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The Matter of Images: Essays on Representations (review)

David Lancaster

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Doherty's point, in short, is that early television was more multifaceted than supposed and that, rather than hurting the quality of public debate, it encouraged the exchange of ideas. It helped the burgeoning civil rights movement, partly by unmasking injustices, and by exposing to the camera lens racial stereotypes that could not stand visual scrutiny. For example, *Amos 'n' Andy*, a popular comic radio show with exaggerated black characters, folded on TV. At the same time, shows attacking Communism, such as *I Led Three Lives*, were often complex, presenting Communists as well-read, prepared to listen to their opponents, as opposed to members of the House Committee on Un-American Activities, often shown browbeating witnesses.

Doherty points out, too, that the blacklist issue was more complex than has been suggested. Insidious as the practice was in blighting careers, it was never fully effective or efficiently implemented. Some performers, who took the smears head-on, won. The most famous examples were Lucille Ball and Desi Arnez, who were too popular and powerful as media personalities to be reached by the blacklists. Liberace, too, survived and prospered in an era when anti-Communism blended easily into slurs on homosexuals (weren't they all effete intellectuals?) and an excessively low neckline might consign a female show host to oblivion as fast as having voted Red in her youth.

The ultimate conclusion to be reached is perhaps not a cheering one for the present time. The progress of television has not shown an optimistic Darwinian-style evolution from crude beginnings to a sophisticated, mature product. Rather, early TV may have nourished more worthwhile debate, perhaps because it had to rely so heavily on live shows featuring journalists and other public figures that had not yet made lifelong careers of surviving on the box, with its slavish adherence to ratings, official network stances, and sponsor demands. Is it possible that today only a show like Bill Moyers' *Now on PBS* echoes the solid intellectual fiber of the early shows?

In the end, the exposure of McCarthy's personality and message to the scrutiny of the camera and his TV critics went a long way towards destroying him. The right thing happened. But the disquieting issue we are left with is what happens when a medium so all-pervasive in its cultural power fails to ask the right questions? When, for example, TV reporters only repeat official press releases without critical analysis, does the medium still contribute to the public good or has it become simply a propaganda tool, in thrall to a specific point of view? This might be the subject for a companion study to *Cold War, Cool Medium*.

**Michael C. C. Adams**

Northern Kentucky University  
adamsm@NKU.EDU

**Richard Dyer**  
***The Matter of Images:  
Essays on Representations.***  
**Second edition.**

**Routledge, 2003.**  
**183 pages; \$75.00.**

**The Invisible Visible**

Back in the days when music hall was the staple diet of British entertainment, most artists had a tag line, which neatly summed up the nature of their act; there were slogans such as "He Of The Funny Ways", or "Always Applauded". If Richard Dyer ever trod the boards, he could be accurately summed up by the name of one of his previous books, *Now You See It*, a study of gay-identified, non-commercial films first published in the 1980s. For much of his writing, both there and here, has all the drama of the conjurer pulling the proverbial rabbit out of the hat. It makes the invisible visible; it drags something previously obscure into the full glare of the spotlight. Dyer does this, moreover, with such clarity and vigour that it is not too much of an exaggeration to say that he is compulsory reading for anyone interested in gay issues, in the nature and function of stardom, and in the host of knotted questions surrounding what the late Edward Said called the "Other".

*The Matter of Images* is a collection of essays that investigate the wide range of this otherness. A revised version of a book first published ten years ago, its new material is a logical extension of the reprinted work on gay and lesbian sexualities, and, above all, on race. This area is whiteness itself, a state so central and so apparently unquestioned that, for Dyer, it has an "everything-and-nothing quality", and therefore can be made visible only by a very particular conjuring trick. In the fresh articles on serial killers, the stardom of Lilian Gish, and the structure and images of *The Birth of a Nation*, he mutates the rabbit, turns it into something alien and strange. In his hands, whiteness is not assumed blandly to be a "dominant ideology", but is seen, rather, as a conglomeration of contradictions and anxieties, held together by little more than obstinate self-delusion and smoke and mirrors.

This is most clearly seen in the two essays featuring Gish. Here, Dyer breaks down Griffith's most famous star into her component parts: he shows how the essence of film itself, the manipulation of light, is used to create a morally exemplary saint, whose reserve, purity and wisdom are embodiments (rather spooky ones, it should be said) of the white ideal. Yet, as the *Birth of a*



*Nation* essay reveals, this ideal is not a simple, monolithic white supremacy: it covertly undermines itself by acknowledging the contradictions in its own position. In a bravura piece of writing, he argues that, although Southern whiteness appears to triumph in the big Klu Klux Klan procession at the end of the film, it is Gish's Elsie Stoneman, a Northerner, who has, in effect, rescued southern whiteness from its debilitation and corruption; for the film, both of these have been brought about by southerners consorting with black women, and, hence, creating the dreaded "mulattos" of Griffith's imagination. The general implication is that whiteness is a pathological state, which normalises itself by using especially cunning narrative sleights of hand.

These added chapters are notable for their force, subtlety and human perception, and similar qualities are on view in the previously published material. One of the best pieces is a study of *Victim*, the pioneering early Sixties "gay" film starring Dirk Bogarde. Here, Dyer offers an acute analysis of the film's attitudes towards homosexuality, and of the self-betrayal that lurks within its seemingly impregnable structure. In its sensitivity to structure, in fact, the book's overall critical approach is a compelling dramatisation of the actual experience of sitting and responding in a cinema (this writer's experience, at any rate). It investigates the sense of being lured into a labyrinth of light, imagery and meaning, where you feel that you are being pursued by something wholly unattainable, yet as close as a handclasp. Only when the film has ended, and you stop and look clearly for the first time at the whole structure, do you realise that all along you have been haunted by the shadow of your own self.

Dyer is an acute guide to this shadow world. In his essay on homosexuality and film noir, to take just one instance, he demonstrates how Clifton Webb's waspish, gay sophisticate in *Laura*, or the lesbian characters in Sinatra's *Tony Rome*, are ghostly doubles who haunt the heterosexual male protagonists, either frustrating their attempts to possess the heroine, or disrupting the even arc of their narrative journey. By contrast, gay-generated imagery and types are doubles of gay people themselves, being both an object of erotic pleasure and a more external self-definition: "the image of gay desire is also an image of what the gay person is." (Chapter Four: "Seen to be Believed.") Although Dyer refers to distinct "dominant" and "oppressed" groups at times, the general tendency is to highlight their complex interrelationships, where each party, to a degree, echoes the other.

*The Matter of Images* achieves this impressive depth and resonance, because it is a collection of relatively short, limited pieces, written originally for a range of scholarly and more general publications. One result of everything being so concentrated is that Dyer has no need to weigh down the writing by endlessly spelling things out, like some academic books; he attacks with the force of a commando, rather than with the lumbering apparatus of the full-scale assault. For this reason, the book packs more punch, and covers more ground, than weightier studies: also, when

he is writing for a less specialised audience, like the readers of the old *Marxism Today*, his prose relaxes and lightens, and it is a deep pleasure to read. The only drawback, for we hacks who fumble with similar material, is that, faced with work of this excellence, a mild depression sets in. The collection is ample proof that Dyer is the king of his particular hill, and anyone else trying the ascent is well advised to give up and seek contentment by pottering about on the beginners' slopes.

**David Lancaster**

The University of Leeds  
d.p.lancaster@leeds.ac.uk

**Marilyn J. Matelski and  
Nancy Lynch Street, editors.  
*War and Film in America:  
Historical and Critical Essays.***

McFarland, 2003.

208 pages; \$32.00 paper.

### Key Distinctions

*War and Film in America* is another addition to the ever-growing number of written exercises addressing the war drama genre. And, as is typical with a book made up of essays by various authors, the quality can significantly vary. It should be noted that this book deals exclusively with films released after World War II, and predominantly with those texts that either directly or indirectly reflect American responses to the Cold War and/or the Vietnamese conflict. Yet, its contributors never clearly define what they mean by a war film and never seriously engage combat films. For instance, the briefly discussed *Black Hawk Down* (2001) intensely recreates an actual combat situation that took place in the 1990s between American troops and irregular indigenous forces during a misguided humanitarian operation in a civil war torn Somalia. But is it a war film? At pains to point out the "partnership" between Hollywood and the military—which has always been the case, and which has obviously resulted in various quid pro quos—the editors/authors lose sight of the key distinctions between war dramas, war allegories, combat films and films about the military.



What the editors/authors do proclaim in *War and Film in America* is that the "old definitions" of combat are no longer applicable in the new world order of the 21st century. Yet no new definitions are ever proffered—other than a post-modernist