The Colonial Spectre of Classicism: Reflections on ‘White Psyche’ at The Whitworth Gallery

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What can early nineteenth-century imperial French wallpaper tell us about contemporary forms of white supremacy? Is it possible to ‘look again’ or ‘conscious look’ at the visual documents of white supremacy in a new way? What abiding role does classicism and its myriad aesthetic forms, including architecture, art, mythology and symbolism, play in the construction and maintenance of white supremacy? These are some of the questions posed by the Whitworth Art Gallery with its exhibition ‘White Psyche’, running from 16th September 2020 to January 2021 (give or take lockdown closures). In the wake of the attention brought to the institutional, structural and interpersonal racism still hard at work in our society by the global Black Lives Matter movement over the summer of 2020, the Whitworth joins many other cultural institutions across Britain and the world in efforts to interrogate, dismantle and decentre whiteness and the white experience while recontextualising the contributions and voices of marginalised Black and Brown people.

The exhibition opens with a weighty preface text declaring ‘White dominance is often unacknowledged... Here, as part of our work to shift this unconscious bias, we focus our gaze on the aesthetics of white supremacy in a story about love and good looks.’ Turning from the text to the images, the viewer encounters ten large neoclassical black-and-white wallpaper prints, evenly spaced out and hung against the white wall of the airy central gallery room. At first glance they seem neither controversial, shocking, violent, nor even particularly unusual. An all-white cast of rosy cherubs, adoring zephyrs (androgy nous, winged figures similar to angels), serious-looking men, and women in delicately flowing drapery enact the dramatic story of Cupid and Psyche across Arcadian landscapes dotted with classical temples. They are surrounded by divine, fluffy white clouds and richly ornamented classical interiors decorated with delicately sculpted urns, ionic columns, life-size pearly white statues and richly ornamented walls, ceilings, windows and floors, as well as helmets, spears, tables, chairs and chaises longues. Designed by the French artists Merry Joseph Blondel and Louis Latiflfe in 1815–1816, and printed by the commercial manufacturer ‘Dufour et Cie’, the ten pieces (sold
in parts or altogether) were produced for the French middle-class market with its taste for classical Greco-Roman antiquity. Such bourgeois images of ‘high taste’ or ‘high art’ sit comfortably within the white cube of the gallery. However, with the introductory text of the exhibition, the Whitworth has undertaken the difficult task of re-examining these ubiquitous classical images, paradigmatic examples of ‘good taste’ and ‘high art’, as exemplary instances of ‘the aesthetics of white supremacy’.

Engaging with this unacknowledged ‘unconscious bias’ towards whiteness, the work of the Black scholar, revolutionary, theorist and psychiatrist Frantz Fanon seems to be the inspirational force lurking beneath the critical agenda of the exhibition. Fanon’s pioneering work on the ways in which racist colonial ideology produces a dual neurosis in both the minds of white colonisers and in the minds of Black colonised peoples catalysed a long process of self-conscious analysis for Black radicals and revolutionaries involved with the anti-colonial Algerian resistance against France. Using a psychoanalytic approach, Fanon explained how the combined weight of colonial occupation and racist colonial ideology alienated the colonised Black subject from his/her identity. This alienation simultaneously stripped the subject of his so-called ‘backward’ and ‘uncivilised’ history, culture and traditions, leaving in its place the hollow ideal of European whiteness. ‘Both the black man, slave to his inferiority and the white man, slave to his superiority, behave in accordance with a neurotic orientation’, Fanon wrote in *Black Skin, White Masks*.1 Read in this context, ‘White Psyche’ has a dual meaning: Psyche, the mythological character depicted as a white woman in the wallpaper series; and the psyche of the Euro-American bourgeois colonial mind – meaning, also, the psychology of white supremacy. However, the task of navigating the complexities and entangled histories of the multivalent meanings of ‘psyche’ across the exhibition space falls largely to the spectator.

In the first of the twelve wallpaper prints (Figure 1), we encounter Psyche and her parents in the temple of Apollo the moment after she has received the terrible prophecy that she will marry a monster whom ‘neither man nor god can resist’. A semi-nude statue of Apollo points two accusatory fingers down at the miserable Psyche who closes her eyes in sadness and leans her limp body against her aghast mother, who looks up to the statue in horror with wide eyes and an open mouth. Psyche’s father clutches his staff, raises his hand in disbelief and lowers his eyes away from the tragic sight of Apollo and his daughter. Meanwhile, to the right of the composition we spy the hidden pubescent boy Cupid, recognisable by his wing and quiver of arrows, listening as he leans against the doorway. A shaft of shadow in the otherwise brightly lit space casts down on Psyche, diagonally framing her and symbolically foreshadowing Apollo’s tragic prophecy.

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1 Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks* [1952], Pluto Press, London, 1986, p 60
As we move around the room and sequentially on with the story, we see the lovers together again as Psyche enters Cupid’s chamber while he sleeps (Figure 2). Psyche holds an oil lamp that illuminates both Psyche’s adoring expression as she sees Cupid for the first time and Cupid’s exposed sleeping body. In the process of looking, our eye is drawn in to voyeuristically admire the idealised white body of the god of love reclining on a recognisably contemporary French chaise longue and his adoring bride in a moment of candlelit intimacy. This titillating moment of simultaneous ecstasy and tragedy (as Cupid is soon to awake and forbid Psyche to see him again) invites the viewer to participate in a coquettish game of voyeurism and forbidden desires.

In the final scene, Psyche is finally claimed as the knot is (literally) tied around her, and we, like Cupid – or rather we as the early nineteenth-century, white male bourgeois French viewer – get to gaze and admire her ‘perfect’, idealised white body draped in a loose, translucently thin dress (Figure 3).

Walking around the exhibition it is hard to ignore the lingering, almost ghostly presence of the ego-centred, white bourgeois male gaze that these images were designed to indulge. An erotic indulgence, even a sadistic indulgence in the pleasure of looking, pervades the series as, like the gods of the story, we look down as voyeurs on Psyche and her divinely ordained trials from the invisible and disembodied perspective of the camera obscura. Coupled to this, the use of grisaille lends the entire series a sense of sober universality – as if the drama of the story takes place in a kind of mythical, eternal space and time beyond history.
The myth of Cupid and Psyche was written originally by the North African writer Apuleius in the second Century CE. Writing in what is now Algeria, the same country whose anti-colonial struggle against French occupation in the 1960s inspired much of Fanon’s revolutionary work, the apparent ahistorical time and space that these scenes project themselves into becomes ever more tied up in a complex web of colonial, Euro-African relations. The Whitworth ties these threads together by noting how Apuleius’s story and identity as an African was absorbed within the ‘dominant culture’ of Rome as the occupier, only to be reproduced by the bourgeois colonial culture of Napoleon I’s France in the form of wallpaper depicting an Arcadian classical (white) idyll for the rich and ‘cultured’ bourgeois.

The apparent ahistorical eternality of the drama the series seeks to project can be read as an attempt to enforce an unavoidably white/European perspective, complete with recognisably French neoclassical furniture and ornament, as universal and as universally relevant. In his article ‘The Cultural Psychology of White Normativity: A Draft to the Concept of White Psyche’, critical race theorist Márcio Nunes de Abreu describes this projection of the white experience and the white perspective as universal as ‘the defining character of the white psyche’.2 Or, in other words, positioning the white experience and white perspective as eternal, ahistorical and transcendent is ‘at once [a] product and producer of a hegemonic culture that speaks for itself, while claiming to speak for the commonality of humanity’.3

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3 Ibid
In this way, much of the exhibition’s coherence and potential for success as a response to calls for decolonisation beyond, in and through the gallery space relies quite heavily on the Whitworth’s assertive claim of an opportunity to ‘look again’, or to ‘look consciously’ at these images of neoclassical white culture in the light of ‘dominant whiteness’. As I walked around the space of the gallery, however, I could not help feeling that the curators could have done more to explain and elaborate on the connections between the two ‘psyches’; much hangs on the conscious looking done by the viewer, it seems. Although gesturing to some, so many of the complex issues potentially at stake in the exhibition are only alluded to, left half formed and trapped in the two bulky blocks of text on the wall – complex issues such as the story of Cupid and Psyche within the context of the erasure of African and Asiatic contributions to Hellenistic culture, hetero-patriarchal control over and violence against women’s bodies, the heavy-handed use of neoclassical forms, subject matter, ornament and style and their consequent relation to white supremacist structures of dominance. Moreover, the significance of wallpaper, or ‘decorative objects’ in the historical context of 1816 France, and the value of these images as infrastructural supports for whiteness as always positioned within a dialectic against an unstated (Black), colonised Other could have been unpacked further for the viewer.

Perhaps the more explicit inclusion of Fanon’s critical perspective would have the viewer flesh out some of these tensions. The exhibition provoked many questions, such as ‘what kind of worldview is projected in these images’, ‘what might be the use/function of these images as depictions of European classical heritage/history’, or ‘how might the experience of these images be different to European and African viewers’. The complexities inherent in the overall display point to the need for a deeper probing of the ideological tensions at play in these exasperatingly white images.

As material objects, it is vital to understand the bourgeois and domestic situatedness of these wallpaper prints, and to see how they participate in the rise of neoclassicism, a broad trend in the Western artistic tradition that sought to associate the colonial societies of Europe and America (particularly post-revolutionary France) with the perceived values of Greco-
Roman culture such as rationality, enlightenment, culture, honour and dignity. As objects, or wallpaper, produced for bourgeois interiors and to provide the backdrop to bourgeois life, they can be read historically as cultural signifiers operating within the colonial logic of early nineteenth-century France. That is to say, by buying and displaying the wallpaper, one could demonstrate one’s cultural status and good taste through association with neoclassical aesthetics and knowledge, and thus the hegemonic logic of the colonial West as the (sole) heirs of the grand classical tradition is collectively reinforced.

Papering over this violence, the reclaiming of the classical canon was part and parcel of a political project that sought to advance a particular view of history, one that promoted the rightfulness of such appropriation for the purposes of political expediency – that is, colonial expansion. Colonial France came to brand its conquering enterprise not as attempts to take control of foreign lands and indigenous people for material gain but instead as a ‘civilising mission’: to civilise the uncivilised nations of the world. Such notions of a ‘civilising mission’ continued until after the enlightenment when it came to be largely displaced by the new god of ‘reason’ as moral arbiter. Stylistically focused on classical subjects, scenes and traditions, all painted with an assiduous attention to detail, a penchant for idealised muscular white bodies and a strict adherence to all things rational, neoclassicism thus emerged as a staple bulwark of white supremacist logic.

Indeed, the view that the West is the unique and privileged heir to the Greco-Roman classical tradition (conveniently excluding the contributions of Africa and Asia to Hellenistic traditions) has been a favourite trope of Euro-American Fascist projects. The twentieth and twenty-first centuries have witnessed the revival of neo-classical architecture: Albert Speer’s plans for an austere Third Reich metropolis; Donald Trump’s calls for ‘beautifying’ state buildings in 2018 (‘make federal buildings beautiful again’); and in the UK, the tiresome bouts of classical trivia and rhetoric from politicians Jacob Rees-Mogg and Boris Johnson. However, classicism and fascism do not just intersect in the arena of political theatre, although it does seem to be the most common meeting space. Across the UK and the US, fascist and right wing groups reiterate this same line of logic to recruit and radicalise potential followers – claiming a monopoly on violence as the ‘civilised’ heirs to a ‘superior civilisation’.

In Black Skin, White Masks, Fanon declared ‘a man who has a language consequently possesses the world expressed and implied by that language’. 4 For Fanon, colonialism is a total project – encompassing all parts of human experience and reality, including language. Merry Joseph Blondel and Louis Lafitte’s vision of the story of Cupid and Psyche emerges from the pan-European colonial visual language of Neoclassicism. Deconstructive attempts on the part of the curators to reveal the putative universality of the blinding whiteness of ‘White Psyche’ fell short of its proposed agenda. Or perhaps not; would the aim be to show how these images

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4 Fanon, Black Skin, White Masks, op cit, p 18
have become culturally ubiquitous because of their invisibility? Might this be a visual exercise in making the ideologically invisible, visible?

In my view, however, these aims have remained somewhat unsaid. Many of the genuinely fascinating questions and problems raised by the images, their context, their usage, their history and their relationship to broader ideological and colonial structures seem to be gestured at but left unfinished, limiting their critical potential. Scratching at the surface of things. Introducing radical insights of a theorist like Fanon could have pushed the exhibition beyond the circular conclusion that these overwhelmingly white images are just products of the colonial white psyche; this would be especially vital in view of the growing insurgent white supremacist and populist forces across Britain, Europe and North America that continue to deploy this logic to violent ends.

But perhaps it is not the job of the curator to answer questions, and the radical potential of an exhibition does not lie exclusively within a gallery space; rather, this space can provoke a sustained inquiry into our own analysis and understanding of images. In the case of this particular exhibition, I would urge everyone who visits to revisit and learn the lessons Fanon taught us.

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