Re-Education as Exorcism: How a White Dog Challenges the Strategies for Dealing with Racism

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One dark night, the actress Julie (Kristy McNichol) hits a white German shepherd dog with her car while driving through the Hollywood Hills. Because the owner is nowhere to be found and she feels responsible for the animal’s injury, she takes him home after a visit to the vet. They quickly bond during his recovery, and Julie’s boyfriend Roland (Jameson Parker) even suggests she should keep him as a ‘bodyguard’ since she lives alone out in the hills. Sure enough, when an intruder actually tries to rape Julie inside her house late one evening, the dog attacks him and saves her. After this incident, she wants to keep the stray as her pet. However, in the events that follow shortly afterwards, Julie’s canine companion is unmasked as a very special kind of attack dog: trained by bigoted racists, it is ‘programmed’ to viciously attack black people and savage them to death. It is literally and figuratively a ‘white dog’.

This bold and self-evident metaphor is also the title of the eponymous 1982 film by Samuel Fuller. Its story was meant to initiate a discourse on the approach to racism, mirrored in the reactions of the characters in the light of the shocking discovery and their varying suggestions on how to react. Fuller originally set White Dog up as a ‘film against a disease created by man’ (Fuller, 1982, p. 23), but it was shelved immediately after the production was finished. Paramount Pictures feared that its treatment of this sensitive topic would arouse racial controversy. Beforehand, the studio had already brought a representative of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) to monitor the production (Dombrowski, 2005, pp. 191, 194). This representative later anticipated distribution problems if ‘the Black population were to collectively voice an objection to the subject matter’ (Dombrowski, 2005, p. 192). Documented concerns had been, for example, the fear that racists could actually use the explained procedure
and create ‘white dogs’ as a consequence (Rosenbaum, 1993, p. 296). This among other misgivings led Paramount to deny the film an official release, and the NBC, which had bought the television rights, decided to step back from screening it. It was not until 1991 that the film became available to a broader public in America; it was first shown in limited movie theatres and sporadically on TV. A decade after its production, the reception was more favourable, and Jonathan Rosenbaum initially labelled it that year’s ‘best American movie […]’, made by the greatest living American filmmaker’ and a ‘masterpiece’ (1993, pp. 295–6). Critics noted that its narrative form is that of a parable, with the dog as the representative for the human race (Rosenbaum, 1993, p. 298). The driven and compulsive endeavour to conquer the hate, manifested in this single white animal, has been compared to Captain Ahab’s chase of the white whale (Hoberman, 2003, p. 14). Others have observed that the camerawork of the film utilizes the mis-en-scène of a Western (Hobermann, 2008), not least because it is accompanied and intensified by the tightly drawn score by Ennio Morricone. Fernando F. Croce (2008) summed up, that ‘[u]nlke its purebred German shepherd protagonist, White Dog is something of a mutt: Part marauding-animal horror movie, part Afterschool Special, part tragic-sardonic agitprop.’

Considering these reviews, it seems superfluous to add another trope or genre to the list. However, it will be argued that applying the narrative concept of a ‘reversed’ Gothic will pull those seemingly eclectic and random elements of White Dog together. At first the film will be discussed as a contribution to the animal horror/animal Gothic genre, focusing on the staging of the dog and the nature of its manipulation through man. This raises the question of how the monstrous here is defined and how it is countered, especially by the two human main characters, Julie and the black animal trainer Keys (Paul Winfield), from whom she anticipates help in ‘re-educating’ the dog. Despite the quite traditional Gothic problem of the occurrence of a monster, Samuel Fuller does not offer a traditional Gothic display; the last sections will examine ways in which he inverts Gothic tropes and motifs from the end of the nineteenth century, in order to address the topic of racism and its effects on society.

The making of the monster

According to Seßlen and Jung, the two main motifs of animal horror are (1) humans turning into animals and vice versa, as for example Jacques Tourneur’s Cat People (1942) or as in David Cronenberg’s adaptation