

**Harwood / Mongrel
Ethnic Bleaching**





Computer technologies allow for the infinite reproduction of a digital image without further loss of quality. The questions are: whose image or images are being reproduced so purely and "cleanly"; and to whose benefit is the capability for infinite reproduction? To answer these questions, first of all we must examine the specific social relations involved and their ramifications for new media. Constructions of race in the form of mental images are much more than simple indexes of biological or cultural sameness. They are the constructs of the social imagination, mapped onto geographical regions and technological sites. These fabrications of race have traceable links to historically specific relations, from those informing the experience of slavery, migrant labour, colonisation, to those affecting friendship and family life. Racial images are pregnant with the social and political processes from which they emerge and to which, in turn, they contribute, and images of different races articulate the political and economic relations of races in societies.

If such patterns figure in wider society generally, then what insights can we gain by looking more specifically at the images in Cyberland? Some pretty specific questions can be raised, such as: when was the last time you saw someone black, yellow or brown in the Apple developer mag? Or why was the Nippon operating system so expensive in Japan? Although some magazines favour images of Japanese women fondling their modems, CyberEurope and CyberUSA offer us an almost complete absence of mongrelised, black or Asian images and, for that matter, a lack of any impure or "filthy" social relations. This lack, or strategic forgetting, of mongrel images in the techno-cultural sphere goes far beyond simply reflecting the self-interest or distinguishing experiences and aspirations of the authoring "Digirati" and their suck-up class of consumers. The new techno purebreds are actively ritualising the "CyberNation" into an ethnic bleaching: a kind of ethnic cleansing but a little less discriminating, and much cleaner.

At the turn of the century, the construction of the Chicago skyscrapers marked a similar, albeit less ambitious, attempt. Then Chicago's elite merely tried to rid itself of the butchers stench from America's biggest slaughterhouses with the watchwords "Let's not deal with the rotting carcass. Let's build a palace in the sky."

Now, dominant racial and cultural groups in society act as an audience to their own techno-cultural-media product. Bleached images of self-congratulatory ritualised distancing, symbolically install these groups as the right people to control, restrict and censor Cyberland. Digital cloning has helped call into question accepted notions of originality and genius,

allowing a re-evaluation of the codes of cultural production—just so long as this does not include the filth of uncomfortable social relations. Given the racialisation and elitism of most art events, attendees might still think that underneath they're all still loveable.

The multicultural lets-get-on-with-each-other-and-get-happy number has for a long time been one of the main tactics for hiding hard, difficult debate under a sixties-style love-in. Mongrel cultures have come too long a way in intellectual rigour to be fobbed off with a flower pushed up the barrel of their gun.

To explore race we must, in the words of Paul Gilroy, "...trace at least two threads of history. The first involves mapping the changing contours of racist ideologies, the semantic fields in which they operate, their special rhetoric and their internal fractures as well as their continuities. The second centres on the history of social groups, both dominant and subordinate, which recognise themselves in terms of race and act accordingly."