

Why do I see a Woman? A Feminist Decolonial Perspective of the Film “Passing”

Sophia Bicudo Passos da Fonseca ^a, Francirosy Campos Barbosa ^b

^a Faculdade de Filosofia, Ciências e Letras de Ribeirão Preto, Universidade de São Paulo, Ribeirão Preto, Brasil, email address sophiabicudo@usp.br.

^b Faculdade de Filosofia, Ciências e Letras de Ribeirão Preto, Universidade de São Paulo, Ribeirão Preto, Brasil, email address franci@ffclrp.usp.br.

Abstract. Film analysis is a way of approaching cinematographic productions in order to promote a broader understanding of phenomena experienced by several social groups. Furthermore, decolonial feminism allows for an interpretation that is sensitive to the complexity of the intersections between sex, gender, race, class, and sexuality and combative of the coloniality of power. In this scenario, the American film “Passing”, by Rebecca Hall, released in 2021 and inspired by the novel “Passing”, by Nella Larsen, published in 1929, which address sex, gender and race in an intertwined way, can provide an interpretation of reality by portraying the passing phenomenon through the character Irene Redfield. With that in mind, through a narrative revision of literature and a film analysis, this article analysed this cinematographic production in order to understand the gendering of Irene Redfield through a decolonial perspective. The results indicate that our culture shape our look towards the world with “markers”, creating realities in this process. Therefore, the look is not fortuitous, our perception is within culture and, thus, in discourse.

Keywords. Passing, gender, race, look, spectator, construction

1. Introduction

According to Jacques Aumont, the spectator is an “active partner of the image, emotionally and cognitively [...] [and also] the psychic organism on which the image acts” [1] (p. 81, personal translation). Thus, there is no passive relationship between spectator and image; but rather what the same author calls “the rule of etc”, according to which, “by making his previous knowledge intervene, the viewer of an image therefore supplies the non-represented, the gaps in the representation” [1] (p. 88, personal translation), so that sometimes the spectators “invent”, totally or partially, images to some extent.

In the film “Passing” [2], an American production by screenwriter and director Rebecca Hall, released in 2021 on the Netflix streaming platform, and inspired by the novel “Passing” by Nella Larsen, first published in the United States in 1929, the character Irene Redfield never claims to be “a woman”. However, most viewers “make up” this fact (without necessarily thinking they heard her say it) in order to fill in this gap; this look at the character is not

fortuitous. On the contrary, it occurs as a result of the social structure that marked American society in the period portrayed in the film and still marks today's society. Therefore, aiming to respond to the question “Why do I see a woman?”, related to the character Irene Redfield (Tessa Thompson), the present article investigates the concepts of body, sex, gender and race through a decolonial feminist perspective focusing on aspects of image and language.

Decolonial feminism, through the concept of intersectionality, allows an understanding of the complexity of the relationships between race, sex, class, sexuality and nationality [3][4][5][6][7], in such a way that it calls into question “the coloniality of power, being, knowledge and nature” [8] (p. 307, personal translation). In addition, the decolonial perspective rejects linear, dualistic and universalizing narratives, focusing on discourses located at borders [9][10], “enunciative *loci* from which knowledge is formulated from the perspectives, cosmovisions or experiences of the subjects subordinates” [11] (p. 19, personal translation).

Moreover, according to the American philosopher Judith Butler, the body is a

“materiality that carries at least certain meanings, and this carrying is fundamentally dramatic. By dramatic, I mean that this body is not just matter, *it is a continuous and ceaseless materialization of possibilities*. People are not their bodies, but **they make their bodies**” [12] (p. 216, my emphasis, personal translation)

Therefore, bodies are not static, nor are they ready-made, but intentionally constructed through the incorporation of possibilities, marked by historicity, in relationships and experiences in the world (e.g., the performances of “drag queens” and “drag kings”). Thereby, added to Donna Haraway’s understanding that “bodies are our selves; bodies are maps of power and identity” [13] (p. 200, personal translation) it is possible to comprehend that this continuous and incessant materialization of possibilities, of which Judith Butler speaks, is related to the identity(ies) assumed by a person in the course there life, which are associated (in a contestatory or conformist way) with the powers established in the context they are inscribed [14].

Furthermore, despite Monique Wittig highlighting that “there is no such thing as sex” [15] (p. 33, personal translation), bodies have been and still are systematically divided into male/female (boy/girl) since birth, based on a category constructed in some societies, therefore non-natural, that establishes different social roles and expectations for human beings (e.g., in the United States, motherhood and femininity are usually associated with individuals identified as belonging to the sex “women”) [16] [17] [18] [19] [20]. This category is inserted in the context of the “social contract of heterosexuality” [15] and of “compulsory heterosexuality” [21], therefore, in a society in which the heterosexual relationship is seen as a parameter of all hierarchical relationships, thus, in which there is the “belief in the superiority inherent in one way of loving [heterosexual] over all others” [22] (p. 235, personal translation). In this scenario, bodies are compulsorily sexualized within a society based on the “political regime” of heterosexuality [23] in order to privilege the division of beings and the creation of social roles and expectations based on factors associated with reproduction (e.g., possibility of gestating or not) [8] [24]; in such a way that the category sex is political and is closely related to culture, making it implausible to make an analogy between sex/gender and nature/culture [16] [25].

Moreover, regarding gender, Judith Butler says that

“[...] gender is not a noun, but neither is it a set of fluctuating attributes, as we have seen that its substantive effect is *performatively* produced and imposed by the regulatory practices of gender coherence [...] **gender is always a doing** [...] is the repeated stylization of the body, a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory framework, which crystallizes over time to produce the

appearance of a substance, of a natural class of being” [16] (p. 56 and 69, my emphasis, personal translation)

“[...] gender identity is a performance supported by **social sanctions and taboos** [...] gender, then, as a body style” [12] (p. 214 and 216, my emphasis, personal translation)

In this scenario, gender is a set of acts repeatedly performed by and under a body, supported by social sanctions and taboos related to the category of sex [17]. Thus, “woman” is associated with “feminine” (“man” is associated with “masculine”) and with the social roles and expectations related to this category.

Furthermore, race is a segregating element created by the colonial imaginary in order to oppress people with a certain skin tone, hierarchizing them through phenotypic characteristics aiming to position them hierarchically in a dichotomized continuum of colonized/colonizer, bad/good, inferior/superior, object/subject [19] [26] [27] [28] [29]. Therefore, colonialism racialized individuals through the creation of negative images associated with blackness [30], the “images of control” [20], in such a way that the colonized is “a being who begins to inhabit a fractured focus doubly constructed, who perceives the world doubly, relates doubly, where the ‘sides’ are in tension and the conflict itself actively informs the subjectivity of the colonized Self in multiple relationships” [31] (p. 365, personal translation). In this sense, becoming black is a “process of affirmation and search for a positive self-definition” [32] (p. 255, personal translation), as well as a political position [33].

Thereby, just as the sex category is a political construction inserted in the social contract of heterosexuality, the race category was engendered within the colonial system of power. Therefore, both are not natural, but mechanisms for hierarchizing people.

With this in mind and considering the fact that I see myself (i.e., see from a specific and situated place in a society) as a white Brazilian middle-class queer woman, this article aims to answer the question “Why do I see a woman?” regarding the character Irene Redfield. Therefore, a decolonial feminist perspective is used in such a way that gender-sex-race are seen through the lens of intersectionality and co-constitutionality while bearing in mind that there are other ways to analyse the film “Passing” [3] [7].

2. Research Methods

This article is a result of a narrative revision of literature and a film analysis.

3. Results and discussion of the results

Situated in Harlem in the 1920s, the film "Passing" portrays the phenomenon of passing, as well as the intersectionality of sex-gender-race-class-sexuality, focusing on the character Irene Redfield, perceived by me as a middle-class black woman, wife of a black doctor, mother of two black boys and organizer of social events to value blackness. In this process, image and language, as well as the absence of language, convey to viewers the social structure of North American society in that space-time period and, in this sense, its culture, in such a way that, although the sex determined by the character is not directly verbally informed, we perceive it as natural and intuitive to assume her as a black-woman.

This occurs, in part, due to cultural markers shared by spectators, such as characteristics of clothing, the character's body and, as a consequence, the behavior expected of her (e.g., submission, docility). In this sense, in Figure 1 and in Figure 2, it is possible to observe how the use of a dress and a necklace, the characteristic shape of the hat and bag carried, the way her hair is organized as well as her phenotypic characteristics identify Irene Redfield as a woman for the public that observes her on screens, since these symbols are associated with the female gender and the roles assigned to this gender (e.g., motherhood, housework). Thus, even though the character does not verbally claim to be a woman, her images do so when inserted into the American culture of the 1920s.



Fig. 1 - Irene Redfield. Source: Observatório do Cinema, UOL



Fig. 2 - Claire Bellow (left) and Irene Redfield (right). Source: Cinematologia

In addition, the contrast and similarity with other characters allow her to be sometimes seen as black, sometimes as white. Thus, in Figure 3, the initial moment of the film, due to the massive presence of white people, together with the lighting (i.e., predominance of light over darkness) and the character's performance associated with the ideal of femininity (e.g., delicacy, passivity, sweetness), which is related to whiteness, it is possible to perceive her as white, whereas, in the domestic environment, in the presence of her husband and children, it is more likely for most spectators to see her as black. Therefore, the phenomenon of passing is inserted in the context and in the relationships, beyond the self.



Fig. 3 - Irene Redfield (left) and Claire Bellow (right). Source: The Cinemaholic

Furthermore, the use of pronouns such as "miss", "ma'am", and "mama" reinforces the categorisation of Irene Redfield as belonging to the female gender. Also regarding language, it is interesting to note that, unlike French and Portuguese, in English adjectives are not marked by gender, so that in the statements "Are you curious?", "I accompany you" it is not possible to "guess" the character's gender, while this is plausible in other languages. Therefore, translations of this film may affect the perception of the different spectators do to cultural, contextual, and language changes.

In this way, through cultural knowledge, spectators fill in the gap regarding the character's gender. In this perspective, although it is a socially constructed and maintained political category, most viewers "automatically" assume that Irene Redfield is a woman due to the naturalizing and universalizing discourse transmitted by the American culture about this construct. Thus, Irene Redfield passes herself as a woman because she fulfills the necessary criteria for us to see her as such, for instance because of being a mother and a wife, roles socially attributed to women, wearing clothes associated with the performance of this gender and maintaining the home as a housewife. However, this process is only possible outside the American and European territory because the construct of gender was, and still is, systematically imposed since the start of the colonisation.

Moreover, due to the historical stigmatization of black women in American society as not being

considered “real” women, it is possible to think that the character tries to carry out an even more marked identification with femininity in order to avoid images of control imposed by the colonizers. From this perspective, voluntary participation (i.e., without receiving payment) in the organization of events for the promotion of blackness (e.g., Negro Welfare League Dance) could be interpreted not only as a way of promoting a positive image of the black race, but also as a way of associating oneself with the female social role linked to benevolence and donation.

In summary, I see a woman because my look is not fortuitous, but situated in a socio-historical and cultural context, in which coloniality imposed ways of seeing, feeling and interpreting the surroundings in such a way that the spectator’s look depends on cultural markers, such as educational level, class, sex/gender, race, sexuality, nationality and religion. Thus, in order to (un)do this look on Irene Redfield, perceiving her as a person before as a black woman, it is necessary to carefully reflect on the borders. In this sense, the “outsider within” perspective [34], acquired by a large contingent of black women, is important and potentiates a more complex understanding of intersections and, therefore, of people.

4. Conclusions

Taking into account what was analysed, it is possible to conclude that the spectator’s perception of the character is culturally situated, so dichotomous imagery and linguistic markers are used to fill in the gaps present in images. In this way, the subject is constructed in counterpoint to the other by being associated with performative characteristics (e.g., dress, necklace, high heels). In this sense, I see a woman looking at Irene Redfield partially because I don’t see a man, since the western culture is structured in binaries, such as woman/man and non-white/white, that tend to overlap daily, even if the ideals of these categories do not.

Thus, the spectator looks at Irene Redfield as a woman because they are inserted in a system of values and cultural norms, in such a way that they identify visual and verbal symbols, gendering, and racializing the character. In summary, the look is not fortuitous, but guided by culture and, therefore, by a social-historical-spatial period in such a way that we create the world and maintain social constructs of a society (e.g., gender, race) as we perceive it. As a result, it is not possible to have a neutral look towards the surroundings, but rather only a situated one.

5. Acknowledgements

This article was produced as part of the Scientific Initiation “‘Identidade’: um olhar antropológico decolonial acerca das percepções de mulheres negras sobre identidade e embranquecimento” being

developed by the author, under the guidance of Prof^a Dr^a Francirosy Campos Barbosa, with funding from FAPESP number 2022/01531-9.

6. References

- [1] Aumont, J. A PARTE DO ESPECTADOR. In: AUMONT, J. *A imagem*. São Paulo: Papirus, 1993. p. 77-134
- [2] IDENTIDADE. Direção: Rebecca Hall. Produção: Rebecca Hall, Nina Yang Bongiovi, Forest Whitaker, Margot Hand. Reino Unido/Estados Unidos: Netflix, 2020. Streaming (98 min)
- [3] Collins, P. H.; Bilge, S. *Interseccionalidade*. 1. ed. São Paulo: Boitempo, 2021
- [4] Curiel, O. Construindo metodologias feministas a partir do feminismo decolonial. In: Holanda, H. B. D. (Org). *Pensamento Feminista Hoje: perspectivas decoloniais*. Rio de Janeiro: Bazar do Tempo, 2020, p. 120-138
- [5] Vergès, F. *Um feminismo decolonial*. São Paulo: Ubu Editora, 2020
- [6] Jardim, G. D. S.; Cavas, C. D. S. T. Pós-colonialismo e feminismo decolonial: caminhos para uma compreensão anti-essencialista do mundo. *Ponto-e-Vírgula: Revista de Ciências Sociais*, n. 22, p. 73-91, 2017. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.23925/1982-4807.2017i22p73-91>
- [7] Minõso, Y. E; Zirollo, N. L. Superando a análise fragmentada da dominação: Uma revisão feminista decolonial da perspectiva da interseccionalidade. *Revista X*, v. 17, n. 1, p. 425-446, 2022. Available in: <https://revistas.ufpr.br/revistax/article/view/84444>
- [8] Costa, C. D. L. Feminismos decoloniais e a política e a ética da tradução. In: Holanda, H. B. D. (Org). *Pensamento Feminista Hoje: perspectivas decoloniais*. Rio de Janeiro: Bazar do Tempo, 2020, p. 320-341
- [9] hooks, b. *Teoria Feminista: da margem ao centro*. São Paulo: Perspectiva, 2019
- [10] Dos Santos, M. F. V. O FEMINISMO TERCEIRO MUNDISTA: O FEMINISMO DECOLONIAL DAS MULHERES DE COR DA AMÉRICA LATINA. In: admin. *IntegRI. Online*, 30 ago. 2020. Available in: <https://integri.com.br/trabalhos-apresentados/eririo-2020/o-feminismo-terceiro-mundista-o-feminismo-decolonial-das-mulheres-de-cor-da-america-latina/>
- [11] Bernardino-Costa, J.; Grosfoguel, R. Decolonialidade e perspectiva negra. *Sociedade e Estado*, v. 31, p. 15-24, 2016. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1590/S0102-69922016000100002>
- [12] Butler, J. Atos performáticos e a formação dos gêneros: um ensaio sobre a fenomenologia e teoria feminista. In: Holanda, H. B. D. (Org). *Pensamento*

Feminista Hoje: perspectivas decoloniais. Rio de Janeiro: Bazar do Tempo, 2020, p. 213-230

[13] Haraway, D. Manifesto ciborgue: ciência, tecnologia e feminismo-socialista no final do século. In: Hollanda, H. B. D. (Org). *Pensamento Feminista Hoje: perspectivas decoloniais*. Rio de Janeiro: Bazar do Tempo, 2020, p. 157-210

[14] Oliveira, K. H. D. Intensos encontros: Michel Foucault, Judith Butler, Paul B. Preciado e a teoria queer. *Revista Estudos Feministas*, v. 29, 2021. Available in: <https://www.scielo.br/j/ref/a/f8xM5gZFZxn9yZwxZbxd8Tt/>

[15] Wittig, M. *O pensamento hétero*. 1ª ed. Belo Horizonte: Autêntica, 2022

[16] Butler, J. *Problemas de Gênero: feminismo e subversão da identidade*. 22ª ed. Rio de Janeiro: Civilização Brasileira, 2022a

[17] Butler, J. *Corpos que importam: Os limites discursivos do "sexo"*. 1ª reimpr. São Paulo: n-1 edições, 2020b

[18] hooks, b. *O feminismo é para todo mundo: políticas arrebatadoras*. 19 ed. Rio de Janeiro: Rosa dos Tempos, 2022

[19] hooks, b. *E eu não sou uma mulher?: mulheres negras e feminismo*. 7. ed. Rio de Janeiro: Rosa dos Tempos, 2020

[20] Collins, P. H. *Pensamento Feminista Negro*. 1. ed. São Paulo: Boitempo, 2019.

[21] Rich, A. Compulsory heterosexuality and lesbian existence. *Signs: Journal of women in culture and society*, v. 5, n. 4, p. 631-660, 1980. Available in: <https://fdjpkc.fudan.edu.cn/upload/article/files/08/86/2a477a8240cf914473ae18e45141/061c6a5c-5518-4fb0-aabe-52b0e0b44282.pdf>

[22] Lorde, A. Não existe hierarquia de opressão. In: Hollanda, H. B. D. (Org.) *Pensamento feminista hoje: perspectivas decoloniais*. Rio de Janeiro: Bazar do Tempo, 2020. p. 235-236

[23] Preciado, P. B. Multidões queer: notas para uma política dos "anormais". In: Hollanda, H. B. D. (Org.) *Pensamento feminista: conceitos fundamentais*. Rio de Janeiro: Bazar do Tempo, 2019. p. 421-429

[24] Preciado, P. B. *Manifesto Contrassexual: práticas subversivas de identidade sexual*. Rio de Janeiro: Zahar, 2022

[25] Butler, J. *Desfazendo Gênero*. 1 ed. São Paulo: Editora Unesp, 2022b

[26] Munanga, K. *Negritude: usos e sentidos*. 4 ed. Belo Horizonte: Autêntica, 2009

[27] Gonzales, L. *Por um feminismo afro-latino-americano*. Rio de Janeiro: Zahar, 2020

[28] De Oliveira, A. P. et al. Identidades em transição:

Narrativas de mulheres negras sobre cabelos, técnicas de embranquecimento e racismo. *Estudos e Pesquisas em Psicologia*, v. 19, n. 2, p. 445-463, 2019. Available in: <https://www.redalyc.org/journal/4518/451860505007/451860505007.pdf>

[29] Dimenstein, M., Silva, G. D. N., Dantas, C., Macedo, J. P., Leite, J. F., & Alves Filho, A. Gênero na perspectiva decolonial: revisão integrativa no cenário latino-americano. *Revista Estudos Feministas*, v. 28, 2020. Available in: <https://www.scielo.br/j/ref/a/gkYn4NVxTgFL8YHKhSRDJ5n/abstract/?lang=pt>

[30] Fanon, F. *Pele Negra, máscaras brancas*. São Paulo: Ubu Editora, 2020

[31] Lugones, M. Rumo a um feminismo decolonial. In: Hollanda, H. B. D. (Org.) *Pensamento feminista: conceitos fundamentais*. Rio de Janeiro: Bazar do Tempo, 2019, p. 357-377

[32] Figueiredo, A. Carta de uma ex-mulata a Judith Butler. In: Hollanda, H. B. D. (Org.) *Pensamento feminista hoje: perspectivas decoloniais*. Rio de Janeiro: Bazar do Tempo, 2020, p. 240-258

[33] Panta, M.; Pallisser, N. "Identidade nacional brasileira" versus "identidade negra": reflexões sobre branqueamento, racismo e construções identitárias. *Revista Espaço Acadêmico*, v. 17, n. 195, p. 116-127, 2017. Available in: <file:///C:/Users/sophi/Downloads/34664-Texto%20do%20artigo-171899-1-10-20170804.pdf>

[34] Lorde, A. *Irmã Outsider: ensaios e conferências*. 1. ed. Belo Horizonte: Autêntica, 2019.