration of the different ways in which it has and can be made to signify – the different ways in which individuals and institutions 'do race'.

As Stuart Hall points out, there are three key moments in the history of 'race' and racism in the West (Hall, 1997b). These occur around slavery and the slave trade, colonialism and imperialism, and 1950s immigration following decolonization. In the next section I shall focus on how slavery and the slave trade produced the first detailed public discussions around 'race' and racism. It was in these discussions that the basic assumptions and vocabulary of 'race' and racism were first formulated. It is important to understand that 'race' and racism are not natural or inevitable phenomena; they have a history and are the result of human actions and interactions. But often they are made to appear as inevitable, something grounded in nature rather than what they really are, products of human culture. Again, as Paul Gilroy observes,

For those timid souls, it would appear that becoming resigned both to the absolute status of 'race' as a concept and to the intractability of racism as a permanent perversion akin to original sin, is easier than the creative labour involved in invisioning and producing a more just world, purged of racial hierarchy... Rather than accepting the power of racism as prior to politics and seeing it as an inescapable natural force that configures human consciousness and action in ways

and forms that merely political considerations simply can never match, this on-going work involves making 'race' and racism into social and political phenomena again (xx).

According to Gilroy, there needs to be a reduction in 'the exaggerated dimensions of racial difference to a liberating ordinary-ness'; he adds that "'race" is nothing special, a virtual reality given meaning only by the fact that racism endures' (xxii). In other words, without racism there would be little meaning to the concept of 'race'. It is racism that keeps the concept alive. What needs to be recognized is 'the banality of inter-mixture and the subversive ordinariness of this country's [the United Kingdom] convivial cultures in which "race" is stripped of meaning and racism just an after-effect of long gone imperial history' (xxxviii).

The ideology of racism: its historical emergence

While it is possible to argue that xenophobia, deriving from ignorance and fear, has perhaps existed as long as different ethnic groups have existed, 'race' and racism have a very particular history. Racism first develops in England as a defence of slavery and the slave trade. As Peter Fryer (1984) points out, 'Once the English slave trade, English sugar-producing plantation slavery, and English manufacturing industry had begun to operate as a trebly profitable interlocking system, the economic basis had been laid for all those ancient scraps of myth and prejudice to be woven into a more or less coherent racist ideology: a mythology of race' (134). In other words, racism first emerges as a defensive ideology, promulgated in order to defend the economic profits of slavery and the slave trade.

A key figure in the development of the ideology of racism is the planter and judge Edward Long. In his book *History of Jamaica* (1774) he popularized the idea that black people are inferior to white people, thus suggesting that slavery and the slave trade were perfectly acceptable institutions. His starting position is the assertion that there is an absolute racial division between black and white people:

I think there are extremely potent reasons for believing, that the White and the Negroe are two distinct species. . . . When we reflect on . . . their dissimilarity to the rest of mankind, must we not conclude, that they are a different species of the same genus? . . . Nor do [orang-utans] seem at all inferior in the intellectual faculties to many of the Negroe race; with some of whom, it is credible that they have the most intimate connection and consanguinity. The amorous intercourse between them may be frequent . . . and it is certain, that both races agree perfectly well in lasciviousness of disposition (quoted in Fryer, 1984, 158–9).

Charles White, writing in 1795, made similar claims, 'The white European . . . being most removed from brute creation, may, on that account, be considered as the most

beautiful of the human race. No one will doubt his superiority in intellectual powers; and I believe it will be found that his capacity is naturally superior also to that of every other man' (168).

Edward Long's own racism is clearly underpinned by sexual anxieties. In a pamphlet published in 1772, in which racism is mixed with his contempt for working-class women, he claims that

[t]he lower class of women in England, are remarkably fond of the blacks, for reasons too brutal to mention; they would connect themselves with horses and asses if the law permitted them. By these ladies they generally have a numerous brood. Thus, in the course of a few generations more, the English blood will become so contaminated with this mixture, and from the chances, the ups and downs of life, this alloy may spread extensively, as even to reach the middle, and then the higher orders of the people, till the whole nation resembles the Portuguese and Moriscos in complexion of skin and baseness of mind (157).

Similarly, in *Considerations on the Negroe Cause* (1772), Samuel Estwick argued that black people should be prevented from entering the country in order to 'preserve the race of Britons from stain and contamination' (156). Philip Thicknesse, writing in 1778, makes similar points:

in the course of a few centuries they will over-run this country with a race of men of the very worst sort under heaven. . . . London abounds with an incredible number of these black men . . . and [in] every country town, nay in almost every village are to be seen a little race of mulattoes, mischievous as monkeys and infinitely more dangerous. . . . A mixture of negro blood with the natives of this country is big with great and mighty mischief (162).

Linking this concern directly to the abolition of slavery, John Scattergood, writing in 1792, argued that if slavery is allowed to end, 'the Negroes from all parts of the world will flock hither, mix with the natives, spoil the breed of our common people, increase the number of crimes and criminals, and make Britain the sink of all the earth, for mongrels, vagrants, and vagabonds' (164).

A letter published in the *London Chronicle* in 1764, which finds a dark echo in contemporary debates on immigration (as does so much of this discourse), is concerned that too many black servants are coming into Britain:

As they fill the places of so many of our own people, we are by this means depriving so many of them of the means of getting their bread, and thereby decreasing our native population in favour of a race, whose mixture with us is disgraceful, and whose use cannot be so various and essential as those of white people . . . They never can be considered as a part of the people, and therefore their introduction into the community can only serve to elbow as many out of it who are genuine subjects, and in every point preferable. . . . It is . . . high time that some remedy be

applied for the cure of so great an evil, which may be done by totally prohibiting the importation of any more of them (155).

Given that slavery and the slave trade were of economic benefit to many people not directly involved with its practice, the new ideology of racism spread quickly among those without a direct economic interest in slavery and the slave trade. Scottish philosopher David Hume, for example, was quite clear about the difference between whites and non-whites. Writing in 1753, he observed,

I am apt to suspect the negroes, and in general all the other species of men (for there are four or five different kinds) to be naturally inferior to the whites. There never was a civilised nation of any other complexion than white . . . [Hume reveals here his ignorance of history]. Such a uniform and constant difference could not happen, in so many countries and ages, if nature had not made an original distinction betwixt these breeds of men. . . . In Jamaica indeed they talk of one negroe as a man of parts and learning; but 'tis likely he is admired for very slender accomplishments, like a parrot, who speaks a few words plainly (152).²

By the nineteenth century, it was widely taken for granted by many white Europeans that the human race was divided into superior whites and inferior others. With such natural gifts, it would seem only right that white Europeans should establish colonies across the globe. Moreover, as Fryer points out, 'racism was not confined to a handful of cranks. Virtually every scientist and intellectual in nineteenth-century Britain took it for granted that only people with white skin were capable of thinking and governing' (1984: 169). In fact, it was probably only after the Second World War that racism finally lost its scientific support.

In the nineteenth century racism could even make colonial conquest appear as if directed by God. According to Thomas Carlyle, writing in 1867, 'The Almighty Maker appointed him ["the Nigger"] to be a Servant' (quoted in Fryer, 1984: 172). Sir Harry Johnston (1899), who had worked as a colonial administrator in South Africa and Uganda, claimed that 'The negro in general is a born slave', with the natural capacity to 'toil hard under the hot sun and in unhealthy climates of the torrid zone' (173). Even if the hot sun or the unhealthy climate proved too much, the white Europeans should not overly concern themselves with possibilities of suffering and injustice. Dr Robert Knox, for example, described by Philip Curtin as 'one of the key figures in the general Western . . . pseudo-scientific racism' (1964: 377), was very reassuring on this point: 'What signify these dark races to us? . . . [T]he sooner they are put out of the way the better. . . . Destined by the nature of their race, to run, like all other animals, a certain limited course of existence, it matters little how their extinction is brought about' (quoted in Fryer, 1984: 175).

Knox is certainly extreme in his racism. A less extreme version, justifying imperialism on grounds of a supposed civilizing mission, was expressed by James Hunt. Founder of the Anthropological Society of London in 1863, Hunt argued that although 'the Negro is inferior intellectually to the European, [he or she] becomes more humanised when

in his natural subordination to the European than under any other circumstances' (177). In fact, as he makes clear, 'the Negro race can only be humanised and civilised by Europeans' (ibid.).³ Colonial secretary Joseph Chamberlain (1895) offers a wonderful summary of this argument: 'I believe that the British race is the greatest of governing races the world has ever seen. I say this not merely as an empty boast, but as proved and shown by the success which we have had in administering vast dominions . . . and I believe there are no limits accordingly to its future' (183).⁴

Orientalism

Edward Said (1985), in one of the founding texts of post-colonial theory, shows how a Western discourse on the Orient – 'Orientalism' – has constructed a 'knowledge' of the East and a body of 'power-knowledge' relations articulated in the interests of the 'power' of the West. According to Said, 'The Orient was a European invention' (1). 'Orientalism' is the term he uses to describe the relationship between Europe and the Orient, in particular, the way 'the Orient has helped to define Europe (or the West) as its contrasting image, idea, personality, experience' (1–2). He 'also tries to show that European culture gained in strength and identity by setting itself off against the Orient as a sort of surrogate and even underground self' (3).

Orientalism can be discussed and analysed as the corporate institution for dealing with the Orient – dealing with it by making statements about it, authorising views of it, describing it, by teaching it, settling it, ruling over it: in short, Orientalism as a Western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient (ibid.).

In other words, Orientalism, a 'system of ideological fiction' (321), is a matter of power. It is one of the mechanisms by which the West maintained its hegemony over the Orient. This is in part achieved by an insistence on an absolute difference between the West and the Orient, in which 'the West . . . is rational, developed, humane, superior, and the Orient . . . is aberrant, undeveloped, inferior' (300).

How does all this, in more general terms, relate to the study of popular culture? It is not too difficult to see how stories of empire in imperial fictions might be better understood using the approach developed by Said. There are basically two imperial plot structures. First, there are the stories that tell of white colonizers succumbing to the primeval power of the alien colonial environment and, as the racist myth puts it, 'going native'. Kurtz in both *Heart of Darkness* and *Apocalypse Now* is such a figure. Then there are stories of whites, who because of the supposed power of their racial heredity impose themselves on the alien colonial environment and its inhabitants. 'Tarzan' (novels, films and *myth*) is the classic representation of this imperial fiction. From the perspective of Orientalism both narratives tell us a great deal more about the desires

and anxieties of the culture of imperialism than they can ever tell us about the people and places of colonial conquest. What the approach does is to shift the focus of attention away from what and where the narratives are about to the 'function' that they may serve for the producers and consumers of such fictions. It prevents us from slipping into a form of naive realism: that is, away from a focus on what the stories tell us about the colonies or the colonized, to what such representations tell us about European and American imperialism. In effect, it shifts our concern from 'how' the story is told to 'why', and from those whom the story is about to those who tell and consume the story.

Hollywood's Vietnam, the way it tells the story of America's war in Vietnam, is in many ways a classic example of a particular form of Orientalism. Rather than the silence of defeat, there has been a veritable 'incitement' to talk about Vietnam. America's most unpopular war has become its most popular when measured in discursive and commercial terms. Although America no longer has 'authority over' Vietnam, it continues to hold authority over Western accounts of America's war in Vietnam. Hollywood as a 'corporate institution' deals with Vietnam 'by making statements about it, authorising views of it, describing it, by teaching it'. Hollywood has 'invented' Vietnam as a 'contrasting image' and a 'surrogate and . . . underground self' of America. In this way Hollywood – together with other discursive practices, such as songs, novels, TV serials, etc. – has succeeded in producing a very powerful discourse on Vietnam: telling America and the world that what happened there, happened because Vietnam is like that. These different discourses are not just *about* Vietnam; they may increasingly *constitute* for many Americans the *experience* of Vietnam. They may become in effect the war itself.

From the perspective of Orientalism it does not really matter whether Hollywood's representations are 'true' or 'false' (historically accurate or not); what matters is the 'regime of truth' (Michel Foucault; discussed in Chapter 6) they put into circulation. From this perspective, Hollywood's power is not a negative force, something that denies, represses, negates. On the contrary, it is productive. Foucault's general point about power is also true with regard to Hollywood's power:

We must cease once and for all to describe the effects of power in negative terms: it 'excludes', it 'represses', it 'censors', it 'abstracts', it 'masks', it 'conceals'. In fact, power produces; it produces reality; it produces domains of objects and rituals of truth (1979: 194).

Moreover, as he also points out, 'Each society has its own regime of truth, its "general politics" of truth – that is, the types of discourse it accepts and makes function as true' (2002a: 131). On the basis of this, I want now to briefly describe three narrative paradigms, models for understanding, or 'regimes of truth', which featured strongly in Hollywood's Vietnam in the 1980s.⁵

The first narrative paradigm, as I shall call it, is 'the war as betrayal'. This is first of all a discourse about bad leaders. In *Uncommon Valor*, *Missing in Action I*, *Missing in Action II: The Beginning*, *Braddock: Missing in Action III* and *Rambo: First Blood Part II*, for example, politicians are blamed for America's defeat in Vietnam. When John Rambo

(Sylvester Stallone) is asked to return to Vietnam in search of American soldiers missing in action, he asks, with great bitterness: 'Do we get to win this time?' In other words, will the politicians let them win?

Second, it is a discourse about weak military leadership in the field. In *Platoon* and *Casualties of War*, for example, defeat, it is suggested, is the result of an incompetent military command. Third, it is also a discourse about civilian betrayal. Both *Cutter's Way* and *First Blood* suggest that the war effort was betrayed back home in America. Again John Rambo's comments are symptomatic. When he is told by Colonel Trautman, 'It's over Johnny', he responds,

Nothing is over. You don't just turn it off. It wasn't my war. You asked me, and I did what I had to do to win, but somebody wouldn't let us win.

Interestingly, all the films in this category are structured around loss. In *Uncommon Valor*, *Missing in Action I, II and III*, *Rambo: First Blood Part II* and *POW: The Escape*, it is lost prisoners; in *Cutter's Way*, *First Blood* and *Born on the Fourth of July*, it is lost pride; in *Platoon* and *Casualties of War* it is lost innocence. It seems clear that the different versions of what is lost are symptomatic of a displacement of a greater loss: the displacement of that which can barely be named, America's defeat in Vietnam. The use of American POWs is undoubtedly the most ideologically charged of these displacement strategies. It seems to offer the possibility of three powerful political effects. First, to accept the myth that there are Americans still being held in Vietnam is to begin to retrospectively justify the original intervention. If the Vietnamese are so barbaric as to still hold prisoners decades after the conclusion of the conflict, then there is no need to feel guilty about the war, as they surely deserved the full force of American military intervention. Second, Susan Jeffords identifies a process she calls the 'feminization of loss' (1989: 145). That is, those blamed for America's defeat, whether they are unpatriotic protesters, an uncaring government, a weak and incompetent military command or corrupt politicians, are always represented as stereotypically feminine: 'the stereotyped characteristics associated with the feminine in dominant U.S. culture – weakness, indecisiveness, dependence, emotion, nonviolence, negotiation, unpredictability, deception' (145). Jeffords's argument is illustrated perfectly in the MIA (missing in action) cycle of films in which the 'feminine' negotiating stance of the politicians is played out against the 'masculine', no-nonsense approach of the returning veterans. The implication is that 'masculine' strength and single-mindedness would have won the war, while 'feminine' weakness and duplicity lost it. Third, perhaps most important of all is how these films turned what was thought to be lost into something that was only missing. Defeat is displaced by the 'victory' of finding and recovering American POWs. Puzzled by the unexpected success of *Uncommon Valor* in 1983, the *New York Times* sent a journalist to interview the film's 'audience'. One moviegoer was quite clear why the film was such a box-office success: 'We get to win the Vietnam War' (quoted in H. Bruce Franklin, 1993: 141).

The second narrative paradigm, again as I shall call it, is 'the inverted firepower syndrome'. This is a narrative device in which the United States's massive techno-military

advantage is inverted. Instead of scenes of the massive destructive power of American military force, we are shown countless narratives of individual Americans fighting the numberless (and often invisible) forces of the North Vietnamese Army and/or the sinister and shadowy men and women of the National Liberation Front ('Viet Cong'). *Missing In Action I, II and III*, *Rambo: First Blood Part II* and *Platoon* all contain scenes of lone Americans struggling against overwhelming odds. John Rambo, armed only with a bow and arrow, is perhaps the most ridiculous example. *Platoon*, however, takes this narrative strategy on to another plane altogether. In a key scene, 'good' Sergeant Elias is pursued by a countless number of North Vietnamese soldiers. He is shot continually until he falls to his knees, spreading his arms out in a Christ-like gesture of agony and betrayal. The camera pans slowly to emphasize the pathos of his death throes. In Britain the film was promoted with a poster showing Elias in the full pain of his 'crucifixion'. Above the image is written the legend: 'The First Casualty of War is Innocence'. Loss of innocence is presented both as a realization of the realities of modern warfare and as a result of America playing fair against a brutal and ruthless enemy. The ideological implication is clear: if America lost by playing the good guy, it is 'obvious' that it will be necessary in all future conflicts to play the tough guy in order to win.

The third narrative paradigm I have called 'the Americanization of the war'. What I want to indicate by this term is the way in which the fundamental *meaning* of the Vietnam War has become in Hollywood's Vietnam (and elsewhere in US cultural production) an absolutely American phenomenon. This is an example of what we might call 'imperial narcissism', in which the United States is centred and Vietnam and the Vietnamese exist only to provide a context for an American tragedy, whose ultimate brutality is the loss of American innocence. And like any good tragedy, it was doomed from the beginning to follow the dictates of fate. It was something that just happened. Hollywood's Vietnam exhibits what Linda Dittmar and Gene Michaud call a 'mystique of unintelligibility' (1990: 13). Perhaps the most compelling example of the mystique of unintelligibility is the opening sequence in the American video version of *Platoon*. It begins with a few words of endorsement from the then chairman of the Chrysler Corporation. We see him moving through a clearing in a wood towards a jeep. He stops at the jeep, and resting against it, addresses the camera,

This jeep is a museum piece, a relic of war. Normandy, Anzio, Guadalcanal, Korea, Vietnam. I hope we will never have to build another jeep for war. This film *Platoon* is a memorial not to war but to all the men and women who fought in a time and in a place *nobody really understood*, who knew only one thing: they were called and they went. It was the same from the first musket fired at Concord to the rice paddies of the Mekong Delta: they were called and they went. That in the truest sense is the spirit of America. The more we understand it, the more we honor those who kept it alive [my italics] (quoted in Harry W. Haines, 1990: 81).

This is a discourse in which there is nothing to explain but American survival. Getting 'Back to the World' is everything it is about. It is an American tragedy and America and Americans are its *only* victims. The myth is expressed with numbing

precision in Chris Taylor's (Charlie Sheen) narration at the end of *Platoon*. Taylor looks back from the deck of a rising helicopter on the dead and dying of the battlefield below. Samuel Barber's mournful and very beautiful *Adagio for Strings* seems to dictate the cadence and rhythm of his voice as he speaks these words of psychobabble, about a war in which more than two million Vietnamese were killed, 'I think now looking back, we did not fight the enemy, we fought ourselves. The enemy was in us.' *Time Magazine's* (26 January 1987) review of the film echoes and elaborates this theme:

Welcome back to the war that, just 20 years ago, turned America schizophrenic. Suddenly we were a nation split between left and right, black and white, hip and square, mothers and fathers, parents and children. For a nation whose war history had read like a John Wayne war movie – where good guys finished first by being tough and playing fair – the polarisation was soul-souring. Americans were fighting themselves, and both sides lost.

Platoon's function in this scenario is to heal the schizophrenia of the American body politic. The film's rewriting of the war not only excludes the Vietnamese, it also rewrites the anti-war movement. Pro-war and anti-war politics are re-enacted as different positions in a debate on how best to fight and win the war. One group (led by the 'good' Sergeant Elias, who listens to Jefferson Airplane's 'White Rabbit' and smokes marijuana) wants to fight the war with honour and dignity, while the other (led by the 'bad' Sergeant Barnes, who listens to Merle Haggard's 'Okie from Muskogee' and drinks beer) wants to fight the war in any way that will win it. We are asked to believe that this was the essential conflict that tore America apart – the anti-war movement, dissolved into a conflict on how best to fight and win the war. As Michael Klein contends, 'the war is decontextualized, mystified as a tragic mistake, an existential adventure, or a rite of passage through which the White American Hero discovers his identity' (1990: 10).

Although I have outlined three of the dominant narrative paradigms in Hollywood's Vietnam, I do not want to suggest that these were or are unproblematically consumed by its American audiences (or any other audience). My claim is only that Hollywood produced a particular regime of truth. But film (like any other cultural text or practice) has to be *made* to mean (see Chapter 12). To really discover the extent to which Hollywood's Vietnam has made its 'truth' tell requires a consideration of consumption. This will take us beyond a focus on the *meaning* of a text, to a focus on the meanings that can be made in the encounter between the discourses of the text and the discourses of the 'consumer', as it is never a matter of verifying (with an 'audience') the *real meaning* of, say, *Platoon*. The focus on consumption (understood as 'production in use') is to explore the political effectivity (or otherwise) of, say, *Platoon*. If a cultural text is to become effective (politically or otherwise), it must be made to connect with people's lives – become part of their 'lived culture'. Formal analysis of Hollywood's Vietnam may point to how the industry has articulated the war as an American tragedy of bravery and betrayal, but this does not tell us that it has been consumed as a war of bravery and betrayal.

In the absence of ethnographic work on the audience for Hollywood's Vietnam, I want to point to two pieces of evidence that may provide us with clues to the circulation and effectivity of Hollywood's articulation of the war. The first consists of speeches made by President George Bush in the build-up to the first Gulf War, and the second are comments made by American Vietnam veterans about Hollywood and other representations of the war. But, to be absolutely clear, these factors, however compelling they may be in themselves, do not provide conclusive proof that Hollywood's account of the war has become hegemonic where it matters – in the lived practices of everyday life.

In the weeks leading up to the first Gulf War, *Newsweek* (10 December 1990) featured a cover showing a photograph of a serious-looking George Bush senior. Above the photograph was the banner headline, 'This will not be another Vietnam'. The headline was taken from a speech made by Bush in which he said, 'In our country, I know that there are fears of another Vietnam. Let me assure you . . . this will not be another Vietnam.' In another speech, Bush again assured his American audience that, 'This will not be another Vietnam'. But this time he explained why: 'Our troops will have the best possible support in the entire world. They will not be asked to fight with one hand tied behind their backs' (quoted in the *Daily Telegraph*, January 1991).

In these speeches, Bush was seeking to put to rest a spectre that had come to haunt America's political and military self-image, what former President Richard Nixon had called the 'Vietnam Syndrome' (1986). The debate over American foreign policy had, according to Nixon, been 'grotesquely distorted' by reluctance 'to use power to defend national interests' (13). Fear of another Vietnam had made America 'ashamed of . . . [its] power, guilty about being strong' (19).

In the two Bush speeches from which I have quoted, and in many other similar speeches, Bush was articulating what many powerful American voices throughout the 1980s had sought to make the dominant meaning of the war: 'the Vietnam War as a noble cause betrayed – an American tragedy'. For example, in the 1980 presidential campaign Ronald Reagan declared, in an attempt to put an end to the Vietnam Syndrome, 'It is time we recognized that ours was, in truth, a noble cause' (quoted in John Carlos Rowe and Rick Berg, 1991: 10). Moreover, Reagan insisted, 'Let us tell those who fought in that war that we will never again ask young men to fight and possibly die in a war our government is afraid to let us win' (quoted in Stephen Vlastos, 1991: 69). In 1982 (almost a decade after the last US combat troops left Vietnam), the Vietnam Veterans' memorial was unveiled in Washington. Reagan observed that Americans were 'beginning to appreciate that [America's war in Vietnam] was a just cause' (quoted in Barbie Zelizer, 1995: 220). In 1984 (eleven years after the last US combat troops left Vietnam) the Unknown Vietnam Soldier was buried; at the ceremony President Reagan claimed, 'An American hero has returned home. . . . He accepted his mission and did his duty. And his honest patriotism overwhelms us' (quoted in Rowe and Berg, 1991: 10). In 1985 (twelve years after the last US combat troops left Vietnam), New York staged the first of the 'Welcome Home' parades for Vietnam veterans. In this powerful mix of political rhetoric and national remembering, there is a clear attempt to put in place a new 'consensus' about the meaning of America's war in Vietnam. It begins in 1980 in Reagan's successful presidential

campaign, and ends in 1991 with the triumphalism of Bush after victory in the first Gulf War. Such speeches (and the reporting of such speeches) may have helped to shape understandings of the war. But the affective power of this way of understanding the war was undoubtedly given an enormous boost by Hollywood's Vietnam. Therefore, when, in the build-up to the Gulf War, Bush had asked Americans to remember the Vietnam War, the memories recalled by many Americans may have been of a war they had lived cinematically; a war of bravery and betrayal. Hollywood's Vietnam had provided the materials to rehearse, elaborate, interpret and retell an increasingly dominant memory of America's war in Vietnam.

This was a memory that had little relationship to the 'facts' of the war. Put simply, the United States deployed in Vietnam the most intensive firepower the world had ever witnessed. Hollywood narratives do not feature the deliberate defoliation of large areas of Vietnam, the napalm strikes, the search-and-destroy missions, the use of Free Fire Zones, the mass bombing. For example, during the 'Christmas bombing' campaign of 1972, the United States 'dropped more tonnage of bombs on Hanoi and Haiphong than Germany dropped on Great Britain from 1940 to 1945' (Franklin, 1993: 79). In total, the United States dropped three times the number of bombs on Vietnam as had been dropped anywhere during the whole of the Second World War (Pilger, 1990). In a memorandum to President Johnson in 1967, Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara wrote: '[The] picture of the world's greatest superpower killing or seriously injuring 1,000 noncombatants a week [his estimate of the human cost of the US bombing campaign], while trying to pound a tiny backward nation into submission on an issue whose merits are hotly disputed, is not pretty' (quoted in Martin, 1993: 19–20). This makes profoundly unconvincing Bush's claim (based on Hollywood rather than history) that the United States fought the war with one hand tied behind its back.

A second example of the consumption of Hollywood's Vietnam is provided by the comments of American Vietnam veterans. As Marita Sturken observes, 'Some Vietnam veterans say they have forgotten where some of their memories came from – their own experiences, documentary photographs, or Hollywood movies?' (1997: 20). For example, Vietnam veteran William Adams makes this telling point:

When *Platoon* was first released, a number of people asked me, 'Was the war really like that?' I never found an answer, in part because, no matter how graphic and realistic, a movie is after all a movie, and war is only like itself. But I also failed to find an answer because what 'really' happened is now so thoroughly mixed up in my mind with what has been said about what happened that the pure experience is no longer there. This is odd, even painful, in some ways. But it is also testimony to the way our memories work. The Vietnam War is no longer a definite event so much as it is a collective and mobile script in which we continue to scrawl, erase, rewrite our conflicting and changing view of ourselves (quoted in Sturken, 1997: 86).

Similarly, academic and Vietnam veteran Michael Clark writes of how the ticker-tape welcome home parade for Vietnam veterans staged in New York in 1985, together with

the media coverage of the parade and the Hollywood films that seemed to provide the context for the parade, had worked together to produce a particular memory of the war – a memory with potentially deadly effects:

they had constituted our memory of the war all along . . . [They] healed over the wounds that had refused to close for ten years with a balm of nostalgia, and transformed guilt and doubt into duty and pride. And with a triumphant flourish [they] offered us the spectacle of [their] most successful creation, the veterans who will fight the next war (Clark, 1991: 180).

Moreover, as Clark is at pains to stress, 'the memory of Vietnam has ceased to be a point of resistance to imperialist ambitions and is now invoked as a vivid warning to do it right next time' (206). These concerns were fully justified by Bush's triumphalism at the end of the first Gulf War, when he boasted, as if the war had been fought for no other reason than to overcome a traumatic memory, 'By God, we've kicked the Vietnam Syndrome once and for all' (quoted in Franklin, 1993: 177). Echoing these comments, the *New York Times* (2 December 1993) featured an article with the title 'Is the Vietnam Syndrome Dead? Happily, It's Buried in the Gulf.' Vietnam, the sign of American loss and division, had been buried in the sands of the Persian Gulf. Kicking the Vietnam Syndrome (with the help of Hollywood's Vietnam) had supposedly liberated a nation from old ghosts and doubts; had made America once again strong, whole and ready for the next war.

Whiteness

In terms of the population of the world white people do not make up a significant number. Yet in terms of power and privilege they are the dominant colour. Of course this does not mean that all white people have power and privilege (whiteness is always articulated with, for example, social class, gender and sexuality).⁶

Part of the power of whiteness is that it seems to exist outside categories of 'race' and ethnicity. These categories appear to apply only to non-white people; whiteness seems to exist as a human norm from which races and ethnicities are a deviation. This is indeed a privileged position. As Richard Dyer (1997) makes clear,

There is no more powerful position than that of being 'just human'. The claim to power is the claim to speak for the communality of humanity. Raced people can't do that – they can only speak for their race. But non-raced people can, for they do not represent the interests of a race. The point of seeing the racing of whites is to dislodge them/us from the position of power, with all the inequities, oppression, privileges and sufferings in its train, dislodging them/us by understanding the authority with which they/we speak in and on the world (2).

To understand the normative power of whiteness we have to forget about its biology and think about it as a cultural construct; that is, something that is presented as 'natural', 'normal' and 'universal'. What makes whiteness so powerful, therefore, is that it is more than the dominant colouring; it operates as an unmarked human norm, and it is against this norm that other ethnicities are invited to measure themselves. Put simply, white people are rarely thought of as white people; they are simply human without ethnicity. We see this every time, for example, we read about a white writer; he will be described as a writer; but if he is black he will often be described as a *black* writer. Blackness is a sign of ethnicity, whereas whiteness is supposedly just a sign of the human. Also, when a black person speaks she will be expected to speak on behalf of other black people, whereas a white person speaks as an individual or for humanity as a whole. When black people are discussed they are discussed as black people, whereas when white people are discussed they are discussed as people. In this way the ethnic invisibility of whiteness positions it as the normative human. Again, to quote Dyer, 'At the level of racial representation . . . whites are not of a certain race, they're just the human race' (3).

Many white people think of themselves as neutral and normal in terms of ethnicity and 'race'. They refer to other people's ethnic origins, while their own remains invisible and unmarked. When a white English person sees the terms 'ethnic fashion' or 'ethnic food', they would be amazed if this were a reference to white English food or fashion. By not being 'raced', they become the human race. To put an end to this privilege and power we have to see whiteness as the sign of just another ethnicity. Noticing difference is not the problem; it is how we make difference signify that may or may not be a problem.

Any discussion of 'race' and ethnicity, therefore, that does not include a discussion of whiteness will always, perhaps unknowingly and without intention, contribute to the power and privilege of whiteness. This is because its power and privilege is underpinned by its very unmarkness, its apparent universality as simply human and normal. To put it simply, white seems 'natural' and 'normal'. This will always be the case until whiteness is widely recognized as just the sign of another ethnicity.

Anti-racism and cultural studies

As was noted with both feminist and Marxist approaches to popular culture, discussions of 'race' and representation inevitably, and quite rightly, involve an ethical imperative to condemn the deeply inhuman discourses of racism. With this in mind, I want to end this section with two quotations, followed by a brief discussion and another quotation. The first quotation is from Stuart Hall and the second from Paul Gilroy.

[T]he work that cultural studies has to do is to mobilise everything that it can find in terms of intellectual resources in order to understand what keeps making the

lives we live, and the societies we live in, profoundly and deeply antihumane in their capacity to live with difference. Cultural studies' message is a message for academics and intellectuals but, fortunately, for many other people as well. . . . I am convinced that no intellectual worth his or her salt, and no university that wants to hold up its head in the face of the twenty-first century, can afford to turn dispassionate eyes away from the problems of race and ethnicity that beset our world (Hall, 1996e: 343).

We need to know what sorts of insight and reflection might actually help increasingly differentiated societies and anxious individuals to cope successfully with the challenges involved in dwelling comfortably in proximity to the unfamiliar without becoming fearful and hostile. We need to consider whether the scale upon which sameness and difference are calculated might be altered productively so that the strangeness of strangers goes out of focus and other dimensions of basic sameness can be acknowledged and made significant. We also need to consider how a deliberate engagement with the twentieth century's history of suffering might furnish resources for the peaceful accommodation of otherness in relation to fundamental commonality. . . . [That is,] namely that human beings are ordinarily far more alike than they are unlike, that most of the time we can communicate with each other, and that the recognition of mutual worth, dignity, and essential similarity imposes restrictions on how we can behave if we wish to act justly (Gilroy, 2004: 3–4).

The work of cultural studies, like that of all reasonable intellectual traditions, is to intellectually, and by example, help to defeat racism, and by so doing, help to bring into being a world in which the term 'race' is little more than a long disused historical category, signifying in the contemporary nothing more than the human race. However, as Gilroy observed in 1987, and, unfortunately, as is still the case more than thirty years later, until that moment arrives,

'Race' must be retained as an analytic category not because it corresponds to any biological or epistemological absolutes, but because it refers investigation to the power that collective identities acquire by means of their roots in tradition. These identities, in the forms of white racism and black resistance, are the most volatile political forces in Britain today (2002: 339).

Notes

1. Early forms of humans ('hominins') first appeared in what is now Africa about 2.5 million years ago. Around 100,000 years ago a small group of *Homo sapiens* (our direct ancestors) migrated out of Africa. This group gradually populated all

parts of the earth. For a period of time early humans co-existed outside Africa with at least two other humanoid species, both of which became extinct, Neanderthals and Denisovans. Some present-day humans carry genes that prove our ancestors had children with these other species. However, people in the world today are descended from either this small group of migrants or from their fellow *Homo sapiens* who remained in Africa. Although, therefore, there is just one race, the human race, it is possible to group people into overlapping populations of biogeographical clusters that are called 'ancestry groups' (marked by differences derived from tens of thousands of years experiencing the same diet and climate).

2. Hume is referring to Francis Williams, who graduated from Cambridge University with a degree in mathematics.
3. 'Race' and racism are not just manifested in representations and social actions and interactions; they also inhabit the inner landscapes of our psyches. For a discussion of this see Franz Fanon's *Black Skin, White Masks* (1986).
4. Chamberlain's speech finds a strange echo in a speech made by Tony Blair on confirming his resignation as prime minister, 'This country is a blessed nation. The British are special, the world knows it, in our innermost thoughts, we know it. This is the greatest nation on earth' (quoted in Storey, 2010b: 22).
5. For a fuller version of this argument, see Storey (2002b and 2010a).
6. Whiteness is divided not just by social class and gender (and other markers of social difference); it is also divided by distinctions within whiteness itself – who to include as white produces different answers at different moments in history.

Further reading

Storey, John (ed.), *Cultural Theory and Popular Culture: A Reader*, 4th edn, Harlow: Pearson Education, 2009. This is the companion volume to the previous edition of this book. A fully updated 5th edition containing further readings is due for publication in 2018. An interactive website is also available (www.routledge.com/cw/storey), which contains helpful student resources and a glossary of terms for each chapter.

Baker, Houston A. Jr, Manthia Diawara and Ruth H. Lindeborg (eds), *Black British Cultural Studies: A Reader*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996. A very interesting collection of essays.

Dent, Gina (ed.), *Black Popular Culture*, Seattle: Bay Press, 1992. A very useful collection of essays.

Dittmar, Linda and Gene Michaud (eds), *From Hanoi To Hollywood: The Vietnam War in American Film*, New Brunswick and London: Rutgers University Press, 1990. The best collection of work on Hollywood's Vietnam.

Dyer, Richard (1997), *White: Essays on Race and Culture*, London: Routledge. The classic account of whiteness and culture.

- Fryer, Peter, *Staying Power: The History of Black People in Britain*, London: Pluto, 1984. A brilliant book.
- Gandhi, Leela, *Postcolonial Theory: A Critical Introduction*, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1998. A good introduction to post-colonial theory.
- Gilroy, Paul, *There Ain't No Black in the Union Jack*, London: Routledge, 1987/2002. One of the classic cultural studies encounters with 'race'.
- Gilroy, Paul, *The Black Atlantic*, London: Verso, 1993. A brilliant argument against 'cultural absolutism'.
- Markus, Hazel Rose and Paula M.L. Moya, *Doing Race: 21 Essays for the 21st Century*, New York: Norton, 2010. An excellent collection of essays on 'doing race'.
- Pitcher, Ben, *Consuming Race*, London: Routledge, 2014. A very interesting account of the role of 'race' in everyday life.
- Williams, Patrick and Laura Chrisman (eds), *Colonial Discourse and Post-Colonial Theory: A Reader*, Harlow: Prentice Hall, 1993. An interesting collection of essays on post-colonial theory.