

May 15, 2014

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Studies in Film Aesthetics: The Graphic Novel

Spring 2014

Fighting Whiteness: Unpacking and Circulating White Privilege in *Scott  
Pilgrim vs. The World*

by

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“Whiteness is a delusion, a scientific and cultural fiction that like all racial identities has no valid foundation in biology [but is] a social fact, an identity created and continued with all-too-real consequences for the distribution of wealth, prestige and opportunity” - George Lipsitz.

Peggy McIntosh, the woman who popularized the idea of white privilege in academia and culture, describes the notion as such; “White privilege is like an invisible weightless knapsack of special provisions, maps, passports, codebooks, visas, clothes, tools , and blank checks” (McIntosh, White Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack). In this same piece, she goes on to talk about how whites cash in on these different assets allotted to them, but largely remain oblivious to the toolkit invisibly strapped to them, to the way in which their sociocultural and sociopolitical standing is secured and circulated through media, language and discourse.

*Scott Pilgrim vs. The World*, directed by Edgar Wright and adapted from Bryan Lee O’Malley’s graphic novels, is a fascinatingly relevant text to put in conversation with the notion of white privilege. The film and graphic novel reveal notions of how white privilege is dispersed, acted upon, and cashed in upon, while also reinforcing them back into the system. The lead protagonist, Scott Pilgrim, is a visual manifestation of white privilege on screen; a portrait of an individual who is awarded special tools and social power to behave in a way that would otherwise demonize him as either an anti-hero or antagonist in any other facet. The following essay will examine the ways in which *Scott Pilgrim vs. The World* demystifies its extremely flawed but entitled heterosexual white male protagonists’ whiteness, who flaunts and revels in his privilege. At the same time, the film does little to award social advantage or agency for

anybody else that is ethnically diverse, thus reiterating the hegemonic social and political advantages of white privilege. With the combination and arrangement of different forms of popular culture ranging from manga, video games, and music, the film itself does not account for the plurality of race, gender, and ethnicities that it intends to market toward. Looking first at the ways in which the film has subversive potential, I will then examine the ways the film portrays white privilege throughout the narrative, but then does little to make a subversive gestures regarding ethnicity, thus eliminating notions of racial and ethnic pluralism in a diverse and varied world and then recirculating meanings and understandings of whiteness and privilege back into the power system that is popular culture.

Ryan Lizardi, in his essay *Scott Pilgrim vs. hegemony: nostalgia, remediation, and heteronormativity*, references Stephanie Coontz's *The Way We Never Were*, where Coontz ironically uses American nostalgia for the 1950s. Coontz painted the period as a time of misery and terror, although it is viewed from a number of American conservatives as a time of family wholesomeness. Scott Pilgrim, like Coontz's work, employs a similar kind of ironic nostalgia. "Scott Pilgrim's adoption of an ironic nostalgia seems at first to be progressively refuting hegemony. Unfortunately, the actual representations of gender and sexuality within Scott Pilgrim reaffirm dominant power dynamics" (Lizardi 5). Meaning, the past (seen in the film from both appropriation of 8-bit video game culture and in flashbacks) plays not as utopian nostalgia but as a nostalgia that is also fraught with wrongdoings, heartbreak and sadness (the past reveals how Scott has done his peers wrong as well as his breakup with Envy Adams.) Therein lies one of the ways in which Scott Pilgrim as text has formative subversive powers, holding within its midst a way to retell history. The film does away with a romanticized view of the past as a place of utopia and can then open a space to talk about privilege, institutionalized racism, cultural

insensitivity, the formation of white identity for power and hegemony, or any number of injustices. But, as Lizardi is interested in, the film does not make a revolutionizing gesture toward notions of gender and sexuality, and (unfortunately) it does the same disservice to notions of whiteness and privilege. The power struggle over who gets to write and rewrite history is up for grabs when a text employs ironic nostalgia of this sort, but just in employing irony, it is not inherently radical, the text must go one step further and *Scott Pilgrim vs. The World* does not. The lead character Scott Pilgrim is white, and all his friends are coded as being white, which is the first indication of a removal of transgressive tones, a removal of an effort to be a racially diverse text, and an example of “Scott Pilgrim’s wasted potential as a progressive text” (Lizardi 7). That is not to say the entire movie is white, but Scott as a protagonist, and his entire peer group, do not represent a sense of pluralism in the way the movie represents plural medias. In a sense, the film stops half-way. Additionally, the film *literally* has a space in the plot for transgression and re-writing of history in the form of the subspace highway. The “‘subspace’ s a good way to conceptualize the difference between Ramona and Scott with regard to their respective abilities to transcend the past and grow up. In *Scott Pilgrim*, subspaces are places where characters are able to open doors and step into warp holes that enable speedy travel over great distances” (Lizardi 4). Apart from the conceptual subversive qualities of ironic nostalgia, herein lies a *literal* way for *Scott Pilgrim* to open new doors of understanding whiteness, to transcend the socially produced and enforced privilege of constructed whiteness, but the film will not go that far in any regard. If *Scott Pilgrim vs. The World* is not going to reconstruct identity and race politics, it is now important to look at some of the specific ways the film will at least display white-privilege, but will stop halfway at making a political or subversive gesture about white male privilege or even “whiteness” in general. The invisible knapsack of special privileges

will stay firmly strapped to the back of Scott Pilgrim.

In *The Possessive Investment in Whiteness: How White People Profit From Identity Politics*, George Lipsitz wrote about the ways in which whiteness is an idea that is culturally produced to privilege and empower certain people while oppressing others, it is a “a scientific and cultural fiction” (Lipsitz). Media such as *Scott Pilgrim vs. The World* go to further display and circulate this idea of whiteness and white privilege, keeping whiteness in a privileged and powerful position in society. To begin, Scott Pilgrim’s moral compass is skewed toward narcissism, dishonest manipulative behavior, and arrested-development. What keeps a character like this not only afloat in the hearts and minds of audiences, but also afloat within the narrative and world constructed in the film? The answer; whiteness. Or the culturally produced and circulated idea of whiteness. The series starts with Scott Pilgrim as a 23 year old who is content, even happy, to live financially off of his roommate Wallace Wells and play bass in a band that he even admits “sucks,” (said by Scott with an ironic smile, of course.) He has no day job, and in the beginning of the film, is manipulating a 17 year-old high-school girl named Knives Chau into dating him, really using her for a sense of comfort and procrastination of an inevitable “adulthood.” This is part of the larger social trend of “recentering” adulthood to a later period of life than in previous generations, which ‘constitutes a shift in power, agency, responsibility, and dependence between emerging adults and their social contexts” (Lizardi 3-4). The kind of reentering of adulthood mentioned here is predominantly associated with middle to upper middle class white people, who begin to see the power granted from the invisible knapsack of privilege to be waning thin, they begin to see the world as a place of eclecticism to which their privilege will be, at times, checked at the door. A certain kind of privileged millennial feels paranoia about this world, unequipped to deal with diversity when their invisible knapsack is made visible. Jean

Twenge, in *The Atlantic* “presented data showing generational increases in self-esteem, assertiveness, self-importance, narcissism, and high expectations, based on surveys of 1.2 million young people, some dating back to the 1920s. These analyses indicated a clear cultural shift toward individualism and focusing on the self” (Twenge). These generational attributes seem to be found crystallized in the character of Scott Pilgrim. Pilgrim’s privilege thus far in his life, where the story begins, has allotted him the capital to live off his roommate and have minimal responsibility, manipulating those around him for his own gain, whether it be emotional stability from Knives Chau or financial security from Wallace Wells. Furthermore, the notions of millennial self-importance and narcissism seem to echo the notions of self-importance of white privilege and power, both feeling entitled. When they converge, they create the ultimate privileged male (anti) hero in Scott Pilgrim.

Many of Peggy McIntosh’s “Daily effects of white privilege” are displayed through the character of Scott Pilgrim. He is situated at an intersection of race, gender and class which give him the ability to utilize time and time again a set of cultural powers and social currency based on his socially constructed (scientifically fictitious) “whiteness.” One of McIntosh’s daily effects of white privilege is: “I can be pretty sure that my neighbors in such a location will be neutral or pleasant to me.” This is almost completely spoken to and parodied in *Scott Pilgrim vs. The World*. Scott resides across the street from his parent’s home, obviously his neighbors will be neutral or pleasant to him. He lives in a place of constant security, not insecurity or economic precarity. He barely pays rent, and owns very little assets. There is a scene in particular where the camera moves through Scott and Wallace’s apartment, with pop up boxes on screen marking who owns which item. Scott owns next to nothing, the furniture, television and appliances all belong to Wallace. Because of the effect of white privilege, Scott’s roommate is pleasant with

him, they seem to get along, and have a close relationship that is not marked with tension. Due to “whiteness” however, Scott is never coded as a freeloader or somebody who needs to be evicted or make his own way. In contemporary American politics, racial minorities are painted as “lazy freeloaders” by the certain popular press in reference to issues surrounding government aid and social programs. But here, Scott is an actual freeloader, but his white privilege manifests in a neutral attitude toward him from the people he freeloads from. An effect of Scott’s white privilege is that he does not become demonized or called names for use of hand-outs and aid.

Perhaps the move across the street from his parents is more a comment on the running theme of Scott Pilgrim being an adult still stuck in a child-like nostalgic past, and re-centering adulthood, but it also displays his privileged position of having a home that is at once secure and close to him in proximity, which is most certainly not the case in all of society, especially in lower income neighborhoods where gentrification continues to push lower-income families out from their roots. This is not something *Scott Pilgrim vs. The World* even comes close to addressing, instead it stops short, only introducing a blatantly privileged millennial man-child but commenting on little else that lay in the margins or that lay in the residual effects of white privilege.

The list of *50 Daily Effects of White Privilege* from Peggy McIntosh also includes that one who is white “can swear, or dress in second hand clothes, or not answer letters, without having people attribute these choices to the bad morals, the poverty or the illiteracy of [their] race” (McIntosh). There are many scenes in which Scott Pilgrim’s bad morals are hung on clear display. He doesn’t answer letters (emails) and his vintage aesthetic is “hip” because of whiteness. If Scott Pilgrim had been a lower-income Hispanic American or African American, would this clothing aesthetic signify the same sort of style? Or would it reflect on poverty or

race? This is one of the effects, one of the hidden powers of privilege that McIntosh wanted to shed light upon. When Scott's bad morals are addressed from other characters in the film, the criticisms of his character are delegated to an "Oh that's just Scott" tone that is tinged with a shrug and with comedy, not a serious concern over his behavior. His sister yells at him over the phone about needing to break up with his "fake high school girlfriend," but the cursing comes out in buzzes and beeps, hence we laugh at the notion that he needs to break-up with her or make any major overhauls to his moral compass. The effect of his white privilege is that his poor judgement is not attributed to his class or race, it is more a laughing matter. Throughout the film, Scott Pilgrim seems to hold this sort of social power and capital that allows him to manipulate and cheat on a younger girl, and that allows him to coward away from making tough decisions when it comes to rehabilitating the emotional damage inflicted on others by his poor judgement and lack of empathy.

When Peggy McIntosh was asked what made her write the list of the effects of white privilege she answered; "I asked myself, On a daily basis, what do I have that I didn't earn?" (McIntosh, interview with Rothman from The New Yorker). In the case of *Scott Pilgrim vs. The World* the idea of earning respect and love is part of the narrative trajectory. What does Scott, in the film, have that he has not earned? For one, an attitude of disregard for the emotional well-being of those around him, exemplified in the way he leads a younger girl on who is madly obsessed with him. Scott has a clear attitude of privilege over a younger and more vulnerable Knives Chau, an attitude he has not earned. These notions of Scott's "earned strength, unearned power" are explored and slightly addressed in the battle with Ramona's seven evil exes, making Scott fight to flaunt what he has already been flaunting. The film never makes a political statement though, other than Pilgrim finally earning what he has been throwing around all along.



*Scott Pilgrim vs. The World* is a white man's journey from unearned power to earned strength, quite literally when he “earns” the power of self-respect and love after the final battle with Gideon. What if Scott had not earned the power of love and self-respect, had he not gotten the girl at the end of the film? That would have been quite a subversion of white privilege. Although Scott finally does have to work to earn respect in the film, this is not a strong political or transgressive statement, especially for a film that has set up a space for such comments with the ironic nostalgia noted earlier.

As McIntosh writes, “It seems to me that obliviousness about white advantage, like obliviousness about male advantage, is kept strongly inculturated in the United States so as to maintain the myth of meritocracy, the myth that democratic choice is equally available to all. Keeping most people unaware that freedom of confident action is there for just a small number of people props up those in power and serves to keep power in the hands of the same groups that have most of it already” (McIntosh). This obliviousness is so blatantly evident in *Scott Pilgrim*. Although he is fighting, working, and active along the plot’s trajectory, Scott is not fighting and active for self-respect outside of inherent respect that comes from his skin color, he has not even known he has not had self-respect until the final moments. *Scott Pilgrim* is fighting for selfish reasons, he is fighting to attain an image for himself that winning the love of Ramona Flowers will grant him, he is not fighting for respect, he gets something handed to him that he did not know he did not have. He is oblivious to his privileged position in society and lack of self-respect until it is literally spilt out in front of his face after the final battle, in the only way a character as oblivious as Scott can understand, in the form of video-game pastiche; of gold coins and +1 leveling up.

Ramona Flowers, who is a stand-in for “cool” or “hip” otherness, represents the social

context of Scott's privilege waning. And not just in the literal sense of forcing Scott to set a clear goal to which he has to work, but she represents Scott's world based in nostalgia of old video-games can only get him so far. No matter how much privilege one has, it takes some sort of agency to get by in the world, barring extreme outlying circumstances. And like many of the other outlying character in *Scott Pilgrim vs. The World*, Ramona seems like a caricature of haphazard representation; hardly flushed out and simply in the film to serve Scott's privileged purposes and shallow goals. "Ramona represents Scott's reluctant transition into adulthood, as she embodies the changes and responsibility he needs to embrace" (Lizardi 3). The characters in the margins are all just there to represent something about Scott Pilgrim. In a way this is a display of white privilege, wherein Scott wields the power to not just divert from stark criticisms of his character, but to have power over characters and situations to represent them as objects that reflect back onto himself, a sort of selfish privilege where Scott is the narcissistic center of his millennial universe. Again, as an example of the film doing a 50% effort toward making radical or progressive gestures, *Scott Pilgrim vs. The World* gives Knives Chau, one of the main Asian Canadian characters, a slight articulation of her awareness of representation, but not until the very last scene when she tells Scott to be with Ramona instead of her, because she is "too cool" for him. But one line after being portrayed as "the stereotype of the submissive Asian woman" is not doing much to make an argument against the fact that *Scott Pilgrim vs. The World* is a film about whiteness and white privilege (Han).

Interestingly enough, Knives Chau is not the only marginalized asian character in the film. Scott Pilgrim himself had the potential to be a more diverse character. "While O'Malley invests the Scott Pilgrim character with a number of autobiographical facets... the Asian part of O'Malley's identity is split from the protagonist and relegated to secondary and tertiary

characters. In that regard O'Malley avoids writing a multicultural comic with a political program (Denson, Meyer and Stein 250). Borrowing from the notion of "white washing of American history" where "non white people often find that their contributions to history are whitewashed, relegated to footnotes, or omitted completely" this text finds itself washing away non-white details in favor for whiteness (Peterson). Clearly, the privilege to (re)write and whitewash history is a clear effect and attribute of white privilege, and in the case of *Scott Pilgrim*, the history, or sense of autobiographical detail is whitewashed over, just as in the case of many facets of American history. To be clear, this example is not to reprimand the creator of the work for constructing a character that is not his own ethnicity, such condemnations would be petty. It is to go to show not only another way in which *Scott Pilgrim vs. The World* holds potential for more transgressive gestures about race and ethnicity, but it also exemplifies the way in which white privilege has a myriad of effects within culture, language, media and discourse. The whitewashing is evident here, the hidden power of whiteness to purvey into different media and secure its grasp on power and discourse.

In conclusion, the point of this case study was not to paint the film racist or slander the text as a malicious display of white privilege, it to point out the ways in which culture and this film in particular secures and allows whiteness to exist in a place that offers them "an invisible weightless knapsack of special provisions, maps, passports, codebooks, visas, clothes, tools , and blank checks" (McIntosh). The invisible backpack of tools is precisely how whiteness affords Scott Pilgrim the cultural capital (or power) to be a morally conflicted character and not have it relate in any way back onto his race. Scott Pilgrim, being the white male protagonist, is afforded certain luxuries that grant him power. As a character he can easily be labeled an emotional manipulator and a creep, but those words are replaced with the patronizing pat of words like

“self-absorbed,” words that have much less emotional heft than the former set of accusations.

Within the theoretical and literal transgressive aspects of the text, *Scott Pilgrim vs. The World* creates a world perfectly set up to comment and deconstruct white privilege, whiteness and whitewashing, to make space for new representations of marginalized race, gender and ethnicity. The film does not do this, but in the very least, it displays and partly demystifies white privilege by putting the protagonist on a trajectory to earn what he has not earned in the past; respect, self-worth, and hard work to attain a goal.

In Peggy McIntosh’s words, “Although systemic change takes many decades, there are pressing questions for me and, I imagine, for some others like me if we raise our daily consciousness on the perquisites of being light-skinned. What will we do with such knowledge? As we know from watching men, it is an open question whether we will choose to use unearned advantage, and whether we will use any of our arbitrarily awarded power to try to reconstruct power systems on a broader base” (McIntosh). *Scott Pilgrim vs. The World* is not reconstructing power systems, but the opportunity, with this knowledge, for a paradigm shift is present and the power is up for grabs to operate in a society where hegemonic male whiteness no longer inherently needs to come equipped with an invisible knapsack of privilege and power. The ability to deconstruct and re-signify the circulation of whiteness within culture and society is an ever attainable goal, it just takes the sociopolitical and sociocultural awareness and work from a millennial generation that does not inherently have to be as narcissistic and oblivious as Scott Pilgrim.



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