

Are orcs racist? : Genre, racecraft, and Bright

Autor(en): **Ramírez, J. Jesse**

Objektyp: **Article**

Zeitschrift: **SPELL : Swiss papers in English language and literature**

Band (Jahr): **38 (2019)**

PDF erstellt am: **25.08.2024**

Persistenter Link: <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-869556>

Nutzungsbedingungen

Die ETH-Bibliothek ist Anbieterin der digitalisierten Zeitschriften. Sie besitzt keine Urheberrechte an den Inhalten der Zeitschriften. Die Rechte liegen in der Regel bei den Herausgebern.

Die auf der Plattform e-periodica veröffentlichten Dokumente stehen für nicht-kommerzielle Zwecke in Lehre und Forschung sowie für die private Nutzung frei zur Verfügung. Einzelne Dateien oder Ausdrucke aus diesem Angebot können zusammen mit diesen Nutzungsbedingungen und den korrekten Herkunftsbezeichnungen weitergegeben werden.

Das Veröffentlichen von Bildern in Print- und Online-Publikationen ist nur mit vorheriger Genehmigung der Rechteinhaber erlaubt. Die systematische Speicherung von Teilen des elektronischen Angebots auf anderen Servern bedarf ebenfalls des schriftlichen Einverständnisses der Rechteinhaber.

Haftungsausschluss

Alle Angaben erfolgen ohne Gewähr für Vollständigkeit oder Richtigkeit. Es wird keine Haftung übernommen für Schäden durch die Verwendung von Informationen aus diesem Online-Angebot oder durch das Fehlen von Informationen. Dies gilt auch für Inhalte Dritter, die über dieses Angebot zugänglich sind.

Are Orcs Racist? Genre, Racecraft, and *Bright*

J. Jesse Ramírez

Bright (2017), the most expensive film produced to date by the American streaming media company Netflix, exemplifies the micro-genrefication of American film within the emerging digital ecosystem of platform cinema. This essay uses a symptomatic concept of genre to triangulate a close reading of the film with analyses of generic forms and “racecraft,” a social epistemology that transforms or “crafts” social relations so that they appear to be biological relations among discrete “races.” Combining elements of science fiction, J. R. R. Tolkien’s Middle Earth mythology, and the interracial buddy cop movie, *Bright* is an allegory of contemporary struggles between oppressed “races” and the Los Angeles Police Department. The film is symptomatic of a post-Black Lives Matter moment in US political and cultural history in which narratives of “racial” diversification can no longer redeem the police as an institution. *Bright* suggests that a new fictional collectivity must be racecrafted in order for such narratives to persist in the current ideological conjuncture. I conclude the essay by explaining the significance of *Bright*’s racecraft in relation to the contemporary resurgence of “race” in genetics.

Keywords: Race, racecraft, fantasy, science fiction, buddy cop film, Netflix

Genre in the Age of Netflix

Genres, whatever else they may be said to be or do, are about patterns and conventions, structures of repetition, and common codes. I want to begin with such a simple claim in order to develop a working concept of

The Genres of Genre: Form, Formats, and Cultural Formations. SPELL: Swiss Papers in English Language and Literature 38. Ed. Cécile Heim, Boris Vejdovsky and Benjamin Pickford. Tübingen: Narr, 2019. 125-43.

genre that is elastic enough to encompass, on the one hand, the aesthetics of genre – genres of literature, film, and other cultural objects – and on the other, the social epistemologies of genre. Despite the recent (re)emergence of various post-symptomatic literary and cultural theories, a symptomatic concept of genre remains a powerful tool for connecting different domains of cultural and social life.¹ Fredric Jameson has influentially described genre as a means of triangulating the interpretation of an aesthetic or cultural object with historical analysis of both forms and social life:

The strategic value of generic concepts for Marxism clearly lies in the mediatory function of the notion of a genre, which allows the coordination of immanent formal analysis of the individual text with the twin diachronic perspective of the history of forms and the evolution of social life. (92)

A symptomatic concept of genre that underscores the symptomaticity of patterns is especially relevant to the contemporary social and cultural conjuncture in the United States, as the production, capture, storage, and analysis of patterns are major organizing principles of platform and surveillance capitalism (Srnicsek; Zuboff). What unites American social media platforms, the national security state, and artificial-intelligence engineers is their shared interest in the generic qualities of human perception and practice. These actors and institutions are keen on predicting what people will buy next or where the next criminal act might occur, and on externalizing human decision-making processes – including those that decide what constitutes consumer preference and “crime” – in technical systems that are cheaper, faster, and more controllable than human actors.

David Ayer’s *Bright* (2017) exemplifies an emergent digital ecosystem in which surveillance, consumption, and genre amalgamate. Upon its release, *Bright* was the most expensive film ever produced by Netflix, an American streaming media company with roughly 58 million official subscribers in the United States alone (“Number”). (If illicit online streaming were included in viewer statistics, the total US audience would be much larger.) From an industrial perspective, *Bright* is noteworthy because it signals Netflix’s competition with established studios for the blockbuster film market. The company is pivoting from the licensing of

¹ Rita Felski’s *The Limits of Critique* is perhaps the most influential recent attempt to articulate a post-symptomatic, post-critical theory. For a response to which this essay is sympathetic, see Konstantinou.

other studios' and networks' content to the production and distribution of its own content. Central to this industrial strategy is an algorithmic cultural logic. As one critic has observed, *Bright* "sounds like it was made by an algorithm" (Rodriguez) because of the quirky and hyper-specific way in which it combines generic elements. If a common critique of genre studies is that generic taxonomies always fail to capture the empirical diversity of cultural production and consumption, Netflix can "solve" this problem by surveilling what people watch on its platform – an analysis that culminates in myriad generic hybrids that are hardly legible for academic genre studies. Anyone who regularly watches Netflix is familiar with the platform's unique, and sometimes hilarious, micro-genres, which, the company claims, recommend content that accounts for 80% of what users watch ("How Netflix"). Alexis Madrigal has counted 76,897 Netflix micro-genres, including "Sentimental set in Europe Dramas from the 1970s," "Japanese Sports Movies," "Critically-acclaimed Emotional Underdog Movies," and "Gritty Suspenseful Revenge Westerns." If *Bright* represents a Netflix micro-genre, it might be called "Mind-Bending Visually Striking Sci-Fi Fantasy Buddy Cop Action Movies about Race." Watching *Bright* is a peculiar experience because it feels as if the micro-genre was algorithmically generated first, as a marketing strategy, and the movie was made second.

To be sure, in capitalist markets, genre has long been a technology for the production and capture of habitual consumption, a way for investors to lower financial risk by banking on the fact that people will consume something similar to what they have already consumed. As Janice A. Radway demonstrates in her pathbreaking study of the romance, nineteenth-century literary entrepreneurs like Irwin and Erastus Beadle

reasoned that once they had loosely identified an actual audience by inducing it to buy a specific kind of book, it would not be difficult to keep that audience permanently constituted and available for further sales by supplying it with endless imitations of the first success. (23)

But Radway also notes that the Beadle brothers' strategy was still risky, and often unsuccessful, because "they lacked a formal way of maintaining contact with the audience they created" (23). After all, print books are stubbornly non-interactive media: you can tap the pages all you like, but the words on the page will not change, and your reading activity cannot be directly measured and communicated to publishers. With the ability (a) to capture, monitor, and analyze consumer patterns directly, on a huge scale and in real time, and (b) to generate micro-

generic forms – and even new content for these forms – on the basis of the metadata, Netflix has partially overcome the Beadle brothers' problem of establishing “a formal way of maintaining contact” with an audience and of “keep[ing] that audience permanently constituted and available for further sales by supplying it with endless imitations of the first success.” Perhaps *Bright* points to a future in which genre, shattered and recombined into tens of thousands of smaller units, flows within a vast digital feedback loop that reshapes the production, distribution, and consumption of American movies.

Racecraft, or, Demystifying Race

When Netflix captures consumer patterns, it also captures the social common sense embedded in those patterns. Turning now to this essay's other thematic concerns, I want to triangulate a reading of *Bright* and its micro-genres with a particular social epistemology, namely, racial perception. “Race” is generic in an etymological sense; *genre* comes from the Latin *genus*, meaning “birth, race, stock, kind” (“Genus”). But one important critical maneuver for demystifying “race” – and demystification will play a central role in the following analysis – is to insist on the anachronism of attributing a modern concept of “race” to the ancients, who certainly knew of human differences, or differences among “peoples,” but not of racial difference (Appiah 11-13). Thus, to claim that “race” is generic is to highlight its specifically modern character as a pseudo-scientific classificatory system. “The term *race*,” write Karen E. and Barbara J. Fields, “stands for the conception or the doctrine that nature produced humankind in distinct groups, each defined by inborn traits that its members share and that differentiate them from the members of other distinct groups of the same kind but of unequal rank” (16). Races are the “genres of man,” the types of human being, organized according to inherited and discrete patterns of skin color and eye shape, hair texture and nose size, temperament and custom.

While racial constructivism appears to reign supreme in the humanities and social sciences – but even here it is not as hegemonic as it seems (Morning) – “race” remains the generic lens through which many Americans perceive one another and the social world. An average American need not have studied the various pseudo-scientific classificatory systems of a Linnaeus or Blumenbach to understand “race.” For racial awareness is an everyday convention of seeing, an

obvious, expedient, and mostly tacit or unconscious explanation of human differences, of why people look, talk, dress, eat, and generally act a certain way – *are* a certain way – and not another. My invocation of “race” thus refers not to a natural substance, which does not exist, but rather to the ways in which sociopolitical experience and practice are “racialized” and “structured by the *signification* of human biological characteristics in such a way as to define and construct differentiated social collectivities” (Miles and Brown 101; emphasis added). I also understand racialization to be at work in instances in which people explicitly repudiate racist beliefs but still invoke “cultural” differences that function like the natural, inherited, and discrete essences that constitute racial difference (Balibar).

Karen and Barbara Fields’s term *racecraft* is useful for thinking critically about “race” because it highlights the ways in which “race” is an ensemble of social practices – ways of doing, making, and crafting social ties that transform the latter into the results of already existing natural substances. Racecraft works like magic; it makes its own crafting disappear. It is racecraft that produces a sentence like “black Southerners were segregated because of their skin color.” But the Fieldses observe that in that sentence “segregation disappears as the doing of segregationists, and then, in a puff of smoke – *paff* – reappears as a trait of only one part of the segregated whole” (17). In other words, racecraft transfigures the action of segregation and replaces it with the pseudo-agency of skin color, i.e., “race.”

“Racecraft” also names something like a worldview, analogous to witchcraft, insofar as both are broad systems of lived experience and practice that explain what are ultimately non-empirical forces. Neither races nor witches are empirically real, but they seem perfectly real to inhabitants of the worlds of racecraft and witchcraft. Racecraft is a field of collective belief and practice that makes sense to its inhabitants, who find evidence of its validity everywhere. Perhaps it can be compared to the environment in the psychiatric hospitals that D. L. Rosenhan famously exposes in “On Being Sane in Insane Places.” Rosenhan shows that once psychiatrists accept that a patient is insane, the diagnosis is reinforced by all subsequent behavior, making it extremely difficult for the patient to be recognized as sane. Within racecraft, it is the people who claim that “race” is not real who are the insane inmates, for they deny what is an abundantly and immediately evidential reality to most people most of the time.

In another case of racecraft that is more directly relevant to my analysis of *Bright*, police officer Jeronimo Yanez shot and killed

Philando Castile, an African American man, during a traffic stop in 2016. Yanez was under the spell of racecraft when, shortly before pulling Castile over, he told a colleague over the radio that Castile resembled a suspect in a prior robbery because of his “wide-set nose” (Smith). For Yanez, it must have seemed self-evident that a “wide-set nose” is an objective and natural mark, a pure sense datum, by which a criminal can be racially identified – that is to say, by which “race” and criminality are racecrafted. Racecraft had transformed a mere body part into the sign of an invisible essence, Castile’s “race,” and of an additional property of that “race,” criminality. While “race” is preeminently visual, within racecraft

physical features function merely as a visible index of an invisible essence that is separate and different from them. Racial essences belong to racecraft’s invisible ontology even though the visible manifestations of those essences are usually available to most Americans, from fifty yards or more, as race. (Fields and Fields 211)

It also must have seemed immediately obvious to Yanez that, as a kind of natural outgrowth or reflex of his invisible racial essence, Castile posed an existential threat to him. Even when material facts blatantly contradict racecraft – Castile clearly and patiently announced his legal possession of a firearm – its fictional facts often prove overwhelming, especially when they are buttressed by a legal apparatus that systematically protects police officers’ judgments about the alleged threat posed to their safety by African Americans.

Both senses of “racecraft” are useful because they powerfully demystify Americans’ racial common sense without placing a moralistic or post-racial prohibition on discussion of “race.” The concept of racecraft exposes “race” to be inexorably science-fictional, a way of using imaginary science to organize belief and practice in a non- or extra-empirical reality. As I will argue in my conclusion, the recuperation of “race” in contemporary genetics discourses makes the demystification of “race” as timely as ever. But the utility of the concept of racecraft is not that it debunks “race” so that we can get over it and stop talking about it, as if racialized social formations were archaic and our language irreparably dated. Just the opposite: racecraft captures the pervasive everyday life of “race” so that we *can* talk about it – and as long as the United States remains a racially hierarchical society, Americanists *must* continue to talk about it – while nonetheless maintaining critical distance from the pseudo-science of “race.” To inscribe a dialectical relation to “race,” which necessitates that we simultaneously

recognize that it is pseudo-science *and* a dominant way of seeing and acting, I will mark all further references to “race” that might be mistaken for references to a natural substance with a strike-through, like this: ~~race~~, ~~racial~~. Conversely, I will leave references to racism, a social practice that needs no demystification, unmarked.

Orcs Are Racist

Bright can be viewed as a hybrid version of a subgenre of science fiction: alternate history, which typically presents a realistic fictional world that differs from the reader’s or viewer’s consensus reality insofar as a key historical event or set of events in that reality either never happened or had radically different outcomes. Ward Moore’s alternate-history novel *Bring the Jubilee* (1953), for example, is set in a world in which the Confederacy has won the Battle of Gettysburg, and subsequently the Civil War. But while Moore’s novel invites readers to imagine the consequences of a historical and material possibility – the Battle of Gettysburg was a contingent event that could have turned out otherwise – *Bright* asks viewers to discard any pretense to historical plausibility and imagine that J. R. R. Tolkien’s Middle Earth mythology is our actual past. Set in contemporary Los Angeles, *Bright* is populated by humans, fairies, centaurs, dragons, elves, and most importantly for my purposes here, orcs. At various points in the film, we learn that the events of Tolkien’s *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy have structured the city’s ~~race~~ relations. Having sided in the past with the Dark Lord – presumably Sauron from *The Lord of the Rings* – orcs are viewed with deep suspicion and hatred by most humans. This generic hybridity alone would make for a rather unique and even outlandish film. But if we reverse-engineer *Bright*’s genres, then it seems that Netflix’s algorithms have identified additional patterns: a significant portion of people who enjoy both science fiction and fantasy apparently also watch inter~~racial~~ buddy cop movies as well as films starring Will Smith. *Bright*’s plot turns on the relationship between Smith’s character Darryl Ward, a jaded Los Angeles Police Department (LAPD) officer who is looking forward to his pension, and Nick Jakoby (Joel Edgerton), the first orc in the LAPD, a “diversity hire,” the object of constant racist ridicule and outright hostility at the hands of his fellow human cops, and a ~~race~~ traitor in the eyes of other orcs. These other orcs, who are shown wearing baggy sports jerseys and baseball caps, or drinking alcohol in run-down neighborhoods, are transparently coded as Los Angeles’s new African

Americans and Latinxs – an oppressed, vaguely menacing, predominantly working class and poor ~~race~~ that is in a constant struggle against the LAPD.²

To answer my question in the title of this essay: yes, orcs are racist. Tolkien created Middle Earth as a “mythology of England” (Shippey 268). Orcs originate in Tolkien’s orientalist caricatures of Muslims and Asians. Though I wish to avoid the thorny question of whether Tolkien himself was a racist, it seems clear that his mythology is inconceivable without the founding assumption that ~~race~~ differentiates the English, other Europeans, and the non-European world. *The Lord of the Rings* allegorizes these somatic, linguistic, and psychological differences as the differences among the ~~raees~~ of “men,” orcs, and the mythology’s various other ~~raees~~. As Helen Young observes,

although Tolkien’s characters are rarely, if ever, entirely circumscribed by their race, essentializing logics of racial difference nonetheless underpin the structure of the peoples of his world. Racial taxonomies shape the cultures of Middle Earth. (*Race* 23)

Racecraft is especially obvious in the *Lord of the Rings* films, in which predominantly white or fair-skinned heroes battle predominantly dark-skinned and undifferentiated hordes. Here the films are simply faithful to the source material. In a letter, Tolkien describes orcs as “squat, broad, flat-nosed, sallow-skinned, with wide mouths and slant eyes; in fact degraded and repulsive versions of the (to Europeans) least lovely Mongol-types” (274).

While Middle Earth is obviously fantastic, this fantasy is remarkable, in my view, not so much for its escapist departures from consensus reality, but rather for its second-order social “realism.” The Middle

² The orcs’ coding as black and Latinx is destabilized by the fact that Jakoby is played by a white actor and by the subtle implication that the orcs who sided with Sauron attempted to exterminate humanity. Orc history not only alludes to the genocide of Native American peoples committed by white colonists, but rewrites and displaces the United States’ history of white supremacy and allows the film’s white humans to take a self-righteous moral stance against genocide. When Ward and Jakoby battle a ruthless Mexican street gang that Ayer portrays as an undifferentiated and killable horde, it is again unclear whether Jakoby is coded as Latinx or something else entirely. These ambiguities are further complicated by the coding of the elves as white and ultra-wealthy. I have chosen to omit these details and several others for the sake of developing a coherent argument about a fundamentally incoherent film that mixes genres and ~~racial~~ codes with sloppy abandon.

Earth mythology mimics – and in a sense, validates – everyday ~~racial~~ common sense. Orcs and dwarves do not exist, yet the idea that the peoples or “cultures” of Middle Earth are distinguished and ranked by their inherited skin colors, phenotypes, body sizes, and psychological tendencies – the orcs being dumb and belligerent, the dwarves being avaricious – is simply an English understanding of “Mongol-types” and Jews in a displaced and slightly exaggerated form. Young calls Tolkien’s work “literally a racist’s fantasy land” (“How Can”), and the paradoxical juxtaposition of literality and fantasy captures the point I am trying to make about Tolkien’s aesthetics. In *The Lord of the Rings*, fantasy is the realism of racecraft; like racist drawings of large noses or lips, Tolkien embellishes social fictions of difference as if he were caricaturing real ~~racial~~ traits. Tolkien’s apparent departure from consensus reality and into the magical world of Middle Earth brings us right back to the science fantasies that shaped what he and many of his contemporaries took to be the common-sense reality of ~~race~~.

While *Bright* aspires to anti-racism, it reproduces Tolkien’s literalization of ~~racial~~ fantasy. The film treats Tolkien’s mythology *as if it were an allegory of actual ~~racial~~ difference in the United States*. *Bright*’s universe is one in which social and political relations are structured by biological differences among antagonistic ~~raees~~ – an exaggerated version of the contemporary United States that *already* exists in the everyday science fantasy of ~~racial~~ difference. ~~Racial~~ social collectives – whites, African Americans, Latinxs, Asians, etc. – already exist, if not physically, then “metaphysically,” in the realm of racecraft. Americans *already* treat members of these collectives *as if* they were orcs or dwarves, i.e., *as if* their differences from one another in “real” life were organized around the same differences in kind that differentiate Tolkien’s ~~raees~~ from one another. Using the social realism and grit of the buddy cop movie, *Bright* gives this ~~racial~~ common sense a visually and narratively concrete existence; it exemplifies the workings of racecraft itself as it transforms the non-empirical into nature. This transformation is on display in a scene in which a detective, ~~racially~~ coded as Middle Eastern, explains why there are no orcs in the American National Basketball Association: since all orcs have large, squat bodies – since their bodies are ~~racially~~ determined – they cannot jump. “It’s not racism, it’s physics,” the detective explains. This ~~racial~~ fantasy is a mimesis of the pervasive belief among Americans that the ~~racial~~ composition of professional sports is determined by the “physics” of natural, ~~racially~~ inherited bodies.

What is novel is that *Bright* flips the racism embedded in Tolkien’s “Mongol” orcs and transforms its own orcs into the *objects* of racism. As

I mentioned above, Jakoby is the first orc in the LAPD. At the beginning of the film, a criminal orc shoots Ward while Jakoby is distractedly buying a burrito – a typically “ethnic” food – from a street vendor. Ward and other police officers suspect that Jakoby allowed the shooter to escape because orcs are ~~racially~~ loyal to other orcs, and thus cannot ever be true cops (thus implying, in a repetition of the rhetoric of the recent Blue Lives Matter movement, that the police are another, competing ~~race~~). Jakoby must prove that he is more cop than orc, a difficult task given that he is subjected to constant racism, and because orcs in the city appear to have legitimate grievances against the LAPD. In a scene that resonates with the shooting of Castile and other African American men, Ward and Jakoby witness LAPD officers savagely beating an orc in front of an angry crowd. Thus, Jakoby’s dilemma is supposed to resonate with that of the “real” cop of color: he wants to join an institution that ~~racially~~ oppresses his own people.

Bright’s “solution” to this dilemma involves a convoluted reworking of its most important generic intertext next to *The Lord of the Rings*, namely, Antoine Fuqua’s *Training Day* (2001). One connection between the two films is direct and obvious: *Bright’s* director David Ayer wrote the *Training Day* screenplay. It is instructive to recall that *Training Day*, starring Denzel Washington as dirty cop Alonzo Harris and Ethan Hawke as Jake Hoyt, his upstanding white counterpart, is based in part on the so-called Rampart scandal of the late 1990s. The scandal centered on police corruption in the LAPD’s Rampart Division, principally in the CRASH anti-gang unit. Members of the unit harassed, beat, and shot alleged gang members, most of whom were Latinx; planted evidence; and worked with the former Immigration and Naturalization Service to deport suspects. As Tom Hayden of *The Nation* reported at the time, the CRASH unit was effectively a paramilitary “law and order” squad that waged a racist war against Latinx youth (“LAPD”). *Training Day’s* Harris is based in part on one of the central figures in the scandal, officer Rafael Perez, a black Puerto Rican (Baker 57).

In *Training Day*, Harris attempts to frame and kill Hoyt when Hoyt refuses to participate in Harris’s corrupt practices. Hoyt’s defeat of Harris at the end of the film is a remarkable white redemption of the LAPD, given that it racecrafts the institution’s abuses as black, displacing the LAPD’s historic oppression of people of color. Harris’s defiant speech at the end of the film invokes another moment of racecraft in American cinema – “King Kong ain’t got shit on me!” – but while King Kong’s death in the 1933 film is pitiable, there is nothing

sympathetic about Harris and nothing to mourn in his death (Sexton 60). For *Training Day* suggests that the problem with the LAPD is not that it is an institution with a deep history of white racism, but rather that it has been infiltrated by too many cops of color – too many “diversity” hires. How ironic, or perhaps all too fitting, that Washington won his first Academy Award for Best Actor as the LAPD’s scapegoat.

Bright is *Training Day* with orcs. Or, to state the thesis more precisely: *Bright* is *Training Day* for a post-Black Lives Matter moment in US political and cultural history in which it is no longer ideologically possible to displace the police’s racist corruption onto a black “bad apple” cop, at the same time that it is no longer ideologically possible to redeem the police as a social institution through a narrative of diversification. *Bright* is of interest to the study of genre and American racecraft because it signals the ideological impossibility of the interracial buddy cop movie and attempts symbolically to solve the problem by inventing a new race.

Training Day with Orcs, or, How to Make Cops Great Again

Bright’s representation of the LAPD combines Tolkien’s racecraft and the racialized image of the police in *Training Day*. As in *Training Day*, the LAPD in *Bright* is post-white. Ward, the lead character, is black, and an unusually high percentage of police who receive screen time and dialogue are Latinx (Captain Perez [Andrea Navedo], Officer Rodriguez [Jay Hernandez]) and Asian (Sergeant Ching [Margaret Cho], Agent Yamahara [Kenneth Choi]). Although Ward’s white colleague, Officer Pollard (Ike Barinholtz), is the most vociferous anti-orc racist in the film, the non-white officers participate in this racism equally. There is a kind of equal-opportunity racism on display in *Bright* that suggests that a predominantly non-white police force – reflecting the demographic shifts in Los Angeles more broadly – is no less racist than a majority white police force. One Latina cop, for example, uses the “all you people look alike” racist trope on Jakoby when she mockingly asks him if an orc on a “Wanted” poster is his cousin. The film’s implicit message is that while it was white LAPD officers who beat the African American Rodney King in 1992, and while it is mainly white officers who have been involved in the more recent murders of black youth, the reverse scenario is just as likely if blacks and other people of color come to dominate the LAPD. If race is “physics,” an obvious, natural condition,

then racism is an equally obvious and natural response to ~~face~~ that *any racial* group in power will be tempted to practice.

Later in *Bright*, the film's predominantly post-white police will replay Alonzo Harris's storyline and prove to be corrupt when Ward and Jakoby accidentally discover a magic wand. Instead of reporting the wand to the higher authorities, Ward and Jakoby's colleagues want to keep it for themselves and use its powers to their advantage. Led by Sergeant Ching, the corrupt cops coerce Ward into agreeing with their plan to murder Jakoby, whom they suspect will report their misdeeds. Ward nearly carries out the plan but discovers in the last second before shooting Jakoby that the other cops have double-crossed him and intend to eliminate him, too. Thus, the narrative and ~~racial~~ logic of the film is that two good, conscientious cops are pitted against the same corrupt, racialized, post-white LAPD that Ayer depicts in *Training Day*. But the crucial difference is that in *Bright*, the black cop no longer epitomizes the police's displaced racism, as Harris has been replaced with Ward, played by the perennial good guy and apolitical action hero Will Smith.³ Ward kills the corrupt cops in self-defense, proving that he, despite being black, is on the side of the "good" LAPD. As if testifying to Ayer's anxiety that the viewer has missed this rewriting of *Training Day*, Ward explains to Jakoby that he had to kill the corrupt cops because "half of our division is on some old-school Rampart shit." Ward and Jakoby then spend most of the rest of the film running from the LAPD and engaged in shoot-outs with various antagonists who want to steal the magic wand from them.⁴

If Ayer wanted *Bright* to revise, or perhaps even "correct," the scapegoating of Harris in *Training Day*, could he have done so with Ward alone? Why does Ward need an orc sidekick? A scene at the beginning of *Bright* is telling. After recovering from his gunshot wound, Ward rises from bed and is pressured by his white wife to kill a fairy that is abusing the bird feeder in the front of their house. When Ward goes outside to kill the fairy, he is greeted by a crowd of black neighbors who are having

³ I would like to thank Keith Corson for this insight into the apolitical aura of Will Smith.

⁴ The primary antagonists are the Mexican street gang mentioned in the note above and Leilah, the leader of an elf sect that plans to resurrect the Dark Lord. As in many buddy cop movies, male homosociality in *Bright* requires the marginalization of women. Leilah's prominent role in the plot as a brutally effective killer does little to change the film's gender politics, which requires the destruction of the femme fatale in order to solidify male friendship.

a small party on the front lawn. The neighbors are listening to rap music and drinking alcohol. Like the orcs, they are racecrafted as “gangstas” whom Ward finds annoying because they lower the value of his home: “You guys just keep doing your gangsta stuff. I’m just trying to sell my house.” Thus, while Ward and his neighbors are all black, they are not united in ~~racial~~ solidarity. In fact, the exchange between Ward and one of his neighbors reveals that Ward disagrees with Curtis Mayfield’s song “We the People Who Are Darker Than Blue” (1970), for Ward’s blue is darker than black (this being the order of solidarity that Ward and other cops will demand that Jakoby practice in relation to his own ~~race~~, the orcs). Seeing that Ward intends to kill the fairy, the neighbor cynically encourages Ward to “take the little homie out LAPD style, like you do.” This “little homie” could easily refer to one of the neighbor’s friends, and thus figures as an indirect reference to the LAPD’s routine violence (“like you do”) against black youth. Before brutally smashing the fairy with a broom, Ward utters the seemingly gratuitous phrase “fairy lives don’t matter today.” On the one hand, it is simply a bad joke, a throwaway line. On the other hand, Ward’s phrase is an obvious reference to the Black Lives Matter movement that subtly aligns Ward with police violence and against his own community. “It’s what I do,” says Ward, as if presenting his killing of the “little homie” as a demonstration of the same police power that he routinely uses against blacks.

In the political climate of the contemporary United States, after the highly publicized police murders of African Americans, *Bright* suggests that it is no longer ideologically feasible to sacrifice a black cop as the scapegoat for police brutality. This is why *Bright* replaces Harris with Ward, a black antagonist for a black good guy. But Ward alone is insufficient. Crucially, *Bright* also seems to believe that it is no longer possible to fix the police by diversifying it. Ward is already a cop, and the rest of the LAPD is predominantly Latinx and Asian. Indeed, diversity itself has morphed into the problem. Although Ward will prove to be a decent cop in the end, his relationship to other African Americans is antagonistic. The other non-white cops in the LAPD are just as racist and corrupt as white cops. Thus, orcs are necessary because they are symptomatic of the ideological exhaustion of the interracial buddy cop movie as a narrative of ~~racial~~ inclusion. There are no more “real” ~~raees~~ whose antagonisms can be overcome through the crucible of policing. In order to continue to tell this ideological narrative of the redemption of the police through integration, a new fictional collectivity must be racecrafted: the orcs.

Early on in *Bright*, Ward's daughter announces the real problem of the film. "Why do you have to be a policeman?" she asks disappointedly. "Everybody hates policemen." In other words, the crisis to which *Bright* is responding – and in this sense it echoes conservative rhetoric – is that America hates cops, that the police are losing legitimacy, and that too many people have forgotten that blue lives matter, too. When Ward and Jakoby eventually bring the wand to the proper authorities and are cleared of wrongdoing, the two cops are given awards at a special public ceremony. Ward is bitter that Sergeant Ching and the other corrupt cops have not been exposed, but Jakoby reassures him that even if the public does not understand the full story, he and Ward know that there is still a difference between good cops and bad cops. Jakoby proudly receives his medal and applause from the crowd, which includes orcs. During the struggle to retrieve the wand, Jakoby is "blooded" – a vague term that the film never fully explains, but clearly functions as a sign of ~~racial~~ recognition among orcs. Jakoby has finally proven that an orc can be a real cop without repudiating his own ~~race~~. For when the existing ~~rac~~es no longer do the trick of legitimizing one of the most violent and oppressive of American institutions, racecraft must go to work on new ~~rac~~es in order to make cops great again.

Against Tolerance

In "How Genetics is Changing Our Understanding of 'Race,'" an excerpt from his new book on DNA featured in the *New York Times*, the Harvard geneticist David Reich urges Americans to face up to a hard, uncomfortable fact: the unexamined assumptions that most of them already hold about the biological nature of ~~race~~ are true. Kicking down the wide-open door of American racecraft, Reich presents various data that allegedly demonstrate that this time, despite centuries of pseudo-scientific theories, genetics has proven that ~~race~~ is real. Reich warns that if scientists fail to have the intellectual courage to keep on dressing up the old ~~race~~ consciousness in the latest science, they are in effect encouraging the growth of public skepticism toward expertise. Worse still, unless science meets racists on their own terms – their belief in the fundamental truth of ~~racial~~ difference – racists will dominate the conversation. To be sure, Reich sounds reasonable: "Arguing that no substantial differences among human populations are possible will only invite the racist misuse of genetics that we wish to avoid." But Reich

falsely uses *race* as a synonym for “differences among human populations” and echoes the right-wing conspiracy theory that there is a pervasive taboo – call it “political correctness” – against speaking honestly about *racial* difference.⁵

Similarly, the most progressive position that *Bright* can muster is that we must politely respect *racial* differences that are obviously real. As Ward explains to his daughter, “orcs are not dumb. All the races are different, and just because they’re different doesn’t mean that anybody’s smarter or dumber, better or worse.” Reich could not have said it better. His research also emphasizes that although *rac*es are different on average, Americans should still treat one another equally as individuals. What *Bright* and the contemporary revival of *race* in genetics have in common is a rhetoric of liberal tolerance that continues to racecraft American social relations. To be sure, a *rac*ially tolerant America is preferable to a *rac*ially intolerant America. However, the critical utopian function of the concept of racecraft is its insistence that *racial* consciousness is a mystification of social life. It thus contains a counter-science fiction that anticipates an American future in which *rac*es can no longer be treated with tolerance or intolerance – not because the peoples currently misidentified as *rac*es will have disappeared, but because the everyday epistemology of *race* will have become defunct in a truly egalitarian society.

To be clear: *Bright* is not a good movie. It was deservedly panned by most film critics, and given its slapdash mixture of generic elements, Lindsay Ellis is probably right to call *Bright* “The Apotheosis of Lazy Worldbuilding.” Nonetheless, within the emerging ecosystem of platform cinema, it does not matter that a film is bad – as long as people watch it. And watch it they did. Netflix is already planning a sequel to *Bright*. Yet I have not attempted to demonstrate that *Bright* is a good movie, only that it is significant to the study of genre in the age of Netflix and to the study of racecraft in the contemporary American conjuncture of police violence and the return of *racial* genetics. For the task of critical genre studies is not simply to celebrate the things we

⁵ There may indeed be average differences among human *biogeographical ancestry groups*. The fundamental flaw in Reich’s article is that he conflates *race*, a social construction, with these groups. Obviously, human beings are different, and some of these differences could possibly be described as average group traits. But the fact remains that *race* is pseudo-science and thus cannot accurately map these traits or their distribution. Genetics is *not* changing our understanding of *race*; it is demonstrating the radical inadequacy of *race* as a conceptual foundation for understanding human diversity.

love, but also to elucidate the things we love to hate, and to understand why products made to exploit American patterns of consumption and ~~racial~~ consciousness can only fail us in more or less interesting ways.

References

Films

Bright. Directed by David Ayer. USA, 2017.

Training Day. Directed by Antoine Fuqua. USA, 2001.

Works Cited

- Appiah, Kwame Anthony. *In My Father's House: Africa in the Philosophy of Culture*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1992.
- Baker, Aaron. "Beyond the Thin Line of Black and Blue: Movies and Police Misconduct in Los Angeles." *Bad: Infamy, Darkness, Evil, and Slime on Screen*. Ed. Murray Pommerance. New York: State University of New York Press. 55-64.
- Balibar, Étienne. "Is There a Neo-Racism?" *Race, Nation, Class: Ambiguous Identities*. Trans. Chris Turner. New York: Verso, 1991. 17-28.
- Ellis, Lindsay. "Bright: The Apotheosis of Lazy Worldbuilding." *YouTube*, uploaded by Lindsay Ellis, 1 February 2018. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gLOxQxMnEz8>. Accessed 29 March 2019.
- Felski, Rita. *The Limits of Critique*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015.
- Fields, Karen E. and Barbara J. Fields. *Racecraft: The Soul of Inequality in American Life*. New York: Verso, 2012.
- "Genus, n." *OED Online*, Oxford University Press, July 2018, www.oed.com/view/Entry/77719. Accessed 18 November 2018.
- Hayden, Tom. "LAPD: Law and Disorder." *The Nation*, 22 March 2000. <https://www.thenation.com/article/lapd-law-and-disorder/>. Accessed 29 March 2019.
- "How Netflix Uses Big Data to Drive Success." *Inside Big Data*, 20 January 2018. <https://insidebigdata.com/2018/01/20/netflix-uses-big-data-drive-success/>. Accessed 29 March 2019.
- Jameson, Fredric. *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act*. London: Routledge Classics, 2002.
- Konstantinou, Lee. "The Hangman of Critique." *Los Angeles Review of Books*, 17 July 2016. <https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/the-hangman-of-critique/>. Accessed 29 March 2019.
- Madrigal, Alexis. "How Netflix Reverse Engineered Hollywood." *The Atlantic*, 2 January 2014. <https://www.theatlantic.com/technology/>

- archive/2014/01/how-netflix-reverse-engineered-hollywood/282679/. Accessed 29 March 2019.
- Miles, Robert and Malcolm Brown. *Racism*. 2nd ed. London: Routledge, 2003.
- Moore, Ward. *Bring the Jubilee*. New York: Ballantine, 1953.
- Morning, Ann. *The Nature of Race: How Scientists Think and Teach about Human Difference*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011.
- “Number of Netflix Streaming Subscribers in The United States from 3rd Quarter 2011 to 3rd Quarter 2018 (in Millions).” *Statista*. www.statista.com/statistics/250937/quarterly-number-of-netflix-streaming-subscribers-in-the-us/. Accessed 29 March 2019.
- Radway, Janice A. *Reading the Romance: Women, Patriarchy, and Popular Literature*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1991.
- Reich, David. “How Genetics is Changing Our Understanding of ‘Race.’” *New York Times*, 23 March 2018. <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/03/23/opinion/sunday/genetics-race.html>. Accessed 29 March 2019.
- Rodriguez, Ashley. “Netflix’s First Big Movie ‘Bright’ Feels Like a Blockbuster Built by an Algorithm.” *Quartz*, 22 December 2017. <https://qz.com/1161921/netflixs-will-smith-movie-bright-acts-like-algorithms-made-it/>. Accessed 29 March 2019.
- Rosenhan, D. L. “On Being Sane in Insane Places.” *Science* 179 (1973): 250-58.
- Sexton, Jared. “The Ruse of Engagement: Black Masculinity and the Cinema of Policing.” *American Quarterly* 61.1 (2009): 39-63.
- Shippey, T. A. *The Road to Middle Earth*. London: Grafton, 1992.
- Smith, Mitch. “Video of Police Killing of Philando Castile Is Publicly Released.” *New York Times*, 20 June 2017. <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/06/20/us/police-shooting-castile-trial-video.html>. Accessed 29 March 2019.
- Srnicek, Nick. *Platform Capitalism*. Cambridge: Polity, 2017.
- Tolkien, J. R. R. *The Letters of J. R. R. Tolkien*. Ed. Humphrey Carpenter. New York: Houghton Mifflin, 2000.
- . *The Lord of the Rings*. New York: Ballantine, 1965.
- Young, Helen. “How Can We Untangle White Supremacy From Medieval Studies?” *Pacific Standard*, 9 October 2017. <https://psmag.com/education/untangling-white-supremacy-from-medieval-studies>. Accessed 29 March 2019.
- . *Race and Popular Fantasy Literature: Habits of Whiteness*. New York: Routledge, 2016.

Zuboff, Shoshana. *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism: The Fight for a Human Future at the New Frontier of Power*. London: Profile Books, 2019.

