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White guilt and racial imagery in Annette K. Olesen’s Little Soldier

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ABSTRACT
The article analyzes Annette K. Olesen’s Little Soldier (Lille Soldat, 2008), from the perspective of “white guilt” (or the “white man’s burden”) as it is thematized in the film. It furthermore critiques the film’s portrayal of the two female protagonists, Lotte and Lily, as racialized opposites. This is done from the perspective of postfeminism and critical race and whiteness studies. The readings include an evaluation of the film as a globalized, postfeminist version of Martin Scorsese’s Taxi Driver as well as an interpretation of the film as a national allegory. Overall, I argue that while the film contains many pertinent, well-chosen images and symbols of a destructive form of white guilt, it ultimately is based on two female figures whose opposite character traits come across as founded on, and thus also as perpetuating, stereotypical racial imagery.

Keywords
Annette K. Olesen; white guilt; racialized women; trafficking; soldier; Iraq War; prostitution.

White guilt and racial imagery in Annette K. Olesen’s Little Soldier

Annette K. Olesen’s film Little Soldier (Lille soldat, 2008) questions global solidarity among women, international politics, and wanting to do good. As Olesen has put it: “The essence is that you’re not doing any good if the person you’re doing something good for doesn’t think it’s good” (Rasmussen 2008).1 Narratives of prostitution and international warfare are brought together in a drama triangle played out between Danish war veteran, Lotte (Trine Dyrholm), Nigerian prostitute, Lily (Lorna Brown), and their common father (figure), Poul (Finn Nielsen). The film largely received positive reviews, especially for Dyrholm’s character and performance; it won the ecumenical prize at the Berlinale in 2009, and was praised for treating highly relevant social issues. Some reviewers were more enthusiastic than others regarding the portrayal of contemporary Danish society, with Politiken’s Michael Bo considering it a harsh national portrait that strikes home (Bo 2008) while Jylland-Posten’s Sophie Engberg Sonne found the portrayals of individuals more convincing than that of contemporary society (Sonne 2008). Walking a tightrope between social and family drama, Olesen relies on symbolism to get her message across. The article first focuses on the film’s representations of the white man’s (or woman’s) burden. In this discussion I explore the types of white guilt portrayed in the film through Shelby Steele’s categorization of two contemporary types of white guilt—one positive and productive; one negative and destructive. The article then turns to the portrayal of Lotte and Lily, especially the contrast between them. This contrast is viewed through the lens of postfeminism as well as critical race and whiteness studies. Overall, I argue that while the film contains many pertinent, well-chosen images and symbols of a destructive form of white guilt, it ultimately is based on two female figures whose opposite character traits come across as founded on, and thus also as perpetuating, stereotypical racial imagery.

Film background and plot

Little Soldier is Annette K. Olesen’s fourth feature film. As in the other three cases, this film too is the result of cooperation with screenwriter Kim Fupz Aakeson. According to Olesen, the film originally consisted of three story ideas, which eventually merged into one. Initially, she and Fupz Aakeson had plans for a gangster film about prostitution:

We kind of imagined 4,000 women chained to a radiator in a basement in Randers, and that some gangsters completely cynically exploited some poor, poor women who had no idea why they had come to Denmark. (Olesen quoted in Rasmussen 2008).2

Yet, after having researched trafficking and prostitution in a Danish context (conversing with several prostitutes and consulting for instance with Marie Bang Nielsen, former trafficking expert at the Police of Denmark), she found that reality was quite different3: “The African prostitutes know very well why they come and have a much more pragmatic attitude about it than what the media likes to portray” (Bo 2008).3 Only a small percentage of prostitutes arrive in Denmark not knowing that they are being...
sold into prostitution (Enggaard 2008). Thus, for Olesen it became more important to present them as tough migrant workers laboring under harsh conditions than to present them as victims.\(^5\) Second, Olesen and Trine Dyrholm had over time discussed a father-daughter drama, and third, she became interested in Iraq war veterans returning laden with guilt and with no one to share it (Bo 2008).\(^6\) Originally the soldier was to be a man, but because of the father-daughter theme the protagonist eventually turned into the female Iraq veteran, Lotte.\(^7\)

As the film begins, the opening credits appear white on black and with the soundtrack consisting of a person’s heavy breathing followed by the sound of choppers, then the sound of background music. We cut to a medium close up of Lotte from the back, clad in a leather jacket, hair in a ponytail, elbows resting on a bar desk. The background music is synchronous while the heavy breathing remains asynchronous. The film then cuts to an extreme close up of a whirling fan in the bar. There is a clear aural and visual connection between the fan and the asynchronous sound of helicopters. The audience, at this point, may well be reminded of the opening scene in Francis Ford Coppola’s Apocalypse Now (1979), with this intertextual link suggesting that Little Soldier is made in the tradition of American cinema after the Vietnam War. The screen turns black and the sound track offers a bluesy brass note. Subsequently we see Lotte in a medium shot walking home late at night. Again, we hear the heavy breathing. A man in the otherwise deserted street recognizes her and talks to her, but the sound is muffled. Evidently Lotte’s senses are dulled; she could be drunk. We then see her react to a sudden off-screen “woosh”. She looks up, and we see fireworks; Lotte looks down again, shaking her head, regaining composure. Finally, the film’s title, “Lille soldat”, appears white on black and we connect the title’s soldier with a restless life of coping with posttraumatic stress. As the opening credits list the names of actors and other members of the production, we follow Lotte waking up the next morning on the floor in her apartment, going to a fridge containing a bottle of vodka, staring out her window and eventually sitting down, zapping through her TV channels. We briefly hear former prime minister, Anders Fogh Rasmussen, commenting on Denmark’s decision to join the war in Iraq in 2003. As the title sequence is about to be over, the doorbell rings, and Lotte is reunited with her father, Poul, who is surprised to find out she has come back earlier than expected.

As to the rest of the plot, we find that somewhere in the Danish province, Poul runs a transport business-cum-brothel. He has recently lost his driver’s license and eventually offers his traumatized daughter a job as a personal driver and protector of his Nigerian call girl, Lily. The situation is awkward as Lily is also Poul’s live-in girlfriend. Despite her age (she and Lotte seem to be the same age), she becomes an odd maternal figure to Lotte who lost her mother when she was eleven. Yet, she is also a competitor as Lotte seeks her dad’s love and attention. And finally, in Lotte’s eyes, she becomes a victim whom Lotte needs to rescue and send back to her nine-year-old daughter in Nigeria. The tension escalates as Lotte goes behind her father’s back (as well as Lily’s) trying to save Lily. She ends up breaking into her father’s safe, stealing his money, retrieving Lily’s passport, and putting her on a plane to London with a further connection to Lagos in Nigeria.

Overall, the film problematizes idealism and wanting to save the world through Lotte who, first wants to do good by participating in the war, and then, as that project fails (because of a mistake she has made), wants to do good by “saving” Lily from the world of prostitution. As Bo Green Jensen writes: “Idealism is put in quotation marks and the nature of goodness is scrutinized. There are no easy solutions to the difficult ethical and political problems” (Jensen 2008).\(^8\)

**Taxi Driver in an age of globalization**

The combination of Lotte being a war veteran, her suffering posttraumatic stress, her ending up as a personal driver, and her “saving” a prostitute calls for a comparison with Martin Scorsese’s Taxi Driver (1976). Green Jensen calls the film a Danish Taxi Driver (Jensen 2008), while Kristian Lindberg less directly considers Little Soldier Denmark’s first “post-Iraq”-war comparable to the first “post-Vietnam”-films, such as Taxi Driver, which indirectly addressed a national war trauma (Lindberg 2008).\(^9\) A further comparison reveals how the world has changed due to globalization over the last 30 years.

In Taxi Driver, Travis (Robert De Niro) returns home from the Vietnam War. Sleepless in New York, he suffers his traumas in isolation. He decides to become a taxi driver and eventually also decides to kill a presidential candidate. When his attempt fails he gets the idea, instead, of saving a young prostitute, Iris (Jodi Foster). He kills her pimp and several men working in the brothel business. Iris has previously expressed herself as a “feminist” but it is clear that she is too young and naïve to evaluate her own female role correctly. At the end of the film, Travis receives a letter from her father confirming that saving Iris was the right thing to do. She has now returned home and started studying. Travis seemingly becomes a folk hero, but the audience is well aware that he is an unstable and dangerous one. In sum, under the glossy surface of national heroism lurks a disturbed national liability in both senses of that term: The nation is liable for the veteran’s posttraumatic stress disorder,
and the veteran, in turn, is a threat to the stability of the nation.

Juxtaposed with this narrative, Little Soldier comes across as an apt postfeminist revision in a new millennium. The main characters (and casting) are multi-ethnic and multi-national, gender roles are inverted and there is no (surface-layer) father figure who ultimately resolves the problems, putting the women in their right place (like Iris' father in Taxi Driver). In addition, the gender roles per se are more complex, with the women exhibiting more of what Judith Halberstam would call signs of heterosexual variation and "feminine masculinity" (1998, 9). Of the two women, Lotte functions as a figurative "global man" (warrior) and Lily as a "global woman" (prostitute). They are brought together by globalization (i.e. migration/human trafficking) and it is hardly accidental that the first scene showing them bonding consists of them kicking a red Coca Cola can back and forth on the ground during a break in Lily's schedule. For decades Coca Cola has functioned as the visual symbol of globalization par excellence (cf. The Gods Must Be Crazy, 1980). Lotte and Lily also become an image of "global sisters". In a sense they have the same father. Poul, as mentioned above, is Lotte's absent father who has not been there for her in her childhood and youth after her mother passed away. At the same time he is Lily's pimp and boyfriend whom she calls "Papa". As to national guilt and liability, Denmark, due to the nation's engagement in Iraq, is held responsible for Lotte's posttraumatic stress and suffering, but as an audience we are not left fearing a raging lunatic among ourselves (the disturbed veteran produced by the nation as in the case of Travis), but are to a greater extent asked to reflect on what it means when a person, or a nation, sets out "to save the world". The issue becomes one of the white man's—or woman's—burden in a Danish post-millennium context.

The white man's burden

The idea of the white man's burden has evolved over time. In his article "White Guilt" (1990), Afro-American writer and documentary filmmaker Shelby Steele discusses white guilt arising concurrently with black power in the U.S. in the mid-1960s with the civil rights and black-power movements. At this point, he claims, the "white man's burden" changed in relation to the era of imperialism and colonization: "Guilt had changed the nature of the white man's burden from the administration of inferiors to the uplift of equals" (497–98). At the same time, however, it evolved into a positive and a negative variant: "the guilt of genuine concern" and "self-preoccupied guilt" (504). "The guilt of genuine concern", Steele argues, is concerned with structural change creating equal opportunities for all regardless of race. It is about creating conditions that enable black people to act as agents who know for themselves what they need in order to develop. The civil rights movement's leading to the Civil Rights Bill (1964) was an example of positive guilt leading to structural change (502).

"Self-preoccupied guilt", on the other hand, is based on a selfish need among white people to save themselves, to regain their innocence—or rather the image of themselves as innocent, as people who have not gained their privileges at the expense of black people. This only has negative consequences: "Guilt that preoccupies people with their own innocence blinds them to those who make them feel guilty" (503). Expanding upon Steele's concept of white guilt which is based on a US context, I would add that seen in a contemporary global context, the white man's privilege may also be gained at the expense of global others more broadly defined—who make the privileged feel guilty for their "ill-gotten advantage" (Steele 499). This, in its negative, narcissistic version, is clearly the fundamental problem in Little Soldier. Lotte has returned from the war with feelings of guilt for something she has done. She evidently carries a personal story about wrongdoing and Lily becomes the person who can comfort her and help her regain an image of herself as good and fair. Lily, on the other hand, is in need of being understood on her own terms, based on her own political and historical context.

Hence, the focus of the film is on Lotte's personal mistake in Iraq, leading to a destructive type of white guilt triggering Lotte's behavior towards Lily. As Klaus Rothstein has argued, it is thus representative of an overall Danish contemporary aesthetic discourse (film, literature, theatre, etc.) demonstrating an empathetic interest in the figure of the returned soldier yet shying away from the overall politics of war. In Soldatens år (2014), Rothstein focuses on the Afghanistan War in Danish literature and culture, but mentions Little Soldier in his concluding remarks, noting that it does not really matter whether the soldier has returned from Afghanistan or Iraq since the film does not treat the politics of war (Rothstein 262). In Steele's terminology, we could say that the war in Iraq could at least have been discussed politically as an attempt to create structural change, whereas the discussion of the returned soldier often develops into a story about the need to redeem a personal guilt feeling.

The family as national allegory

Viewed as an allegory, however, Olesen's film is not merely about the need of an individual to absolve him- or herself of personal guilt. Little Soldier is heavily laden with symbols inviting allegorical readings—something that elicited negative as well as
positive responses from film critics. Christian Monggaard at Information, for instance, finds that the messages are sometimes “too square, the presentation too didactic, and the scenes too symbolic” (Monggaard 2008).\(^1\) An example is the ominous murmur in the Jaguar Lotte drives for her father. The two talk so much about the murmur that the point that this is really about them and their lives is hammered in.

Conversely, when Kim Skotte in Politiken, finds the symbolism discreet, but clear, he interprets the murmur in the Jaguar allegorically, on a national level: ”There is an ugly murmur in the well-greased Danish society of excess” (Skotte 2008).\(^2\) He proceeds to explain:

The murmur indicates two of those things we would rather not hear too much about. Denmark has become a nation that sends its soldiers into war. We prefer not to hear too much about that. Especially not about how Danish soldiers kill and are killed in a brutal war far away. The other thing is the complex of problems regarding prostitution and trafficking. (Skotte 2008)\(^3\)

Skotte sees such a great potential in the topic of the ominous murmur that he also uses it to summarize his positive review:

Maybe that is what the film is about if you read between the lines. How two people from the periphery of everyday life in Denmark—a forgotten Danish soldier and an illegal immigrant worker—behave as victims and survivors in an affluent nation where in recent years the political style has been to turn a deaf ear to the worst murmurs. (Skotte 2008)\(^4\)

Denmark, in other words, is guilty not only of having become a warring nation responsible for killing people abroad—and having their own soldiers killed as well, but also, in general, for being somewhat suspiciously affluent (“velbjægeret”) and on the profiting end in a globalized world which has its victims, not only abroad in less privileged countries, but also at home, be it the “forgotten” soldier or the illegal work immigrant. Denmark, you could say, is like Poul, profiting from Lotte’s and Lily’s misfortunes, while ignoring any misgivings, be they external (through Lotte and Lily) or internal (his own conscience). This viewpoint can be seen as an expression of global white guilt.\(^5\)

Monggaard’s and Skotte’s interpretations of the car symbolism illustrate how symbols may work better, the more thoroughly one probes them. That the murmur reflects the relationship between father and daughter is obvious. That it could also be a metaphor for national and geopolitical circumstances is less obvious, but also seems plausible, not least since the film’s opening credits include the clip with Fogh Rasmussen commenting on Denmark’s involvement in the Iraq War. In fact, the murmur in the Jaguar is such a well-chosen symbol that I would like to take it a few steps further and claim that from a white-guilt perspective it is no accident that the car is precisely a white Jaguar and that a significant number of scenes are filmed with the white Jaguar’s windshield framing the interaction of the main characters. This, I argue, becomes an image of structural oppression on a geopolitical level.

### The white Jaguar

Poul’s Jaguar is filmed in loving detail—in long shots and aerial shots, but also in extreme close ups showing off the Jaguar logo and other features, such as the retractable antenna, headlights and taillights. In the context of this film—whether intended or subconsciously—the white color connotes the idea of white guilt. The fact that the Danish pimp drives an older model of the British luxury car functions, it seems, as a clever symbol, connecting past British hegemony, the European slave trade of past and present, and the pimp with Lily in the Danish province. After all, the brand and the model connote British (bygone) imperialism, and in the nineteenth century, Lily’s homeland of Nigeria was colonized by the British. Since the end of the fourteenth century, Europeans had settled as slave traders along the Nigerian coast, and Nigeria became the main exporter of slaves to the American colonies until the mid 1800’s. Today trafficking is one of the greatest human rights problems in Nigeria (”2008 Human Rights”).

The Jaguar also functions on a symbolic level as an animal. Predators often function as symbols of the other in depictions of a globalized world, and more specifically in Scandinavian contemporary narratives about globalization, immigration and oppression.\(^6\) The predator usually represents man’s animal side. It can be threatened and threatening at once. It can be noble and barbaric, and it usually ends up representing the non-white person (cf. Badiou 2001, 12–13). Olesen similarly describes Lily as “hunted prey” as she lives illegally in Denmark (Bo 2008).\(^7\) Yet, the predator symbolism also functions more complexly in the film. The Jaguar is first and foremost Poul’s attribute—he is the one preying on others. He has, however, lost his driver’s license and to a certain extent appears impotent. Lotte takes over behind the wheel. Ultimately, however, the decisive aspect of the white Jaguar is that it frames Poul, Lotte and Lily’s relations. In the end, it structures their behavior and interpersonal relations, emphasized by the many scenes in which the car’s front windshield frames the characters and their dialogue—both while the car is in motion and while it is parked.\(^8\) The characters, in turn, may be interpreted more broadly as representing not just three individuals, but also Denmark (especially through the figure of Poul) and
the nation’s geopolitical relations. It is an old, failing model in need of repair or replacement. It provides a structure of oppression rooted in patriarchy, imperialism, colonization, racism, misogyny, slave trade, and a general exploitation of less privileged people.

White Lotte’s burden

While the car and its dominant presence may be seen as capturing global structures of oppression, the overt focus is on Lotte’s attempt as an individual to “save” another individual. It is hard to imagine a more satirical representation of the “white man’s burden” than the scene towards the end of the film in which Lotte saves Lily from a customer with a penchant towards necrophilia. Here Lotte becomes a superb example of what is also often referred to as the white-savior figure. Henning (Henrik Prip) is a well-paying regular whose house Lily enters to follow a set ritual. She takes a pill that renders her unconscious. Henning carries her into his bedroom but leaves the door ajar, so that Lotte—after being called by her driver and protector—can keep an eye on them. In this scene, however, Lotte whom we have seen participate in this scenario before, has had enough, bursts into the room, punches Henning aside, and throws Lily over her shoulder and carries her outside to the car. Lily literally becomes the white Lotte’s burden—a heavy object she carries on her shoulders. Metaphorically Lotte is the burdened white person who thinks she has to save the black person who cannot save herself. In public—in the middle of the day and in front of shocked children and adults—she carries Lily to the car parked on the suburban street. Lily hangs over her shoulder in a humiliating position with her pants down (literally and symbolically), anaesthetized and defenseless. It is an image laden with heavy symbolism, which illustrates what Steele calls “the fearful underside of [white] guilt” (502). It is a white-savior guilt turning the black person into a passive recipient of “white action” (Steele 504). And worse yet, it is demeaning: “The selfishly guilty white person is drawn to what blacks least like in themselves—their suffering, victimization, and dependency. This is not good for anyone—black or white” (Steele 506).

Most of the scenes in which Lotte tries to save Lily against her will, clearly border on parody. If the problem with self-centered white guilt is that the black person becomes a passive recipient, one can, as discussed above, hardly imagine a more passive recipient than a drugged and unconscious Lily. And if the problem with white guilt and idealism (including feminism) furthermore is that the white person wants to create the black person in her image (as universal), one also can hardly imagine a more satirical scene than Lotte’s subsequent and final attempt at saving a reluctant Lily. After Lotte has punched Henning, Poul maintains that Lily can no longer work in Denmark; she has to be sent to Sweden. Lotte now has to rescue her both from prostitution in general, and from being sent to Sweden where her working conditions will most likely be worse than they were in Denmark (where she has benefitted from being Poul’s girlfriend). Lotte steals her father’s money, books a hotel room, calls and orders Lily as an escort, and then surprises her with the “customer” being her, Lotte, who once more wants to save her. This time she brings an outfit for Lily to change into, and expects Lily to dress just like herself—in military pants and a wool shirt. As Lily sarcastically replies—holding onto the idea that Lotte has called for her as a customer—“You want to fuck yourself?” It is a spiteful line, illustrating Lily’s resistance to Lotte’s plan as she insists on being a prostitute—a professional making a living, and not a victim. At the same time it also frames the situation in its ambivalence. “You want to fuck yourself?” can be taken literally to mean having sex with oneself. But “fucking”, of course, can also be used in expressions like: “Go fuck yourself” (i.e. “Go to Hell”) or it can mean to ruin something, as in “fuck something up”. And Lotte may be “fucking herself” in so many ways, as she struggles with self hatred and destruction and a desire to be loved (not least by her father) as well as a desire to create Lily in her own image, as what she needs the other woman to be—a need rooted partly in self-preoccupied white guilt.

Still, one must point out that Steele operates with a dichotomous model that is thought-provoking, yet also somewhat simplistic. While Lotte to a large extent is portrayed as an example of misguided white-savior guilt—and is furthermore discussed along those lines in the film’s peritexts (reviews and interviews)—she is also a good example of a person who is not just blind to the black person. She is, after all, placed in a situation in which she becomes a witness to a type of assault occurring repeatedly, not just on Lily’s terms, but also on those of the customer and the pimp/father—and furthermore those of Olesen.

Cultural female opposites

Steele writes about white guilt from a position that does not take gender into account. Little Soldier, on the other hand, is clearly a postfeminist film in which one of the interesting aspects is how a critical interest in gender intersects with an overall aesthetic interest in race. As opposed to the second-wave feminism of the 1960s and 70s, which, at least in retrospect, has been criticized for essentializing and universalizing the white, middle-class, Western woman (Brooks 1997), Little Soldier is sensitive to cultural difference. A lesson Lotte has to learn is that she cannot take for granted that her norms, including her views on motherhood, are universal. Lotte wants Lily
to return to her daughter, a desire that is understandable given her own past. After all, something personal is at stake for Lotte who was a child when her mother passed away. We are constantly reminded of her childhood loss, both through scenes that indicate that her father was not present either, and through the musical leitmotif playing the well-known Danish children’s song ”Lille soldat” in a melancholy piano version. Clearly, Lotte has been hurt as a child and wants to compensate for that loss.

The expectation that a mother should be present and available to her children in a particular manner, though, may also be culturally determined and thus moral. The topic of ”good mothering” is well known, for instance, from contemporary au-pair stories ”constructed around sympathy for the children who are left behind” (Stubberud 2015, 131). Yet, as Elisabeth Stubberud points out, this viewpoint is based on rather ”specific ideas of what constitutes ’good mothering’” (p. 131). Olesen emphasizes this latter stance on cultural relativity in an interview when she states: ”She [Lotte] passes moral judgment and wants to save Lily from the basic elements that constitute Lily’s life. Translate that into wanting to introduce democracy to Iraq!” (Bo 2008). Thus, while Lotte as a character allows us to think that she is motivated on a personal psychological level to reunite Lily with her daughter, it appears that as a representative of a type—the guilty white Dane—she is driven primarily by her culturally determined heteronormative morals. Lily, the film maintains, must be seen as an admirable self-sacrificing mother who seeks to give her daughter a good education: ”The only person in the story who saves someone in a wholehearted and self-sacrificing manner is Lily” (Olesen quoted in Rasmussen 2008).~

Racialized female opposites

According to Olesen, Lotte and Lily are to be each other’s ”negative/positive” (Bo 2008). This negative/positive contrast becomes problematic when it ties in with stereotypical apprehensions about black and white people as these have structured racial judgments for centuries.

Far into the process of script development, the prostitute was to be a girl from Latvia. The primary reason that she became Nigerian was that Olesen was attracted by the visual dynamic between a dark-skinned call girl and Trine Dyrholm’s blonde, blue-eyed Lotte (Redvall 2008, 155). Fupz Aakeson was skeptical at first since female escorts in reality tend to be from Eastern Europe, yet in the end, aesthetic considerations won out. I would maintain that their contrasting skin colors may work well aesthetically, yet the distribution of character traits connected to the dark and the light character becomes ethically problematic in a real-life context where ”racial imagery is central to the organisation of the modern world,” as Richard Dyer puts it (1997, 1).

Within a traditional racial imaginary the black person is body, biology, sensuality, and sexuality. According to Fanon: ”For the majority of Whites the black man represents the (uneducated) sexual instinct” (Fanon [1952] 2008, 154). The black person is furthermore associated with rhythm, music, ”Louis Armstrong or songs from the Congo” (Fanon 27). Naturally, Lily—working as a prostitute—has a reflected, instrumental relation to her body and her sexuality. Nevertheless, she also is the woman who—when she is on a break or during her spare time—instead of kicking off her high heels—gets out on the dance floor in a bar and dances sensually to blues music in front of Lotte. To Lotte, in her rigidity, becomes her diametrical (white) opposite. She appears self-possessed, in control, albeit inhibited in her introversion. The scene seems an updated example of Fanon’s claim above, with contemporary soul music replacing Louis Armstrong and tribal music. As Dyer has warned us more recently, the stereotype sticks in one’s imagination even when one is aware of it and tries to counteract it. Recalling his own embarrassment at being a white man dancing to the sounds of funk in front of black people, he admits: ”I have never felt more white […]. I know perceptions of looseness and tightness of the body are dubious” (Dyer 1997, 6). Yet, he could not help thinking that all black people are loose and can dance while whiteness is connected with ”tightness, with self-control, self-consciousness, mind over body” (p. 6). So ingrained are the racial stereotypes, which seems to go for Little Soldier, too.

Lily and Lotte are gendered so that Lily is more in touch with her (feminine) body, sensuality and sexuality. This, according to Olesen, is rooted in a desire to operate with a soldier-prostitute contrast in which Lily is granted the female characteristics and Lotte the male characteristics:

What fascinated me in combining a female soldier and a prostitute was to a larger extent the sexual contrast between them. They are, so to say, in opposite camps regarding their womanhood and their feelings. Lotte has completely shut down her womanhood while Lily—both physically and mentally—expresses it strongly. (Nyheder fra DFI 2009) ~

As a contrast to Lotte, Lily—expressing her womanhood strongly—is held up as positive, but the contrast still perpetuates a racial stereotype. Lily, as we have seen, can dance, and—as Lotte’s diametrical opposite—she can bring out Lotte’s passionate side. It easily becomes a case of the ”natural” black person allowing the (over)civilized white person to be reconciled with herself (cf. Fanon [1952] 2008, 111).
After Lotte has saved Lily from a customer holding a gun to her head at a hotel, the two drive to a beach and let off steam by turning up the car radio and dancing wildly to heavy rock. Here Lotte dances, too. The emotional discharge brings them together and Lotte initiates a kiss on the lips. As Michael Bo puts it: “The tall woman in her battle uniform stops up in front of the diminutive woman in her light summer dress, who leans forward a little. Their lips meet. Where is this going? Their lips part. And meet again…” (Bo 2008).

In an interview with Bo, Olesen maintains that no women have reacted to this scene, while men have felt a need to ask whether this is to insinuate something lesbian: “All men who have seen the film think they find a lesbian undertone. But no women find it. Oh well, they kiss. And they return a kiss. But it is more about recognizing each other, far beyond what is sexual” (Bo 2008).21 To me the interesting question is not so much one of sexuality as of racialized sexuality. Granted, mutual recognition, as mentioned by Olesen, is important. Fanon cites Hegel, when he adds the perspective of racism to Hegel’s philosophy and finds that as the ultimate goal for black and white people: “They recognize themselves as mutually recognizing each other” (Fanon [1952] 2008, 192). Meanwhile his manifesto also terminates in a simpler, less reflective attitude: “Superiority? Inferiority?/Why not simply try to touch the other, feel the other, discover each other?” (206). Perhaps this is what Lotte and Lily do. Yet because Lily is tied to physicality and sexuality, while Lotte is not, it still appears that it is Lotte, not Lily, who seeks a kind of wholeness in this kiss. The need for recognition is not entirely mutual.

In making her films, Olsen deliberately sets out to avoid stereotypes in order to promote social change. Her creative processes, documented thoroughly by Eva Novrup Redvall, involve ongoing research, readings and improvisations during script writing in order to, among other things, avoid clichés and make films for black and white people (Redvall 146). Reality is drawn in to oppose what Olesen calls “iconic images that one subconsciously carries around” (Olesen quoted in Redvall 2008, p. 149).33 Still, it seems that the black-white iconic imagery has, to a large extent, been allowed to become manifest in Little Soldier. As such it illustrates Dyer’s point that “racist thought […] is part of the cultural non-consciousness that we all inhabit” (1997, 7). And while Olesen seeks to take responsibility for it—by trying to avoid clichés—she does not quite succeed in her endeavor when it comes to racial stereotypes in Little Soldier.

A mildly feel-good end

As pointed out by Bo Green Jensen, there are no easy solutions to the problems Little Soldier depicts. The film poses interesting questions about prostitution, war, patriarchy, gender, and power without necessarily being able to answer them. The end, in turn, is quite open.34 Lotte sends a reluctant Lily (dressed like herself) off on a flight to London, expecting that from there she will return to Lagos in Nigeria: “You are free now”, she exclaims.35

Freedom comes at a price, and Lotte is subsequently confronted by her father and his henchmen. Poul has to regain his honor and respect by beating up his daughter who has turned against him. Lotte encourages him to hit her, promising she will not return his punch. When her father is finally satisfied that she has had enough of a beating, he invites her back into the backseat of the Jaguar so they may all drive home. Lotte declines. Bloody and limping, she drags herself along the Danish highway. First she is shown from the side in a medium traveling shot as we follow her walking. A low angle makes her appear strong, and this impression is confirmed when we detect a smile on her lips. The film then cuts to an aerial shot in which we see her from behind. The perspective is gradually heightened and Lotte ends up a disappearing dot in the province. It is not clear where she is heading, but we see the surrounding fields, farms, houses, cars, roads, and eventually also the horizon in which there is a vague hint of a sunrise. Melancholy piano music gradually accompanied by an uplifting trumpet underscores a potential finale. Lotte, it seems, gains a new kind of freedom by giving up her relationship to her father and by not reentering the white Jaguar having functioned as a symbol of a destructive type of patriarchal and racial imaginary benefitting neither black nor white people. Unlike Travis in Taxi Driver, Lotte is not acknowledged by a patriarch, confirming that she has done the right thing. Instead she incarnates the woman, who may learn from her mistakes as she tries to “save the world”. Meanwhile, we do not know what happens to Lily. Poul claims that she will not be able to return to her village and that most likely she will set up a brothel somewhere else in Europe, but this may be an argument biased by his need to justify his involvement in human trafficking. As Lotte remains the focal point and provider of a somewhat happy ending, we are left with the trope of the white woman becoming liberated at the expense of the other woman.36

Conclusion

Olesen’s film does nuance our understanding of prostitution, feminism, international warfare, and other important issues—and it carries a basic, humanist message about everybody wanting to be a good human being. As discussed above, it succeeds in making us question what type of (white) guilt feelings motivate us to help—or “uplift” to use Steele’s term—
the global other, and in what way. The symbols discussed above, such as the scene in which Lotte carries Lily out of Henning’s house, or the scene in which she forces her to dress like herself so she can “liberate” her, function as though-provoking, parodic examples of self-preoccupied white guilt. It does, however, also become too parodic, making it an over-simplified condemnation of the protagonist. At the same time, the use of the front windshield of an old, white Jaguar falling apart comes across as an apt metaphorical way of framing the relationship between the three main characters since these scenes may be read allegorically as capturing Danish geopolitical relations in a contemporary age of globalization.37 Lotte’s refusal to reenter the car thus leaves us with a sense of hope for the future. Finally, however, the stereotypical racialization of Lotte and Lily comes across as reflecting an oppressive realm of racial imagery in an equation where interests in gender, aesthetics, and race intersect so that gender and aesthetics trump race. In other words, one could regard the two female characters as challenging conventional hetero- and homo-normative apprehensions of gender, and as creating an aesthetically pleasing contrast. Yet, in a world still dominated by racial stereotypes, they hardly break the mold.

Notes

1. “Essensen er, at man jo ikke gør noget godt, hvis den, man gør noget godt for, ikke synes, det er godt.”
2. “Vi forestillede os nærmest, at der sad 4.000 kvinder lændede til en radiator i en kælder i Randers, og at der var nogle gangstere, der fuldstændig kynisk udnyttede nogle stakkels, stakkels kvinder, der ikke anede, hvorfor de var kommet til Danmark.”
3. For thorough documentation of all the sources and informants consulted by Olesen and Fupz in developing the script, see Redvall 2008, p. 152.
4. “De afrikanske ludere ved godt, hvorfor de kommer, og har et meget mere pragmatisk forhold til det, end man ynder at beskrive det i pressen.”
5. Olesen explains: “According to the National Police it is only about one to two percent of the women working as prostitutes in Denmark who can really be called victims of trafficking. The rest are well aware of what business they have entered. Scandinavia is a great place to be a prostitute” (Enggaard 2008) [Ifølge Rigspolitiet er det kun cirka en til to procent af de kvinder, der arbejder som prostituerede i Danmark, der egentlig vil kunne kaldes trafficking-øfre. Resten af dem er i høj grad bevidste om, hvad det er, de går ind til. Skandinavien er et fedt sted at være prostitueret].
6. Denmark participated in the Iraq War between 2003 and 2007. They had about 545 soldiers stationed mainly at Camp Eden. Seven soldiers were killed (Friis 2012). At the same time, Denmark participated in Afghanistan from 2002 to 2014, with 43 soldiers losing their lives (Rothstein 2014).
7. The names of the two female characters appear to be chosen for their symbolic value. At least one critic notes that Lotte reminds one of the Lotte corps (Lottekorpsen) (Skotte 2008). Together “Lotte” and “Lily” create poetic rhythm (as two-syllable names beginning with L), suggesting their kinship. The name Lily chosen by/later a black person is further-more interesting (her “real” name is Kimmie) due to the association of the lily with whiteness, innocence, and virginity, which we find in both poetry and Christian art. Frantz Fanon moreover writes about “a lily-white truth” (126), his overall point being that within European social psychology, (lily) white is associated with goodness, truth, and purity while black is associated with meanness, dirtiness, and mendacity. This pertains to skin color as well. Fanon, for instance, asks: “Doesn’t white symbolize justice, truth, and virginity” (157).
8. “Idealismen sættes i anførelse og godhedsens væsen bliver gransket. Der er ingen nemme løsninger på de svære etiske og politiske problemer.”
9. Hence, the film contains at least two intertextual links to post-Vietnam-War American cinema (Apocalypse Now and Taxi Driver).
10. I use the term postfeminist the way Ann Brooks does, when she argues that after the second-wave feminism of the 1960s and 1970s, the movement becomes inflected by postcolonialism, deconstruction, and poststructuralism (Brooks 1997).
11. Lily is a “global woman” par excellence as she represents sex (with customers), spousal love, and domestic work (for Papa), and a maternal figure (for Lotte, especially in the scene where Lotte lies close to her, seeking comfort). As Barbara Ehrenreich and Arlie Russell Hochschild write about migrant women in the West, “It is as if the wealthy parts of the world are running short on precious emotional and sexual resources and have had to turn to poorer regions for fresh supplies” (2002, 4–5). Lotte is a female version of a “global man” as she is the female soldier sent to fight in Iraq. The fact that she is portrayed as a masculine female offers an opportunity to question our notions of masculinity in general. According to Halberstam, masculinity—understood as a naturalized relation between maleness and power—is best questioned from the position of the masculine female (2). In addition, female masculinity allows one to “explore a queer subject position that can successfully challenge hegemonic models of gender conformity” (9).
12. Thus, in the context of Danish cinema, the film is interesting as one of several films thematizing (returned) soldiers and personal and national guilt (feelings) in the new millennium. These films include Susanne Bier’s Brothers (Brødre, 2004), Janus Metz’ Armadillo (2010), Tobias Lindholm’s A War (Krigen, 2016), and Lisa Ohlin’s Walk with Me (De standhaftige, 2016).
13. Rothstein notably published his book about Afghanistan soldiers in Danish film and literature before Lindholm’s A War as well as Carsten Jensen’s war novel The First Stone (Den første sten, 2015). These are works that to a greater extent thematize the politics of war.
14. The returned soldier wracked with guilt for what he has done in Iraq or Afghanistan also shows up in other
Scandinavian cinemas such as the Norwegian Sara Johnsen’s *Upperdog* (2009). For an interesting analysis of the soldier’s guilt in this film, see Dancus (2014).

15. “for firkantede, serveringen for didaktisk og scene- nerne for symboltygende.”

16. “Der er en grim mislyd i det velsmurete danske overdflodsamfund.”


19. Which in a Scandinavian context I also refer to as Scandinavian Guilt (ScanGuilt), a term that is also relevant for my use of Steele’s “white guilt”. See introduction to this volume as well as Oxfeldt (2016).

20. A good example is Kristian Lundberg’s poem *Vi är de döda, nu snart* (2014), in which the snow leopard constitutes a potent leitmotif; for an analysis of this, see Iversen (2016). Another example is Jonas Hassan Khemiri’s *Montecore*. *En unik tiger*; for an analysis, see Oxfeldt (2012).

21. “jaget vildt”.

22. Depending on how you count the scenes shot through the windshield, there are seven to about twelve of them: 1) Lotte and Poul as Lotte becomes his driver, 2) Lotte and Lily to and from call girl assignments, 3) Lotte and Poul driving to Sweden to pick up a new Nigerian prostitute, 4) Lotte, Poul, and a prostitute being dropped off in Sweden so they may pick up a new Albanian one, 5) Lotte and Lily the day Lily is threatened at gunpoint by a Swedish customer; they drive to and from the hotel, and to and from the beach, 6) Lotte and Lily driving home from the hospital where Poul is placed under observation one night, and 7) Lotte, Poul, and Lily driving to Henning’s house where Lotte decides to rescue Lily.

23. This image is also the main motif on the film poster. The Danish Film Institute’s website features images of the film posters as well as stills that, among other motifs, show Lotte carrying Lily on her shoulders as well as the aforementioned Jaguar framing the protagonists’ interaction. See: http://www.dfi.dk/faktaomfilm/filmda/57601.aspx?id=57601. Zentropa also has three stills on their website: http://zen tropa.dk/portfolio-item/lille-soldat/ (both sites accessed 12 January 2018).

24. Exceptions are the ones in which Lotte saves the prostitutes (and herself) from customers who are acting violently without the consent of the prostitutes—at the brothel as well as at a hotel room Lily visits.

25. It is also postfeminist in its exploration of hetero- sexual variation, contrasting a feminine and a masculine female. In this regard, the male critics’ surprise and admiration vis-à-vis Dyrholm as exceptionally “unvain”, willing to portray a masculine, haggard female, is worth an analysis in and of itself.

26. “Hun fælder en moralsk dom og vil frelse Lily fra de grundelementer, der rent faktisk udgør Lilys liv. Oversæt det til at ville indføre demokrati i Irak!”

27. “Den eneste i historien, der redder nogen helhjertet og selvopofrende, er Lily.”

28. Subsequently, Olesen has described working with two actresses such as Dyrholm and Brown as gratifying as they created beautiful images by virtue of their contrasting skin colors (Bo 2008).

29. The song is Hillary Thaddeus’ ”Only You Can Love Me This Way”.


33. “ikoniske billeder, man ubevidst slæber rundt på.”

34. Olesen’s not-so-happy endings evidently encounter much resistance. When she once again decided not to tag a happy ending on her film, TV2 withdrew their support from her project. In the end, DR contributed financially and saved the film (Redwall 158).

35. This is another highly ironic scene in which Lotte proclaims Lily is free while straddling her on the hotel bed, pinning down her arms and legs, and threatening to call the police on her if she does not agree to Lotte’s plan of liberation.

36. A classic example is Jane Austen’s novel *Jane Eyre* in which the protagonist becomes a liberated white woman while her cultural other, the Jamaican-born creole Bertha Mason, is left to die in a fire (cf. Spivak 1985).

37. As I see positive as well as negative aspects of representation in *Little Soldier*, I do not by any means intend for this analysis to express a wholesale condemnation of the film, but rather to carry out what Ella Shohat and Robert Stam refer to as a “multi-valent analysis” (2014, 194).

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