

# Mirror, Mirror

'Negrophilia: Avant-Garde Paris and Black Culture in the 1920s'

by Petrine Archer-Straw. (Published by Interplay/ Thames and Hudson, London. 200 pages, 123 illustrations.)

**N**egrophilia is an excellent examination of the effect of black people on modern culture, using the Parisian art scene of the 1920s as the focal point and microcosm. At the launch of the book last December, it was introduced as concerning 'white people who love black people'. This is a needlessly reductive and superficial slant to apply to a closely, subtly-argued study of art and its reflection of racism, politics and the bounds of reality and fantasy.

Looking at images, artefacts, performances and performers of various kinds, Petrine Archer-Straw opens a door onto a huge vista of discussions about racism, modernity, fantasy and projection - and onto the very ways in which these are discussed. In this way, her project goes far beyond a straight, merely aesthetic history of art, or even an analysis of a social reality related to our own, into a sophisticated understanding of discourse itself.

'*Negrophilia's* imagery cannot be looked at dispassionately. For it to be released from the fear that obscures our understanding, it must be engaged with intimately. If that fear is a result of racism, then that, too, must be exorcised,' she says. 'In order to do this, the book has used another voice, one that is 'collective' and non-

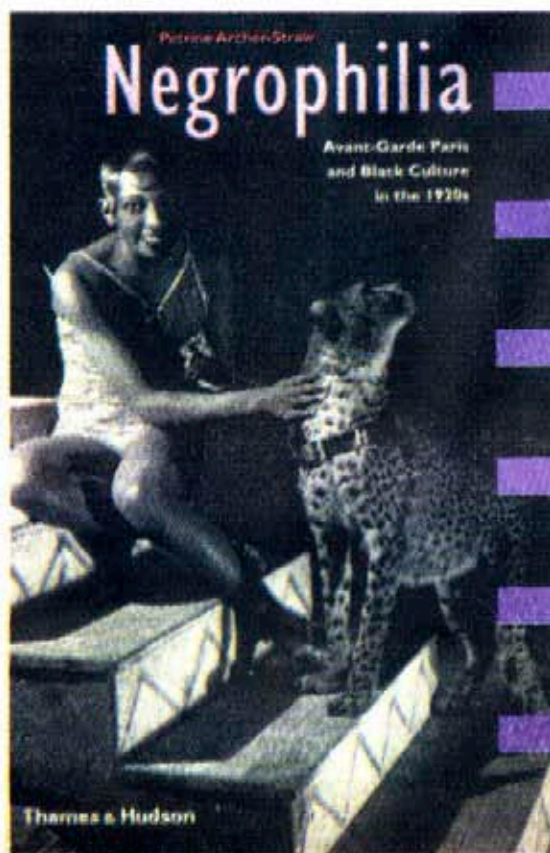
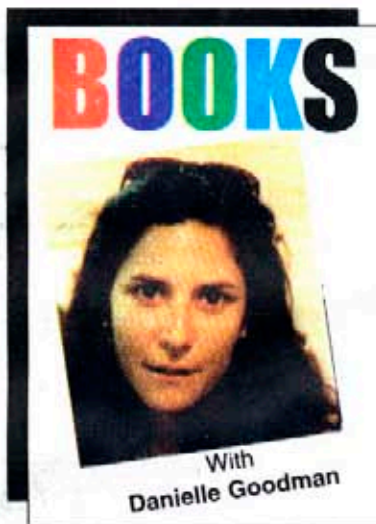
European. This voice conveys a sense of the "we" that has been muted in the past and more often represented as "them".'

Rarely do theory, practice, and the framework of discourse present such a seamless and powerful whole. The integrity of process, subject and viewpoint is exemplary. Archer-Straw has done a really virtuoso piece of scholarship and presentation. Content, context, style are as one; ethic and aesthetic are distinguished by their solidity, clarity and elegance.

To resume her argument briefly. 'What made black people modern,' she says, 'was the fact of the diaspora, their trans-cultural state, their restless (dis)continuity and the possibility of their cultural mutation. The blacks who travelled to Paris carried with them the burdens and blessings of these contradictions; they came in search of acceptance within a modern milieu that would respect the peculiar hybrid nature of their creativity. But their desire to be cultural insiders was confounded by members of the white avant-garde, who were striving to be outsiders.'

In varied and subtle explorations of the forms of this dynamic, Archer-Straw tracks the meetings, mergings, and clashes between blacks, whites, and their ideas about each other - and the ways in which their differing positions in the shifting economic and social power-relationship modified these ideas. In a sense, *Negrophilia* is as much concerned with 'negrophobia', and with the shades of mimicry and minstrelsy that underly the confrontations of cultures and colours.

The book relates the 'othering' process, from the height of European colonialism onwards, as it



was modulated through images of black people in art, sports, advertising, ethnography, and photography. A good example of this process is shown by Archer-Straw in her analysis of the way in which post-war European audiences identified Jack Johnson, the boxer's outsider status with their own feelings of alienation after the trauma of the First World War. The war had exemplified modernity's soullessly efficient violence. Artists sought an alternative to the materialism of modern life in the idea of the 'primitive' (read: 'spiritual and morally sound') black culture.

By contrast, and simultaneously, the 'primitivisation' of black people was counterpoised, correlated with, and backed by the association of blackness with modernity. The perception of anarchy, freedom, and authenticity in blackness was linked to the wish to shatter old forms and create a new society. Archer-Straw skilfully takes us through the process by which African art became a conceptual tool for white avant-garde artists to signify anarchy and transgression. This is merely an extension of the ways in which African colonial expansion was legitimised by creating images and associations of violence: 'From the 1860s, Africa operated on the levels of the real and the unreal, at once site of civilising missions and scientific expeditions and the "heart of darkness" where every expedition was like a personal journey into the unknown to confront one's own fears and phobias.'

Africa and black people were made into 'shadow selves' for white Europe.

The sadomasochistic image-construct always concluded with the white as technologically 'top', but dependent on the black 'bottom' for spiritual or emotional sustenance. African images, artefacts (both of genuine ethnographic value and curios), art, and even people became

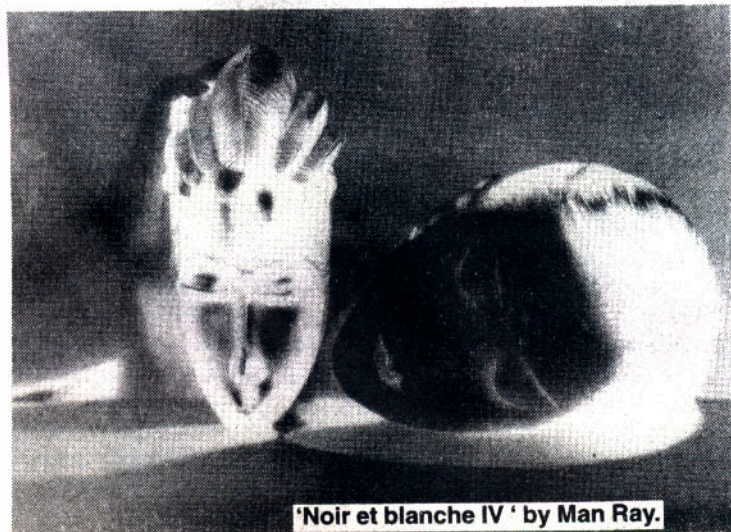


'Noir et blanche II' by Man Ray.

the representatives, tools, or actors-out of white Europeans' neuroses and therapy at one and the same time. Incidentally, it will be interesting to see where such a line of inquiry - which is clearly developed relative to Fanon's 'Black Skin, White Masks' - could be taken in the area of psychology at this particular time.

Tying theory in with artefact and image, as Archer-Straw does, is an immensely effective way to discern and reveal submerged patterns. The images range from the advertisements of 'hot chocolate' in the late 19th Century up to the subtle shifts in perception of Josephine Baker during her stint in Paris, to careful deconstruction of artists' portraits and even photographs of their studios, like Brancusi's. In her examination of interior and furniture design, she traces with great precision, based on visual motifs and clues, the evolution of the 'primitive'. This moved from the ideal of the ethnographer to the representation of colonialist power, to the reduction and mass-marketing of the code of the 'primitive' in items of what Archer-Straw calls *Black Deco* for the public.

(Late-20th / early-21st Century's culture's distinct characteristics are speed, *immateriality* (in that its 'artefacts' are mostly outgrowths of information, or information itself), ease of access, and reliance on technology. What does this mean for the cultures of ex-colonies, which can broadly be recognised for their concentration on the material (needs and artefacts), and their relatively low and slow access to technology and its channels of distribution? At the beginning of the 21st Century, culture is increasingly visual, and pop culture is spread further faster (and thinner, arguably). What can this tell us about our psychology? Can we evolve another psychology in the way that Archer-Straw has started to articulate a 'collective',



'Noir et blanche IV' by Man Ray.

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