



**Undead Hyperwhite Vampire: Underworld Evolution, 2006.\***

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\*I had hoped to include eight images in this article, all from major motion pictures. One request was granted, the image reproduced here from Underworld: Evolution (2006—Columbia Pictures). The remaining seven included three from Warner Brothers Entertainment Inc: one each from Matrix Revolutions (2003), I am Legend (2007) and Blade II (2002); two images from 20th Century Fox: one from I, Robot (2004) and one from 28 Days Later (2002). Permissions were simply too costly for this author or the publisher, even for strictly educational usage, amounting to a total of approximately \$1,500 (the sum of fees charged regardless of whether permission was ultimately granted—a likely occurrence at least in the cases that would have required Will Smith’s personal consent).

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## SOCIAL THOUGHT & COMMENTARY

# Dead White Men: An Essay on the Changing Dynamics of Race in US Action Cinema

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“A blockbuster [is]...the place where collective social desire for transformation and salvage, revolution and restoration, anarchy and obedience is simultaneously fastened and split.” (Pfeil 1992)

**T**he largest costume retailer in the US, rejoicing at the empty box stores left behind by the bankruptcy of chains like Circuit City, reported that its most popular disguises for the lucrative (and unusual) Saturday Halloween of 2009 were Zombies, Vampires, and Michael Jackson (NPR 10.22.2009). Dead white men all, except not quite. Zombies and vampires are not so much dead as undead, and Michael Jackson was not white, except perhaps in his later years.

The popularity of both the undead white man and the newly dead, whitened, black man points to what anthropological studies of popular cinema have long taken into account: the stories movies tell are in accord with the “attitudes, daydreams, ethics, and modes of life of a people” (Wolfenstein 1953:268).

It is not only that Americans watch the action, science fiction, or horror movies that will be central to this essay and in which whiteness, deadness, and maleness are all under strident attack, but that they delight equally in becoming the blood-spattered bearers of these fantasies themselves. With capes and fangs, or with bandaged heads and rotted skin, they lurch through bars and downtown city streets. Some even (in the finest bit of irony available today) play at being the zombie Michael Jackson—these grave risen moonwalkers, with tight black pants and chalk-whitened faces, dance *en masse* to the dated strands of his “Thriller,” each fluttering a single spangled glove.

The last forty years has seen a slow rising tide in the popularity of the living dead, on screen and off. This same period has also seen the nascence of a second set of characters who, though more powerful today than the dead white men they very often vanquish, have received much less popular commendation. These are the black (super) heroes, first born into popular culture in the 1970s in film and in comics (cf. Brown 2000), who have slowly developed into the killers designate of evil white men, both dead and undead.

This trend, which was at first only tentatively present in the careful unfolding of story and character, has becoming an increasingly predominant element in the story-lines of US blockbusters. There are hints of it in the buddy films of the late 1980s when Sergeant Roger Murtaugh (Danny Glover), for example, shoots with aggressive glee a single white south African who has stolen and threatened his daughter (*Lethal Weapon 2* [dir. Richard Donner 1989]). It is there even slightly earlier in Lando Calrissian (Billy Dee Williams), one of the first black characters in a mainstream film to kill a white man specifically as a means of establishing himself as both good and trustworthy—though he, like Glover, dispatches only one: a “white skinned” storm trooper (*Return of the Jedi* [dir. Richard Marquand 1983]).

What began, however, as a tentative pattern within the narrative structure of action films and in comics has since exploded into a new configuration of race relations evident in, if not governing, these films. Blade (Wesley Snipes, in a film of the same name [dir. Stephen Norrington 1998]) hunts white people, as does Dr. Robert Neville (Will Smith) in the horror/sci-fi/action crossover film *I am Legend* (dir. Francis Lawrence 2007), so too does Darius Stone (Ice Cube) in the poorly reviewed 2005 blockbuster *XXX<sup>2</sup> - The State of the Union* (dir. Lee Tamahori). And though Blade may hunt vampires; Neville—zombies; and Stone—politicians, each of these (lifeless, white) vil-

lains is marked by a very similar set of characteristics. Evil is white. It is usually male; it “reproduces” itself orally (if at all)—that is, via the mouth rather than the genitals; it finds pleasure in greed and overconsumption; and its passage through culture, its very biology, is marked as being explicitly dangerous to the continued survival of the human race. Meanwhile, the black action heroes repeatedly called to vanquish these undead (or otherwise corrupted) whites are no longer the “buddies” of the 1980s and early 1990s, who play second fiddle to the rampages of their white counterparts (Pfeil 1995, Willis 1997); they are no longer extra, expendable characters who are sent off by whites, like canaries in a coal mine, to test the efficacy of unseen adversaries; nor are they merely scenery, filling up streets or starships—a silent fluid and chromatic backdrop against which the action takes place (Wallace 1995). These black men now are heroes in their own right. They are cast as vengeful and lively characters, both likable and utterly fantastic, with back-stories and motivations all their own. And they kill, as all action heroes must, with indiscretion.

Who they kill, however, is the central topic of this essay, and not only who they kill, but how that killing has come to form the very ground—the necessary premise—of both their heroism and their goodness. My central claim, here, will be that we know these new super black men to be heroes not despite the fact that they kill white characters but because of it.

This shift in the black man’s role, from decorative expendability to that of tentative-killer-of-others (in the 1980s and early 90s) to their increasingly common position at present as both massacrers and good guys, has been, I will argue, a mythic—and quite popular way—of reconstituting and expanding race in US popular culture along very specific and, once articulated, easily recognizable lines. Likewise, the substantive markers of race have shifted in films of the past decade to include not only common sense “biological” features—like skin color—but also quantitative gatherings of characteristics. There are, in other words, *things* that make white people white and black people black. The assembling and redistributing of these things has become as much the substance of race in the films considered as a character’s skin color, back-story, or the narrative patterning of individual lives.<sup>1</sup>

Despite the optimism implicit—and I think warranted—in these arguments, the reader may be led to imagine an era now past when black men killed white men and were bad and that, rather than their behavior having changed in recent years, what has shifted is the popular commendation and scripted framing of their actions. Nothing could be further from the truth.

Black men have not progressed from evil killers of whites into good ones, but rather from non-killers into killers. Or, to put it in even starker terms, black characters, and black men, specifically progressed from hardly existent, more scenic or symbolic than human elements within films (1910s-30s) into disabled (1940-50s) and later expendable (1960s-1990s) characters (Bogle 1994, Cripps 1993). Black men not only very rarely killed in movies made before the 1970s, but once they emerged from the cinematographic background toward the end of World War II and began to be given speaking parts and stories of their own, they were the persons most likely to be maimed, to die, or to be killed outright in service of the plot (Nickel 2004). Nor did this plot have much to do with the black character *per se*. Rather, in almost every case, these early integrated films were about white people, their struggles, their stories, their society—all issues that the timely demise of the black character helped to positively resolve. Bad moral influences were banished, illegal or corrupting behaviors called out into the open, untoward cruelty punished, families reunited, and even the unmarried were resettled into domesticity. All the black man had to do to achieve all of this was die (cf. *Body and Soul* with Canada Lee [dir. Robert Rossen 1947] and, more recently, *Man On Fire* starring Denzel Washington [dir. Tony Scot 2004] and a great many others in between). Despite the fact that the maiming or killing of a black character was what returned these film worlds—and the whites who inhabited them—to normalcy, this was not because the blacks were themselves a source of evil or instability. To the contrary, these characters were generally highly sympathetic and chaste, bordering at times on the saintly. Rather than embodying evil—a function more likely to be assigned to deviant whites like Italians or alcoholics—they somehow, almost magically, dispelled it. Goodness flowed from the person of the black man, even more so when he was disabled in some way. While having been close to him was often enough to make a white man moral or imbue him with the necessary strength for righteous action (cf. *The Green Mile* [dir. Frank Darabont 1999]; Farelly 2000, Hyden 2007).<sup>2</sup> Whatever past, family, and significant personal desires of his own a black character might be given in these films, and regardless of what tales they purported to tell about African-American life as an aspect of US (read white) experience, these films were neither in their form, their story, or their characterization *about* blacks. The black man was little more than a vehicle in the white man's story, and not the reverse.

Despite a not insignificant increase in behind-the-scenes racial diversity in Hollywood since the 1950s, it has remained true to the present day that

the vast majority of US multiracial films, even those with black actors at their helm, are produced for predominately white audiences by predominately white production teams. What, then, is one to make of the fact that whites are—as will be amply illustrated below—increasingly conceptualizing themselves as virus ridden bloodsuckers, whose effective eradication is premised not only upon a black male hero's exceptional strength, creativity, and adaptability but upon his differences from them, be this his immunity from what ails them or his strong moral fiber? It is true that the black man's sacrifice, his capacity for righteous action, his mysticality and quasi-saintliness could be understood as merely continuations of early trends (Dyer 1997). But this does little to capture what is most compelling about race relations in the contemporary blockbuster: that black men kill white men in order that the world might be returned to a version of "normalcy" that explicitly excludes white men, their consumer cultures, and their sterile logics. Something, that is to say, has changed though many things have in the process remained very much the same.

### **Of Blockbusters and Anthropologists**

"Imaginary relations at the social, collective level can thus be seen as ourselves looking at ourselves while we think we are seeing others."  
(Hamilton 1990:17)

"Contemporary cultural anthropology," Martha Wolfenstein wrote in 1953 "looks for regularities running through all the products of a culture" (268) to which Gregory Bateson added: "Anthropological analysis always consists of two parts. First the recognition of significant themes and second the verification that these themes are in fact characteristic of the culture we are studying (1956:137). Both are speaking explicitly of popular film and its relationship to mythic, psychic—what have more recently been thought of as the "imaginative" (Appadurai 1996, Anderson 1991, Lacan 1967, Said 1978)—practices of a people.

Bateson's interest was in Nazi propaganda films and their relationship to German fantasies of family life; Wolfenson was writing an introduction to a methodological text for the analysis of mainstream national cinemas (France, Italy, China, the Soviet Union, to which Margaret Mead among others contributed their "field" notes). Movies, and most especially mass mar-

ket popular movies, were considered by some of the most influential anthropologists of this generation to hold the same keys to understanding the cultures that produced and consumed them that myths or oral traditions provided in less technologically advanced societies. The fact that these films were normative products of the elites of such cultures, and were in certain cases also actively propagandistic, increased rather than diminished their importance as objects of study (cf. Mead and Méteraux 1953).

However, things changed. Hollywood is such a power in the culture industry (a term popularized after Bateson's and Mead's, and, perhaps more importantly, Hortense Powdermaker's [1950], ethnographic incursions into this territory) that considering Hollywood for its own sake, rather than in terms of the absurdities it magnifies and injustices it perpetrates, became conflated with supporting the stances popularized by its films. Anthropologists, concerned about the appropriateness of this type of research, took an almost half-century hiatus away from the terrain of Hollywood and its products. During this time, film analysis was taken up by other disciplines in the academy including feminist studies, critical race theory, and subaltern and cultural studies.

When anthropologists returned to considerations of mass media, they tried to address previous criticisms of this research by considering less the normative contents, effects, and pleasures of Hollywood cinema within local (i.e. US) discourses of race or heroism, morality, or femininity (to name just a few) and opted instead to focus on the ways these films (as products) have traveled beyond the contexts of their production and the ways in which they are received, rejected, or remade elsewhere (cf. Ganti 2002; Ginsberg, Abu-Lughod, and Larkin 2002). There are exceptions—Elizabeth Traube's work on the retrograde representations of women during the Reagan era of US cinema (1992) and Sherry Ortner's current ethnographic research in Hollywood (in press)—but for the most part the project begun by Mead and Bateson has not been taken up again. Anthropology has largely ceded US mass culture, in its home context, to a broad smattering of other fields and analytic approaches.

This essay is, then, informed by the sorts of textual analysis common to disciplines beyond my own anthropological training, most notably feminist films studies (and the English and Comparative Literature departments that host such studies). Despite the fact that this work is not ethnographic, my concerns and motivations are intensely anthropological: I am interested in the ways representations of dominant cultural patterns are changing in the

space of fantasies and how these shifts in depiction, motif, and worry might index larger cultural changes not yet obvious in everyday social relations. I hold that black-white racial dynamics have been so radically altered in popular films of the last decade—in ways both stereotypical and at odds with stereotypy—that these dynamics deserve reconsideration within the framework of the films themselves. And secondly, I argue that “race,” still albeit largely a black-white affair in the stories Americans tell themselves about themselves, is manifestly more flexible than even two decades ago. I suggest that race is adhering by different means to different bodies or, to put it another way, that it is more often figured as “cultural” and thus divisible into discrete qualities, than as “biological” and thus both inherent and readable off of the surfaces of bodies. This change in the way race is popularly typified makes new sorts of characters possible (e.g. the black samurai; the black president) as well as new sorts of stories (e.g. the eradication of white men). Thirdly, these movies are all about the necessity of reinserting gift exchange, and its attendant cultural fecundity, back into the greedy consumer capitalism characteristic—or so they tell us—of (dead) white men’s culture. These films, in other words, are not only about shifts in the ways race is depicted and embodied but about the overthrow of raced logics of commerce, of social geography, and of biological reproduction. Mythic figures—like the newly ubiquitous ambulatory white undead in contemporary North American culture and the lively black supermen that rout, eviscerate, and explode them in blockbuster action films—are, to borrow the words of James Ferguson, both “socially and cosmologically productive;... they require to be analyzed, and not just refuted” (1999:85).

In this essay, then, I track both the shift of black people—though in most cases and for reasons that will be explained black men—from scenery to superstardom, and I examine the far more recent shift of the black man from the first killed in any given action interaction (cf. “Unfair Racial Cliché Alert” 2009)<sup>3</sup> to the one with the task of slaughtering a subsection of white humanity *en masse* in order that the rest of white, or increasingly multiethnic, humanity might be saved from their scourge. In order that such salvatory feats might be accomplished, characterizations of black men have of necessity been changed to prevent their slipping over into cinematic and cultural stereotypes of unkempt and unthinking savagery.

White men too have been made to change. They have become killable in interesting and, I will argue, new ways. Zombies, vampires, the virus-infected, and other sorts of hyperwhites—that is, whites over-endowed with tradi-

tionally white characteristics (cultural as well as racial)—have, since the late 1990s, swarmed the big screen largely replacing aliens, robots, and Nazis as the mythic forces to be reckoned with (read obliterated) in order that the patterns of a normal life might continue or, at the very least, be restored to the realm of possibility. This pattern is repeated almost endlessly in blockbusters released between roughly 1998 (and the first of the *Blade* films) and 2008 (and the serious-yet-spoof, black-superman film *Hancock* [dir. Peter Berg]). This is the period I will be most concerned with here, though race and depictions of racial difference are as old as the technology of cinema itself.

### Enter the Matrix

It has often been remarked upon, both in scholarly work and in popular discussion, that *The Matrix* trilogy (dirs. Andy and Larry Wachowski 1999, 2003, 2003) provides a broader and browner view of humanity than is usually seen in popular cinema. Why then, one blogger who is enthusiastic about this on-screen diversity queries, are Neo (Keanu Reeves) and Trinity (Carrie-Anne Moss) two of the films stars so “completely, deathly white?” She continues:

...the Matrix [sic] is growing embryos from combined genes taken from existing human units. Therefor, there would be no cultural influence deciding which sperm was mixed with which egg; it would be either randomised, or calculated so the units had optimum power potential. Either way, skin colour would not be a factor, and would therefor be ignored—thereby randomised. Darker pigments are more dominant than lighter ones, so in a randomised society everyone would be brown... (“Nitpickers” 2008).<sup>4</sup>

Zion, the last human city located deep below the crust of the earth, is depicted in the films as just such a “randomized” society; its inhabitants range from translucent to ebony with the vast majority falling somewhere in between. Racial diversity and gender equality are both facts of life in Zion which, the viewer is led to believe, is the result of necessity—in the first case, to achieve the greatest possible breadth from a limited gene pool and in the second, because life in Zion is hard and women’s physical as well as intellectual labor is as necessary as men’s to the colony’s survival. Thus, while petty conflicts and familial strife (of the soap-operatic variety) abound in Zion, there is no evidence of power adhering different-

ly to the darker skinned than to the lighter, or that men are more qualified to blow things up or kick some serious ass than are women. The mistake this blogger makes, and it is not her error alone, is to let the diversity of Zion and of the ships piloted therefrom to overrun her eyes, blinding them to whiteness of the matrix.

If one looks closely at the human population of the matrix—that is all those born, bred, fed, and harvested by the machines for their power, whose minds are kept occupied and their bodies, thus, alive by the programmed distractions of a simulated world—one sees that they are white. All of them are white. Nor is this accidental. The Wachowski brothers constructed two opposing worlds for these films: Zion, or the “real” world, is diversely utopic, while the matrix is monocultural and dissimulating. The former is the world of the truly living and the free, and the latter of the half-living and the willfully deluded. One is pointedly not-white, neither in its logics nor its chromatics, though it does not exclude whites, and the other is exclusively and deliberately white, becoming ever more so as the program called Smith (Hugo Weaving) slowly, from film to film, takes over everyone else’s body. So complete is his colonization of the matrix’s inhabitants that by the end of the trilogy not only is everyone in the matrix white, but everyone in the matrix is Smith. He, with his bland verging on pasty complexion, thinning wisps of hair, unwaveringly flat affect, smart suit, starched white shirt, and clipped tie is the whitest of white men, whether considered culturally or physiologically. Even his former (by the second film) employment as an “Agent”—the spooks of the machine world—bespeaks his averageness, his rationality, his unswerving devotion to the bureaucratic and the regulatory and, in the end as in the beginning (though differently so), his utter lack of particularity.

What one sees then at trilogy’s end are the streets of the matrix’s city lined with identical Smiths, thousands of them, and once the glower of the white man Smith is affixed to the front of every head, his black tie neatly clipped in homage to some bizarrely overwrought form of civilized rationality around every neck, there can no longer be any question of racial diversity within the matrix. Smith, like the virus he is (a problem, as we know from films like *I am Legend* and *Blade*, that white men tend to have), has erased all that is lively about the matrix and all that is its bustling, albeit monoracial, diversity; so too goes its pretences at reality. Indeed, once all the whites have one white become, even the sun has gone and what remains are the wet cement canyons of a city infested. Smith is the infestation, and it is a black character, in this case a woman, The Oracle

(played by Gloria Foster and Mary Alice), in a peculiar alliance with Neo, the spectrally white hero, and the machines far away in their own city panicking (in their own way) at the matrix's loss, who ultimately saves the day. The "essence" of this lone black woman is so strong that she not only survives Smith's hack (that's the part where he sticks his hand into people and changes them into another instance of himself), but she occupies him as a ghost might until just the right moment when she lets her presence be known and changes the fate of her world. This change involves (complexly and no need to detail it out here) all the Smiths bursting with their own light, whiteness steaming brilliantly from every eye socket and mouth hole (see Dyer 1997), until the flesh of him—all the thousands of him—dissolves in the force of that light, and he is vanquished. Neo, the other white man present at the white light explosion-finale of the trilogy, vanishes right along with him. In fact, after this epic battle that appears to be between two white men, no one but The Oracle remains, a black woman alone, face down in the mud of a ruined city which she must, and does, rebuild. In the end, when the sun rises upon a matrix rebuilt, it shines its beauty and its warmth only upon brown of skin: The Oracle on her park bench, the child Sati who "built" the new dawn, and Serif an Asian man in a smart (Asian) jacket.

I expect a certain objection must by now have begun to gnaw at the minds of at least a few readers. There are people in matrix who are not white. Even excluding the programs who live there—The Oracle, The Architect, The Key Maker, The Merovingian, his wife and their thugs, Serif, Sati and her parents, among others—whose hues are as diverse as those of Zion's human population, there are other unexplained bursts of brownness: the blind black man at the entrance to The Oracle's apartment building, the children in her living room, the Indonesian woman taken over by Smith in *Reloaded*, a bustling Asian market (also in *Reloaded*). These exceptions are all governed by a single rule: the closer one gets to a sentient program, especially a non-white program, the more diverse the background inhabitants become. One could argue that racial diversity is being deployed here in a simplistic and relatively old-fashioned way, since the non-whites are clearly being used as a means of setting a given scene's mood and as well as providing its backdrop. In every case, however, these "extras" manifest the personality of a sentient program in exactly the same way that his or her "race" manifests that personality. More than this, they do something that is ubiquitous in cinema, though most especially that

tending toward the science fictive; they are used to expand the personality or “self” of a character outward into that character’s environment.

Story, as Caroline Walker Bynum has pointed out in her masterful treatise *Metamorphosis and Identity* (2001), is, along with shape, the very essence of a human identity that purdures. Fictive humans—the characters, regardless of their form, in the stories we tell ourselves about ourselves—gain narrative weight, or in Walker Bynum’s terms “story,” in part through the ways in which they shift shape, not only in becoming other than they were—the worm, for example, into the butterfly or The Oracle into Smith and Smith back into The Oracle again—but also in the ways they cause their environment to change shape with them. By imbuing more than just the physical body of an entity with a certain shape and thus also a certain set of stories, fiction bends *everything*, shifts the given shape of *everything*, such that the environment can be made to carry story to the same degree that the body does (cf. Bakke 2007). Traces of the person persist, as we have seen with The Oracle “within” Smith, though forms are made to change.

Fictive persons, at their densest (one might even say, at their best) shift shape, whether their own or that of their environment, and the ways in which traces of common attribute permeate this process makes both their identity and their humanity palpable to audiences. Narratives of other worlds, then, in the form of gossip, superstition, religious treatises, memoirs, or blockbusters are according to Walker Bynum (whose own work is on the medieval period) universally made weighty and therefore interesting through the metamorphoses of some elements and the persistence of others. In this, identity is in no way ever limited to the simple bounds of a given, as if natural, body.

What the Wachowski’s do in *The Matrix* is make this ancient logic flesh, whether in the persons of those non-white, merely ambient, amblers or in the decorative schema, social decorum, and even skin tone and ethnic features of the sentient programs themselves. They thereby give the impression that these programs tug at the matrix and reform it in their image. Such blooms of racial diversity within the soup of whiteness that is otherwise the matrix’s human population function primarily as a means of making clear to viewers, even if under the radar of conscious understanding, that certain beings are more expansive, more impactful, more narratively weighty than others. The ways in which these “persons” all of whom are explicitly identified as programs and all of whom are no less explicitly raced (whether white or black or brown) spread themselves—that is, spread their shape and their

story—into their immediate environment create anomalies of setting and skin color that in every case align neatly with that being's other assumed-to-be chosen surface level characteristics. This in turn causes them to seem more real, denser if you will, than any of the human characters in the film, with the notable exception of Neo, the films' hero, to whom these programs are, for their part, inexorably drawn.

What one sees, then, when The Oracle, a black woman, is near are other people of color not exclusively but obviously. One also sees other indices within the US cultural context of blackness. She lives in a small poorly kept up tenement, the walls yellow with age, and with a chain link fence across the windows. When she meets Neo out of doors, it is in a sort of desolate urban park, all cement and ravens, hedged by crumbling high rises. The same holds true for the program called Serif, a small Asian man and kung-fu virtuoso. When he is near, Asians—primarily though again not exclusively—multiply in the background, and the walls have a peculiar tendency to be made of rice paper. Even The Merovingian, who is white, indeed French, surrounds himself with race and culture markers of both high-bourgeois and doomedly-decadent whiteness. The whiteness of the matrix's humans are, around the Merovingian, magnified. Wealthy, beautiful, finely dressed, sipping from crystal goblets, eating expensive pieces of torte (in *Reloaded*) or dressed in plastics, latex, and leather, pierced and punked out, with 10 inch heels and strap on dildos (the boys no less) in *Revolutions*, these white people reflect him, his chosen form, his strength, and his impotence. They are not characters in their own right, they are merely worldly extensions of him—scenery, if you will, but scenery of a very specific sort.

I do not venture idly into such a nuanced discussion of race, and indeed of the relative densities of personhood, in *The Matrix*. For though it would seem, on the surface of things, that black people have little to do with the demise of white people in these films (The Oracle's role in the climax as oft overlooked as the matrix's monoraciality), the fastidiousness with which the Wachowski brothers have created racial worlds highlights much more than the one point about race many have been quick to notice: that Zion's inhabitants are massively and diversely brown.

There is another racial world to these films, that inside the matrix, and not only are the people therein “completely, deathly white”—like Neo and Trinity—but their whiteness is reflective of their cadaveresque existence. These white people are the half-living by their own choice. They delude

themselves willfully, and they shut out the nagging possibility of a life more full of living, preferring, on the whole, the banality of the late 20<sup>th</sup> century office cubes and thick cuts of steak over the knowledge of good and evil and a richer, albeit materially attenuated life in the “desert of the real,” i.e. all that exists outside of and beyond the matrix. This is what white people are to the Wachowskis, white men themselves, and not to them alone. Representations of whites as those who (at best) shirk the task of fully living and (at worst) bring a greedy and unswerving sameness to all that they touch is a significant part of what has made the rise of black heroes and heroines both possible and, more importantly, compelling. Evil’s face has long been a white one; what has changed in recent years is that the hero’s face, her hands, and her intangible (though still oft represented) essence has been remade into a black one. Sameness is such a danger (we learn from Smith) that difference (we learn from The Oracle) is the only hope for actual salvation and the continued existence of human life and human culture which is not, and ought not be misunderstood as, white people’s lives or the continued dominance of white culture.

### **The Living Dead**

Already by the late 1990s, whites were regularly reproducing virally rather than sexually, and black action heroes were creeping onto the screen to vanquish them and set things right. In the decade since the first of the *Matrix* films (and the first of the *Blade* films—released in 1999 and 1998 respectively), this trend has only become more pronounced.

Over and over again, in the most popular and least nuanced of cinematic genre, whites are depicted as the animated dead (mostly, in the past 30 years of zombie films) or the no less animated undead (vampires foremost among these). The undead who, while generally granted slightly more fashion sense and nicer homes than the living zombie dead, are no less dependant on the living for the sustenance of their own attenuated lives. Both “species,” that is to say, feed on people, consuming them (at times more of them than at others) in order to live themselves. Zombies do this eating unthinkingly, though historically they exhibit a definite taste for brains, and vampires do it ritually, civilizing their hunger even, by the *Underworld* films scientizing it (dir. Len Wiseman 2003, 2006), but they are no less hungry than their zombie kin for the blood of the living whatever trappings of civilization they may drape that hunger in.

If these animate albeit not-precisely-living whites only brought death to the living, they would be no more than preternatural serial killers and unlikely the return stars of literally scores of films (at latest count, Wikipedia has over 300 feature length zombie films listed—the vast majority of which have been made since 1990—and over 200 films about Dracula alone, making him, in their words, “the subject of more films than any other fictional character”). Zombies and vampires do not, however, *only* feed on the living. In their wanton consumption of the lives of others, they remake their meals, i.e. regular people, into themselves. Every zombie bite or misplaced spatter of blood (into an eye or a mouth) converts its object, usually a regular guy or gal running in the opposite direction, into just another chomping, staggering, hunger-driven, creature of death—a reproductive strategy that leads inevitably to that uncanny moment when someone looks into the transformed eyes of a loved one and immediately hacks them to bits in order to avoid their own inevitable zombification.

Though vampires may be more discriminating in their vampire-making than are the zombies in their zombie-making, the procedure is much the same. The essence of the beast is that its bite, though it may be used to kill its prey, is equally a weapon of transformation. Those victims that are so chosen—rather than simply bled dry and left for dead—become the self-same as their executioner: joyless, effete, white fiends in human form who feed, because they must, on the blood of lesser men. Eating, then—the sole task necessary to the continued animation of both the undead and the living dead—is not only infectiously and sexlessly reproductive of both species, but it is also, and just as importantly, formally and racially transformative.

Whereas the attenuated whites in the matrix are clearly just that—white—zombies and vampires are often more suggestively so. The vast majority of both species have white skin, and those very few who were non-whites, of whatever racial background “have whitened skin by virtue of being dead” (Dyer 1997:212). Not only are they liberally dusted with some sort of skin-lightening agent, often with all the subtlety of having had a bucket of chalk dumped over them, but their eye color is also changed, usually in US films, from brown to blue. In *Resident Evil* (dir. Paul W.S. Anderson 2002), when one of the main female characters, an Hispanic woman (Rain Ocampo played by Michelle Rodriguez) is infected, she first dies, stays dead about an eighth of a second, and then bursts into fiercely masticating, salivating living-deadness with chalk white features and electric blue eyes. In *Die Another Day* (dir. Lee Tamahori, 2002), the 20<sup>th</sup>

Bond film, two North Korean characters are transformed into white people. The first, whose transformation is successful—and who is renamed “Graves” and assisted by an evil, hyper-rational, murderess named “Frost” (just in case the deathly pall of their skin was an insufficient clue to their racial affiliation and its mortuary nature)—gets to keep his brown eyes. The other, Zao (Rick Yune) whose transformation is interrupted, keeps his Asian features (and Asian name) though his skin is at times so translucently white that the blue of his veins can be seen crisscrossing his scalp, and his eyes, like Ocampo’s above, shine a preternatural blue. He also has diamonds stuck all over his face so that he sparkles, in every scene, with their cold, hard, whiteness. In *28 Days Later* (also 2002), the black zombie who in the end saves multicultural Britain and the heterosexual family in one fell rampage has bright red eyes and very oddly grayed skin, as if he had been painted over with whitewash. His blackness, while evident and important to the film—he is the one who vanquishes the evil whites, though with a twist—is painted over, literally grayed-out, with the white death of his infection.<sup>5</sup>

George Romero, in the first of his classic zombie films, *The Night of the Living Dead* (1969), one of the oldest and perhaps the most influential of all films of this genre, simply skips over the problem of black zombies by deliberately making all of his white both in skin and in culture—their rags the clothes of businessmen and suburban housewives. Likewise, and quite straightforwardly, the character most full of life and therefore most capable of saving the world as we knew it—Ben (Duane Jones)—is black. He is also the only active character in the film; he is always thinking, always moving, always buying time with clever zombie-defying tricks, and when compared with the white characters whose passivity borders at time upon suicidal languishing, his character makes the already-half-deadness of the still-living their most salient characteristic. Living whites in *The Night of the Living Dead* are, as many authors and not a few viewers have pointed out, often functionally indistinguishable from dead whites. Unfortunately for Ben, he is pulled limb from limb at the end of the film by those remaining whites, proving once again that white people are not only more “full of death” (again here I borrow the words of Richard Dyer, who has written extensively on the subject) but that they bring death, almost obsessively, to all the rest (Dyer 1997:212)—much to their detriment in this film, because with Ben’s assassination goes any hope of human survival, white or otherwise. In the end, only the zombies (a term never used in this film) remain.

Forty years later, much the same story is told in *I am Legend*—the 2007 Will Smith star-vehicle, that like *The Night of the Living Dead* eschews the term zombie while exemplifying the genre. Not only is the only recognizably human character for the first 4/5ths of the film a black man, but all of the other attenuated humans are white, whether the mannequins in the video store (Dr. Robert Neville's [Will Smith] only "human" friends) or the zombies in the dark (his truest enemies). What's more, the zombies are all also male, save a sole female specimen Neville keeps tied up in his basement. No attempt is made in any of these films (the *Matrix* and *28 Days Later* included) to disguise the fact that the half-living, soulless, gamete-less creatures that threaten the world's very well being are other than white men. Even those movies that include some few, indeed token, blacks among the ranks of the undead make only minor show of them amongst the hordes of white blood-suckers and brain-eaters overrunning the world.

As if all of this casting of whites—and white men most especially—as the singular agents of the destruction of a world built according to the rule of their own self-lauded rationality were not suggestion enough that something had gone awry with society's dominant actors, a new race of hyperwhites, even more zombified, more dangerous, more vampiric, more mindlessly robotic, and even physiologically whiter than their precursors has emerged, across a series of films, since the turn of the millennium. Zao, with his ruined face, marbled white skin, preternaturally blue eyes, total hairlessness, visible veins, speed, and capacity for thought hints at this new form of whiteness. Once dangerous enough in stereotyped form, whites that might before have triumphed over the heroics of the well-meaning and the well-trained of either race or gender are being replaced by more capable, and whiter, versions of themselves.

The heroes, called up to vanquish the hyperwhites (to be described in more depth in an instant) are of two sorts: they are women, and they are non-white, most often black but the minorityscape itself is broadening year by year. And whether female or brown skinned, the one thing that these vanquishers prove with the utmost of ease is their unquestionable superiority over white men, dead or undead.

The problem, if we are considering plot, is that these new heroes would have no equals if the cast of villains were not white men made stronger to counter them, forced, as it were, by circumstances beyond their control to mutate into more condensed versions of themselves. When vampires, these new white villains are more emotionless, more driven by rationality

and by greed, and more likely to be the CEOs of vampire corporations slowly taking over the world than were their merely undead white predecessors. When zombies, they are fast. They run as fast as a human and in some cases faster. When robots, they also move lithely and with a speed no human can match, and they have the capacity to work as a team; they are, if you will, single minded (*I, Robot*, dir. Alex Proyas 2004). When aliens, a fairly new development, they have even larger heads and more all-hungry brains than did earlier saucer men with blasters. They hunger for knowledge, and they get it, at high cost to those humans upon whose minds they magically conduct their extractions (*Indiana Jones and the Kingdom of the Crystal Skull* [dir. Steven Spielberg 2008]; *Knowing* [dir. John Koestler 2009]). And when mutants, they are rational and emotionless to the point of losing all capacity for empathy for the plight of the humans they were (once) committed to pleasuring and protecting (see most especially the translucent, blue-veined, hairless, hyperational, and well-hung yet nevertheless sexually impotent Dr. Manhattan of *Watchmen* [dir. Zack Snyder 2009]). The vast majority of hyperwhites, regardless of the genre they inhabit, exhibit some qualities of the hive. To vanquish them, thus, one must destroy all of them, their warrens, covens, and hive-minds.

If these subtleties of common characteristic were too minor or understated for the action blockbusters that these new villains inhabit, these hive-minded, hyperwhites all also happen to look alike, whether robot, zombie, alien, vampire, or mutant. All are intensely phosphorescently white, with skin that appears at times to glow in the dark and which is stretched so thinly over their bones that the veins, especially those in the head and face, show through it. These men are made of marble. They are also utterly hairless: no facial hair, no eyebrows or eyelashes, no chest hair, and not a wisp upon their heads. They all have blue eyes, and they are all male (excepting the lone female in *I am Legend* mentioned above); they have a wiry, often semi-emaciated physique, and when not running around in various stages of undress, they are most often clothed as the working class.

The ruin that these depilated white men wreak, the death they carry with them and bring so quickly to the unsuspecting, has been both modernized and ratcheted up. Likewise, the heroics, and thus also the heroes, necessary to contain these new villains have grown simultaneously more dazzlingly supernatural. The creativity, flexibility, and moral sense—in a word, the *difference*—of these new heroes from their quarry might seem at first glance to be a result of, or a reaction to, the newfound inhumanity of those to be van-

quished. In fact, the opposite appears to be the case. The new heroes emerged first. These super black men and (for the most part) white women triumphed so easily over the white men and everyday white monsters they were scripted to vanquish that the later group had no choice but to change or become obsolete.<sup>6</sup> In changing, of course, the obsolescence of a previously taken for granted dominance of white culture and with it the unquestioned superiority of white men has been all but guaranteed.

### **White Worlds Vanquished**

Much of what is under negotiation in these films circles around the singular question of culture, not just as it appears in distorted form—in the virus like machinations (and mastications) of undead and living dead—nor only in the seemingly infectious corruption of those few granted institutional power, political skill, and the white skin necessary to wield both to personal advantage. More fundamentally, these films seem to be asking, albeit deep in the interstices of plot and characterization: What is it to be a human being in the world? And, as each moves towards its happy ending (these are, after all, US films): What sorts of people do we want to become? In brief here, and in more detail below, the answer these movies seem to provide is that the sorts of people “we” (read white men) are is neither good, balanced, nor over the long term, sustainable. And the sorts of people we want to become—the post-apocalyptic human world we hope to inhabit—is one in which white men, whether considered as raced-beings or as the bearers of certain cultural proclivities and institutions, are not only no longer the dominate bodies/logics in society but are thinned out and reduced to just another set of proclivities, another shade of skin. The human future that these films suggest make it abundantly clear that there is nothing particular or compelling about white men or their ways. Indeed, they are more dangerous than other sorts of people and ought to be reduced, diluted, and forbidden their excesses.

What black action heroes, whose *difference* from all that ruined the old world is as marked in the color of their skin as it is in their approach to the project of living, have to offer such a future humanity is fecundity. At the simplest level, this involves a return to reproductive processes grounded in an exchange of fluids that even if not sex *per se* at least involves the intermingling of selves rather than the yawning maw of one humanoid bearing down upon the exposed neck of another.

In order to insure a return to a generous and fruitful sort of social-sexual reproduction, black men always end up giving a great deal of themselves. Most literally, they give their blood and other forms of biological material, but they give also their intelligence, their judiciousness, their time, their labor, their morality, and occasionally, even still, they give their lives. In this way, they are not so different than their cinematic forefathers, who in the 1940s, 50s, and 60s gave endlessly of themselves in order to ensure white man's return to health and wellbeing. In those days, there was still a modicum of hope that white culture and white lives could (at least in the movies) be "fixed" by the black man's sacrifice. By the turn of the most recent millennium, an epochal shift marked at least in part by the increasing prevalence of hyperwhites, such optimism was difficult if not impossible to maintain, and the only hope remaining for the future involved stopping whiteness dead in its tracks, incinerating it, blasting it to bits, unplugging it, or braining it with a firm blow to the head. Black action heroes, of course, do all of these things, else they would not be action heroes. In addition, however, to attempting to remove the sterility of the white man's logic and his reproductive tactics by killing him—individual by individual—they also do their level best to cure him. When successful at this task, they not only save the world (the action hero's given task), but they set sickness right, they undo unfortunate mutation, and they purge the living of that most dangerous form of human corruption: white men who have lost control of their hungers. It turns out, or so these movies tell us, that the scourge of whiteness has an antidote and its essence is blackness.

Blade (Wesley Snipes), Dr. Robert Neville, and xXx (the second, played by Ice Cube) each a black action hero of a different type—Black Samurai, Black Scientist, and Black Jailbird—resolve the crises in their respective films by "coloring" whites. They do this by taking their own difference—a difference that in *Blade* and *I am Legend* is explicitly biological—and engineering, from it, a cure. Blade and Neville, at least, use laboratory science to give life rather than to take it away (xXx uses something even trickier to fill white men with a black essence, to which I will come round in the end). The generosity of this process makes it clear that scientific rationality—a classically white tool for social and biological engineering—in black hands is a new sort of tool. It is not one designed for ever more efficient killing, the ends to which movie whites are most likely to put it, but rather for purging white bodies of white evils by the relatively simple means of inoculating them.

Nowhere is this more evident than in the *Blade* films, where the white vampires, corporately organized, seek in knowledge—whether in history (*Blade*) or genetic engineering (*Blade II*)—to further their own power over the society of vampires (*Blade*) or all remaining humanity (*Blade II*). There is a greed and thoughtlessness in their reproductive strategies that should by now be easily recognizable as an index of their whiteness; they care not what they destroy in their quest to create, via scientific means, newer, better, stronger, and more powerful versions of themselves. These improvements always seem to need as their essential ingredient the blood of Blade, and thus do the films' plots unfold: the black man's biology in the white man's hands is the key to the super weapon that will turn all the world into their slaves (*Blade*) or into them (*Blade II*). Blade, of course, thwarts these attempts to hijack his exceptionalness, sans his moral sense, by those who hope to engineer it into even whiter whites (with all dangers such a shift entails). In his battle, Blade uses guns and a sword and some other cool weapons especially designed for vampire elimination, and the fight proceeds, more or less, as one might expect with white people exploding into dust and cinders at every turn. But Blade is also doing something else. He is making use of the same science that the white undead rely so heavily upon for their own projected victory, but to radically different ends. Blade is a special vampire not only because he can walk undamaged through the light of day, but also because rather than gaining his sustenance by draining the living, he injects himself with a serum, engineered in a lab, that quells his hunger. He is a junkie of sort, but not a selfish one. His use of chemistry does not make him *not* a vampire; it simply liberates him from their appetites.

Any (white) vampire could have done the same; any vampire, rather than working long nights in a lab to engineer a more deadly perfect version of themselves in hopes of taking over the world, could have made a like serum and also learned to control their hunger (for blood, for power, for excesses of every imaginable sort), and yet none did. Whites, we are let to know between the lines, treasure the appetites that rule them, while blacks, or at least Blade, are repulsed by these. The serum that subdues his need for blood—designed not incidentally by a black woman in thanks for his having saved her from being eaten—also has a second use. When administered in a timely manner, it unmakes vampires. Blade, thus, uses science not as a weapon against them—for this task, the gun loaded with silver bullets suffices—but as a means: first, of preventing himself from becoming like them (he holds his hunger at bay) and second, for curing those newly infected (and

by *Blade Trinity* almost any person bitten) back into humans again. All he has to do really is inject the willing with this small, sciencized bit of himself, and he returns to them their humanity. Without the black man's genetics, without—in a word—his essence, here as in *I am Legend*, *The Matrix* (all three), *Underworld*, and *XXX*,<sup>2</sup> whites are lost, in most cases willingly, to the destructive deliriums of their own hungers.

Whites, of course, will always be dangerous, they will always be tempted, they will always have the capacity for nefarious deception, and they will always hunger to increase themselves at the expense of others. For these reasons, their numbers as well as their logics must be greatly diminished. Its OK, in other words, to kill a lot of whites while simultaneously attempting to inoculate them against themselves. But killing whites, "coloring" them, and diluting their influence are not the only means black action heroes use to rid the world of white men. They also adopt white means to solve humanity's troubles. *Blade* uses science; Dr. Robert Neville takes it one step further and builds himself a laboratory. Agent Gibbon's (Samuel Jackson) in *XXX*<sup>2</sup> spreads his convictions via rational argument as does Morgan Freeman in almost every film he has ever starred in regardless of whether he kills white people (which he sometimes does) in the process. Black action heroes, as Denzel Washington has perhaps made more abundantly clear than all the rest combined, use their minds to solve problems and thus to set the world right. Scientific rationality, considered thought, logical argument, intelligence, and education, not to mention the business suits, lab coats, and other sorts of uniforms that were once, not very long ago, the sole providence of white people are now common characteristics of black ones. In other words, in popular cultural representations, black men, like many white men, are much "whiter" than they used to be, and this whiteness is almost exclusively cultural. Whites, thus, at least those few who have been released from their appetites, are not the only ones to have been "colored" as blacks ascend to super stardom. Whites may have been infected by black essences, but blacks have been made to adopt white ways.

It is easy to level a stinging critique against such processes in the US context. They stink both of slavery and of white men's dreams of "good minorities" who are like them in every way save the shading of their skin. A black man who lives the white man's life, occupies his house, dresses in his clothes, and adopts his logics is a despicable character precisely because he has allowed himself, indeed he has himself striven, to become precisely that Other whose entire *method de vivre* has proved itself—in history as well as

in story—infinately harmful to the human spirit and to the human body. He has been assimilated, and willingly so, by that form of life that knows naught but assimilation (Bhabha 1984). Though such processes are never perfect (at least in real life) as a generation of post-colonial scholarship has made abundantly clear, in the movies, blacks can be made white (and vice versa). It is therefore undeniably of symbolic importance when they are not.

It is Will Smith and not Ashton Kutcher (or, for that matter, Charlton Heston)<sup>7</sup> in that basement laboratory in *I am Legend* working out how to save some rabid, hairless hyperrats in cages. It is Will Smith, a black man, who sacrifices himself repeatedly throughout the film for the good of a humanity that wishes only to eat him and, despite his white coat and white-gloved hands, it is Will Smith, a black man, who does his science standing up rather than sitting down; he is active despite trappings of passivity, just as he is black despite the trappings of whiteness. His skin color, his moral stance, his bodily attitudes, and the adaptability of this intelligence, not to mention the fact that he is in possession of a needle thin phallus by means of which he spreads life and not death, are all clear indices of his non-whiteness. All the while the fact of his science, his lab coat, his obsessive data keeping, his high-rent-district residence, his patterns of speech, his civilian clothes, his German shepherd, and his interest in honing his golf game, despite the end of civilization as we know it, all bespeak a whiteness that while external to his person—these are things worn, spaces occupied, and motions gone through—are essential to his success at his given task: preserving something of the world from the ravages of the hyperwhites. The “something” that he saves, however, is nether their world nor—if we read him as a black man—strictly speaking his own. His black family is dead; the white institutions that supported him in his endeavors are also dead; what he has left to work with are remnants of raced worlds. These he gathers together, in his body and in his labor, in hopes of engineering a space and a biology within which human’s might continue to survive, if not flourish, absent the purity, sterility, routinization, and thoughtlessness of the all-consuming whites.

## Conclusion

More than providing specifics about what race and gender are for time immemorial, or even suggesting what it is they might be becoming in some concrete sort of way in a multiracial and yet still largely segregated US, what all of this points to most clearly is a popular cultural interest in and

a certain pleasure/horror derived from play with race. Stories while still highly raced are being narrated differently now, attributes are being affixed to different sorts of persons, for the simple reason that a more diverse set of tools are in play. The physical characteristics of race, for one, are no longer entirely linked to symbolic or cultural ones, and this partial unlinking of stereotypical behaviors (outfits, spaces) from physiological attributes has allowed for new mixes of race and thus new sorts of humans to come into being. Despite assumptions to the contrary, *I am Legend* is more forward leaning in this respect than are *The Matrix* films. Stereotypes in the latter—in spaces, behaviors, and races—are made to cling to explicitly raced bodies (i.e. The Merovingian drinks champagne and The Oracle lives in a tenement and not the reverse) rather than sliding over them and fixing to unexpected subjects.

I make no claims here that racial stereotypy is dead; in fact, quite to the contrary, much of the fuel for the plots of these films and for their very real entertainment value is in the slide of stereotypical cultural attributes over bodies (whatever their color) and into behaviors and environments. But *I am* also suggesting something else. These men, black men with big guns and clever minds, have two abilities very rarely granted to their white male counterparts. First, they have the capacity to give rather than simply manifesting a drive to consume; and second, they allow for a return to sexual, rather than viral, reproduction. The fecundity they offer to the future world is both one of a culture grounded in exchange and thus also reciprocity, and the return of the phallus and thus also a life-giving reciprocity to sexual reproduction. The fact that many of these black heroes operate within white idioms of power only serves to make the fact, the very shape, of their difference more audible.

One need not be conscious of all the details outlined here, and many more besides, to understand intuitively that black men are using white men's tools differently than are white men themselves. Inside all of the entertainment value (and woven between all the pyrotechnics), this simple fact changes the sorts of stories and the sorts of human futures that black action heroes are both used to tell and labor to preserve. What is important here is that the stories white people are used to tell have become increasingly attenuated and oversimplified (they consume and pervert life and, if left unchecked, they will consume and pervert everything), while those that black people are used to tell have become, simply by virtue of a recombinatory approach to stereotypy, deeply nuanced.

As for the films themselves, each in their own way, under the cover of plots and explosions and fabulous effects, tell not only stories of the dangers that white men and their logics pose to the well-being of the rest but of the obsolescent white man and the failed viability of a world fabricated by him. The very essence, and I mean this literally, of the dreams of salvation have changed. After the apocalypse, after near extinction, after re-engineered genetics and cancer treatments gone terribly wrong, after even global infertility and viral attacks, the world that black action heroes, and ass-kicking women, and even a smattering of Hispanics and Asians, fight for is one in which white logics along with white people are reduced nearly to nothing. It is not that these new heroes have made the world unsafe for whites, in fact far from it, but by using a black protagonist or equally a female one (a fascinating trend in its own right) to do away with those who embody and typify all that is wrong, or dead, or potentially harmful about white people, i.e. those very aspects of whiteness that, as bell hooks put it make their "...presence felt in black life most often as a terrorizing imposition, a power that wounds, hurts, tortures" (1992:169), these filmmakers have made the world safe for a mélange of colors and categories of persons, previously pushed to the edges by the white man's logic and his assimilationist way of life.

What exactly it is to be all these other things, and persons, and colors in flux in these films remains somewhat unclear as black men become white (*Resident Evil: Extinction*), brown women become mothers to white children (in the British films, see most especially *Children of Men* and *28 Days Later*), and white women are made explicitly superior to white men in adaptability, intelligence, and strength (cf. *Terminator 3: Rise of the Machines* [dir. Jonathan Mostow 2003] *Resident Evil: Apocalypse* [dir. Alexander Witt 2004], and *Hancock* [dir. Peter Berg 2008]). There are all sorts of transitions in these movies going in all sorts of directions, a trend one can only expect will broaden further with the next film and the one after that. The one thing that is sure in all of this, however, is that the only way to return things to "normal" is to ensure the absence of white men from the social scene or at least to greatly reduce both their numbers and the institutions dependant upon their logics.

Thus, though Will Smith may die at the end of *I am Legend*, his genetic material lives on and is carried forward (in a vial). The mix this precious tube holds is of him, a black man immune to the white man's infection, and a white women smote by it. The black man's natural immunity is the cure for the hyperwhite man's insatiable hunger. He returns them to civilization, or

so we are given to believe, but it is a civilization that by its very nature is not that created by whites for whites. It is multiracial, not only because the stragglers are a rainbow themselves but because even the whitest of white men, if they are to survive the new world order, will need to be—cellularly, essentially—black; black all the way down. The world after *The Matrix*'s close is likewise abundantly multicultural. The white man Smith, in all his instantiations, is gone; Zion survives, and the programs who live in the still morning sunrise of the first day are shades of brown and fragments of cultures—none of which are white. Perhaps most telling in all of this is the film to have garnered the least fanfare, *XXX<sup>2</sup>—The State of the Union*, the end of which finds the white president returned to his rightful place at the head of the nation, flags behind him, white men by his side, speaking the words of Tupac Shakur without even knowing that he has done it. The black people know, however, and they see fit to tell those whites in the audience who might not have noticed that the state of the union had changed.

#### ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Thanks go to Joseph Fitzpatrick, Elizabeth Traube, and Elizabeth McAlister for their time, their interest, and their expertise. Thanks also to all those in residence at the Center for the Humanities at Wesleyan University in 2008-2009 and to the American Locations workshop at the University of Chicago, whose members generously helped me work through an earlier draft. Special thanks are given to the editors of *Anthropology Quarterly* for their support of this endeavor.

#### ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup>Films considered in the text of this essay include: *28 Days Later* (dir. Danny Boyle 2002); *A Patch of Blue* (dir. Guy Green 1965); *Blade* (dir. Stephen Norrington 1998); *Blade II* (dir. Guillermo del Toro 2002); *Blade Trinity* (dir. David S. Goyer 2004); *Body and Soul* (dir. Robert Rossen 1947); *Children of Men* (dir. Alfonso Cuarón 2006); *Die Another Day* (dir. Lee Tamahori 2002); *Hancock* (dir. Peter Berg 2008); *I am Legend* (dir. Francis Lawrence 2007); *Indiana Jones and the Kingdom of the Crystal Skull* (dir. Steven Spielberg 2008); *I, Robot* (dir. Alex Proyas, 2004); *Knowing* (dir. John Koestler 2009); *Lethal Weapon 2* (dir. Richard Donner 1989); *Man On Fire* (dir. Tony Scot 2004); *The Matrix* (dirs. Andy and Larry Wachowski 1999); *Matrix Reloaded* (dirs. Andy and Larry Wachowski 2003); *Matrix Revolutions* (dirs. Andy and Larry Wachowski 2003); *The Night of the Living Dead* (dir. George Romero 1969); *Resident Evil* (dir. Paul W.S. Anderson 2002); *Resident Evil: Apocalypse* (dir. Alexander Witt 2004); *Resident Evil: Extinction* (dir. Russell Mulcahy 2007); *Return of the Jedi* (also known as *Star Wars: Episode VI*) (dir. Richard Marquand 1983); *Underworld* (dir. Len Wiseman 2003); *Underworld: Evolution* (dir. Len Wiseman 2006); *Watchmen* (dir. Zack Snyder 2009); and *XXX<sup>2</sup> - The State of the Union* (dir. Lee Tamahori 2005).

<sup>2</sup>It is surprising how often black characters, when not killers, are cast in the role of “Magical African-American Friends” or, in Spike Lee’s words, “super-duper magical negroes.” They are given little to no backstory or motivation of their own and the sole, unadulterated purpose of their character is the salvation (usually spiritual) of a white one. Such black men, and less often black women, are plot devices and not people per se. A host of recent examples include: *Green Mile*, *The Legend of Bagger Vance*, *Forest Gump*, and *Ghost*. Even Laurence Fishburn’s character in *The Matrix* falls into this category, albeit with more nuance.

<sup>3</sup>This is a well documented trend, and though a non-white woman makes it to the end of *I am Legend*, the fact that the sole black character, despite being the star, does not, fits within a narrative that should make innate sense to audiences due simply to the fact of multiple exposures. See the “Unfair Racial Cliché Alert” webpage [http://www.feoamante.com/Movies/Racial/racial\\_1960.html](http://www.feoamante.com/Movies/Racial/racial_1960.html) (accessed 4/2008) for a list of over a hundred (mostly horror) movies since the 1960s in which every non-white character is killed before the end.

<sup>4</sup>It should be noted that it is the machines, and not the matrix, that are growing embryos.

<sup>5</sup>Race is a very different thing in Britain and in British films, and for this reason I bring *28 Days Later*, *28 Weeks Later*, and *Children of Men* (not to mention *Shaun of the Dead* [dir. Edgar Wright, 2004]) into this essay only in passing.

<sup>6</sup>The fact that most of the films in which hyperwhites appear are installations in a series is not incidental. In the first film (or less often the second), a more traditional white enemy is vanquished. In the next (the second, or at times the third), the new white enemy appears. In *Resident Evil: Apocalypse* (dir. Alexander Witt 2004), the second in the franchise, two new zombie-fighting weapons are engineered, the first is a massively ugly, skinless, formerly white man, called “Nemesis” with staples through his face and massive muscles and guns. The second is Alice (played by Milla Jovovich), a slight, white, beautiful woman. More than her beauty, however it is her agility, speed, and intelligence along with her flexible use of her environment and an empathy rarely seen in action heroes of either gender that makes her the superior of the two warriors. The climax of *Apocalypse* is a test fight between these two versions of a human anti-zombie weapon, and she bests him easily. It is not until three years later, in the third film, *Resident Evil: Extinction* (dir. Russell Mulcahy 2007) that Alice is pitted against the hyperwhites, a new sort of zombie engineered specifically to best her. In the *Underworld* series we see the same dynamic. The first film (2003) pits the Vampires against the Lycans—decadent whites again lively “blacks” or, if you will, cultured bloodsucker against sewer-dwelling animals—a white woman wins the battle for her side but only at the expense of faith in her race and renewed respect for, and alliance, with the brutes she so long hunted. Once this task is accomplished and morality tale told, the sequel (2006) unleashes the hyperwhites. Likewise in *Blade* (1998) Wesley Snipes kills vampires of the regular sort and only after he is proven to be massively and incontrovertibly superior to them are the hyperwhites, loosed upon the scene, again in the second film of the series. Even the aborted *XXX* franchise follows this logic, though differently so. Despite the fact that the enemy remains white, shifting only from Eastern European mobsters in the first film to evil US bureaucrats and politicians in the second, the hero becomes blacker, as does the world and the values he defends.

<sup>7</sup>The original version of the film *Omega Man* (dir. Boris Sagal 1971) stars Charlton Heston.

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