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Preface:

Bringing Race and Media Technologies into Focus

Lynne Joyrich

The term *camera obscura* derives from the Latin “dark chamber.” A darkened enclosure with a small opening through which rays of light can pass, projecting an inverted image, in “natural color,” of whatever opaque body faces the aperture on a receiving surface and thus yielding an optical device able to focus, reveal, and reproduce images out of light and shade: the camera obscura is one of our earliest and most historically significant media technologies.¹ This, no doubt, is well known to readers of this journal. But, taking another look at this term and its imagery, what does it mean to consider a technological device, a media apparatus, through the lens of the “dark” and “shaded,” with all the cultural connotations—for race and space, of knowledge and fantasy, in science and entertainment—that these terms have historically been made to carry? What sort of openings or gaps might exist within the enclosures of our thinking about technologies and “opaque,” “colored” bodies, allowing for what kinds of reflections and projections, facings and inversions, productions and reproductions to appear or dis-

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appear? What constructions of inside and outside, or visible and invisible, engineer our receptions, revelations, and screenings, and what are the implications of these mechanisms of perspective and supposed truth? What has been constituted as the obscure—as enigmatic and inscrutable, as dusky and dim, as nameless and anonymous, as primitive and remote—by the optics of our own theoretical foci and apparatuses?²

If I have begun this special issue preface by playing out various images and overtones associated with the term *camera obscura*—and particularly certain racialized images and overtones evoked by this technical device—it is to suggest the particular importance of considering questions both of race and of technology, of race *and/as* technology, to *Camera Obscura* itself. In fact, for this discursive location, one might do the same with the signifier *preface*. While a utopian fantasy exists that technology is somehow “pre-face”—that it can be literally faceless and bodiless, offering an escape from a raced materiality, that it encounters us all equally and with color blindness, having no particularity or profile—this is, indeed, a fantasy. As the essays in this special issue make clear, technology is very much faced and raced, embodied in relation to particular modes of mediation and distinctly mediated (that is, differently articulated and experienced) by how it is embodied.

Race, in other words, and as many others have argued, is not simply represented in media texts; it is not simply something on which technologies may operate. Rather, the apparatus of race (in complex intersection with apparatuses of gender, generation, sexuality, class, nation, and so on) is configured and reconfigured by and through our material and signifying technologies: the very ways in which we think, experience, and enact race are tied to our media forms, just as race (and gender, generation, sexuality, class, nation) mediates our interpretations and uses of these forms in turn. From the differences inscribed in literature and installed through literacy to the negatives that make up photography’s evidentiary archives, from the shaded imitations and impersonations of theatrical performativity to the shadows of cinematic illusionism, from TV in “black and white” and then in “living color” to digital dreams of recombination and even genetic recoding: our imaginaries of race have been technologized and our imaginings of technology have been racialized.³

To emphasize the formation of these intersecting imaginaries as the authors in this issue do—that is, to trace the ways in which race has been constituted via media technologies and the ways in which media texts have been constituted via arrangements of race—is not to say that race (or, obviously, racism) is not “real.” To the contrary: race historically has been, and certainly continues to be, constructed as a critical reality—both a diacritical and a dangerous one. Our emphasis on the complex formation of various techniques, mediations, and machines of difference is thus designed not to de-realize questions of media and race (much less of racism) through claims of “mere” virtuality, but, rather, to refuse the very oppositions usually assumed between the real and the fantasized, the natural and the cultural, the material and the discursive, the embodied and the mediatised. As my coeditor Wendy Hui Kyong Chun points out in the essay that follows, “like technology, race has never been merely cultural or biological, social or scientific,” and the (fairly recent) belief that these pairings can be strictly separated is itself an effect of certain technical ways of seeing.

It is this refusal of oppositions that is signaled by the cojoined “and/as” in our title “Race and/as Technology.” In suggesting through that hybridized term that race is not something that simply operates alongside technology, nor is it “only” a media effect, we hope to go beyond a too-easy dismissal of race as nothing but an obviously “false” ideology—a deception appearing, as Karl Marx and Frederick Engels famously described it, “upside-down as in a camera obscura,” to be put upright by clear scientific thought.⁴ Such a view, itself relying on particular technical imperatives (and illusions), discourages the in-depth and reflexive analysis that the topic of race and/as technology requires.⁵ That is, we cannot presume that, in the light of “truth,” race will simply fade away into obscurity. Rather—as the authors in this special issue demonstrate—we must constantly rethink and reenvision the terms by which “difference engines” have been devised and deployed, looking through the gaps and apertures of technologies and media texts to develop new apparatuses for engaging with questions of race.⁶ It is our hope that, in this way, we might continue to focus and refocus our own “camera obscura,” allowing for ever new kinds of reflection.

Notes

1. “A darkened chamber in which the real image of an object is received through a small opening or lens and focused in natural color onto a facing surface rather than recorded on a film or plate.” *The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language*, 4th ed., s.v. “camera obscura.”
2. These terms—*dark*, *dusky*, *dim*, *enigmatic*, *inscrutable*, *remote*, *anonymous*, *nameless*—are only some of the synonyms given for *obscure* in *Roget’s II: The New Thesaurus*, 3rd ed.
3. Such points have been made not only by our contributors (in their essays in this special issue, as well as in their previous work) but also by many other scholars—indeed, too many to list here. But just to give a very short sampling of such work, see the collections Manthia Diawara, ed., *Black American Cinema: Aesthetics and Spectatorship* (New York: Routledge, 1993); Valerie Smith, ed., *Representing Blackness: Issues in Film and Video* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1997); Sasha Torres, ed., *Living Color: Race and Television in the United States* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1998); Beth E. Kolko, Lisa Nakamura, and Gilbert B. Rodman, eds., *Race in Cyberspace* (New York: Routledge, 2000); Alondra Nelson and Thuy Linh N. Tu, with Alicia Hines Headlam, eds., *Technicolor: Race, Technology, and Everyday Life* (New York: New York University Press, 2000); and Coco Fusco and Brian Wallis, eds., *Only Skin Deep: Changing Visions of the American Self* (New York: Abrams, 2003).
4. Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, *The German Ideology*, ed. C. J. Arthur (New York: International Publishers, 1970), 47.
5. There is a whole body of scholarship on race and ideology (and on the inadequacies of conceptualizing race as “mere” ideology)—again, too much work to do justice to here. For just one key text, though, see Michael Omi and Howard Winant, *Racial Formation in the United States: From the 1960s to the 1980s*, 2nd ed. (New York: Routledge, 1994).
6. The “difference engine” was what the inventor, Charles Babbage, called his 1822 device—a tabulating machine that many now view as the first computer in our modern (or postmodern) sense of the term. It is also the name of an alternative history/alternative technology novel by the well-known cyberpunk writers William Gibson and Bruce Sterling (though, in referring to Babbage’s mechanical devices, this novel is better characterized as a “steampunk” piece). But beyond these

technological references and resonances, the term seems a particularly apt one for describing such social apparatuses as race and ethnicity that have been made to produce and tabulate differences among human communities and populations, and it is in that metaphorical sense that I use it here.

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