

Do Racists Play Video Games? The Dialectic Relation of White Supremacists to Popular Culture

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Abstract:

Cultural critics C. Richard King and David J. Leonard shed light on the complex relation of white power and popular culture in the contemporary US. By analysing online discussion forums of white supremacists, the authors trace the dialectics of rejecting and re-appropriating popular culture commodities in fields as diverse as music, sports, and video games; furthermore, King and Leonard lay bare the at times thin red line between mainstream discourses around popular culture and white nationalist attitudes towards this phenomenon.

How to cite:

Winkler, Robert A.: „Do Racists Play Video Games? The Dialectic Relation of White Supremacists to Popular Culture [Review on: King, C. Richard and David J. Leonard: Beyond Hate. White Power and Popular Culture. Surrey: Ashgate Publishing Limited, 2014.]“. In: KULT_online 44 (2015).

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.22029/ko.2015.930>

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King, C. Richard and David J. Leonard: *Beyond Hate. White Power and Popular Culture*. Surrey: Ashgate Publishing Limited, 2014. 188 p., paperback, £ 20,00. ISBN: 978-1-4724-2749-6

In 2015, excessive racial violence has forcefully destroyed last illusions of any post-racial idyll in the Age of Obama. The ongoing police brutality of white officers against African American men laid bare the structural shortcomings of contemporary US society while racially motivated massacres like Dylann Roof's Charleston church shooting revealed the incomprehensible magnitude of racial hatred still existing in some American hearts and minds.

Cultural historians C. Richard King and David J. Leonard – both of whom teach at Washington State University and are affiliated with its leading Department of Critical Culture, Gender, and Race Studies – tackle the relation of white power and popular culture in our current digital age from two perspectives. At first they collect representative statements from the online discussion forums of one of the leading white supremacist websites. The authors develop a “critical ethnography of the virtual communities established and discursive networks activated through the online engagements of white separatists, white nationalists, and white supremacists with movies, music, television, kitsch, video games, and sport” (p. 7). Correspondingly, chapters three to eight allow for an entry into the racist's mind by featuring the almost unbearable attitudes of the white supremacy community towards the popular-culture realms of music, television, Hollywood, sport, video games, and social media. Thereby, the authors demonstrate in-depth knowledge and provide extensive references on the specific dimensions of scrutinized popular culture.

The second perspective of the book aims to “challenge the tendency to disassociate mainstream discourses surrounding race or popular culture from the more extreme versions found among white nationalists to reveal a significant level of continuity” (p. 10). The book's first two chapters provide the groundwork for this conclusion by detecting patterns of “veiled” white supremacy in contemporary American mainstream society in the vein of established theories of colorblind racism (cf. 18ff). The ninth and last chapter, “Beyond Hate: Wade Michael Page, White Power, and Popular Culture” (p. 159-73), verifies their thesis by discussing in a politically engaged way the popular discourses in the wake of racially motivated massacres committed by white supremacists; the authors convincingly critique the tendency to stigmatize and pathologize racist individuals in order to neglect and ignore broader patterns of structural racisms.

Chapter seven, “Gaming the Racial Order: White Power Identities and Ideologies in Video Games” (p. 111-35), is a lucid example for the authors' method of linking white supremacists' readings of popular culture commodities with the broader consumption and production of these very artefacts in mainstream society. King and Leonard contend that the white nationalist's ambiguous relation to video games is – just like their general attitude towards mainstream popular culture – informed either by rejection or biased interaction (cf. p. 112). On the one hand, video games are blamed for the effeminacy of male white youth, and therefore endanger the maintenance of the white race. In order to buck this trend and to use this medium for recruitment purposes, white nationalists have on the other hand begun developing a number of video games since the mid-1990s (cf. *ibid*). The white nationalist's competing evaluations of the immensely popular video game *Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas* give ample evidence for this assessment. While some within the community appraise the supposedly authentic depiction of African Americans as dangerous gangsters and violent criminals, other white nationalists wholeheartedly reject it due to the perceived glorification of black culture (cf. 114ff). The authors subsequently elaborate on societal discourses around black masculinity and criminality; increasingly, white power advocates would produce seemingly scientific studies intended to prove a correlation between black males and criminality. Within this climate, violent video games featuring African American stereotypes like *Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas* are being produced and, more significantly, the white nationalist reading of these games is put forward as well.

In these days in which race has forcefully reentered public and academic discourses, King and Leonard's monograph provides an unprecedented insight into the white supremacist's mind. The author's detailed and extensive collection and analysis of online discussions within the white nationalist community covers every major popular culture battleground. The main significance of this study, however, lies in its detection of the interconnectedness of the nexus of popular culture, hegemonic power, and racial politics. This rich and insightful monograph is indispensable for a more comprehensive understanding of racial discourses in contemporary US society.