

## The Michael Brown-Darren Wilson Episode: a Metonym of Spectacular American Terror

Michael Brown-Darren Wilson Episode - any and all events associated with the death of Michael Brown at the hands of Ferguson Police Officer Darren Wilson.

Metonym - “Tropes select certain phenomena and ask the mind to perform a range of procedures with them...according to which we may select and organized experience” (Shaw 107).

- “Where metaphors organize perception through comparisons that work precisely to the degree that they leave no trace of the relations they assert, metonyms operate through a process of substitution in which we have to determine the whole of which the metonym is a part. Where metaphors encourage us to suspend judgment, metonyms urge us to discern relations and to draw conclusions, an activity that puts us in close touch with history’s concatenation of time, persons, and events, the significance of which we can never know in advance” (Goldsby 184).

Spectacular, Spectacle - “The spectacle cannot be understood either as a deliberate distortion of the visual world or as a product of the technology of mass dissemination of images. It is far better viewed as a *weltanschauung* that has been actualized, translated into the material realm - a world view transformed into an objective force” (Debord qtd. in Goldsby 26). Battered bodies transformed into an objective force.

Terror - trauma, or the fear of “an overwhelming experience of sudden catastrophic events” (qtd. in Goldsby 172).

American - of or relating to the culture and society of America.

Some American media sources present the death of Michael Brown at the hands of Ferguson Police Officer Darren Wilson as a metaphor. According to what Jacqueline Goldsby refers to as “culturally logical,” Brown’s death has been sanctioned by the structure governing Ferguson; Brown’s death is deemed “necessary and rational,” in line with developments of American national culture (Goldsby 26). Such a metaphorical understanding of Brown’s death occludes not only the facts that the deaths of black males at the hands of police “intersect quite frequently with the technologies and temperament at work in national cultural developments” (26) and that police assisted deaths of black males and their relation to modernity is often disavowed, but metaphorical understandings of Brown’s death also occlude “the terribly real

instances[s] of the death wish lying in wait for black people within [the] national culture and its modern styles of power” (181). This paper seeks to question the role of media’s kaleidoscopic nature in promoting metaphorical understandings of Brown’s death, explain the consequences of such metaphorical understandings, and offer an alternative structure of analysis when thinking and writing about the Michael Brown-Darren Wilson episode: namely, the metonym.

It is readily acknowledged that the media is kaleidoscopic in nature. In theory, the mediated relationships explore “endless potential patterns, a riot of colors and shapes” (Zelinsky, Monk, and Hanson 317). However, as Christina E. Dando suggests, in “Kaleidoscope Eyes: Geography, Gender, and the Media,” “a kaleidoscope is not just the *patterns*, but also the *mechanism* to create these patterns, and the *human eye* to gaze through the kaleidoscope to these patterns” (Dando 17; emphasis added). Regarding the actual kaleidoscope and kaleidoscopic theory, there are three particular things of which to be mindful: the kaleidoscope creates beauty from reality; its inventor, Sir David Brewster, believed his understandings and conceptions of beauty to be shared by every person; and, in order to discern the beauty espoused by Brewster not only must the kaleidoscope as a mechanism be attuned to a correct, fixed position, but so too must the eye of the viewer.

Kaleidoscopic thinking undergirds, and is supported by, modern consumer culture and mass culture capitalism. That such cultural frames of thinking pivot on substituting one spectacle for another in a non-stop display of ever-changing attractions is not necessarily surprising; the degree to which battered black bodies have functioned as spectacular attractions is unnerving and unsettling, however. Guy Debord writes, “The spectacle cannot be understood either as a deliberate distortion of the visual world or as a product of the technology of mass dissemination of images. It is far better viewed as a *weltanschauung* that has been actualized, translated into the

material realm - a world view transformed into an objective force” (Debord 12-13). Media’s interpretation and analysis of the death of Brown as metaphor is an attempt to actualize a world view centered on white supremacy, translated as the battered black body of Brown.

The kaleidoscopic nature of our mediated sources is, at times, dangerous and threatening to the practice of civil rights and social justice, particularly as related to the representation of black male, masculine bodies. Moreover, the death of Michael Brown is “not a metaphor of delimited citizenship [of] African American[s]” as Joe Klein would argue; but, the death of Michael Brown reflects a metonym and the “problem of interpreting the most obvious part of” Michael Brown’s death and its meaning “in relation to the larger but less visible structures that conceal” Brown’s death’s “mutability from view” (Goldsby 184). I submit that the kaleidoscopic function of media in the U.S. facilitates and furthers metaphorical understanding(s) of Michael Brown’s death: discerning these connections should be our jobs!

*TIME* magazine’s Joe Klein, *MSNBC*’s Dr. Melissa Harris-Perry, and some protesters on the ground in Ferguson have interpreted the death of Brown within the structure of metaphor. Analysis of “Michael Brown-as-metaphor” “queers,” that is, exposes, complicity with the structural demands of kaleidoscopic mediated sources and also queers complicity with white supremacy and mass culture consumption: no matter the race, gender, or creed of the person who concludes that Michael Brown’s death should be understood metaphorically.

Joe Klein, the white, male, Jewish-descended news journalist for *TIME* magazine states his claim, clearly and directly regarding Brown’s death:

At first, it seemed a perfect metaphor for 400 years of oppression: a white police officer shoots an unarmed black teenager multiple times...This takes place in a town that appears to have been cryogenically preserved from the 1960s. (Klein)

In Klein's imagination, the interaction between Brown and Wilson should be substituted for the 400 years of oppression suffered blacks in the U.S. at the hands of authorities like the officer who killed Brown; Klein immediately disavows any contemporary historical analysis. More specifically, of the 400 years of oppression suffered blacks, the 1960s represent the time period in the U.S. which could best explain how Brown could have possibly met his death at the hands of one sworn to serve and protect the citizenry of Ferguson in 2014. For Klein, Brown is the "perfection of metaphor": that is, until "uncanny" facts begin to "blur" the metaphorical understanding (Klein). After realizing that the equation of Brown with the civil rights activists of the 1960s may, just indeed, be illegitimate - whether this is because civil rights legislation failed to account for the likes of Brown or if Brown does not reflect the legitimacy of a civil rights movement is unknown - Klein transforms Brown into a walking, living repository of what Salvant would call "sacred blood" to be spilled in the furtherance of identifying that which is to be secured. Klein writes,

A great many bodega owners won't see Michael Brown as a metaphor for anything. They see potentially threatening customers every day. Blacks represent 13% of the population but commit 50% of the murders; 90% of black victims are murdered by other blacks. (Klein)

*MSNBC's* Dr. Melissa Harris-Perry, the biracial, feminist-leaning, professor and host of "Melissa Harris-Perry," took particular exception to Klein's metaphorical analysis of Brown's death. During her weekly commentary section of the 26 August 2014 show, entitled "Open Letter," Dr. Harris-Perry writes:

Joe, when a community is reeling from an unarmed teen shot to death... it is not a metaphor...The people of Ferguson and the nation are mourning the death of a real

person...this death and...actions are consistent with the long history of similar deaths and actions mak[ing] them historically rooted, not metaphorical. (Harris-Perry)

Dr. Harris-Perry's explication of the death of Brown certainly challenges understanding(s) of Brown's death within the realm of metaphorical analysis and interpretation: but, how are we left to interpret his death, if not as metaphor? While Dr. Harris-Perry's polemics against Klein definitely push back against and counter Klein's contention of metaphor, she does not offer an alternative structure of analysis. While she is limiting in this area, her analysis is certainly worthy of praise for spurring students and researchers to consider just what type of analysis of Brown's death could encompass her impassioned pleas, respective of the historicity of time and place and people associated with Brown's death.

Harris-Perry is not alone in attempting to contend with understanding(s) of Brown's death as metaphor; Jeffrey Toobin of *The New Yorker*, Rich Lowry of *Politico Magazine*, Sandy Fitzgerald, and even protester Taylor Gruenloh, believe the death of Brown to be "just a metaphor" (Lieb and Mohr).

Substituting Michael Brown's death for 400 years of oppression suffered by African Americans in America or for police brutality is a dead, sterile operation. Understanding Brown's death as metaphor delimits our understanding of the death itself, and Michael Brown as a human being and the times and circumstances associated with his death. We escape our collective responsibility and complicity for the death of Michael Brown.

While the metaphor of the kaleidoscope does work to shift and change the patterns of images caught within the range of vision of the viewer, this paper takes issue with the idea that images being viewed reflect the "whole." The continuously static positionality of the mechanic

assemblage represented by the kaleidoscope *and* the viewer reflects (w)holes in what seemingly exemplifies infinite diversities. The superficiality of the multiplicity of voices through which our understanding of the killing of Brown at the hands of Wilson is funneled is directed through a field of viewing contained by the cylindrical restrictions which acknowledge complicity with industrial-commodity culture capitalism and render understanding of Brown's death as dead, sterile metaphor. Mediated through such a lens, we are left most vociferously to understand Brown's death as a "metaphor" - both from representatives of the dominant culture and from subordinated cultures - for the residual effects of America's relationship with white supremacy. Such a perspective is delimited due to the kaleidoscopic structure of the instruments used by the apparatus of our mediated sources. Seen as a metaphor, Brown's death precludes investigation into the motivations for his death and "encourages us to suspend our judgment," our cognitive abilities (Goldsby 184). If we could reposition our point of viewing the Brown-Wilson episode allowing understanding of the episode to resonate as a metonym, then perhaps we could "discern relations and draw conclusions" with relevance to Brown's death and "conduct activities which put us in close touch with history's concatenation of the time, persons, and events" leading to the destruction of the human being referred to as Michael Brown (184).

#### Works Cited

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