# The Human Stain (Robert Benton, USA 2003)

Before its theatrical release, Robert Benton's film adaptation of Philip Roth's novel *The Human Stain* had already been floated as a prestige project for Miramax Studios. Complete with an impressive all-star cast, including Oscar winners Anthony Hopkins and Nicole Kidman, the quality of the expensive production was also highlighted by the selection of the director Robert Benton, who was awarded three Oscars in the course of his career for best screenplay and best director. Yet far less impressed by its costly advertising campaign were the critics, almost all of whom panned the film. The film's reception was primarily centered around comparisons to its literary source material, the renowned novel by Philip Roth. For example, Elaine B. Safer criticizes the film as follows: "In the process of simplifying the focus of the book, Robert Benton has eliminated certain themes and emotional responses,"[1] and Xan Brooks laments: "As brokered by Benton, this adaptation is finally too genteel and respectful for its own good. *The Human Stain* ticks all the right plot boxes and touches on all the correct themes. But it also drains off Roth's bile and blunts his polemic."[2]

Judgements such as these testify to the continuity of a notion that considers a film adaptation's literary source material as the superior original and, accordingly, its film version as inferior. What is behind such assessments is the traditional high esteem given to the medium of literature in general and their most respectful admiration of the novelist Roth in particular – and, in addition, a basic skepticism toward the mass appeal of Hollywood cinema. From the perspective of media theory, a vantage point such as this seems rather constricted: on the one hand, because the process of transfer through

1 Elaine B. Safer, "More Stains than One: Film and the Adaptation of Philip Roth's *The Human Stain*," *Studies in American Jewish Literature* 23 (2004), 161.

2 Xan Brooks, "The Human Stain," *Sight and Sound* 14, no. 3 (2004), 46.

a medium is far more complex than the term "film adaptation" initially suggests; on the other hand, too, because such a position of assessment concentrates mostly on the limitations of the adapting medium without bearing in mind its specific potential for composition. Consequently, Robert Benton's film The Human Stain (USA 2003) will not be examined in the form of a critical comparison to Philip Roth's novel but as a text that demonstrates the productive reception of another text. Thus, it will not be about a derivation but a detour, not a supposed reduction of complexity but the condensation of a texture.

At the center of the story of The Human Stain is the attempt at a radical self-transformation. Coleman Silk, a respected dean and successful professor of Classics at Athena College, is fired shortly before his retirement due to a statement he makes that many perceive as racist. Outraged and disappointed, he becomes more and more isolated, and, at the age of 71, begins an affair with 34-year-old cleaning woman Faunia Farley. However, this process of isolation has a back story, as Nathan Zuckerman, both Silk's friend and the narrator, finds out: Coleman Silk comes from an African-American family which he has been denying for decades, as a consequence of his decision to identify as white. As successful as Coleman initially seems to be at passing during his dynamic career, the film's protagonist is shown as torn and tormented at the end of his life, which quite unheroically ends in a car accident in a ditch.

The motif of racial identity construction as passing hearkens back to a long American literary tradition that is astonishingly revived in Roth's novel:

> "Perhaps not since the Harlem Renaissance writer Nella Larsen, in *Quicksand* (1928) and *Passing* (1929), brilliantly limned the psychic conflict of the subject caught between black and white worlds has an American novelist so provocatively placed the individual's spectres of guilty betrayal, inner rage, and quest for authenticity in the context of examining an America obsessed with the seductions and dangers of reinventing oneself."[3]

This interpretive approach conceives of Roth's novel *The Human Stain* as an all-American narrative, as a complex engagement with the promises and dangerous of the American Dream. Coleman Silk's story is therefore exemplary of the American story: the pioneer's hopeful search for a new identity, the consequences of a constant pushing of boundaries, the abandonment of a cultural

3 Ranen Omer-Sherman, *Diaspora and Zionism in Jewish American Literature: Lazarus, Syrkin, Reznikoff, and Roth* (London: Brandeis University Press, 2002), 254.

heritage, the relentless desire to assimilate. Greil Marcus relates the discovery of the Self to the discovery of the New World and characterizes the relationship of both discoveries as the drama of America par excellence: "That is because, with the reality of a myth of social revolution now part of the American past, the drama Roth has fixed on is the drama of American self-invention, a drama in which every American is his or her own Columbus, discovering America as it is invented."[4] To invent a country is also always to reinvent oneself. Therefore, the discovery of America represents the discovery of American identity as the model of unbounded potential. Connected to the story of discovery is the prospect of a new happiness, since the decision to shed one's own past is connected to the promise of liberation, which Mark Shechner describes as the great American myth: "The possibility of breaking free of your past, making your own destiny, and claiming your unique 'I,' unbounded by the demands and expectations of a 'we,' is still the great American myth."[5]

Robert Benton's film prefaces Coleman's decision to pass as white with a conversation with his mother, in which precisely this position against the restrictive "we" and for the independent "I" comes to the fore. "You need to be proud of your race!" Coleman's mother demands, after her son has opened up to her that, unlike his brother Walter, he will not be attending a black college.


*Figure 26: "You need to be proud of your race!"*

4 Greil Marcus, "Philip Roth's *U.S.A.*," *The Threepenny Review* 83 (2000), 20.

5 Mark Shechner, *Up Society's Ass, Copper: Rereading Philip Roth* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2003), 194.

"They are always talking about the 'Negro people,'" Coleman complains, "about 'we, the Negro people,'" in order to ultimately point out the alternative to being proud of one's race to his mother: "What about me? What about being proud of being me?" It is the desire for liberation from the burden of community, with all its restricting implications, that Coleman is driving at. His passing as a white person is justified by the reconstruction of an identity against the determinism of his former group identity. But the dream of an unbounded I, of an absolute individualism cannot be realized. In this sense, Coleman's self-discovery does not represent any space of possibility but a hideout and, ultimately, a prison. No one knows this better than Coleman's mother, who points out to him in another flashback: "Coleman, you think like a prisoner." But even her hinting at the pain of crossing a boundary, at the, as she explains, unbearable uncertainty related to one's own descendants, at the dangerous possibility that they could not become as white as Coleman, falls on deaf ears. A statement from the boxing coach Doc Shizner, who encourages Coleman not to register as a black person for the sake of a scholarship, has a more lasting effect.


*Figure 27: Registration Card*

Shizner tersely responds to Coleman's concerns: "You're neither one thing nor the other. You're Silky Silk!" The only skill that Coleman needs to realize his dream is the talent he has developed in the ring, of always being one step ahead of the other boxer's perception. And thus, Coleman chooses his own ambitions against his family's heritage, "grateful that the unpredictable lot-

tery of melanism among people of mixed race gave him the opportunity to live out his dreams."[6]

But although the melanin in his skin can be hidden, it cannot be erased. Coleman's aspiration of self-invention does not derive from the freedom of the undetermined subject but from a construction that is able to draw its profit from breaking the congruence of inside and outside – from a destabilization of constant visibility. Homi Bhabha states: "By disrupting the stability of the ego, expressed in the equivalence of between image and identity, the secret art of invisibleness [...] changes the very terms of our recognition of the person."[7] Coleman's dream is nothing more than the endeavor to utilize that very art of invisibleness. He attempts to hide the variable of his identity that he fears is the essential and determinative one – without realizing that his self-liberating exile, the encapsulation of definitions and expectations, catalyzes a process of inclusion as exclusion. Last but not least, the accusation of racism that brings Coleman's university career to an abrupt end shows that the social being is constantly subjected to racial typecasting, that one's supposedly self-determined choice eventually is always confronted with a public response.

Coleman's passing takes place along a paradox that both acknowledges and denies the mechanism of racial identity construction, since Coleman confirms his racial difference at precisely the moment he tries to overcome it. Dean J. Franco explains:

> "However, his [Coleman's] choice for privacy, including the closeting machinations of passing, is as much an acknowledgment of the public claim of race as it is a rejection of it. His self is a raced one, even if only because he has to closet it, and his rejection of the public claims of race in favor of a liberal individualism nonetheless acknowledges the potential for public possession of the private."[8]

Coleman's self-liberation is therefore, at the same time, a self-limitation: the desired liberation, the claim of a free I, ultimately leads to the reduction of the subject to a disciplinary project of self-control. The organization of a racist society undermines his decision of being "in between;" it calls for a decision that pushes the unspecified toward specification: "The machinations of race

6 Ibid., 194.

7 Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, 66-67.

8 Dean J. Franco, "Being Black, Being Jewish, and Knowing the Difference," *Studies in American Jewish Literature* 23 (2004), 95.

create the antithetical dichotomy […] – not post-ethnic freedom, but racial straight-jacketing."[9] Coleman's misunderstanding is based on the fact that he considers his will to be sovereign, not for one, but for *the* determining variable of identity. But the idiosyncratic image that Coleman designs for and by himself is still influenced by extra-individual structures that form and color it. In Coleman's restless search for the pure I, his purported liberty proves to be illusory the moment it comes out in favor of whiteness over blackness.

This whiteness makes up a central visual factor in Robert Benton's film. The first shots of The Human Stain already seem to sink into whiteness: they show a snowy country road whose edges blend into the surrounding countryside without any definable border. Its dividing lines and traffic barriers are buried under a thick layer of snow, just as the terrain beyond the road, which causes the foreground and background to become almost indistinguishable. At the end of the street, two bright, white headlights appear, under which the title of the film, The Human Stain, is superimposed in an equally bright, white script. The two faces that finally appear in the following shots behind the car's windshield seem to be hardly distinguishable from the color of the diffusely illuminated snow: they almost appear to be parts of a monochromatic winter landscape that fit seamlessly into the shapeless whiteness.

*Figure 28: White Landscape*

Beyond its tranquility, this icy wilderness seems cold and forbidding, even destructive, as the sequence goes on to show. A spotlight appears on the other

9 Ibid., 94.

side of the road and shines its bright light on the car approaching on the horizon, whose driver cannot avoid the glare: on the slick road, the car begins to spin and finally lands in a ditch. Just as little as the snow appears as a romantically transfigured backdrop, so little warming or illuminating is the light in this situation. As a sign of danger, it brutally turns toward its victim, who is mercilessly illuminated and ultimately blinded to death. Here, light and danger are closely associated, and they are reflected in the frosty cold of the snow, which displays the connection to death not only metaphorically but also quite concretely: the snowed under ditch becomes a grave.

With this repeatedly reflected layering of whiteness, Benton points to a context that is described in Roth's novel as a snowstorm, as "that blizzard of details that constitute the confusion of a human biography."[10] The whiteness presented in the opening sequence represents a substantial, as well as transparent, quality, a texture that disseminates a shimmering, suggestive network of relationships. In his *Mythologies*, Roland Barthes links the complex semantics of whiteness to the filmic projection of a face, namely the face Greta Garbo:

> "It is indeed an admirable face-object. In *Queen Christina* […] the make-up has the snowy thickness of a mask: it is not a painted face, but one set in plaster, protected by the surface of the colour, not by its lineaments. Amid all this snow at once fragile and compact, the eyes alone […] are two faintly tremulous wounds."[11]

Barthes' imagery is as seductive as it is complex: Garbo's white makeup is not only reminiscent in its color, but also in its material density, of a layer of snow, under which all of the characteristics of the living person remain hidden. Moreover, at the same time, her face seems complete and ephemeral; it acts as a sign of perfection and, simultaneously, as a sign of the undifferentiated. It is boundlessly beautiful and yet its beauty remains closed on its surface – consisting of a color that is actually none. It is less representative of the individual than for the all-encompassing, and it opens up a timeless ideal for the absolute, as Barthes explains: "Garbo offered to one's gaze a sort of Platonic Idea of the human creature."[12] This also addresses another dimension

10 Philip Roth, *The Human Stain* (New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 2000), 22.

11 Roland Barthes, *Mythologies*, trans. Annette Lavers (New York: The Noonday Press, 1991 [1957]), 56.

12 Ibid.

of whiteness, that is, its transcendental quality, its relation to the soul and spirit that transcends the physical: here, Garbo represents the embodiment of a disembodiment. Barthes takes this notion even further by describing the characterization of Garbo as a goddess: "The name given to her, *the Divine*, probably aimed to convey less a superlative state of beauty than the essence of her corporeal person."[13] The essence of Garbo, as one is to understand Barthes, surpasses her physique, and, correspondingly, the perfection that it so clearly produces is more connected to formlessness than to form: "[H]er face was not to have any reality except that of its perfection, which was intellectual even more than formal."[14]

For Roland Barthes, whiteness represents the amorphous per se: snow and plaster refer to a mass that can take on all manifestations and also give them up again, a materiality that can be solidified into any conceivable form in order to then free itself from it again. As a shapeless shape, the whiteness stands for the counterplay of defining and blurring boundaries, for the counteraction of concretization and abstraction. And the transgressive power of whiteness goes even further: as a portrayal that escapes representation, whiteness also represents the visible and the invisible at the same time. In his study *White*, Richard Dyer connects this paradox to the construct of the "white race" and explains:

> "Whites must be seen to be white, yet whiteness as race resides in invisible properties and whiteness as power is maintained by being unseen. To be seen as white is to have one's own corporeality registered, yet true whiteness resides in the non-corporeal. White is both a colour and, at once, not a colour and the sign of that which is colourless because it cannot be seen: the soul, the mind, and also emptiness, non-existence and death, all of which form part of what makes white people socially white. Whiteness is the sign that makes white people visible as white, while simultaneously signifying the true character of white people, which is invisible."[15]

Dyer addresses an important connection: it is not solely the visible, the visual constant of physical traits, that is decisive for the construction of racial identity but also the link to the invisible, to that which cannot be directly extrapolated from the physical manifestation but which is directly connected

13 Ibid., 56-57.
14 Ibid., 57.
15 Dyer, *White*, 45.

to it. The body designated as "white," as a medium, transcends the actually physical, it points to the sign of whiteness, to all of the invisible connotations with which whiteness is associated in Western cultural and intellectual history. Richard Dyer underlines the fact that this complex symbolism specifies whiteness as a social and racial category as well because the exterior of a light-skinned person that is evocative of whiteness is always associated with the invisible qualities of a specific cultural complex. Of note here is the fact that the "colourless sources of racial colour"[16] within cultural history are more crucial to the construction of racial identities than to the color-granting pigment in skin. The semantic momentum of whiteness becomes effective even at the point where its accentuation through color is hardly pronounced: "We are not the colour of snow or bleached linen, nor are we uniquely virtuous and pure. Yet images of white people are recognisable as such by virtue of colour."[17]

Neither the skin of the "white" nor the "black" person is literally white or black; both notions are not terms for an actual color tone but, rather, projective concepts. As such, both models focus not on the particular but on the universal. However, it must be kept in mind that the encoding of skin colors looks back at a history that conceived of the assignment of a race as a consecutive process: in that context, "white" was considered the basis of nature and "black" as its a posteriori derivative. Claudia Benthien points out the fact that this schema represented a stable constant in Western discourse:

> "Analogous to printing technology or painting, 'white' skin was most often understood as a kind of color-neutral canvas or unwritten page – as a *tabula rasa* –, and darker skin as its painted counterpart. 'Colored' skin is thus, contrary to light skin, interpreted as being marked; it becomes skin that deviates from a neutral norm."[18]

Dark skin was not only considered a gradation but was also subject to a position of judgment that interpreted its blackness as a degeneration. Richard Dyer notes on this:

> "However, genealogical research was also at other points motivated by the search for the origins of humankind *tout court*. In this perspective, white people represent the only sub-race that has remained pure to the human race's

16 Ibid., 42.
17 Ibid.
18 Benthien, *Im Leibe wohnen*, 171.

> Aryan forebears (and has even perhaps purified that inheritance via the Caucasus). Non-whites then become seen as degenerative, falling away from the true nature of the (human) race."[19]

The assumption of a biologically rooted contamination as the cause of dark skin can be described as one of the most stable paradigms of anthropological research, which remains a central constant across various stages of the history of knowledge. The claim to purity and transparency is thus attributed primarily to the white race, which thereby acquires a distinctive quality. Richard Dyer stresses:

> "In the quest for purity, whites win either way: either they are a distinct, pure race, superior to all others, or else they are the purest expression of the human race itself. What is interesting in either version is the emphasis on purity, and of the special purity of whiteness, for [...] this is a theme central to what is implied and mobilised by this group called 'white.'"[20]

The idealization of whiteness goes hand in hand with the idealization of the person classified as white. The perception of skin color is clearly marked by this interrelationship of effects: the focus here is less on the different shades of light and dark, but rather on the rigid division into black and white, which as a system of differentiation decisively facilitates the formation of categories. This presupposition also gave direction to the filmic stageability of skin. Richard Dyer can attest to the fact that, since the beginning of filmmaking, the orientation toward a white face became the decisive technological prerequisite:

> "Innovation in the photographic media has generally taken the human face as its touchstone, and the white face as the norm of that. [...] Experiment with, for instance, the chemistry of the photographic stock, aperture size, length of development and artificial light all proceeded on the assumption that what had to be got right was the look of the white face."[21]

The presupposition of the white norm as the objective of technical innovation thus proves to be a guide value in two ways: it establishes whiteness as an indisputable basic premise with which to organize and direct the medium, and it makes that which defies every definition into an undesirable deviation. It is

19 Dyer, *White*, 22.
20 Ibid.
21 Ibid., 90.

this very connection that is increasingly solidified by the conventionalization of practices in filming techniques. Richard Dyer highlights:

> "All this is complicated still further by the habitual practices and uses of the apparatus. Certain exposures and lighting set-ups, as well as make-ups and developing processes, have become established as normal. They are constituted as the way to use the medium. Anything else becomes a departure from the norm, or even a problem. In practice, such normality is white."[22]

There are several factors that are pivotal for the filmic construction of the white subject that are conspicuous in the context of film lighting, in a form in which the light in the film is connected to the film as light. Central to the effect of whiteness in a person is, for example, the film's illumination of its subject, which can be achieved by a specific dramaturgy of light and, in connection with this, by contrast with the non-white. To conceive of film as a medium of light also means considering it a technology that is able to transport the implications of light into a more far-reaching context, such as the cultural-historical formation of light imagery and symbolism. All of these nexuses are reflected in the linkage of whiteness to light in its functionalization and iconization – and they play a crucial part in the film-aesthetic staging of whiteness in Robert Benton's THE HUMAN STAIN.

The opening of THE HUMAN STAIN already disseminates a dense white, whereby all of the associations that are connected to the gleaming radiance of the bright are erased: the layer of snow is not a glistening, romantic backdrop, and the light flashing in the darkness does not lead to any brilliant enlightenment but proves to be a merciless glare that causes the protagonist to fall into an abyss right at the beginning of the film. With this, Benton breaks with a cultural tradition that elevates light in its illuminating function, with the tradition of Western discourse that again and again used the imagery of light and seeing in order to explain man's access to the world and build the path to knowledge. In Benton, this access, so to speak, becomes its opposite: the beginning is the end, illumination is death – the whiteness becomes lost in the burial shroud of the snow. Coleman Silk's demand for whiteness, which is narrated throughout the film, reaches its climax in the white downfall; the search for a new self is preceded by its exitus.

Connected to this destructive image of loss and decline is the depiction of the event that sets it in motion. It begins with a presentation of Coleman

22 Ibid.

Silk's professional sphere of activity, Athena College. In a comment offscreen, Coleman Silk is introduced as "Professor for Classics," and shortly afterwards, a sequence shows his enthusiasm for his area of research while leading a seminar. Roth's novel is full of references to the art and culture of Classical Greece; again and again, he reveals how fulfilled the protagonist is by the grand narratives of antiquity. In turn, Benton illustrates this context on the visual level by presenting certain props reminiscent of the Classical Age as visual references to Silk's inner self. For example, the design of Coleman's house reflects the link to the ideal of antiquity in numerous details. This includes, for example, ancient vases that decorate the hallway and foyer, the white pillar that is set up against the doorframe of his study, and the ancient Greek theatrical mask that hangs in his coat closet. Most conspicuous, however, are the several busts and sculptures that are found in almost every room, from the hallway to the living room and study. In their form and composition, they display a homogenous, undeniable whiteness – both outwardly and inwardly.

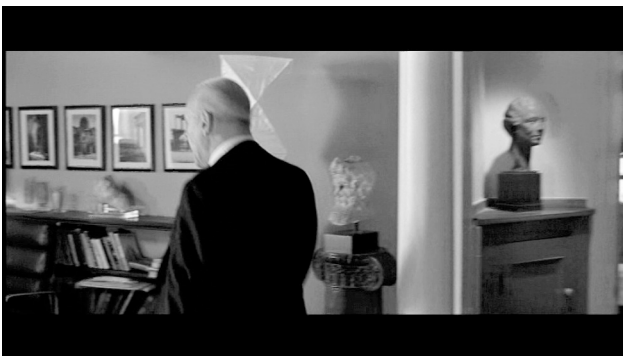

*Figure 29: White Sculptures*

Within Western art and intellectual history, ancient sculptures are often understood as representations of an intellectually pure whiteness, as figures of a cool grandeur, which, at the same time, represents distance from the world's profanity. The Classicist movement that developed in the second half of the eighteenth century brought this notion to light in its preferred artistic style, just as the contemporaneous intellectual scene also oriented itself toward a return to Classical ideals. The enthusiasm for the beauty of ancient sculptures, initiated by the German art historian Johann Joachim Winckel-

mann, had its most prominent exponent in Johann Wolfgang von Goethe. In his *Theory of Colours* (1810), Goethe declared white to be the epitome of purity.[23] Goethe's classification, which conceives of white as the highest and most profound but conceives of colors, on the other hand, as an expression of the superficial and banal, had many adherents. Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel puts forth a similar notion in his *Lectures on Aesthetics* (1835-38) and develops the idea of *das Kunstschöne* (the artistically beautiful) as the idealization and glorification of antiquity. In this context, Classical sculpture is understood as the consummate unity of dignity and distance, as a form that is capable of constructing a counterpoint to the hectic distractions of the profane. Hegel admiringly remarks that ancient sculpture is "withdrawn from this link with external things and is […] independent in itself, not dispersed in or complicated by anything else."[24] In 1873, a formulation related to this concept of sublime distancing was developed by the art theorist Walter Pater, who describes the radiant effect of Greek sculpture as follows: "That white light, purged from the angry, bloodlike stains of action and passion, reveals, not what is accidental in man, but the tranquil godship in him, as opposed to the restless accidents of life."[25] Here, the association of white with spirit and transcendence is once more clearly shown: as the expression of a pure, timeless idea, ancient sculpture represents an ideal that uncovers a godlike quiet in shielding its viewers from the hustle and bustle of the world.

Coleman Silk's imagination also seems to be determined by this idealized symbol of sublime grandeur. The display of radiantly white busts and sculptures evinces the orientation toward an ancient model, which connects white with the association of timeless beauty and, simultaneously, with the idea of the claim to absolute knowledge. In the process, Coleman's preferences for whiteness over blackness illustrates the solidification of a white ideal around which he orients his identity. But this ideal becomes even more fragile the more one closely considers it. This is already shown by a glimpse of the ancient sculptures with which Coleman decorates his home's interior. Because the philosophical idea of an immaculately pure white, from which the idea of superior sublimity is derived, proves itself to be unstable, since such figures,

23 Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, *Theory of Colours*, trans. Charles Lock Eastlake (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1970).

24 Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Aesthetics: Lectures on Fine Art, Volume II*, trans. T.M. Knox (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975), 733.

25 Walter Pater, *The Renaissance: Studies in Art and Poetry* (London: Macmillan, 1915 [1873]), 224.

as is now known, were initially colorfully painted and, therefore, did in no way originally exude the aura of spirit and transcendence with which it was later associated. The assumed purity is an idealized projection that is able to deny, but not erase, the layer that surrounds it. It inevitably encounters its own opacity in claiming to be transparent.

The ambivalence of this relational context is visualized in the images in the film whose conspicuous encoding of whiteness is presented not as a promise of liberation but as an uncanny death knell – as the depiction of a self-design whose uncompromising orientation carries within itself the greatest contradiction. This is evinced, for example, in the presentation of Coleman's first great love, Steena Paulsson. Her connection to Coleman's fascination with whiteness is hinted at by her ancestry. Steena's ancestors came from Northern Europe, and her name is "Danish and Icelandic" – and it seems to be precisely this unknown land of ice that awakens Coleman's fantasies of conquest and makes Steena into an enticing snow queen. Robert Benton's dramaturgy of light highlights this allusion by additionally brightening Steena's pale skin and, thus, staging her as a literally white surface. Furthermore, the use of lighting accents, which endow Steena's blonde hair a glowing radiance, is noteworthy. Multiple reflections cause her hair to shimmer and gleam; at the same time, the lighting introduced from above achieves the effect of a halo around her head. What emerges in this type of staging is the form of a godlike beauty, a radiant promise of eternal whiteness.

It should be noted that the light-dramaturgical reflections do not seem to be artificial additions but appear to be natural and genuine. Steena is not a platinum blonde who must constantly bleach her hair, and her skin does not disappear underneath a layer of powder but comes across as clear and not made up. Steena therefore appears as the personification of an unaffected sincerity, as a being that owes its appeal to its genuine fidelity to nature. Here, too, the tie to the racial ideal of whiteness comes to the fore, as Steena's references to her family attest. "They're tough, those Icelanders…" she explains during her visit with Coleman's family and, with this, refers to an attribute that establishes a causal connection of the Nordic climate with the character of its inhabitants. Richard Dyer explains that the myths about the genealogy of the "Aryan" or "Caucasian" race is geared toward the ideal of a northern type, as well as to its ability to adapt to specific climatic conditions:

> "The Aryan and the Caucasian model share a nation of origins in mountains. […] Such places had a number of virtues: the clarity and cleanliness of the

> air, the vigour demanded by the cold, the enterprise required by the harshness of the terrain and climate, the sublime, soul-elevating beauty of mountain vistas, even the greater nearness to God above and the presence of the whitest thing on earth, snow."[26]

As part of a cultural process of signification, the climatic conditions described here were posited as the definitive requirements for the construction of what Dyer characterizes as the "white character":

> "All these virtues could be seen to have formed the white character, its energy, enterprise, discipline and spiritual elevation, and even the white body, its hardness and tautness (born of the battle with the elements, and often unfavourably compared with the slack bodies of non-whites), its uprightness (aspiring to the heights), its affinity with (snowy) whiteness."[27]

Dyer further notes how far-reaching the formation of white virtue was specified as a racial quality in reference to its identity-forming function: "The Aryan/Caucasian myth established a link between Europeans and a venerable culture known to predate Europe's oldest civilisation, ancient Greece. […] The myth's function was to provide a white (that is, European-like) origin for Greek society."[28] Therefore, the northern type is explained as the source of the highly developed civilization of the Ancient Greeks – as a mythical site of origin which precedes what is commonly referred to as the cradle of European culture.

For Coleman, Steena Paulsson seems to be the embodiment of everything that is connected to the Nordic character: her cool elegance itself trumps the grandeur of ancient sculptures, and her white beauty seems to be more original than the ideal of Classical Greece. Steena thus becomes the instance of white identity par excellence. Her function is that of an "imagery of the cold to suggest the distinctiveness of a white identity."[29] Interestingly, the Nordic ideal can also be seen in the direction that lighting techniques took in the history of cinematography, as Dyer notes: "From the late 1910s on, it became usual to refer to the ideal for lighting the movies as 'North' or 'Northern' light."[30] Dyer describes the quality of this cinematic "Northern light" as

26 Dyer, *White*, 21.
27 Ibid.
28 Ibid.
29 Ibid.
30 Ibid., 118.

"soft, white and steeply slanted" – and it is in this same steep and, in effect, softening light in which Steena is preferably shown.

This can be seen, for example, in her first appearance, the moment Coleman falls in love with her. The dramaturgy of lighting in the sequence presented as a flashback accentuates Steena's appearance as a radiant shape of light, whereby it is striking how dark Coleman, at first hidden between the shelves in the library, seems compared to Steena, who is lit from above. When Steena turns around and turns toward Coleman, her face is presented in a close-up that again reinforces this impression: while a light from above gives Steena's blonde hair a noticeable radiance, the additional backlight creates an effect that brings out her bright face against the dark background. At this point, the expression of isolation as the sublime separation from the profane surroundings, which is also central to the effect of sculpture, becomes unmistakably obvious. The cinematic "Northern light" creates a contouring that is achieved not only by light-dramaturgical accents but also by cultural implications. Richard Dyer explains: "However effected, this light has certain implications. It is, literally and symbolically, superior light. The North […] is also the region of North Europeans, the whitest whites in the white racial hierarchy […], the North is an epitome of the 'high, cold' places that promoted the vigour, cleanliness, piety and enterprise of whiteness."[31] According to Dyer, the effect of lighting a white person with this idealized light is the following: "White people come off best from this standardised Northern light, such that they seem to have a special affinity with it, to be enlightened, to be the recipient, reflection and maybe even source of the light of the world."[32]

All of these implications and associations play a role in the filmic image of Steena Paulsson, which is constructed and mediated by cinematographic techniques. In this context, it should be noted that this image is depicted as Coleman's own subjective image, which not only shows up in the camera work during the episode in the library but also in the structuring of the narrative. Because the flashback to the love story between Coleman and Steena, unlike the film's other flashbacks, is directly introduced as a memory of the older Coleman, who tells his friend Nathan about how he met Steena while looking at an old photo. This subjective perspective, contoured both by the narrative and the visuals, presents the picture of Steena as an image that Coleman has

31 Ibid.
32 Ibid.

himself designed – as a kind of soft focus through which his orientation toward the ideal of brightness shines through.

This orientation comes up in another moment, in the only one that ties the motif of snow to the romantic associations that the film had so strongly rejected previously. It is the moment that follows the first sexual contact between Coleman and Steena in the form of affectionate pillow talk. "I guess things would have gone so differently back home," Steena explains when faced with the spontaneity that has pushed her into this sexual adventure. "Yes, I can imagine," Coleman replies, only to fantasize shortly thereafter about a fictitious backdrop that he describes as follows: "And when fall slips into winter, and the air turns cold, there'll be sled rides, skating on frozen lakes, singing carols round yule-tide…" Coleman's stylization of a winter atmosphere with which he associates Steena and her countries of origin refers to an idyllic notion of the color white: a Christmassy color whose peaceful mood includes the gently gliding movement of a sleigh ride and the elegant turns of ice skaters on frozen lakes. But Coleman's strained attempt to reduce winter to its harmonious, atmospheric dimension is bound to miss the mark, as he soon finds out. Because the cold is always two-faced; its cozy atmosphere can, in the twinkling of an eye, turn uncanny. The glittering surface of the frozen lake not only includes skating but also the possibility of breaking through the ice and falling in.

This shows up in a sequence in which Coleman invites Steena to dinner with his mother in New Jersey. The setting alone announces the looming conflict: on the streets, the snow starts to gradually melt, just as the whiteness in which Coleman cloaked himself for Steena begins to subside. Even though Steena does not show any signs of her irritation during the harmonious dinner, a bit later, the inevitable eventually comes out, and in tears, she explains, "I can't do this, Coleman," as she leaves Coleman – and therewith pronounces what to Coleman is unbelievable but obvious to everyone else: the pure ego is a phantasm that must break down as soon as it abandons the isolation of self-construction and is confronted with the world outside of itself. For the moment Coleman introduces his family, the whiteness, initially unquestioned for Steena, reveals itself as a projected surface.

In the context of the colonial Self's attempts at assimilation in the process of constructing a racial identity, Homi Bhabha speaks of a "form of difference that is mimicry – *almost the same but not quite*."[33] Bhabha then expands on

33 Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, 127.

the fact that this type of partial differentiation has a distinct impact on the production of a discourse of racial identity – especially when it concerns the question of the exterior and its representation:

> "*Almost the same but not white*: the visibility of mimicry is always produced at the site of interdiction. It is a form of colonial discourse that is uttered *inter dicta*: a discourse at the crossroads of what is known and permissible and that which though known must be kept concealed; a discourse uttered between the lines and as such both against the rules and within them. The question of the representation of difference is therefore always also a problem of authority."[34]

It is this very context that Coleman's mother emphatically points out to her son again when he shares his final choice of whiteness against choosing his black family. Coleman may strive to make use of a strategic shift within the discourse on race, he can attempt to make use of the effects that result from it – however, the "problem of authority," to which the individual has no access, remains undeterred by it. The question of who controls the discourse and in what way, who stabilizes its movements and determinations and in what form, is crucial to the construction of racial identity. The free ego reaches its limit where it intends to cross this limit. Coleman's mother sees through this mechanism quite clearly when she explains to her son: "You're white as snow and you think like a slave." Coleman's retreat into whiteness is not a promise of freedom but its opposite: it is a form of subjugation to the same system that he is trying to overcome.

Despite the fact that Coleman so intensely resists his mother's prophecies about the circumstances he will become tangled up in, the inevitable burdens of his individual self-construction stand out: the costs outweigh the profit. And the more Coleman longs for whiteness, the more he tries to capture and possess it, the more mercilessly it badgers him, towers over him like an avalanche which will eventually bury him under its weight with overwhelming force. Because the signifying power of whiteness cannot be tamed nor calculated. It constructs patterns and signs; in turn, these take shape, play their game as symbols, become shapes that cannot be disciplined by the will of the individual. The unyielding consistency with which this process extends to language is evident in the situation that is the main reason, perhaps even the main cause, of Coleman's retreat from academic life.

34 Ibid., 128.

The accusation of racism that his colleagues use to provoke the premature end of his career is based on Coleman's seemingly thoughtless designation of two absent students as "spooks." While the college faculty sees in this remark a use of the slang term "spooks" as a derogatory term for dark-skinned people, Coleman defends himself by pointing to another and, in his opinion, much more common meaning of the term, namely the designation of ghost-like beings, which does not imply any racial attribution. Both cases have to do with the reduction of a semantic complex to a single component of meaning – a process that seems just as unfounded as Coleman's strained attempt to fall back on a singular determinant of his own identity. Coleman stubbornly insists on the dictionary definition of the term "spook" that he presents to his colleagues as one that he wants to claim as his own: "Ghost – I was referring to their ectoplasmic character." When they point out the second definition of the term in the dictionary, "derogatory: Negro," Coleman at first reacts as if bewildered: "I never laid eyes on them, how could I know they were black? All I did know was that they were invisible. These students have never attended a single class. 'Do they exist or are they spooks?' Consider the context!" But the consideration of the context that he demands from his colleagues is a skill that Coleman himself does not master. For the context of his academic life is one that is politically regulated – a context that considers the presence of the Other in language under conditions of discrimination.

It stands to reason to interpret Coleman's use of the term "spooks" as a treacherous moment of unmasking, as a metaphor for the return of the racially repressed, driving the remaining residue of his blackness back to the surface. Using the term "spooks" as metonymy rather than a metaphor results in yet another connotation. In his engagement with colonialism, Bhabha differentiates between the use of metaphor (as a substitution) from that of metonymy (as a way to register the parts that are missing). In this context, the metonymies that show up in the context of colonialism designate something other than the return of the repressed:

> "These instances of metonymy are the non-repressive productions of contradictory and multiple belief. They cross the boundaries of the culture of enunciation through a strategic confusion of the metaphoric and metonymic axes of the cultural production of meaning."[35]

35 Ibid., 128.

However, in Coleman's case, the contradiction inherent to the "strategic confusion" does not function as a subversive liberation: rather, it must become dangerous when it encounters a context that imposes severe sanctions on the transgression of discourse-stabilizing boundaries. Coleman's use of the term then appears less as the possibility of tactical transgression than as a fatal misunderstanding based on the confusion of different attributions. This relation becomes apparent when one considers it in the context of a parable that calls to attention Coleman's confusion about the abstract and manifest forms of the whiteness he aspires to – a parable found in Philip Roth's collection of essays *Reading Myself and Others* (1975):

> "'Oh, watch it, sonny' – the father calls after him – 'you're skating on thin ice!' Whereupon the rebellious and adventurous son in hot pursuit of the desirable exotic calls back, 'Oh, you dope, Daddy, that's only an expression,' already, you see, a major in English. 'It's only an expression' – even as the ice begins to groan and give beneath his eighty-odd pounds."[36]

Roth impressively illustrates the fatal consequences that can result from the confusion of distinct spheres and the lack of insight that the carefree person has even in the face of the danger of falling into the ice. Coleman, too, is unable to distinguish between the opposing spheres of the ephemeral and the concrete, each with its own specific rules and consequences. "It's only an expression," he too seems to shout, unable to recognize the additional implications that arise at the very moment when the term breaks away from its assumed arbitrariness and becomes a signifying solidification. Coleman's reductive attachment to an idealized form of whiteness already demonstrates his myopic behavior – and it is not surprising that his final failure rests on a similar fallacy.

It is ultimately the "art of invisibility" that causes the protagonist's downfall because, in the context of language, the word "spooks" actually refers to Coleman's self, or more precisely, to the dilemma of his ectoplasmic character. Coleman's conception of identity is based on the Platonic idea of the Self, on a purely spiritual being to be imagined beyond physical entrenchment. But even that notion proves to be dysfunctional when integrated into a context that requires a link to the visible as a significant prerequisite for the recognition of existence. "To charge me with racism is not only false, it's spectacularly false!", Coleman exclaims, once again aptly expressing the conflict inherent in

36 Philip Roth, *Reading Myself and Others* (New York: Vintage, 2001 [1975]), 30.

his self-design. In actuality, the accusation of racism could be characterized as *obviously* false, if one were only to look closer at the person toward whom it is directed. If Coleman is a racist, he is at least not the white racist that he is accused of being. Nevertheless, more important than this relation is the hint at his own ghostlike being hidden in Coleman's formulation, the reference to the "specter." For the spectacular is nothing more than the paradoxical merging of visible and invisible, the inextricable contradiction on which Coleman's self-construction is based. It is this antagonism that also makes up the precarious status of whiteness that commences a contradictory organization in which the claim to the invisibly universal is connected to the necessity of a visible marker. In other words: Coleman's claim to invisibility is false in a spectacular way precisely because it is uttered within a culture of visibility. Richard Dyer states: "In a visual culture – that is, a culture which gives a primacy to the visible as a source of knowledge, control and contact with the world […] – social groups must be visibly recognisable and representable, since this is a major currency of communication and power."[37] Everything that attempts to resists this postulate of visibility must be rebuffed as dangerous, which is why Coleman's choice of a ghostlike being represents a fateful threat that already carries within itself the announcement of his own annihilation.

Benton's film achieves a final, comprehensive dissemination of whiteness in its imposing final tableau. In this depiction, an icy landscape that fills up the screen seems to once again condense all of the suggestions and implications that the film has connected together into a web of associations throughout its running time. As in the opening sequence, the white of the wintery surroundings make it seem limitless – the snow-covered surface of the frozen lake and the clear expansion of the horizon seem to begin to resemble one another both in their bright coloring and in their flatness and coalesce into an extensive white. It almost looks as if Coleman's philosophical conception of timelessly beautiful purity is coming into its own in this icon of whiteness, as if Hegel's notion of "pure identity," which he describes as "formless whiteness,"[38] is visually reflected here. But in the snow-covered terrain that makes up the end of the film, there is something other than the promise of an infinite vastness of a space of the possibility of whiteness – since the shapeless landscape just as well represents the lack of identity of the subject wandering

37 Dyer, *White*, 44.

38 G.W.F. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. A.V. Miller (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), 31.

about in the white, as well as a desperate search for direction which seems impossible in the all-encompassing whiteness. The promise of liberation that Coleman ties to the idea of unbounded whiteness then turns into a sign of a lack of individual authority, whose ostensible straightforwardness begins to get lost in the unmarked vastness. The pull of the white surface manifests here as a kind of transcendence that is simultaneously threatening and enticing. For, on the one hand, the monochromatic winter landscape is presented as a scene of erasure and dissolution, and, on the other hand, its whiteness also suggests the crossover into the infinite. The appeal of the icy expanse is also simultaneously its greatest risk, since the fascination of the white zone is nothing other than the dialectic of fullness and emptiness, of all and nothing, inherent to whiteness.

It is this contradictory formation that also underlies America's whiteness because the land of unlimited possibilities is perpetually occupied with setting up its own borders to defend, to strengthen – as the consequence of a limitation of the unlimited, without which the creation of a unifying form is impossible. The abstraction as which Coleman floats through his ghostly life as can only exist in an undefined no-man's-land, but not in America, whose dream is not supposed to remain virtual but to become actual. The transition from the Old World to the New World requires a new identity, and this identity was never a formless idea but, as Toni Morrison notes, "the self-conscious but highly problematic construction of the American as a new white man."[39] There are many universal longings connected to Coleman's dream of a new identity that were also a part of early America: the notion of a future of liberty, the promise of a new human dignity. But the promise of a universal humanism is not tenable in a country that needs borders to asserts itself both inwardly and outwardly. Toni Morrison describes the precarious effect of this prerequisite as the construction of "a nation of people who decided that their worldview would combine agendas for individual freedom and mechanisms for devastating racial oppression."[40] In light of this context, the dream of a unifying warmth proves to be a cold phantasm: America is not a melting pot but an icebox. Salvation through dissolution is juxtaposed with the insistence on ossification, the idealistic notion of colorlessness is solidified within the white norm.

39 Toni Morrison, *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992), 39.

40 Ibid., 39.

Thus, what remains at the end is not a conciliatory resolution, but an unsettling sense of indeterminacy. The mise-en-scène of the final sequence shows a remarkable arrangement of comprehensive uncertainty. What is striking, for example, is the depiction of a surface under which something is hidden that can be guessed at but not visually grasped. This surface is, on the one hand, the ice cover of the frozen lake; on the other hand, it is also the harmless exterior of the character who is placed in its midst: Lester Farley, Coleman's and Faunia's murderer. The fact that the threat under the surface remains palpable as an omnipresent disturbance is shown not least by Nathan Zuckerman's careful steps over the ice, whose load-bearing capacity seems limited despite its ostensibly impenetrable density, and by his fearful retreat when Lester Farley, carrying a huge ice drill, comes closer and closer to him. But Farley's presence is just as ambivalent as the icy landscape surrounding him. Even though the potential weapon seems brutal at first, his attempted retreat into the deserted wasteland, his flight from a hectic civilization, also makes him appear helpless. In fact, at this moment he is presented more as Coleman Silk's successor than as an antipode, since, like Coleman, Lester also tries to escape history. Whereas one seeks liberation from the confinements of racial discrimination, the other one longs for peace after his gruesome experiences in the Vietnam War. Both defensive movements seek salvation in an undefined whiteness whose quality, however, does not promise redemption from the aforementioned American traumas but, rather, proves to be their most potent embodiment. On top of this, Coleman and Lester have something else in common. Both try to set themselves up in secret places, with all hiding places proving to be permeable layers. Coleman's secret identity is already unmasked by his name ("coal man"), and Lester's retreat is discovered by Zuckerman's arrival, as Lester finds out: "You know my secret place. You know everything now, don't you, Mr. Zuckerman? But you won't tell, will you?"

Lester's words sound like a distant echo of Coleman Silk, like a plea from the protagonist for his narrator to keep silent. Although this request sounds impossible to fulfill – Zuckerman has already known the secret for a long time – Coleman's struggle for discretion is just as comprehensible with regard to the secret construction of his identity. Because the only shift of power that Coleman is able to achieve in the strictly regulated hierarchy of a racist society is connected to the claim of exclusive knowledge. The moment the disciplinary gaze of the powerful fails to achieve its ends, the moment the object of discipline is not perceptible as such, the inferior party acquires the option

to negotiation, which agitates the power relation. Coleman knows more than the person whose gaze captures him: it is precisely this position of power that enables the identificatory tie to the world of whiteness to begin with. Even Faunia, to whom Coleman gets closer than to any other person around him, cannot cross over the threshold of knowledge. "I see you, Coleman," she whispers after the erotic dance she has performed for him. "You want to know what I see? I see everything. You can't keep any secrets from me." But Coleman's response hints at the contrary: "You never know," he replies – and thereby pointedly describes the breaking point of an epistemology based on visibility, that circumstance of visual ambiguity that is capable of offsetting the authority of the gaze. What Coleman seems to neglect is that the power structure in racist societies develops strategies that seek to repress those very moments of instability. Bhabha speaks of the "priority of knowledge 'of' over knowledge 'that'"[41] as well as of the "priority of eye over inscription"[42] in order to describe the hierarchy of knowledge in racist societies. Every shift that threatens to oppose this structure must be suppressed or rejected, so as not to endanger the power apparatus. Therefore, the form of knowledge that is not visually verifiable, that cannot endure the gaze's scrutiny, is declared void or impermissibly fended off. Bhabha stresses: "Such an epistemological visibility disavows the metonymy of the colonial moment, because its narrative of ambivalent, hybrid, cultural knowledges – neither 'one' nor 'other' – is ethnocentrically elided in the search for cultural commensurability."[43]

Coleman's attempt to exert control over the construction of a secret must fail in a society that bases its claim to existence on the postulate of epistemological visibility. Because the effort to protect his autonomy is bound to the rules and regulations that surround the subject in the form of the society that defines it. Although the visual ambivalence of Coleman Silk's external appearance offers the potential to slide between racial poles, as a social being, the ego remains constantly subjected to its racist definition. Dean J. Franco describes this relationship as "the metaphysical duality of race" and explains: "Coleman's being black-in-secret makes blackness and race […] at once real and ephemeral, and this is the status of race throughout."[44] Racial identity can only be conceived of as a double existence that encompasses both

41 Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, 181.
42 Ibid.
43 Ibid., 181-182.
44 Franco, „Being Black," 90.

the ephemeral and the actually tangible and visible. On this condition, the retreat into the ephemeral is not a tenable option. Escaping from social labeling cannot succeed – least of all if it takes place within a discourse that is held in motion by the desire for knowledge, as Franco notes: "The desire to know is the engine that drives our social fixations."[45]

In the end, it is the is demand for knowledge that also drives the narrator of Coleman Silk's story, Nathan Zuckerman. However, Nathan is far removed from the position of an omniscient narrator. Again and again, he remembers how limited his knowledge is, how inadequate his interpretation of what is happening could be, how difficult the reconstruction of the events becomes, events that he himself was not able to witness. Already the very first presentation of the character Zuckerman hints at the difficulties involved in the process of storytelling. Coleman abruptly confronts the famous, award-winning author, who has been extremely unproductive in the past five years, with his biggest problem: prolonged writer's block. Drawing on Coleman's explanations of Classical Greek tragedy, Zuckerman confirms his diagnosis by describing his condition as "peripety, or peripeteia: the moment when the hero learns that everything he knows is wrong…that's me." This remark, which describes the unstable process of knowledge formation as well as its incalculable effects, seems to echo Coleman's words: "You never know." The connection between both men, who develop a friendship during the course of the film, is established by their first encounter: their helplessness and the fact that they recoil from an impenetrable whiteness is considered by both to be both a promise and a menace. It is not only Coleman's identity design, but also Nathan's writer's block, that is interconnected with the paradox of whiteness, with the simultaneity of emptiness and fullness inherent to it – for the block that threatens to destroy the author's existence manifests as a piece of paper with nothing written on it, as a white page, as a gleaming nothingness. Thomas Macho points out that the whiteness of the blank page that piles up in front of the author is also transferred to the world of knowledge:

> "Suddenly, the whiteness that blocks the epiphany of knowledge demonstrates its original power. The author knows what he has always known (yet strategically forgotten), he knows about the antecedent authority of white-

45 Ibid., 97.

> ness, the authority of a blank surface that is simply there – and that defies every endeavor to create meaning."[46]

The menace of the blank surface results from the fact that it is capable of forming identities but is itself without an identity: the broad grid of nothingness appears as a threat that seems to annihilate any meaning. But even this threat has its limit – and this limit is the white of the cinema screen which turns out not to be the total collapse of order and meaning, but proves to be a projection surface that does not remain blank but is filled with images. And so the final visualization of whiteness that the film undertakes points not only to the possibility of the destruction of meaning, but equally to the potential of the formation of meaning, to the process of signification that is associated with the white page as an inscription surface.

The final image of whiteness is the one that is superimposed onto the shot of the frozen lake. After the dialogue between Nathan Zuckerman and Lester Farley in the middle of the icy wasteland, a transparent whiteness spreads out across the screen, which gradually reveals itself to be the blank screen of a computer.

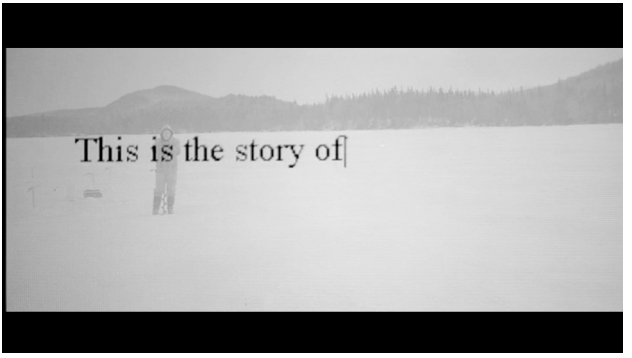


*Figure 30: White Screen*

It is the computer into which the author Zuckerman types the first words of his novel *The Human Stain*, words that appear both as characters on the computer screen as well as letters on the movie screen. They are fragments

46 Thomas Macho, "Shining oder: Die weiße Seite," in *Weiß*, eds. Wolfgang Ullrich and Juliane Vogel (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer, 2003), 18.

of the same text that begin to spread out across multiple levels – as the final boundary crossers and mediating links that coat the opaque white with an instance of possible orientation. Therefore, in a reversal of the opening sequence, the film's closing represents a renewed inversion. The end is the beginning, white is not only the location of erasure but also the initial reason for genesis: a surface that can catalyze a multilayer flow of meaning. The film presents this process as a structure doubled in itself, as a process in which various media procedures dissolve into one another. In doing so, the screen proves to be a signifier for the complicated alternating relationships tied to the process of meaning generation. The tension between the image of the Self and the image of the Other, which runs through the entire film, spreads out a boundless terrain of possible forms of meaning. This terrain reveals itself as a layering of different sign levels, in which Coleman's desire for his own narrative is overwritten by Zuckerman's reconstruction, which in turn is overlaid with the film viewer's interpretation. The possibility of condensing the white surface into a white image space simultaneously reveals a reflection in the projection: blurriness and sharpness seem to encounter one another, sight and insight seem to intersect.

In this context, the narrator's ego proves to be a non-character, just as whiteness ultimately refers to a non-presence – to an ideal that is longed for but cannot be attained. In whiteness lies the absence of the particular and the specific, as well as, at the same time, a promise that holds out the prospect of an infinite space of possibility of variable formation. If Coleman's story stands for the story of America, then the whiteness interwoven into it reveals itself as a source of dissolution as well as a means of ossification. What distinguishes whiteness as a quality, that is, its fluid compatibility, is opposed to the embodiment of whiteness in the guise of racial identity: its solidification into a defined form. America's whiteness can only be thought of in this simultaneity – as a counterplay of limitation and delimitation, as the indissolubility of concreteness and abstraction, as a conundrum of shape formation and shape dissolution.