

Hollywood's Terror Industry: Idealized Beauty and *The Bluest Eye*

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Film exists not only as a popular form of entertainment but as a social institution. The assembly-line mass production of film in 1940s Hollywood, now termed classical cinema, fashioned, via the enormous output and consumption of newsreels, animated cartoons, serials, shorts, and feature films, a medium of socialization so innocuous and pervasive that its effect remains the focus of contemporary film study and analyses. The introduction to Robert Kolker's *A Cinema of Loneliness* touches on the relationship between film and viewer as "[filmmakers] created the images in which a culture consented to see itself and, as audiences responded favorably, the continuation of genres, plots, players, themes, and world views promoted by the studios were perpetuated in film after film" (3). Kolker's later assertion that "films constitute a factory of ideological production" (257) is tempered, somewhat, by Dudley Andrew's observation that "Ideology does not descend on the populace from some demonic mountain top of politics. It is a virtually impersonal system which produces reality for every subject of a culture" (113). The "world views" being "promoted by the studios" were not the desires of Hollywood executives or the forced indoctrination of the many by the few, but rather a glossy, idealized representation of the institutionalized racism and segregated reality of 1940s America. Hollywood simply held a black-and-white, 35mm mirror to the face of a nation already subject to white cultural hegemony, projecting and perpetuating a country's ideals back to its audience at twenty four frames per second.

The social implications of film as an artistic medium and agent of cultural normatization has not escaped critical examination, even beyond the sphere of film theory, as the continued consideration of literary texts necessarily includes film analysis as film continues to pervade and influence authors and their works. Toni Morrison's novel *The Bluest Eye* presents the tragically realistic lives of disenfranchised blacks in the early 1940s, whose social mobility is stifled by the hegemony of white culture in America while tacitly serving as participants in the perpetuation of

these cultural ideals. Morrison's novel is, in part, an examination of the construction and dominance of a cultural ideal of beauty, and her characters' pursuit of this impossible model, what Samy Azouz describes as "a disturbing paradigm of whiteness/beauty." More specifically, *The Bluest Eye* describes the internalization of the white ideal of beauty by the black characters and their effort to come to terms with their inevitable inability to approach such an impossible standard.

This concept is repeatedly illustrated through references and allusions to film whereby the continuation of the ideal of beauty, or the Hollywood ideal, is constructed and reified through the bodies of the actresses present onscreen. When Jacqueline Stewart describes "the seeming failure of dominant cinema to provide black viewers with images reflecting their lives and aspirations," she is addressing the hegemony of white culture through film, and by extension the Hollywood ideal (651). Shirley Temple, Claudette Colbert, and Greta Garbo – each an internationally recognized and widely popular Hollywood actress of the 1930s and 1940s – are all noted examples in *The Bluest Eye* of this ideal whose influence delineates Claudia, Pauline, and Pecola's conceptions of beauty, ultimately serving as a catalyst for Pecola's obsession with the titular blue eyes and for her subsequent insanity. The iconography of 1940s America, reduced to Hollywood's whitewashed cultural portrait of Temple as the cherubic and innocent child, Colbert as the humorous ingénue, and Garbo as the dignified maiden, serves, as Debra Werrlein argues, to "promote superficial and ahistorical conceptions of the United States," to where, by the time Morrison was writing *The Bluest Eye*, nostalgia for the past had already formed a culture desirous of the supposed innocence of a lost childhood (54). The Hollywood ideal, then, is at once the manifestation of a culture's aggregated notions of beauty and a microcosm for white hegemony, as blacks could only aspire to a dominant white model in the absence of established black cultural figures, informing the disenfranchised black characters' struggles to realize any form of cultural visibility through white terms. This monolithic structure – idealized beauty perpetuated through film – is, then, inherently terrifying in its ubiquity and power to establish as normative an impossible standard, leading, in the extreme, to madness for those who pursue it.

The central theme of *The Bluest Eye*, around which Claudia, Pauline, and Pecola orbit, is the Hollywood ideal as the quintessential criterion for beauty, and how psychologically destructive the belief in and aspiration toward that ideal can be. Morrison, in a description of the origin and objective of her first novel, explains that “The assertion of racial beauty was not a reaction to the self-mocking, humorous critique of cultural/racial foibles common to all groups, but against the damaging internalization of assumptions of immutable inferiority originating in an outside gaze” (xi). What Morrison is describing is the “racial self-loathing” formed by subjects who are rendered necessarily outside the sphere of social agency by a set of cultural standards limited to a single, other race (xi). The establishment of a hierarchy of beauty with a prerequisite racial qualifier forces the black characters in *The Bluest Eye* to aspire to what is an impossible ideal, reified through the medium of film in the physical bodies of the actresses onscreen. This notion, of film as a progenitor of cultural hegemony, is the same force that Azouz articulates in describing film as “a gigantic instrument for the dissemination of ideology,” as well as what Andrew describes, stating:

In our culture the mass media are primary technologies of ideology, with the cinema standing in the forefront of these because of its remarkable illusionistic guise and because of the prestige and honor accorded it by the populace. Its technology has stressed the attainment of an ever-sharper realism through which to present the objects and stories which carry the messages of the day. (113)

Here Andrew exposes the cinema for the institutionalizing juggernaut that it is, revealing to both the reader and viewer the malignantly influential power of this popular social institution. The MacTeer girls, Pauline, and Pecola, alienated by the Hollywood ideal, are able to discuss what is beautiful but not to act what is beautiful, marginalized by race and gender to a cultural existence on the outside looking in.

Inevitably what concerns Morrison is not simply the theoretical institution of cultural ideals of beauty and the self-hatred generated in the subjects unable to approximate those standards, but also its manifestation in the characters of her novel, the fictional avatars for a real-world social issue. An early example of the girls’ relationship with the Hollywood ideal occurs in

a discussion of Shirley Temple during the tea party at the MacTeers' house. As Frieda and Pecola share in their adoration of Temple, Claudia explains to the reader, "I hated Shirley. Not because she was cute, but because she danced with Bojangles, who was *my* friend, *my* uncle, *my* daddy...So I said, 'I like Jane Withers'" (19). Even this minor textual example provides insight into not only white cultural hegemony in America but also the conflict it engenders in the psyche of marginalized subjects who "understand that power resides in the childish sex appeal of blonde hair and blue eyes" (Werrlein 65). Morrison is presenting several cultural icons who serve to describe the establishment of white cultural dominance and its resultant effect on society. Shirley Temple, who remains a household name, was the original child-star and the blond-haired, blue-eyed youth model of the Hollywood ideal, while the now-forgotten brunette Jane Withers acted as Temple's antagonist in the aptly named movie *Bright Eyes* (1934). Bill "Bojangles" Robinson is remembered foremost as Temple's ebullient black side-kick, acting in support of and service to narratives "that cooperatively perpetuate racial hierarchies" (Werrlein 64). This historical contextualization helps elucidate Claudia's reaction of contempt towards Temple. Claudia, in the italic emphasis of "my," is forming a racial identification with Bojangles – the only actor who could belong to *her* – but, importantly, has to transfer this identification to Withers, who, as antagonist to Temple, in both appearance and attitude, is Claudia's closest physical incarnation with enough power to be worth appropriating.

Claudia's encouraging early stance in opposition to the Hollywood ideal is, of course, short lived, as she psychically manipulates the initial anger felt in response to her unnamed rejection of Temple's representation of an unachievable ideal into complacent acceptance. As Claudia describes the satisfaction felt in destroying her white Shirleyesque dolls she gradually becomes aware of the rising feelings of guilt inspired through their destruction. Claudia's desire to discover the essential quality that motivates the societal lionization of the Hollywood ideal, personified here by Temple, eventually results in the learned reflex of admiration, similar to Frieda and Pecola, as she explains:

When I learned how repulsive this disinterested violence was, that it was repulsive because it was disinterested, my shame floundered about for refuge. The best hiding place was love. Thus the conversion from pristine sadism to fabricated hatred, to

fraudulent love. It was a small step to Shirley Temple. I learned much later to worship her, just as I learned to delight in cleanliness, knowing, even as I learned, that the change was *adjustment without improvement*. (Morrison 23, emphasis added)

Claudia's repression of her hatred toward the Hollywood ideal, and eventual assimilation in support of it, portrays the love/hate dynamic prompted by its internalization and the culturally-invisible subject's aspiration to something they unconsciously reject. Whether Claudia accepts or denies the Hollywood ideal, loves it or hates it, she will always remain outside of it, rendering her transformation an "adjustment without improvement."

Claudia's internal struggle to accept the Hollywood ideal, and her place outside of it, is not limited to the abstractions of actresses onscreen, as she is forced to confront her repressed hatred in the character of Maureen Peal. Maureen is described as "A high-yellow dream child with long brown hair," who "enchanted the entire school," and quickly becomes a target of Claudia and Frieda's resentment (Morrison 62). Claudia, in an illustration of the love/hate dynamic that the internalization of the Hollywood ideal constructs, openly derides Maureen with her sister while secretly confessing a desire to befriend her; "we were both secretly prepared to be her friend, if she would let us" (Morrison 63). Claudia and Frieda's condescension is mixed with admiration and a desire to make contact and associate with a tangible example of beauty. The extensive scene in which Maureen defends Pecola at school, which leads to the confrontation between Maureen and Claudia, acts as a metaphor for Claudia's concomitant confrontation with the Hollywood ideal. As their confrontation escalates Claudia reveals the underlying source of her frustration when she shouts, "'You think you so cute!'" to which Maureen responds, "'I *am* cute! And you ugly! Black and ugly black e mos. I *am* cute!'" (Morrison 73). Maureen, in her reply, correlates blackness with ugliness, upholding the Hollywood ideal, and uncovers a basis of shame in Claudia, and ultimately Frieda and Pecola, by articulating the girls' inherent deficiencies in the face of white hegemony. Here "Morrison attributes Maureen's power not just to lightness, but to its beauty," a dynamic of power, articulated in the novel, that is specifically germane to these characters who are, in this scene, performing "the particular predicament of black *girls* in a white nation" (Werrlein 63). This notion is summed up afterwards by Claudia stating, "We were sinking under the wisdom,

accuracy, and relevance of Maureen's last words. If she was cute—and if anything could be believed, she *was*—then we were not. And what did that mean? We were lesser. Nicer, brighter, but still lesser” (Morrison 74). On the hierarchy of relative beauty Claudia is acknowledging, at least to herself, that she, Frieda, and Pecola are below Maureen, but that “Maureen Peal was not the Enemy and not worthy of such intense hatred. The *Thing* to fear was the *Thing* that made *her* beautiful, and not us” (Morrison 74). The “*Thing*” that Claudia is attempting to communicate and describe is not the Hollywood ideal, the hierarchy of beauty, or white hegemony alone but the terrifying relationship those three abstractions share that places whiteness over blackness and Maureen over Claudia, Frieda, Pecola, and by extension Pauline. The enemy is not Maureen, who is subject to the same cultural standards as the other girls, but rather the valuation of human worth based on superficialities embedded within ideals of beauty and not in intrinsic human qualities.

Such superficialities, the physical qualities that delineate social value, are continually reified throughout *The Bluest Eye* through examples in film. The continually referenced exemplars of beauty within the novel all share in common their status as (white) Hollywood actresses, personifying the aspects of a culture's ideal of beauty, as “Filmic images depict the splendour and sumptuousness of everything that denotes whiteness and connotes prestige and supremacy” (Azouz). This, however, seemingly expresses a logical tautology whereby what it is to be an actress is to be beautiful and what it is to be beautiful is to be an actress. This suggestion prevents any possible exemplification of female beauty to exist beyond the cinema's leading ladies, a notion that pervades the thinking of the characters in *The Bluest Eye* who share a reality with, and are forced to mediate, the productions of Hollywood's golden age. It is imperative to note that this conception, the Hollywood ideal itself, is, like the films and the characters these actresses portray in them, a construction. That is to say that the ideal of beauty that Claudia, Pauline, and especially Pecola are all striving to achieve, formed through the physical characteristics of actresses onscreen, is itself not based in reality. This is presented to the reader by another adept filmic allusion in the form of Pecola's namesake, as Maureen asks ““Pecola? Wasn't that the name of the girl in *Imitation of Life*?”” (Morrison 67). John M. Stahl's *Imitation of Life* (1934) – a film not coincidentally starring Claudette Colbert – depicts, as Maureen goes on to describe, a daughter's rejection of her mother as she attempts to pass as white, an ironic

juxtaposition to Pecola's narrative in which she is defined as being anything but able to pass. The impetus behind naming one's daughter after a character in a movie – the subconscious desire for her daughter's life to model the character's – and the misremembering or misspelling of that character's name (originally Peola), points at the very imitation Pecola's life was based on and will eventually become.

The import of this allusion is not immediately apparent; it is only later in the novel, as Pauline describes her childhood and relationship with Cholly, that the reader is made to understand the profound impression film has had on the development of her own conceptions of beauty – the indelible imprint of the Hollywood ideal – and how this impression would ultimately color her ideas on the relationship between beauty and self-worth:

[Pauline] went to the movies instead. There in the dark her memory was refreshed, and she succumbed to her earlier dreams. Along with the ideas of romantic love she was introduced to another—physical beauty. Probably the most destructive ideas in the history of human thought. Both originated in envy, thrived in insecurity, and ended in disillusion. In equating physical beauty with virtue, she stripped her mind, bound it, and collected self-contempt by the heap. (Morrison 122)

This insight helps to explicate the significance of the title *Imitation of Life*, as classic Hollywood's prolific cinematic output assumed mimesis as its guiding maxim in its attempt to successfully imitate life. Whereas "Unlike early cinema, classical cinema sought to minimize audience awareness of theater space and to encourage the absorption of the spectator into the narrative space of the film text," so too did Golden-Age Hollywood seek to eschew any correlation between the imitation and the caustic nature of the Hollywood ideal (Stewart 671). The "disillusion" here is the virtue the Hollywood ideal presents itself as being, in that it is just as much a construction as film itself and therefore cannot be achieved. Paradoxically the microcosm of white hegemony that is the Hollywood ideal, unattainable for the characters in *The Bluest Eye*, is only made more dominant by these characters' attempts to achieve it, becoming "accomplices of their own oppression" (Azouz). By attempting to mimic a decidedly white conception of beauty, the black characters participate in advancing the Hollywood ideal, while

their failure to realize this ideal acts to further disenfranchise blacks, perpetuating this negative feedback loop of failure and self-loathing. Borne from this is the terrifyingly innocuous specter of hegemony itself – here the predominating ideal of beauty dressed up as a Hollywood starlet – where one is no longer able to disentangle the authority from those who legitimize it.

Tracking the trajectory of Pauline's character through *The Bluest Eye* describes the destructive and corrupting influence the Hollywood ideal has on spectators, as it engenders expectations that ultimately fail to manifest in reality. The passive spectatorship that often serves as film's appeal becomes exponentially complicated as black viewers replace themselves diegetically within the narrative of the "films that privilege white (racist, hegemonic) values and perspectives" (Stewart 654). Pauline describes her moviegoing experiences as "*The onliest time I be happy,*" explaining:

Every time I got, I went. I'd go early, before the show started. They'd cut off the lights and everything be black. Then the screen would light up, and I'd move right on in them pictures. White men took such good care of they women, and they all dressed up in big clean houses with the bathtubs right in the same room with the toilet. Them pictures gave me a lot of pleasure, but it made coming home hard, and looking at Cholly hard.
(Morrison 123)

Pauline's first-person portrayal of film's effect on the viewer serves as an illuminating depiction of film as "a magnificent machine of ideology" in its ability to produce immediate and future expectations in the viewer's reality (Andrew 112). This assertion is forwarded by Stewart's claim that "Characters such as Pauline Breedlove in Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* (1970)...exemplify unsophisticated black spectators who uncritically enjoy Hollywood cinema despite the illusionist incongruity with the 'realities' of their black lives" (655). Pauline's failure to establish a critical distance between the reality of the films she views and her own, at once forces her to desire the Hollywood ideal and to find fault with any aspect of her life that falls short of this model. Of course an actualization of the Hollywood ideal is no closer to Pauline than any of the novel's other characters; however, the reader can observe in Pauline the effect "her education in the movies" has in contouring the relationships she has with others (Morrison

122). The relationship Pauline has with her family is pervaded with a sense of disappointment and discontent, as both she and they fail to approach the reality she has come to expect through film spectatorship, as “desire becomes the desire for what white Americans desire; a thing beyond Pauline’s psychic reach” (Azouz). The locus of Pauline’s attraction to the families and lives of the whites she works for is her ability to place herself once again as a spectator within, what is for her, an idealized world with which she has no other possible connection.

The initial contact with the Hollywood ideal that Claudia, Frieda, and Pecola experience through Maureen Peal earlier in the novel, serves as a precursor for their next, more definitive, interaction in the form of the girl Pauline works for. This nameless “little pink-and-yellow girl” helps to describe the actual power that an approximation of the Hollywood ideal has in a cultural context (Morrison 109). Although the “little girl” was “smaller and younger than [Claudia, Frieda, and Pecola],” she addresses Mrs. Breedlove not even as Pauline but as “Polly,” showing the inverted power dynamic that is so natural for the girl and so confusing for the MacTeer girls and Pecola (Morrison 108). The girl’s very namelessness helps function to elevate her status within the novel as an idol, or ideal, as something that cannot be named, that should be situated beyond the purview of these three young characters. She becomes a stand-in for Jane of the “Dick and Jane primers” that, Werrlein stresses, “posit the literary ‘masterplot’ in *The Bluest Eye*,” (56) a character that functions as an ideal “exist[ing] almost entirely outside of history—as if no thing and no time exists beyond the suburban present” (58). However Morrison, although illustrating these characters’ pursuit of an unattainable model of beauty, is commenting on the illusory nature of this ideal, as something that can exist at best as a very good forgery or approximation. To that end, this nameless, cherubic idol, who is the closest actualization in *The Bluest Eye* of the Hollywood ideal, is immediately humanized, stained by the berry cobbler in her “pink sunback dress and pink fluffy bedroom slippers” (Morrison 108). The “pink-and-yellow” girl, one of the only white characters to speak in the novel, is brought to tears in this moment, acknowledging, though not consciously, her own inability to realize this ideal in the presence of, and at the hands of, those to whom she is made to believe she is superior.

Though the reader is not given insight into the pink-and-yellow girl’s desires or attitudes with respect to ideals of beauty, we are shown that the Hollywood ideal remains a construction

unattainable for any of the characters, white or black. The Hollywood ideal, as unsubstantial as the white hegemony of which it is a microcosm, and as much a false representation of reality as the films in which it is depicted, is the terrible *fata morgana* these characters pursue and defer to without truly comprehending. This aspiration, in part, results in Pecola's tragic mental decline as she becomes obsessed with the Hollywood ideal, fixating specifically on blue eyes. In a conversation she holds with an imaginary friend, Pecola approaches the incomprehensibility of this ideal and the hegemony it represents; "But suppose my eyes aren't blue enough? *Blue enough for what?* Blue enough for . . . I don't know" (Morrison 203). Pecola's "I don't know" is the "*Thing*" Claudia hints at earlier, specifically the relationship the Hollywood ideal shares with white hegemony, but where Claudia takes out her frustration on Maureen, Pecola delves inward, accomplishing a psychic split with reality based in an internalized self-hatred. The tragedy is not Pecola's failure to assume the Hollywood ideal, but rather her failure to realize what Werrlein describes as the "counterhegemonic potential" of the novel (54). Morrison ultimately wants to show that the cultural pursuit of this ideal that cannot be achieved, at once allows it to remain the dominant conception of beauty and makes the reader complicit in Pecola's madness; as Claudia explains, it was "All of our waste which we dumped on her and which she absorbed. And all of our beauty, which was hers first and which she gave to us," that caused Pecola to "[step] over into madness" (Morrison 205, 206). Pecola's madness is abetted by the characters in the novel who force their negative qualities on her in order to look and feel better about themselves by comparison, effectively formulating through Pecola the terror of the Other and of hegemonic dominance.

Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* examines the pervading effects of white hegemony on black society. The reader is presented with the inherent struggles and frustrations of those aspiring to achieve social agency through means that are not their own, within a culture that forces blacks to desire an essentialized whiteness. These aspirations manifest themselves specifically in the characters' desires to achieve an ideal of beauty that is constructed and reified through film, a medium that serves as a microcosm for the white hegemony it perpetuates via the images onscreen. The Hollywood ideal is the illusory model of beauty personified by, but not inherent to, classical Hollywood's leading actresses. It is terrifying in that it is simultaneously powerful and ephemeral, something that can be pointed at but not touched, as much a

construction as the films themselves are. Yet, in Claudia, Pauline, and Pecola's pursuit of the Hollywood ideal, its continued dominance is ensured, functioning to further disenfranchise and prevent blacks from realizing cultural visibility. Morrison's aim is not, however, to simply present an inescapable cycle that causes some to tragically descend into madness, but rather to expose this hegemonic ideal for the illusion that it is as an impossible paradigm for anyone of any race to achieve.

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