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This text is the paper for the Conference *Seeing the "Other?" Theories & Histories of (Post) Colonial Visual Culture*, Conference, German Maritime Museum Bremerhaven, April 8-9, 2021, Panel *Theories and Methodologies*

## Colonial Heritage in Museums. Critical Whiteness Studies in Practical Work

(Slide 1)

I would like to thank you for the warm welcome and for the invitation to present my speech here today. My pursuit of Critical Whiteness Studies began some 17 years ago. At the time, it was met with intense incomprehension. This was true both for the scholarly and the private realms. Members of the white majority were often personally offended by the mere mention of the term "Critical Whiteness Studies". They took a defensive position. Since then, a lot happened in the German-speaking world. "Whiteness" has become a generally accepted term that describes a specific social position.

At the time, it was important to me to use the German term, "Kritische Weißseinsforschung," instead of the English "Critical Whiteness Studies". Because I did not intend to transfer an Anglo-American research approach onto a German-language context. Instead, it was my intention to work out a specific German tradition. Please bear this in mind, when I proceed with my presentation. My scholarly work consists of transforming to German Art History the examination approach developed by Black Germans in other scientific disciplines.

(Slide 2)

My talk is divided into four segments.

1 Why Critical Whiteness Studies?

2 How does it work?

3 What can be done with it?

4 What are the future action points?

Let me start with segment one.

## **1 Why Critical Whiteness Studies?**

*The Blind Spot. Bremen, Colonialism and Art* was an Exhibition at the Bremer Kunsthalle in 2017. During the preparatory stages, I was in close contact with the curator, Julia Binter. She was very ambitious about handling the subject with the utmost sensitivity and correctness. She asked for my assessment after the first idea for a poster was developed. The intent was to campaign with a positive image of Black people in the public. The portrait of a *South Sea Resident* by the well-known German artist Emil Nolde served for the poster (slide 3). As much as I appreciated the intention, I had a strange feeling. Therefore, I suggested to consult with the Africa Network Bremen. They fiercely rejected the idea for the poster. The necklace of the person in the Nolde-Picture was associated with enslavement. The Africa Network Bremen and the Kunsthalle came up with a new motif for the poster, after work very hard on it. As a result, a Picture called *Reclining Female* by Ernst Ludwig Kirchner was selected. Her gender was deliberately covered with a text box that served as a "Blind Spot" (slide 3 – further on).

This example, along with many others, makes clear, a multi-perspectival approach is crucial. "Good intentions" are often misunderstood. Countless companies have this experience when they attempt to represent diversity in their advertisements, which frequently results in accusations of racism, exactly what they try so hard to avoid. This is also true for scholars: Our view of the world is severely limited by our personal socialization. Considering other perspectives and learning about other cultural contexts cannot be a substitute for dialogue and personal encounters. Critical Whiteness Studies is an instrument to introduce new advantage points in relationship to the white self. It enables us to ask novel questions and to listen to other positions in the society. The goal is to share the power of definition.

(Slide 4)

## **2 How does Critical Whiteness Studies work?**

White people describe themselves by age, sex, profession, or religion but not by referring to their whiteness. When they stress that whiteness has no influence on them as a person, they suggest neutrality. In doing so, they make whiteness the universal, neutral norm. At this point "race" is defined as something that only concerns Black people. On the one hand, the uncritical denial of the difference renounces their own structural privileges. On the other hand it denies the exclusion and the discrimination Black people experience every day. This often occurs out of ignorance and can even be well-intentioned. As long as this is not deliberately reflected, it leads to a situation wherein the fundamental interdependence of science, and rule cannot be revealed. As a consequence, the existing social injustice will be perpetuated. This is exactly what the term "Kritische Weißseinsforschung" addresses.

The word "critical" comes from the Greek "krinein;" it means "to separate, divide, eliminate." In Plato's *Theaitetos* the term is explicitly used in the sense of "differentiating the true from the false."

In German, the term "Kritik" has been used since the 18<sup>th</sup> century, especially in reference to and with the meaning implied by Immanuel Kant. For Kant, the term referred to the transcendental self-criticism of reason, judgment, and correction of awareness.

Critical Whiteness Studies stands in this tradition of thinking. As a theory it serves to critique the purely white perspective and thereby deconstructs traditional (white) perspectives. More concretely speaking, it is a method whose goal is to separate the perspectives of white people from those of non-white people by using analytical means in order to attribute separate values to the latter. Acknowledging the difference is hence of central importance.

(Slide 5)

A crucial aspect of Critical Whiteness Studies is the deliberate reflection of and the work with terminology. Differentiating between "image" and "picture" has turned out to be helpful, since it enables us to talk about the "white image" a picture carries wherein the skin color is lightened. Colors play a very special role in European Art History, especially the question of how human skin should be depicted. This theoretical and practical discourse has existed since Antiquity. However, it only addresses renderings of light skin. Although dark skin occurs as well, as far as I know, no text have survived wherein painters reflect about depicting dark skin.

(Slide 6)

### **3 What can be done with Critical Whiteness Studies?**

As pointed out before, the fundamental principle of Critical Whiteness Studies is one's personal position – while we ought not to be neutral, we should be knowledgeable. Due to the given power structure, Black people are forced, from the moment they are born, to deal with the white world, to analyze it, and to position themselves within it. Research has proposed different phases of awareness vis-à-vis the difference:

Phase 1: Insecurity. The white world view falls apart upon the realization that it is not neutral.

Phase 2: Resistance. We refuse to believe that this is how it is.

Phase 3: Shame. We are ashamed that we did not know. We would like to be an exception and teach others. Get a confirmation from Black individuals that one is learning.

Phase 4: Guilt. We would like to make amends. We wish that Black people will forgive us. This phase leads, for example, to a situation where remembrance becomes very popular, streets are given new names, and new memorials are erected.

Phase 5: Acceptance. We accept the difference in perceiving the world. White people see their own privileges and perceive structural racism within society. They can use their privileges to share power, and they can get active within their own habitat without indoctrinating others.

(Slide 7)

Based on this theoretical background and thanks to the practical methods available, we can apply Critical Whiteness Studies in multiple ways within the realm of European Art History. The following aspects are of particular importance:

1 The scholarly self-image: Reflecting upon privileges leads to a new openness towards other perspectives. In practical terms this might mean that a white person turns down an invitation to give a paper and recommends a Black person instead. Maybe this person is less well known or the lecture style is less comfortable for a white audience. Although this is what I frequently practice myself, for today's lecture I decided to address you personally. It is my first talk in English about this delicate topic.

2 Resource allocation: There is increased interest in introducing quotas to recruit more people with a migration background, migration experience, and people of color involved in research. One question arises in every application process: Is our decision indeed based on neutral, professional criteria, or is it not ultimately more convenient to add someone to a team who seems to be a "natural fit?" Are we willing to deal with diverging perspectives? In the end we may have to realize that structural racism has entered our own cultural institution.

(Slide 8)

3 Title of the work of art: Many colleagues feel uneasy about this work by Rubens because for the longest time it was referred to as *Portrait of a Negro*. In an attempt to improve the title, it was subsequently called *Portrait of an African*. However, the sources reveal that its original title was *Four Temperaments*.

(Slide 9)

4 Picture description: For many years, I asked students to describe this picture in one sentence. And then this one (slide 9 – further on). The result: White individuals never mention the lighted skin color, but the dark one. The selected terms were not on an even level. Addressing this in a seminar leads to practice more equality.

(Slide 10)

5 Visual place: In European Art History, Black people are not only used for specific roles (like the Black king of the Three Magi), but also as a structure element in the picture. Once one is aware of it, this phenomenon may be encountered in many contexts. This insight can come in handy when interpreting pictures or undertaking contextual analysis.

(Slide 11)

6 Iconography. In European Art History, skin color is neither neutral nor realistic. Saint Mauritius, for instance, may be found in versions with light as well as with dark skin color.

(Slide 12)

7 Skin color. Once sensitized, we also discover the meaning of Whiteness, the color white, and light skin in European Art History and can proceed to include this when interpreting the works. Other exciting questions are: What is not depicted? Who is excluded from representation? How would we communicate in the presence of a Black person?

(Slide 13)

The last point to my presentation is...

#### **4 What are the future action points?**

I have talked a lot about awareness-raising measures as well as the necessity for scholars to change their own attitudes. Plenty of smart books pertaining to the issue have been published, and concepts for workshops were organized. What is still lacking, though, is a resolute, practical implementation of said theories. The time is ripe for this now.

One of my doctoral students works in the Toy Museum in Nurnberg. As part of her work over there is, she classifies the tin toys in her collection into the categories "racist" and "possibly racist." She records on data sheets whether certain stereotypical depictions were already intended as racist when the objects were made or whether we only perceive them as such today. After completing this process, she will involve Black individuals in the process to creating an exhibition.

(Slide 14)

As part of my work at the State Museum Bremen I presently work with students to change the cases in the Public Storage, which opened in 2003. The process entails contextualizing texts and images, with the support of artistic interventions and additional perspectives. We will definitely not come up with a perfect solution. Yet we can make recommendations. Among the Twitter Community, I asked the question: How do we handle with objects that we perceive as racist today?

contextualize them 80%

contrast them 5%

put them into storage 8%

leave them as they are 7%

80 % of the responses to non-representational survey vote for contextualization. We will continue to ask such questions via social media and thereby try to encourage active participation. Once the students' idea of redesigning the cases has been implemented, we will ask our visitors: How do you like our implementation? The answers we receive from Black individuals, for instance from the Africa Network Bremen, will be of particular

importance to us. We will ask the latter as experts and pay them accordingly. Clearly, it is not an honorary office or volunteer work to offer a cultural institution one's own minority perspective.

(Slide 15)

When the State Museum Bremen placed a Black doll among numerous white ones in its Public Storage in 2003, it was certainly not intended as a racist act. It appears that, on the contrary, the intention was to refer to white dominance or to point out that there are also other skin colors.

A view in the inventory files reveals that we do indeed own five other Black dolls and that they offer a wide range of differences.

My students came up with the idea to place another case beside this one and design it differently: There would be only one white doll among several Black dolls. They also plan to show a reconstruction of the so-called "Doll Experiment" from the 1940s, which shows that small children quickly adopt social-learning, resulting in the fact that the white are the good person and the Black the bad person. They react accordingly when encountering dolls with different skin colors. This even encompasses the psychological act of violence that Black children are no longer willing to identify as such. The proposal was put forward by white students of Brazilian, Greek, and German origin. Before presenting their plan to the seminar, they asked their Black fellow-students for their evaluation. The idea was met with enthusiasm.

The only thing that will help us to move forward is user-centered, multi-perspectival work in heterogenous groups and the understanding that we, as institutions, are among the learners, too!