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Clyde R. Taylor. *The Mask of Art: Breaking the Aesthetic Contract–Film and Literature.* Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1998. xiv + 343 pp. $22.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-253-21192-7; $45.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-253-33403-9.

Reviewed by Sheila Petty (Department of Film and Video, University of Regina)
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In *The Mask of Art: Breaking the Aesthetic Contract–Film and Literature*, Clyde R. Taylor makes an important contribution to the underexplored area of aesthetics, race, culture, and art. A dense and complex work, this book explores the history, politics, and ideology of aesthetics in the western world by tracing the rise of the notion of a so-called universal aesthetic, based on white Eurocentric precepts, which truncates other equally valid modes of cultural expression. The book takes aim at a wide range of film and literary texts as well as other artistic aesthetic constructions, including sculpture and painting.

In the Preface and Acknowledgments section of the book, Taylor clearly sets out his challenge to the politics of representation and assumptions that are systemic in present-day artistic practices by challenging "the veracity and probity of 'the aesthetic,' the overdeveloped paradigm for control of our values regarding art and beauty, an eighteenth-century intellectual plantation from whose grip most of us have yet to free ourselves" (p. xiii). This goal, which is undeniably ambitious, is played out against an interdisciplinary backdrop of film, cultural studies, literature, anthropology, philosophy, and classics. Furthermore, Taylor strives to go beyond mere description of the struggle against western aesthetic standards by attempting to seek out new directions for analysis that focus on ways in which art and beauty can be probed "with more even-handedness and less false consciousness" (p. xiii).

In addition to the Preface and Acknowledgments section, the book is comprised of fourteen chapters organized into three major sections. Part One begins with an overview of the rise of Black aesthetics in film and other media, problematizing a movement which was forced to establish its project in defiance of western aesthetics. He continues by exploring what he views as the "Monopolated Light and Power Company" (p. 55), by tracing the history of "the aesthetic as a distinct category of perception" (p. 10). The discussion, which ranges from the ancient Greeks through the Renaissance to the canonization of classical narrative form in cinema, exposes the reinforcement of white, male cultural values in western society.

Part Two focuses more explicitly on the politics of representation and how "discursive irony occurs in the verbal interactions between the more and the less powerful" (p. 160). Taylor proposes several interpretive frames for analyzing various forms of irony: Despotic irony, Ethiopicist irony, Radical Ethiopicism, Cyclopism, Aesopianism, and Achebianism, or radical resistance. The value of forging these categories lies in their challenge to the status quo assumptions of current aesthetic calculations and their ability to question "the priorities of the ruling art-culture system formed out of the assumptions as aestheticism, but now comfortably perpetuated as indispensable institutions of 'modern' living" (p. 216).

In Part Three, Taylor moves on to foreground artistic constructions that "break the aesthetic contract" (p. 263). His analysis of *Things Fall Apart*, *Beloved*, *The Other Francisco*, *Ritual Clowns*, *Yeelen*, *Daughters of the Dust*, and Maya Lin's Vietnam Memorial, amongst others, presents such works as projects of radical resistance which "offer the clearest light out of the established art-cultural regime *and* toward more humanizing perspectives" (p. 223). In the end, Taylor proposes "an ongoing, engaged deconstruction of aestheticism simultaneous with a protracted and collective reconstruction of cultural knowledge, with the aim of establishing radically wider cultural democracy than now exists" (p. 304).

The major strength of this volume is its scope. Taylor succeeds not only in exposing the western aesthetic project, but also in demonstrating an interconnectedness between the aesthetic aims of different Black artistic media in creating and maintaining cultural authority. By discussing literature, film, and other art practices, Taylor accentuates the vitality of Black cultures and places

them in a wide contextualized landscape that assists the reader in shedding preconceptions that such voices are necessarily marginalized.

Unfortunately, however, this very scope is also its weakness. There seems to be a tension between three equally valid projects: an analysis of and challenge to the ideological underpinnings of western aesthetics, the study of black independent cinema, and a probing of the necessity or usefulness of a black film aesthetic. As a result, promising areas of discussion are necessarily, although unfortunately, brief in length as Taylor balances range with analysis.

There are several examples of this difficulty throughout the volume. For example, the section on Griffith presents one of the most developed discussions in the book. Taylor's analysis of the history, politics, and issues raised by this controversial film is most illuminating and comprehensive. However, when he deals with the specific contributions of Griffith to the rebirth of film aesthetics, Taylor only presents an overview list (p. 122) of Griffith's innovations without demonstrating through an explicit aesthetic analysis of the film text how these aesthetics specifically contribute to the rise of classical Hollywood narrative style and its systemic code of racism. Later, Taylor offers a unique view of the oppressive nature of master scene editing without then demonstrating through a specific filmic example how this oppression works in a practical sense (p. 140). In addition, Taylor's tantalizing discussion of the American dream theory, with its emphasis on the inequality between Black characters and White characters, fails to go beyond assertion when he chooses to move on rather than offer a specific application of this theory to any one of a number of mainstream Hollywood films that would support his contention (p. 146).

This overview approach is not restricted to discussions of western aesthetics alone. In Taylor's astute analysis of *Daughters of the Dust*, he adeptly contextualizes the film through an illumination of diasporic issues (pp. 274-88). His exploration of the character of the Unborn Child and the way in which multiple planes of existence and time frames converge in this construction illustrates the importance of this film as a "resistant narrative" (p. 274). By raising the issue of whether or not the film embodies "Western or contra-Western notions of beauty" (p. 275), Taylor is underscoring the importance of circumscribing Black aesthetics within a Black cultural context and according to Black cultural precepts. However, although he asserts that *Daughters of the Dust* does indeed encompass a unique Black aesthetic, especially focused on the representation of Black women, he does not offer specific aesthetic examples from the film itself to demonstrate his position.

Thus, it would seem that specific aesthetic filmic analysis is de-emphasized by Taylor in favor of maintaining his larger overview project. This being said, it is important to note that Taylor's detailed research and passion for his subject leaves the reader wanting more, not less. The number of provocative and groundbreaking questions the volume raises makes it an invaluable asset to the fields of film, literary, cultural, and diaspora studies.

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