Imitation of Life (Douglas Sirk, USA 1959)

Douglas Sirk's Imitation of Life (USA 1959) was produced at a turning point both within and outside Hollywood, a phase that marks the beginning of cinematic modernism. While classical film had been characterized by a character-driven plot, a coherent narrative schema, and inner causality, modernism would begin to question this consistency and break up the unity of both illusion and form. While classical Hollywood cinema previously attempted to hide the traces of the production process, modern film addresses the image and thus itself: it presents itself as a self-reflective medium that plays with classical rules of meaning-making and alters them in the process. As a form of cinema that contests the coherence of classical films and seeks to overcome it, modernism is characterized by an aesthetics of fragments, ellipses, and disruption.

Sirk's film Imitation of Life can therefore be situated at a point of crystallization in film history where established and varied modes of production and reception encounter, comment on, and thus modify one another. Sirk's Imitation of Life must be considered as a conglomeration of different texts in the sense that it has recourse to several source materials. The primary text is that of Fanny Hurst's bestselling novel Imitation of Life (1933), which had already been adapted to film twice before Sirk's version: John M. Stahl's version from 1934 was a Universal production with three Oscar nominations; the second film was released, to little acclaim, in 1948 as an independent production from director Joselito Rodríguez with the title Angelitos Negros in Mexico. In terms of racial themes, the extent of dissemination and degree of reflection evoked by Hurst's novel and Stahl's Hollywood adaptation can be

seen not only in the numerous reviews and discussion of both works[1] but also in the development of a further source text: namely Langston Hughes' satirical play *Limitations of Life*, performed for the first time in the United States in 1938.

Even if classical Hollywood cinema had been exposed to increasing economic disruptions in the late 1950s,[2] Sirk's IMITATION OF LIFE was a monumental commercial success, a triumph for Universal, which had its highest box-office earnings to date with the film. The production was conceived as a vehicle for the stardom of Lana Turner, who managed to swing a celebrated comeback with IMITATION OF LIFE after a long hiatus from film. In addition, Lucy Fischer mentions the fact that the film's reception fell on fertile ground in the development and specialization of debates in film studies.[3] Both the development of *auteur* theory in France and genre studies in the United States granted Sirk more and more attention; in addition, the proliferation of ideological criticism raised awareness of racial, class, and gender issues. Fischer underlines: "Thus, *Imitation* [sic] is a cinematic prism […] – one capable of breaking a social/intellectual 'spectrum' into its component parts."[4] This is one of the reasons why most critics characterize Sirk's last Hollywood film as the climax of his artistic work. Released at the zenith of his American career, IMITATION OF LIFE is seen as the culmination of classical melodrama and, at the same time, as its aesthetic subversion. Charles Affron remarks that the film displays an inner imbalance that does not allow for a cohesive interpretation: "Its profusion of ironies leads us not to some stable value, but rather to the value of the ironic processes and their multiple, unresolved meanings."[5] Judith Butler also emphasizes the fact that the film is constantly calling into question the cohesion of its own consistency of illusion: "*Imitation of Life* […] engages melodramatic tropes to the point of hyperbole where the phantasmatic becomes temporarily unbelievable. Although the title indicates a *mimetic*

1 A comprehensive list of reviews can be found in Valerie Smith, "Reading the Intersection of Race and Gender in Narratives of Passing," *Diacritics: A Review of Contemporary Criticism* 24, no. 2 and 3 (1994): 43-57.

2 This includes, not least, MCA's purchase of Universal shortly after production of IMITATION OF LIFE was completed in 1959.

3 Lucy Fischer, "Three-Way Mirror: *Imitation of Life*," in *Imitation of Life*, ed. Lucy Fischer (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1991), 5.

4 Ibid.

5 Charles Affron, "Performing: Irony and Affect," in *Imitation of Life*, ed. Lucy Fischer (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1991), 215.

purpose, the film is more clearly about the construction and contestation of the mimetic illusion itself."[6] Sirk condenses the imagery of essence and appearance into a richly varied complex of motifs of imitation and illusion. Since the film addresses and showcases its own artificiality, it points to its own constitutive mechanisms in a self-reflective process and thereby allows the constancy of illusion to rupture in itself: IMITATION OF LIFE becomes a declaration of its own creation. By exaggerating and stylizing, heightening sentimentality to the extreme, and demonstrating the artificiality of the staging process, Sirk liberates the Hollywood melodrama from its innocence and challenges its credibility in a form of film that raises both ideological and aesthetic questions. In Sirk, the aesthetic achievement of melodrama lies in its ideological failure. Sirk's IMITATION OF LIFE does not attempt to solve problems that are raised on the narrative level, but instead exposes them in all their complex contradictions. The potential for subversion lies in a meta-filmic approach that critically questions Hollywood cinema's requirements of mass appeal by exposing all of the means that it requires to fulfill those requirements.

Already in the film's opening credits, Douglas Sirk demonstrates that the theme of imitation and deception forms the basis of IMITATION OF LIFE. "What is love without the giving?" asks the title song at the beginning, which then insists moments later: "A false creation, an imitation of life." Accompanied by the sustained strings of the music, the credits fade in and out, while in the background, diamond-like fragments ripple across the screen. The movement of the shimmering stones runs from the top to the bottom edge of the picture, where they are caught and collected, as if in an invisible container, until they fill the entire screen. Neither the transparent stones nor the structure surrounding them are clearly identifiable in their materiality. Judith Butler interprets the material as polished glass fragments that move around in a container filled with water and explains: "The effect of the song is to bring into question the authenticity of the jewels, cut glass refashioned into 'diamonds' through the artificial effects of the water and the camera."[7] Here, one can already ascertain a self-reflective commentary that points to the cinematographic guiding of the eye in the visually distorting staging of a sham existence: "We are given to understand the distorting visual effects of water

6 Judith Butler, "Lana's 'Imitation': Melodramatic Repetition and the Gender Performative," *Genders* 9, no. 3 (1990), 3.

7 Ibid., 2.

as parallel to the effects of the camera; just as the water absorbs and accumulates the beads, so the camera absorbs and accumulates the gaze."[8] The reference to visuality is foregrounded here, where the visual spectrum spans from the capability of blurring and refracting light to further-reaching implications of reflection. In this way, Douglas Sirk presents the basic motif of essence and appearance as a multilayer fabric of varying technical illusions, evoking a central reference to the complex structure of the filmic text through the demonstration of visual deception.

The film's opening sequence continues this approach, which transfers the theme of both recognized and unrecognized identity to the level of the plot and to the structure of the constellation of characters. This already becomes clear when the film's two female protagonists meet, a white mother and a black mother. Both women are single and unemployed at the beginning of the plot. The vastly different directions that their careers will take in the future, however, are already noticeable at the start of the film. The first visual impression that the viewer gets from Lora Meredith, played by Lana Turner, is that of a fragment: in two close-ups, Sirk first presents Lora's legs and chest before he reveals her whole body in a medium long shot. In addition to this classical cinematographic gesture of fetishization, Sirk intrafictionally makes Lora the object of the camera's gaze in the subsequent shot. While she is desperately searching for her daughter Susie, she is photographed by Steve Archer, a process that anticipates not only the incipient love affair between the two characters, but also Lora's rise from model to celebrated stage and screen star. From the outset, Lora is staged in an eroticizing manner, which causes her motherly position to fade into the background. The opposite applies to Annie Johnson, who is already introduced in the first sequence as a guardian angel and caring mother. Already, her discreet clothing establishes a significant contrast to Lora's tight-fitting outfit; furthermore, she is the one who finds Susie, takes her into care, and thus takes on the role that Lora is not able to fulfill.[9]

The play with the false obviousness of superficial structures, which Sirk has already demonstrated in the opening credits, is continued when Annie

8 Ibid.

9 The depiction of motherly care is supported and expanded on with a gesture that emphasizes not only the emotional but also the nurturing function of the mother: although Annie is quite obviously in financial straits, she at first feeds both children with hot dogs.

and Lora first meet. Because of her light complexion, Lora initially does not consider Sarah Jane to be Annie's biological daughter, but, rather, a white girl whom Annie is caring for as a nanny. The flippant way in which Lora allows visual clues and conventional role patterns to coincide is striking, for it refers to a form of identity confusion that traverses the entire film as a basic motif: the search for authenticity between role expectation and role fulfilment. A central pivot of this motif is Sarah Jane, whose identificatory dilemma becomes clear as early as the opening sequence. When Susie asks her new playmate, "Where do you live?", Sarah Jane replies: "No place," an answer that does not just refer to her current living situation but describes the problem of the lack of a home in a broader context. Elisabeth Bronfen explains the precarious situation of cultural hybridity by means of the difficulties that arise "when the affected subject can no longer make a decision between the simple opposition of homeland and foreign land because the border runs right along his own body."[10] Sarah Jane's efforts to escape this unsolvable dilemma is apparent in her doleful plea, "I want to go home, too!", which she directs toward her mother as Lora and Susie make their way home.

Figure 11: Sarah Jane in Tears

Weary, she finally breaks out in tears and thus, for the first time, presents the affect which has been repeatedly described as the basic mode of melodrama.[11] As a physiological process that externalizes a character's inner ag-

10 Elisabeth Bronfen, *Heimweh: Illusionsspiele in Hollywood* (Berlin: Verlag Volk & Welt, 1999), 252.

11 Cf. Steve Neale, "Melodrama and Tears," *Screen* 27, no. 6 (1986): 6-23.

itation, crying is assigned a special status of signification. In the context of Julia Kristeva's concept of abjection, tears present an experience of ambivalence on one's own body because they dissolve the borders between inside and outside, between the I and the not-I, thus threatening the perception of the self as a stable subject clearly distinguished from the world surrounding it.[12] In relation to the melodramatic genre and its privileging of sentimentality, a flood of tears can additionally be seen as a gesture that, through its excessive power of representation, points to semantic contexts that cannot be expressed or compensated for by language. In his influential study *The Melodramatic Imagination*, Peter Brooks argues that melodrama's exaggerated vocabulary of behavior consistently points to a subtext that is located on a level other than that of the directly legible content. He speaks of a kind of "gesture that evokes meanings beyond its literal configuration"[13] and thus ascribes to it a particularly broad potential for symbolic reference. In addition, Brooks places the expressive power of the gesture in relation to the inexpressibility of that which should be expressed and explains:

> "[T]he more elusive the tenor of the metaphor becomes – the more difficult it becomes to put one's finger on the nature of the spiritual reality alluded to – the more highly charged is the vehicle, the more strained with pressure to suggest a meaning beyond. […] To the uncertainty of the tenor corresponds the exaggeration, the heightening of the vehicle."[14]

The uncertain, which lies at the core of Sarah Jane's dilemma, is presented as something unspeakable that is nonetheless expressed in forms of articulation that, in their expressivity, can be deciphered as symptoms of the problem.

This form of depiction grows in intensity as the sequence goes on. Moved by Sarah Jane's outburst of emotion, Lora offers to let both characters stay in her apartment, an offer that Annie accepts gratefully but that Sarah Jane, however, confronts with a new problem. While both girls play together, Susie offers Sarah Jane a black doll, who then rejects it and instead grabs a white one. Since the conflict seems to escalate and end in tears, Annie carries Sarah Jane with her into the room behind the kitchen, which will be where she lives

12 Cf. Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982).

13 Peter Brooks, *The Melodramatic Imagination: Balzac, Henry James, Melodrama, and the Mode of Excess* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1976), 10.

14 Ibid., 11.

for the next few years. Sarah Jane's outburst, "I don't want to live in the back! Why do we always have to live in the back?" expands toward an additional component that connects the theme of racial differentiation to that of class structure. The back room, as a traditional place for servants to live, preliminarily announces the position that Annie willingly accepts and that will define her relationship with Lora throughout the remainder of the film. In an interview, Sirk explains why this accentuation was so important to him as a change to Stahl's first film adaptation:

> "In Stahl's treatment of the story, the white and the Negro women are co-owners of a thriving pancake business – which took all the social significance out of the Negro mother's situation. […] So I had to change the axis of the film and make the Negro woman just the typical Negro, a servant, without much she could call her own but the friendship, love, and charity of a white mistress. This whole uncertain and kind of oppressive situation accounts much more for the daughter's attitude."[15]

Sirk points to the fact that the mother's under-privileged status represents an important catalyst for Sarah Jane's rebellion. Thus, in rejecting the black doll, she appears to be simultaneously rejecting a normative spectrum of roles that prescribes a servile position to black people. The insecure terrain of Sarah Jane's choice of the white doll becomes apparent in the shot that closes out the opening sequence. After Annie and Sarah Jane retire to the room behind the kitchen, the camera first shows the door closing behind both characters and then lingers on the black doll that Sarah Jane had contemptuously tossed onto the kitchen floor.

It is not the promise of a bright future but a stereotypical Negro doll that remains in the picture –so it seems. But the finality of this attribution is deceptive: just as Sarah Jane's attempt to establish a white identity seems to have been unsuccessful, so is the fixation on the black remainder, as Lora's confusion on the beach scene has already shown. As a racial hybrid, Sarah Jane stands for a threshold existence, which not only marks the space between white privileges and black disempowerment but also represents a site of identificatory ambivalence. The inextricable nature of the two racial determinants that constitute Sarah Jane's identity finds its visual counterpart in the kitchen floor's black-and-white-tiled floor pattern, which, like an echo, blends with

15 Quoted in Jon Halliday, "Sirk on Sirk," in *Imitation of Life*, ed. Lucy Fischer (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1991), 228.

Figure 12: The Black Doll

the checkered pattern of the doll's dress and thus visualizes the intersections of the two poles as a double layering. In the process, Sirk's staging techniques evince an approach that causes the stylistically charged exterior to become a reference to the conflict-laden interior: style and subject comment on each other and consequently construct a mutual system of meaning.

Although the introduction of both central characters, Lola Meredith and Annie Johnson, at first suggests a parallelism in characterization (both are single mothers), an oppositional structure comes to the fore in the rest of the film that focuses on a bipolar pattern of attribution. This model contrasts Lora's career ambitions as an actress in the public sphere with Annie's altruistic caregiving in the private sphere and thereby constructs the following spectrum of association: imitation and artificiality on one side, naturality and realness on the other side. The result of this characterization is a racial contouring that, according to Richard Dyer, allows the following interpretation: "The film [...] seems to want to say that black culture is more authentic than white, materially and culturally."[16] Amid the insubstantial worlds of imitation that the film announces in the opening credits, Annie seems to represent a secure anchor for genuine authenticity. In the first sequence, Annie proves her maternal instincts in the protection and care that she grants to both children; an ability that notably distinguishes her from Lora. Annie thus appears as a corrective,

16 Richard Dyer, "Four Films of Lana Turner," in *Imitation of Life*, ed. Lucy Fischer (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1991), 205.

so to speak, as Lora's "better half": she is selfless (rather than selfish), caring (rather than irresponsible), natural (rather than artificial).

Moreover, there is another factor in play: the job situation that at first places Annie in the service of the white head of the household as unpaid help. Lucy Fischer has pointed out that unpaid domestic work from a black nanny in a white household can be seen as an anachronism: in fact, most black women in the 1940s[17] worked in the public sphere, mainly in the armaments industry.[18] Important in this context is the fact that Annie's job is presented as a personalized, quasi-familial occupation; as a relationship that entails neither regular work hours nor regular compensation, thus suggesting a system of exploitation more reminiscent of slavery than of a regulated agreement between employee and employer. Marina Heung argues that this form of presentation obscures the inherent class conflicts and thus causes a shift in the racial issue. In keeping with melodrama genre conventions, Sarah Jane's rebellion is not articulated as the manifestation of a social conflict, but rather as the climax of a family crisis:

> "The purpose is, in fact, to render invisible Annie's working status and to make her relationship to Lora seem simply personal, and consequently unproblematic. Where the issue of race is concerned, the basic strategy is to transpose the issue onto the framework of the maternal melodrama, so that the site of conflict is between a black woman and a white-skinned daughter, rather than between a black domestic and her white mistress."[19]

By contrast, Valerie Smith argues that the daughter's hostile attitude toward the black mother can be understood as a resistance against unjust working conditions, in the sense that it contains an allusion to the legal regulation of slavery that defines the light-skinned child in terms of her black traits and hence classifies him or her unequivocally as a slave.[20] Accepting the mother's black heritage would therefore mean taking on her subordinate status – both in the private and public spheres. In such a situation, race manifests not solely as a familial category but additionally as an instrument of social regulation, as a constellation that confirms and stabilizes existing power relations.

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17 The film's timeline starts in the year 1947.

18 See Fischer, "Three-Way Mirror", 10.

19 Marina Heung, "'What's the Matter with Sarah Jane?': Daughters and Mothers in Douglas Sirk's *Imitation of Life*," in *Imitation of Life*, ed. Lucy Fischer (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1991), 312-313.

20 See Smith, "Reading the Intersection of Race and Gender", 49.

The fact that Sarah Jane's rebellion can nevertheless be considered in the context of a failed mother-daughter relationship stems from the fact that the film provides numerous entry points that allow for an interpretation of the racial subject matter as a space free of ideology. Thus, for example, Lora appears to be completely oblivious to the racist structures that determine the social positions of white and black families. "Miss Lora, you don't know what it means to be…different," states Sarah Jane and hence aptly describes Lora's ignorance of her own privileged position – whereupon Lora explains that she has never treated Sarah Jane differently than her white friends and acquaintances. Even if Lora simply denies a difference between black and white life experiences, the different power-relational conditions of the two areas remain visible throughout the entire film. Although the back room from the opening sequence turns into a much more lavish living space with Lora's increasing prosperity, Annie's and Sarah Jane's subordinate status remains unaffected, as the unaltered address of "Miss Lora" evinces. Although Susie and Sarah Jane grow up in the same household, their access to luxuries and social privileges differ in a significant way, which can especially be seen in Susie's privileged position: unlike Sarah Jane's rather modest clothing, she prefers upscale outfits, attends an exclusive, expensive boarding school, and gets her own horse as a graduation present. Whereas Susie's social position is explicitly defined, Sarah Jane moves in a field of diffusion in which the attributes of her mother's heritage and her desire for social recognition clash.

At the same time, the crucial problem is portrayed less as a vigorous social revolt but rather as a form of visual ambivalence that complicates classification within a system of social order. As a solution to this dilemma, the film presents a bipolar schema of racial labeling, at whose cusp Annie stands as the incorporation of a black essentialism. In contrast to the daughter's visually indecipherable enigma, the black mother appears as a visual hyper-body that attempts to smooth out all identificatory disruptions. In Annie, race appears not only as essence but as essence with a guaranteed visibility. This visually induced essentialization is also evident in the fact that with Annie's characterization, Sirk evokes the tradition of black stereotypes, especially the mammy stereotype. In early Southern novels, the mammy was stylized as the product of white fantasies of idealization and superiority: in them, she seemed crucial for the harmonious relationships on plantations, in the sense that she is not only loyal to the slaveholder and never questions her subordinate status but also that, as a mediating figure, she suggests a pseudo-familial relationship between white and black worlds. In cinema, this literary cliché is not only

perpetuated but also visually condensed and augmented. This includes, for example, the staging of a decidedly corpulent and asexual mammy type, which, according to Donald Bogle, began appearing in films starting in the 1910s.[21] In the characterization of Annie Johnson, Douglas Sirk makes recourse to the mammy tradition but also modifies and updates it at the same time. This can especially be seen in the character's physique: even if Annie's girth can hardly be compared to the classic mammy stereotype's corpulence, some similarities can still be observed in how her character is staged. For example, the stable position that the character occupies in the frame is striking. Like her predecessors, Annie captivates with an enormous visual presence; she often almost takes up the entire picture. Unlike earlier depictions, however, Sirk does not emphasize this effect with a full-body portrait but prefers close-ups, especially to depict her submissive, smiling face. In doing so, what remains markedly unaltered is the ideological message from an essentialism conditioned by racism, which is presented as a structure of compensation for the racial hybrid's ambiguity. By concentrating on the black mother, the film diminishes Sarah Jane's appearance as white: she is shown exclusively in relation to Annie, while her light-skinned father is never seen.[22] This system of visual labeling establishes a binarism that tries to overcome the insecurity of an exterior mixture with an essentializing stabilization. Annie appears as a substantial "essence" that functions as an answer to the potential semiotic shifts in "appearance." This strategy of evening things out results in a type of visualization that acts as an ideological index and thus offers a counterbalance to the unsettling image of the hybrid.

The representation of racial cues takes place not only at the visual level but is complemented by additional narrative elements, such as in the fatalism that is articulated primarily in relation to Annie's religiosity. This includes several statements from Annie that characterize the stoic endurance of social injustices as a virtue pleasing to God. Noticeable here is, for example, the Christian vocabulary that she uses to describe Sarah Jane's behavior: "It's a sin to be ashamed of what you are. And it's even worse to pretend, to lie. Sarah Jane has to learn that the Lord must have had his reasons for making

21 See Bogle, *Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies, and Bucks*, 9.

22 The only time Sarah Jane's father is mentioned is in the opening sequence, when, answering Lora's astonished question, "Sarah Jane is your child?", Annie responds with the succinct explanation: "Sarah Jane favors her daddy. He was practically white. He left before she was born."

some of us white and some of us black." The extent to which Annie, in contrast to Sarah Jane, strives for a life of piety, can further be seen in her deathbed statement: "I'd like to be standing with the lambs and not with the goats – on Judgement Day."[23] Annie's belief in divine justice is just one more element of her deterministic outlook on life, which excludes any type of social criticism or rebellion.

Annie's Christian resignation helps to solidify the impression of a predetermined social position that is accepted with complacency. Susan Courtney emphasizes that this configuration draws on a long cinematic tradition: "The film's incessant projection of the servant's smile is a projection of the master's pleasure."[24] Since the beginnings of cinema, smiling servants and self-satisfied masters have been an integral part of a repertoire of racist images – a character constellation that Douglas Sirk takes up and expands on. In this context, it becomes obvious that through her belief in predestination, Annie takes on a corrective function against the hybrid's insecure position at the threshold of the races. The attempt at coherence, at meaning-making, at consistency, stands in stark contrast to the unsettling lack of footing in the half-breed, who is constantly confronted with the task of defining and defend his or her identity and the social position that comes with it. The film juxtaposes the unsettling potential for conflict in the "mulatta" Sarah Jane with the figure of Annie, a juxtaposition whose eruption of racial dualism can again be traced back to its bipolar structure. The black essentialism demonstrated in the process can be seen as an attempt at compensation that presents cohesive racial identity as a secure terrain of self-discovery.

The antithesis to Annie's essentialized blackness is Lora's glaring whiteness. A central factor here is the film's dramaturgy of lighting, which provides Lora's character with a decided radiance. Bärbel Tischleder states:

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23 The lamb motif had already been introduced a few sequences prior, in a scene that shows Sarah Jane dancing in her room. In a downward pan, the camera focuses on Sarah Jane's feet, which kicks aside a stuffed lamb lying on the floor. The impression that Sarah Jane's dismissive attitude is especially directed against Annie's religiosity is not only hinted at by the Christian symbol of the lamb but also reinforced by the fact that she rigorously rejects all of her mother's suggestions to get involved her Baptist church community.

24 Susan Courtney, "Picturizing Race: Hollywood's Censorship of Miscegenation and Production of Racial Visibility through *Imitation of Life*," *Genders* 27 (1998), 43.

> "Lora is hyper-visible. She is illuminated to the extreme, so that one gradually gets the impression that she herself is a source of light. All the shadows are eliminated from her face, and her blonde hair has an intense luminosity. […] Her gesticulations are affected and effusive and are not only doubled in the mirror but appear to be reflected in total in the room's gaudy, flamboyant décor. This is magnified by the fact that she is lighter than the background; her *glow* seems to transcend physical limitations."[25]

The staging technique described by Tischleder is particularly conspicuous in shots in which the frame encompasses both Lora and Annie. In these shots, it is obviously that the lighting is focused on Lora, which visually privileges whiteness, whereas blackness appears as a shadowy background. This impression is augmented by Lora's association with prosperity and wealth, which is reinforced by her twinkling jewelry and additionally manifests in the ultimate insignia of whiteness, such as brightly powdered skin and platinum-blonde hair. Here, the film draws on an important image factor within Lana Turner's star persona: on a form of glamor that is repeated in the accumulation of luxury items such as expensive outfits, hair-dos, and jewelry. Gleaming materialism, which becomes the focus of Lora's life and her raison d'être, dominates the mise-en-scène: her new home's furnishings are sumptuous and luxuriant, her dresses brilliant and radiant both in public and behind the scenes, the encrusted diamonds and jewels on them glittering and sparkling. Central to this careful selection of costumes and props is the display of the artificial, which is presented as a superficial lack of substance in opposition to an authentic interiority. Here, Douglas Sirk highlights the increasing plasticity of Lora's lifestyle by shifting the relation of fore- and background and significantly destabilizing the relation between character and environment. In the process, the ostentatiously displayed opulence seems to take on a life of its own that overpoweringly hangs over the narrative.

This form of unbridled artificiality is not presented as a worthwhile ideal but as a force that increasingly infiltrates and contaminates Lora's life. The overexposure of an external world of objects, which accompanies and drives Lora's success as an actress, at first seems to resemble a classical allegory of female objectification. Through the simultaneous presence of an antithesis,

25 Bärbel Tischleder, *Body Trouble: Entkörperlichung, Whiteness und das amerikanische Gegenwartskino* (Frankfurt am Main: Stroemfeld, 2001), 136-137.

i.e., Annie's character, however, it becomes apparent that the depicted artificiality simultaneously assumes a hierarchical function in connection with the racial subject matter. Judith Butler states: "At first, the idealization of Lana as feminine icon appears unrelated to the racial politics of the film, but the phantasm that Lana produces through her presentational gestures is clearly revealed as part of the cruelty of whiteness, not as a descriptive feature of bodies, but as a compulsory requirement for desirability."[26] Through the stylization and idealization of a shiny surface structure, whiteness does not recede as an invisible normality but makes itself seen as a social formation and ideological construction. Douglas Sirk emphasizes this structure in both the arrangement of the mise-en-scène and by means of a lighting strategy which, by directing the light, makes the focusing and privileging of white people obvious. By immersing the entire plot in a glistening artificial light, the film not only hyper-emphasizes the visually perceptible but also creates a sensibility for the interdetermination of racial identity and stabilizing mechanisms of representation. In contrasting both main characters, Annie and Lora, the film creates a tableau of binary opposition in which black and white seem to exist in clearly disparate categories. However, the insecurity of such a terrain, where the primary consistency of interpretation is located, becomes evident when the 'either/or' confronts the 'both/and'. The *tragic mulatta* Sarah Jane appears as an embodiment of this kind of insecurity, through which the limitations of the racial identification system become apparent.

The "tragedy" of Sarah Jane is constituted as the suffering of a stigmatized form of difference on the one hand and, on the other hand, as an insatiable longing to be anchored in an identity that, as a safe haven, promises safety and stability. Unlike the tendency toward color-blindness in the maternal figures of Annie and Lora, Sarah Jane conceives of racial dualism as a decisive social criterion rather than an unavoidable determinism. Her wish to be white, articulated throughout the entire film, is consistent with the demand for privilege and status increase on the one hand but also with the longing for another mode of being on the other hand. The attempt to determine one's own place within a symbolic world articulated in the opening sequence continues in a scene that shows the young Sarah Jane at school, where her strategy of pretending to be a white is revealed when her black mother shows up. When Annie enters the classroom and greets Sarah Jane as her daughter, the latter reacts panicked and helpless: speechless, she jumps up from her desk and

26 Butler, "Lana's 'Imitation,'" 5.

hastily exits the school building. The subsequent argument between mother and daughter takes place beyond a closed interior, on the street, where the setting immediately draws the eye to the red of a traffic light. The color red appears as a warning sign in numerous set pieces and props: in Annie's dark red scarf and the red rain boots that Sarah Jane carries with her, as well as in a red fire hydrant and an illuminated red sign advertising Christmas trees. As a quasi-continuation of the checkered pattern introduced in the opening sequence, Sarah Jane wears a black-and-white checkered dress that seems to figuratively reflect both poles of identification. This impression is reinforced by the black coat that her mother tries to dress her in. However, it is not presented as a protective covering but instead as a layer that is immediately superimposed by another layer, namely that of white snowflakes.

Douglas Sirk intensifies the effect of Sarah Jane's identity conflict through a filmic grid of signification that translates the structural fabric of acknowledgement and denial into visual terms, thereby making clear that the crisis cannot be transformed into a satisfactory solution. Sarah Jane's attempt at removing herself from her own identity dilemma is unequivocally presented as having failed, as the insistence on an option that basically does not exist. Elisabeth Bronfen states:

> "Having to choose between two symbolic worlds in order to arrive at one's own subjectivity in such a forced way means that, in one and the same gesture, one is both offered and denied the possibility of a choice. For when one chooses one of the alternatives, the chosen one is in any case limited by the entanglement of both possibilities."[27]

The vehemence with which Sarah Jane nonetheless continues her fight for a symbolic localization can be seen in her outburst, "I hope I die!" On the one hand, this accusation against her mother expresses Sarah Jane's trepidation and hopelessness. On the other hand, it also articulates a form of aggression that is not only directed against Annie but also against herself, threatening to culminate in her own effacement. For Sarah Jane, the loss of a feigned, coherent white identity is synonymous with the loss of her own existence: she would rather be dead than admit that she is the daughter of a black mother. Later on, it becomes apparent that neither Annie, nor Lora, nor Susie, nor the film itself is able to resolve this conflict. After Annie tries to explain that there is no need for Sarah Jane to be ashamed of her ancestry and reiterates

27 Bronfen, *Heimweh*, 251-252.

to Lora that she is loved the same by everyone, Sarah Jane retreats to her room crying. Even Susie's offer of friendship is rejected: "She says I'm not her friend. She says nobody's her friend." It becomes clear that Sarah Jane's suffering from a cultural hybridity does not translate into a sentimental resolution. The structural dilemma appears as a tangled discontinuity that excludes a conflict-free zone within the symbolic world.

Even when Sarah Jane's passing in school is presented as a failed illusion, a fundamental option for interaction remains: namely that of a sliding alternation between different performances of identity. The fact that this practice can be staged as a successful oppositional strategy is presented in a later sequence that shows an incident during a work meeting between Lora, her agent Loomis, and the Italian film representative Romano at Lora's house. The first shot already hints at a shift of established mechanisms of classification. Lora's request of Sarah Jane to help her mother with preparing for the evening reception is presented in a low angle shot: Lora is in the first floor of the house and looks up a staircase at Sarah Jane, who answers the request looking down from the second floor. The camera perspective flips the social hierarchy, as it assigns Lora the worm's-eye view and Sarah Jane the bird's-eye view. When the guests finally arrive and Sarah Jane is supposed to serve the hors d'oeuvres, the latter stages an imposing parody of the classic slave woman of the South. Swaying her hips, Sarah Jane enters the room, balances the tray on her head and bows in an exaggeratedly servile posture before placing it on the table. When Lora, astonished, asks Sarah Jane where she learned this "trick", the latter answers: "Oh, no trick to totin', Miss Lora. Ah l'arned it from my mammy…and she l'arned it from old Massa…fo' she belonged to you!"[28]

Figure 13: Sarah Jane's "Trick"

Sarah Jane's servile posture and imitation of a stereotypical slave dialect do not fail to have an effect on those present: speechless, they observe a theatrical

28 Quoted after the continuity script in *Imitation of Life*, ed. Lucy Fischer (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1991), 116.

performance, which supremely irritates them because it was not announced as such. Although Sarah Jane's audience is made up of theater experts, whose profession it is to work closely with the art of representation and illusion, no one present has an appropriate response. With a final triumphant smile, Sarah Jane leaves the room and leaves behind a completely stunned audience. In the subsequent conversation in the kitchen, Lora demands an explanation for Sarah Jane's behavior, to which the latter states: "You and my mother are so anxious for me to be colored… I was going to show you I could be."

Sarah Jane's performance conveys a critique that extends across multiple levels. First, it indicates the flaws in the opinion held by Lora and Annie that racial differences do not matter within a common household run by women. Sarah Jane attacks this blindness to a real, existing difference within social positioning with a parody that, on the one hand, is directed toward her mother in the position of a smiling servant and, other hand, toward Lora as slaveholder. Mary Ann Doane stresses how radical this approach is and notes: "This is the film's most blatant presentation of the intersection of racial relations and property relations and the history of slavery that subtends them."[29] Moreover, Sarah Jane's performance also indicates a context whose unsettling effect lies in rejecting the acceptance of ontological concepts of identity. This not only involves the rejection of being assigned a black role, which both Lora and Annie, as well as the social logic of a racist society, grant to Sarah Jane, but just as well the ostentatious emphasis on the performative aspect of constructions of racial meaning. Sandy Flitterman-Lewis emphasizes:

> "As she [Sarah Jane] adopts a strategy of posing, of self-conscious mimicry, exaggeratedly performing the social dictates for a woman of her color, the text itself uses this parody to foreground the fact that race is, above all, a matter of social construction. What makes Sarah Jane black or white is in fact socially defined, and in this sense, race is seen to be an effect of discourse."[30]

The suggestion of the discursive nature of racial identity becomes even more clear when one bears in mind the complex relation of black passing and white spectacle within Sarah Jane's portrayal. Far beyond the notion of a closed racial entity, an image emerges in which a white actress plays the daughter of a

29 Doane, *Femmes Fatales*, 237.

30 Sandy Flitterman-Lewis, "*Imitation(s) of Life:* The Black Woman's Double Determination as Troubling 'Other,'" in *Imitation of Life*, ed. Lucy Fischer (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1991), 333.

black person, who in turn pretends to be white and ultimately performs an exaggerated parody of a black woman: white appears as black appears as white appears as black. With this, the paradigm of the congruence of essence and appearance not only fades into the background, but it is presented from the outset as impossible.

But even the practice that articulates the critique, namely the performance as spectacle, is subjected to a significant revaluation. The tangled overlapping of various performances does not solely entail the rejection of social-normative role expectations but, additionally, those media mechanisms that perpetuate and stabilize such blueprints of identity. Even here, several layers are overlapping. For one, Sarah Jane imitates her mother's behavior, whose characterization, on the other hand, can itself be seen as an imitation of established Hollywood clichés – the critique encompasses not only the individual behavior of a single person but also the participation of the medium in the construction of racial stereotypes. The fact that Lora is included in the theatrical spectacle results in another semantic context, namely the critique of those privileges which make such a parody possible in the first place. Unlike Annie, Lora's success in her career is predicated on acting in the public sphere, which is structured by the normalized standardizations of an extremely effective entertainment industry. Addressing Lora, the glamourous screen star, develops as an affront that aims at the historical exclusion of blacks from white culture's ideal of female beauty.

The didactic play staged by Sarah Jane presents an impressive re-staging of social interpretation rituals. In the next sequence, which responds to Sarah Jane's triumph with an emphatic humiliation, the film illustrates the fact that the possibilities of modulating racial identity are nonetheless extremely limited. After her performance in front of Lora and her guests, Sarah Jane secretly leaves the house in order to meet up with her boyfriend, Frankie. The escape into the world of whiteness that she hopes for, however, ends in catastrophe. When Sarah Jane suggests that they should elope to New Jersey together and start a new life there, Frankie responds provokingly with an aggressive accusation: "Is your mother a nigger?" At first, Sarah Jane reacts as if bewildered and answers with a defensive attitude that uncannily seems to imitate Lora's utopian blindness to race: "What difference does it make? You love me…" But Frankie is not ready to engage in the unconditional declaration of love asked of him and insists: "Are you black?" After this demand for a binary classification, Sarah Jane responds with a final desperate attempt at claiming an identity: "No, I'm as white as you!" Frankie reacts with a ruthless outbreak of violence:

he brutally slaps his girlfriend in the face and beats her until she collapses and is left lying in a puddle next to the curb.

With this cruel orgy of physical violence, Douglas Sirk impressively displays the difference between two forms of performance: posing as black and passing as white. Furthermore, a causal relation is suggested by the fact that the one directly follows the other: Sarah Jane's brutal mistreatment appears as a punishment for the offense of not having properly staged the drama of racial identity. In this way, Sirk creates a paradoxical system of parallelism and simultaneous opposition. On the one hand, the different forms of portrayal are comparable, since they both indicate the semantic relation of racial identification and performative practice. On the other hand, what is striking is the contrast between each of the achieved effects, which presents the actress in one instance as a superior strategist and as an inferior loser in another. This difference is explained by the fact that the first form of parodic repetition is unsettling in its flamboyant exaggeration, whereas the second is weakened by its intended inconspicuousness and is thus circulated as an element of the hegemonic discourse. The more exaggerated the presentation of racial identity is staged, the more clearly the performed "essence" manifests itself as a stylized configuration in which the body brings its cultural characterization to light. However, the moment the actress loses the distance from her embodied role and strives for an illusion in which the difference between Self and appropriation of the Other is suppressed, the unmasking function of the parodic spectacle fades into the background. The concurrence of the manifest and latent text of body politics appears, then, no longer as an emphatic parody but as an attempt at a self-created identity construction that arises from the pressures of discursive adaptation.

In the remainder of the film, this pressure to adapt is staged as an identity swap that attempts to alleviate the anguish of an enduring crisis by choosing an exhibitionist body model. Sarah Jane's preferred source of inspiration seems to be Lora's acting career, whose success is mainly constituted by the employment of physical charms as capital for the body on public display. In a rapid succession of images that act as a time lapse to mark the transition from the film's first segment to the second, Lora's rise to stardom is depicted as a transformation into a public emblem: multiple shots of title-pages, which combine Lora's seductively smiling face with headlines about her success, are strung together and overlapped by neon advertisements that present Lora's name in glowing advertising type. The climax of her rise-to-stardom story is depicted as a type of public identity, which elevates her artificially stylized

body to an object of admiration. Sarah Jane's strategy of being self-made is notably oriented toward this model that stages the female body as an erotic spectacle. This renewed attempt at choosing her place within the symbolic world culminates in her aspiration to not only imitate a specific system of encoding but to appropriate it completely. Lauren Berlant characterizes this process as "code-crossing" and explains: "This involves borrowing the corporeal logic of an other, or a fantasy of that logic, and adopting it as a prosthesis."[31] Sarah Jane's goal consists of diverting mechanisms of testing race, in constructing an illusion that translates the sociopolitical regulation of racial identity into an impregnable abstraction.

The model that Sarah Jane ultimately chooses as compensation for her unsolvable dilemma paradoxically refers back to precisely those structures of seeing that she seeks to avoid, namely to a type of fetishism that relies on voyeuristically steering one's gaze toward the body. Mary Ann Doane states: "For Sarah Jane, to be a white woman means to become a sexual commodity, to perform for the male gaze in seedy nightclubs and scanty costumes which situate her identity first and foremost in relation to the body."[32] The desperate longing that drives Sarah Jane to take this step is noticeably staged in her first performance in a red-light district. While her tight-fitting, corset-like outfit with fishnet stockings unquestionably foregrounds the demands of the performance, the background hints at the structural determinism that determines Sarah Jane's existence: the nightclub stage's backdrop features two masks next to each other, one laughing and the other crying. The reference to theater emphasizes not only the ambivalent proximity of comedy and tragedy but also the need for a performative portrayal, which is the prerequisite for any assertion of the Self.

Sarah Jane's attempt at escaping the inextricable contradiction of her race and filling the identificatory void with a self-chosen artificial figure nevertheless fails this time as well. And, once again, it is the interfering element represented by her mother that shatters the dream of a coherent Self. Although Sarah Jane tries to secure an escape from the invocations of her mother in this episode by leaving her hometown and assuming a new name, Annie is able to track down her daughter and reveal her self-chosen identity in front of the nightclub owner. Sarah Jane's strategy of replacing her own body with

31 Lauren Berlant, "National Brands/National Body: *Imitation of Life*," in *The Phantom Public Sphere*, ed. Bruce Robbins (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 199.

32 Doane, *Femmes Fatales*, 238.

a better model, her aspiration of imitating Lora's success by adapting to the same fetishization, misfires. Her constantly re-articulated attempt to remove herself from subordination to a racial body regime is doomed to failure because the ambiguity inherent in the mixed-race body is neither able to be categorized nor hierarchized. Every denial of this ambivalence is illusory, for the appropriation of a seemingly closed essence implies, at the same time, the pronouncement of its opposite.

The fact that Sarah Jane's hybrid subject position cannot be translated into a system free of contradictions is shown even in the moment when her mother seems to surrender to the demands of a self-chosen identity. The last confrontation between Annie and Sarah Jane is presented in a sequence that depicts the sacrifice of their familial relationship. Again, their encounter is embedded in the presentation of a public performance: it takes place directly after Sarah Jane's show performance at the "Moulin Rouge." Sarah Jane's decision to continue her job as a nightclub dancer against her mother's wishes at first seems to be successful. In this way, her rise from the backstreet establishment "Harry's" to the "Moulin Rouge" club suggests a career that seems to replay Lora's story of rising up from an underpaid advertising model to a celebrated star of theater and film. While the luxurious ambience of the "Moulin Rouge," combined with the expensive, rhinestone-studded costumes complete with feather trimming, as well as the sumptuous stage décor with its heavy silk curtains and protruding stair constructions, seems to resemble a rise in status; however, Sarah Jane's part in the show is demoted from one-woman performance to ensemble member. On the one hand, Sirk highlights these mechanisms by the sheer number of revue dancers and, on the other hand, by the fact that the type of performance itself conveys a de-individualized structure of repetition: the showgirls ride by the audience on a conveyer belt while each one performs the same erotic, seductive gesture on a mechanical chair that swings back and forth.

Sandy Flitterman-Lewis argues that such a sexually loaded presentation, in its highly conventionalized form, weakens the vigor of the protagonist's attempt to break out: "[Sarah Jane's] assertion of identity becomes a mere parody of a highly conventional notion of female sexuality already existing in the dominant culture. As such it can provide no true liberation, but only the imitation of revolt."[33] In fact, Sarah Jane's performance in the public sphere goes hand in hand with a loss of autonomy; this is not only due to a stereotypical

33 Flitterman-Lewis, "*Imitation(s) of Life*", 334.

depiction of femininity but also to a filmic diversion of the gaze that ties what is depicted to her suffering mother's perspective. Already the first shot of the sequence belongs to Annie, who enters the establishment with a concerned look on her face; the following shots show the performance in a shot-reverse-shot, where a long shot of what is going on onstage alternates with medium shots of Annie's position of observer in the auditorium. Again, it is the black shadow visualized by her mother that undermines Sarah Jane's pretensions of determining her place within the symbolic world all by herself. The attempt to divert the gaze from mechanisms of racial verification, and instead direct it toward her self-constructed public identity, fails in the moment in which the hybrid's resistance to interpretation is again bound to the mother's black body, by which a return to the binary system of racial difference takes place.

If nothing else, this situation leads to Sarah Jane's rigorous rejection of her mother when the latter subsequently looks for her daughter in her motel room. Sirk's elaborate strategy of lighting and shadows builds up to the tense encounter in the interior's unbalanced atmosphere. The room is not evenly lit; instead, an ensemble of several lamps casts various shadow patterns onto the ceiling and walls. Not only the light, but also the viewer's perspective and the movement of both the camera and the characters, as well as the rapid change of shot sizes, make for an impression of instability and incongruence: if the actions are at first presented from a slight low-angle shot, the perspective then switches to a high-angle shot a few moments later; if at first the camera remains in a static position, it then pivots in several directions in the following shots; if at first Sarah Jane is situated to the left and Annie to the right of the shot, these positions are then switched shortly afterwards; if the camera initially focuses on the characters in a medium long shot, the field of view narrows along with the encounter's increasing intensity until it ends in a close-up on both characters' faces. Far from any assumption of unity, Sirk thus conveys a suggestion of discontinuity that is superimposed as a fabric of meaning onto the tug-of-war of proximity and distance that mother and daughter play out.

This visual arrangement shows itself to be particularly impressive in a shot that follows Annie's anxious question about her daughter's happiness. In this moment, Sarah Jane turns away from her mother and looks into a mirror while she replies, "I'm somebody else. I'm white. White! White!"

The framing of this shot displays the interlacing of several frameworks: while the mirror shows the reflections of both Sarah Jane and Annie, the frame of the film image surrounding it only captures the figure of Sarah Jane

Figure 14: The Mirror

standing in front of the mirror, whereas Annie is situated offscreen. Whereas Sarah Jane is perceptible simultaneously as model and image, Annie appears as an imitation lacking substance, as a reflection whose antecedent remains hidden. Accordingly, the connection between mother and daughter as a common image is presented as an illusion that has no stable presence in the reality surrounding them. Moreover, Sarah Jane's double appearance, which encloses Annie's reflection, suggests a dominance of white over black, which seems to bring the victory of her self-chosen identity within reach.

Conspicuous here, however, is the fact that Sirk confronts the moment of self-affirmation with a double response: that of the mirror's reflection at the visual level and that of the statement "I'm somebody else" at the auditory level. Sirk's preferred use of mirrors, reflective surfaces, and spectral refractions, runs like a leitmotif through his filmic oeuvre. On his approach of visualizing the identificatory ambiguity of his characters by means of visual reflections, Sirk comments: "What is interesting about a mirror is that it does not show yourself as you are, it shows you your own opposite."[34] With this statement, Sirk not only refers to the ambivalent status of human self-discovery but, just as well, the medium's instance of mediation that assails the illusion of a holistic self. According to Lacan, the genesis of the ego takes place in the imaginary through the child's identification with its reflection. In the process, it is crucial "that this form situates the agency known as the ego, prior to its

34 Fischer, "Three-Way Mirror", 3.

social determination, in a fictional direction."[35] The child's encounter with its mirror image is tied more to misperception than to recognition, since the gaze upon the Self does not correspond to a coherent experience of truth but occurs as an illusory representation. As the site of identification, the mirror proves to be an instance of deception, since it is there that the construction of the ego as an imaginary unity, otherwise only perceived as fragmented, takes place. The resulting image, therefore, also represents a split: although it first appears as an autonomous entity, it simultaneously becomes clear that that which presents itself as "I" in the reflection is only the product of a representation. The observer can only see the reflection of the Self as a flipped image, as Sirk notes, as "your own opposite", as a representation that causes the illusion of a consistent subject to collapse in on itself.

As a model of imaginary subjectivity, the reflected image indicates a structural ambivalence that is articulated as a paradox of identificatory self-awareness: "I is simultaneously not-I", or, as Sarah Jane formulates it: "I'm somebody else." This inconsistency lies at the heart of the symbolic matrix that the mirror image constructs as the formation of a subject: at the point where the ego believes it will find itself, it runs into an Other that constantly confronts the promise of wholeness with the representation of the Self as a stranger. What is important is that the knowledge of the subject's schism is mediated by a visual instance that not only catalyzes the transformation of the Self but initiates it. Jacques Lacan explains: "It suffices to understand the mirror stage in this context *as an identification*, in the full sense analysis gives to the term: namely, the transformation that takes place in the subject when he assumes [*assume*] an image."[36] Sirk's staging technique presents the process of reflection as a mediatized image of opposition and inversion, especially since Sarah Jane's body, doubly represented in the film image, appears simultaneously light and dark: whereas the reflection is heavily illuminated and shows a radiantly white Sarah Jane, the body of the figure standing in front of it is in the dark and thus appears as a black outline.

Despite these discernible references to the structural ambivalence of identity, which appears as an unsolvable difference, Sarah Jane further attempts to maintain the illusion of an unbroken self-image. Unlike previous moments of passing, this time she is supported by her mother, who does not blow her

35 Jacques Lacan, "The Mirror Stage as Formative of the *I* Function," in *Jacques Lacan: Écrits. The First Complete Edition in English*, trans. Bruce Fink (New York: Norton, 2006), 76.

36 Ibid.

daughter's cover in front of her coworker but preserves it: in a further instance of passing, she pretends to be a former black nanny who wants to pay a visit to "Miss Linda." With this gesture, she finally gives in to Sarah Jane's demand that she keep quiet in public about their being related and never again introduce herself as Sarah Jane's mother. Conforming to the sentimental tradition of the maternal melodrama, this scene seems to depict the apotheosis of altruistic motherly love, which culminates in Annie's selfless sacrifice. The standard of melodrama, that is, to emotionally involve the audience, is nevertheless undermined in Sirk's film by addressing the relationship between actor and viewer. The silent agreement between mother and daughter about Sarah Jane's performative identity already indicates an awareness of the power of imagination. Neither Annie nor Sarah Jane produces the notion that they both share as anything genuine. Rather, their agreement is constituted by believing in an illusion and simultaneously knowing that it is an illusion. Furthermore, the fact that the film viewer shares their secret creates a distance that manifests as an awareness of the artificiality of what is perceived. With this, Sirk emphasizes both the limitation of the cinematographic mechanism of identification and a transition process that makes the claim of de-differentiation articulated by mother and daughter seem untenable.

Elisabeth Bronfen assesses Annie's and Sarah Jane's declaration of familial love as follows: "For the people surrounding the two characters, this love is not visible, only for us – in any case only as a radical refraction, as a tipping over of contradictions into a void that revolves around a traumatic core that cannot be formulated."[37] This refraction, visualized by the reflection of light on the mirror's surface, makes it undeniably obvious: there is no unadulterated existence, there is only an imaginary relationship to the real that is thwarted by multiple fantasies, by various ideas of fear and desire. The pain of a perpetual crisis, which is invoked by the coexistence of two racial determinants, can thus only be alleviated but not definitively overcome.

Douglas Sirk devotes significant attention to Sarah Jane's repeated attempts at self-discovery by means of passing. However, they are embedded into a system in which spectacle operates not as an individual decision but, instead, as the entire film's structural dynamic. This is seen in the numerous self-referential moments with which Sirk points to the limits of the cinematographic constancy of illusion. It is thus not surprising that Sirk renames his characters in such a way that signals the thematic connection between art and

37 Bronfen, *Heimweh*, 318-319.

life as "telling names." The *tragic mulatta* Peola in Hurst's original becomes Sarah Jane in Sirk, whose double name already hints at her inner conflict between two identificatory poles. Her mother's name is transformed from Delilah to Annie and thus repurposed as the sonic echo of a certain stereotypical role: that of the *mammy*. The successful protagonist in Sirk's film is ultimately named Lora, not Bea. Here too, Sirk manages to connect the film to an extradiegetic context by means of similarity in acoustics. "Lora" is reminiscent of "Lana" and yet again alludes to the lack of distance between model and image. These name changes are embedded into a narrative that reveals further modifications of the source material. In contrast to Hurst's novel, Douglas Sirk's film does not focus on industrial entrepreneurship, but rather on the will for self-affirmation through public performance. It is solely this wish to performatively express oneself that controls the characters' fates like a driving force – as the key to success or as the reason for failure. This is apparent in the characterization of Lora, whose career acts as the narrative's fulcrum. The crucial aspect here is that Lora's performances are not limited to the public sphere but are continued even in private. Her first appearance on the beach at Coney Island turns out to be a staged form of maternal care, as the film later shows – but turns out to be a model and motif for the photographer Steve Archer,[38] who titles his photograph "Mother in Distress" and conceives of it as part of an exhibit in the Museum of Modern Art.

From the very beginning, moreover, Lora's occupation is connected to the art of dissimulation, as her first job shows: she addresses a mail-order company's standardized sales letters by hand to give them a personal touch. She even has her talent for imitation to thank for her contract as an advertising model for flea powder because, of all things, she is chosen for a role that she is hardly able to fulfill in her daily life: that of the active housewife. The fact that Lora easily masters the art of acting, without even a script, is further brought to light by her entrance into show business. To obtain a meeting with the influential agent Allen Loomis, she pretends to be a film actress from "International Studio" – a performance that totally convinces the agent, even when he has long known that she is only pretending. It is Lora's convincing portrayal of a Hollywood star that announces the beginning of her success story: as an actress who plays an actress, she not only enthralls the Agent Loomis but also the author and director David Edwards, who acts as a mentor to her stage

38 Even here, Sirk transforms the source material by changing the admirer's occupation: instead of an ichthyologist, Sirk's version presents him as a professional photographer.

career to the point where he conceives and stages his plays solely for her. But with the diva's increasing success, it gradually becomes clear that authenticity and portrayal can hardly be separated from one another anymore, since her exalted movements and stylized poses are integrated into her family's daily life beyond the stage and film set. Thus, Lora's behavior can consistently be classified as a theatrical gesture – independent of venue or audience structure. These reenactments are so obtrusive that both people who are standing next to Lora, annoyed by her performing, react to them: both her partner Steve and her daughter Susie demand: "Stop acting!" in situations that call for an honest declaration of love: Steve demands it after having proposed marriage to Lora, and Susie demands the same after she has confronted her mother with the accusation of neglect. What is striking is the fact that in both cases, Lora looks past her respective interlocutor directly into the camera – as if she were addressing not Susie and Steve but an audience offscreen whom she is trying to impress and convince with her acting abilities.

Not only Lora, but Steve and Susie as well try out their talents of dissimulation several times and prove themselves to be – like every character in the film – well-versed actors. Steve distorts the notion of himself as an artist with well-paid commissions for an advertising firm, where he photographs staged situations that are sold as if they are natural. And several times, Susie tries to imitate her mother's role. Her imitation is not solely limited to her exterior, which the daughter highlights in her choice of similar outfits and accessories, but continues to a point where Susie desires the same paramour as her mother: Steve. Annie and Sarah Jane are also active as actresses: Sarah Jane alternately mimes the black daughter and the white orphan, and Annie's preferred role is the maid. Steve's accusation toward Lora, "What you're after isn't real!", with which he wishes to criticize the insubstantiality of her acting ambitions, comes off as ridiculous: not only because he could just as easily direct the accusation toward himself, but also because he is trying to draw a line between appearance and essence that the film excludes from the very beginning. When the difference between original and imitation is no longer possible because the points of reference themselves have become fragile, the concept of reality that Steve demands can only seem absurd.

The art of imitation is most clearly revealed when it refers to the sphere of the film; that is, to the instance that engenders it in the first place. In addition to Lora's performances, the contrived actions of other employees in the entertainment industry stand out: the agent Allen Loomis mentors Lora at first, but he repudiates her the next moment, when it seems she has not

passed the audition. And David Edwards, Lora's director and occasional lover, apparently values grand acts of posturing as much as his preferred actress does. After Lora tells him that she only wants to play serious roles and rejects working with him on his next comedy, Edwards throws his manuscript into a fire: "There goes my pride…up in ashes! Well…goodbye!" Lora, on the other hand – ever the professional – is unimpressed and, after David's exit, chalks up what has just happened as having all been an act: "Just a theatrical gesture. He never makes less than six copies." Complementing the depiction of these stereotypical types of behavior, which primarily include a narcissistic need for recognition and a pronounced talent for pretense, Douglas Sirk inserts more explicit allusions to the film industry. These include, for example, the introduction of a fictitious director, "Felluci," whose name is clearly derived from the name of the real director Fellini. Felluci is conceived of as a serious representative of his trade, as a director with great artistic aspirations who offers Lora the role of "Rena" in the film *No More Laughter* and thus gives her the opportunity to switch from her typecast comedic roles to serious roles. When Steve asks her about it, Lora describes the role as: "Only the best part since Scarlett O'Hara!" Along with a self-referential nod to film history, Sirk references the theme that is the central focus of Imitation of Life: the question of racial identity and its power-differential hierarchization. Sarah Jane's slave parody, which assigns Lora the role of the white plantation owner's daughter, a Scarlett O'Hara in the flesh, is a clear reference to this, as is Lora's attitude toward racial privileges: her self-portrayal combines her repeatedly mentioned egalitarian aspiration with social discrimination that actually occurs.

The jigsaw puzzle of varying forms of self-appropriation and appropriation by others continues masterfully in numerous extra-fictional references that are staged to conspicuously stimulate the film's narrative. Thus, Sirk's decision to cast Lana Turner in the starring role evinces an approach that successively dissolves the dividing lines between actor, embodied character, and star persona. Charles Affron remarks: "Much of the characterization is made to resonate against our extra-fictional knowledge of Lana Turner, a knowledge not of film buffs but of the vast moviegoing public."[39] In fact, the numerous resonances with her offscreen persona complicate the answer to the question of which story Imitation of Life is actually telling: that of Lora Meredith or that of Lana Turner. Just like Lana, the film also points out that Lora's age poses an obstacle to her film career; just like Lora, Lana also tried

39 Affron, "Performing", 213.

to get away from being typecast in comedic roles and to be taken seriously as a distinguished actress; just like with Lana, garishly displayed luxury and glamor become the determining image factor for Lora. Perhaps the most obvious parallel between the two figures can be seen in the narrative integration of one of the biggest Hollywood scandals of the 1950s: the Stompanato Affair of 1958. As a suspenseful mother-daughter drama, the event offered the ideal source material for the melodramatic text of Imitation of Life. Johnny Stompanato, Lana Turner's former boyfriend, was stabbed to death on April 4, 1958 in Turner's bedroom by her 15-year-old daughter, Cheryl Crane. In the following weeks, the media interest that the case aroused led to excessive coverage of the diva and her daughter, with the central focus being a possible love affair between Stompanato and Crane. Turner's testimony was tensely awaited in the pending court case, during which the motive of self-defense claimed by both mother and daughter was acknowledged. No one was indicted, but custody was withdrawn from Turner and awarded to Crane's grandmother. Accordingly, press coverage of the case argued that it was Turner's irresponsible careerism that had led to the neglect of her daughter. The striking parallel of the mother-daughter conflict, embedded in the problems of a single mother and the tension between narcissistic star identity and maternal responsibility, as well in competition for the same lover, could have hardly escaped movie audiences of the late 1950s. In order to bring out this congruence even more, Sirk integrated details that viewers were familiar with from the extravagant coverage of Turner from the previous year. In addition to decking out the fictitious star Lora Meredith with pink-colored accessories, which were reminiscent of Lana Turner's often-photographed pink bedroom, he also filmed at a school that Cheryl Crane had actually attended, as well as reenacting the graduation celebration that took place there: just like Lana, Lora gives her daughter a horse as a gift.

To emphasize that, as the director, he himself is part of this process of media staging, Douglas Sirk draws attention to two reference points. For one, he inserts a self-referential allusion that amounts to a hidden cameo: Lora's first play is titled *Stopover* – an allusion to the original title of Douglas Sirk's first Hollywood melodrama, which he later renamed All I Desire. In addition, Sirk includes a remark by director David Edwards, who judges Lora's decision for a socio-critical drama as follows: "And that 'colored' angle in it. It's absolutely controversial!" This addresses a position that reflects on the issue of race relations in the United States in general, but also in relation to Hollywood cinema in particular. With the help of production notes, it is apparent

how exhaustive the choice of actress for the role of the mixed-race Sarah Jane was: "A search that stretched to two continents preceded the selection of Susan Kohner to play the light-skinned Negress who pretends she is white. Producer Hunter and Director Sirk interviewed almost 100 Negro actresses and tested five non-Negro thespians before deciding on Susan."[40] Even the mere formulations from Universal indicate the problem of defining, representing, and interpreting racial identity formations, considering the fact that the candidates were classified with the binary classification Negro/non-Negro.[41] Moreover, Sirk integrates the theme of race relations by making reference to the American civil rights movement. Annie's explanation, "Miss Lora, we just come from a place where my color deviled my baby," for example, points to the effectiveness of segregation laws and the legally legitimized racial discrimination in the Southern United States. Additionally, Sarah Jane's first attempt at passing can be seen as a then-current reference to the segregation in public schools and the recent *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka* case (1954). Marianne Conroy argues that the episode with the doll at the start of the film hints at the spread of sociological studies on racial identification of black and white children that had been cited several times in relation to the legal battle surrounding *Brown v. the Board of Education*.[42] Judith Butler sees parallels to Rosa Parks' bus strike of 1955 in Annie's rejection of Steve's offer to reserve her a seat on the train.[43] All of these indications point to a reflection of America's cultural-

40 Universal Pictures, "*Imitation of Life*: Production Notes," in *Imitation of Life*, ed. Lucy Fischer (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1991), 184.

41 This approach is based on a debate about the representation of race relations that has accompanied Hollywood cinema since its beginnings and has led to different regulatory guidelines. The first systematization of regulatory provisions took place in 1927 with the enactment of the "Don't and Be Carefuls" from the Motion Picture Producers and Distributors of America (MPPDA). One of the most important clauses, which prohibited the portraying mixed-race romantic or sexual relationships, was included in the expanded version of the Production Code of 1930 and for the later tightening of the guidelines in the Production Code of 1934. The ban on "miscegenation," which was defined as the sexual mixing of the black and white races, was only lifted in 1956. On Hollywood's censorship guidelines regarding "miscegenation," see Courtney, who discusses these guidelines with the example of the production of John M. Stahl's film Imitation of Life (USA 1934).

42 See Marianne Conroy, "'No Sin in Lookin' Prosperous': Gender, Race, and the Class Formations of Middlebrow Taste in Douglas Sirk's *Imitation of Life*," in *The Hidden Foundation: Cinema and the Question of Class*, eds. David E. James and Rick Berg (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), 132.

43 Butler, "Lana's 'Imitation'", 8.

political state, which is most succinctly crystallized in the casting of Mahalia Jackson as a choir singer in the closing sequence, which noticeably makes reference to the civil rights movement.

The reference to an "outside," to a world beyond the filmic image, permeates Imitation of Life. Michael Stern stresses how this system of reference is evoked time and again by Sirk's staging techniques:

> "Sirk's direction of Turner has her constantly glancing out of the frame, distracting her attention from the business in which Lora Meredith is involved, emphasizing again the distance between the actor and the role. In a more general sense, Lora Meredith is motivated throughout the film by invisible forces, out of the frame. The telephone calls that interrupt her, the casting calls, knocks on the door, and intangible visions of success all draw her attention from what is visible in the film toward something outside the character's purview."[44]

In depicting the fringes of the filmic illusion, Douglas Sirk achieves a degree of self-reflection that shifts the overarching motif of imitation from a narrative function to the thematization of the cinematic *dispositif*. Far from presenting a coherent fictional text, he instead constructs a system of correspondence between spaces of discourse within and outside the film that, by decidedly referring to the world outside of it, makes the coherence of the diegesis seem fragile. The effect of this type of study of the relationship between reality and its filmic representation is that the film discloses its status as film, a status that is thus constantly thrown back onto the film itself. The thematization of the cinema *dispositif* seems to constantly accompany the narrative. Consequently, Imitation of Life, in its references to its own process of production and reception, in its exhibition of the media contexts that constitute it, demonstrates an awareness of the fact that it is itself an artificial construct.

In this context, it must be noted that the exposition of the cinematic *dispositif* is bound up in a paradox that can be described as a sliding between fiction and metafiction. Robert Stam describes this tendency of self-reflective films as follows: "They demystify fictions, and our naive faith in fictions, and make of this demystification a source for new fictions."[45] The films about

44 Michael Stern, "Imitation of Life," in *Imitation of Life*, ed. Lucy Fischer (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1991), 282.

45 Robert Stam, *Reflexivity in Film and Literature. From Don Quixote to Jean-Luc Godard* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1992), xi.

Hollywood that Hollywood directors have produced are therefore Janus-faced – Christian Metz uses the term "double agent"[46] in his theory of filmic enunciation – because, on the one hand, they criticize the constructedness of the Hollywood myth but, on the other hand, themselves contribute to Hollywood's discursive system. The functions of self-referentiality are diverse and are not limited to the undermining of narrative credibility or to the breach of the illusion's constancy; not least, therefore, because every reference to itself in the tension between depiction and what is depicted implies a commentary both on the Self and on the Other.

In precisely this ambivalence, one can then also locate that dynamic which makes up the structural fabric of the film Imitation of Life: passing. Even when Douglas Sirk foregrounds the *mulatta*'s resistance to interpretation as an ideological paradox, he uses a wide range of references to draw attention to the fact that even those figures whose racial identity seems to be beyond all doubt are connected to self-affirmation qua passing. This comes to the fore in looking at both characters who are presented as being within the binary system of race as black and white poles of the film: Annie and Lora. Sarah Jane's pleading with her mother when she is leaving the motel room noticeably quotes the term: "And if – by accident – we should ever *pass* on the street, please don't recognize me!" The next time the two characters meet actually takes place on the street, on the occasion of Annie's funeral procession. Not only the function of the mourners as an audience, but also the pomp of a public spectacle, as established by Annie's will, refer to the acting gesture that underlies every act of passing. In this respect, Annie proves to be just as accomplished an actress as Sarah Jane in terms of the choice of public identity. Even Lora is explicitly associated with the term "passing" when her agent Loomis declares his approval: "But you do have some qualifications. Your face will *pass*." Beyond the allusions to Lora's talent for imitation, which during this scene refers to her passing as a Hollywood diva, the expression further evokes an implicit allusion to the performance of racial identity. Daniel Bernardi explains: "The performance of whiteness attempts to trick us into believing – experiencing and expressing – that there are those who count as white and those who do not, and thus the story the performance tells is the story of pass-

46 Christian Metz, *Impersonal Enunciation, or the Place of Film* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2016), 30.

ing. There are no white people, only people who pass as white."[47] Bernardi's formulation refers to a movement that attempts to translate the discursive nature of racial identity into a stable unity. The resulting effect of veracity is often solidified to the degree that the incongruence behind it is covered up. Against this, the movement of passing, in its performative dynamics, attests to the fact that one's supposed interiority is merely a fantasy inscribed on the body's surface. Here one must bear in mind that the practice applies not only to the intentional act but, beyond that, can be conceived of as an overarching structural principle. Pamela L. Caughie explains: "Passing is neither something one does (as in performing a role) nor something one is (a subject position we must account for) but a way of naming and conceptualizing an interpersonal, psychopolitical dynamics."[48] Moreover, Caughie stresses the arbitrary relation between intentional and non-intentional articulations of the Self and explains: "The slippage between the volitional and the performative subject makes passing inevitable whenever any I claims to speak for itself."[49] Each epistemological assertion of the "I," according to Caughie, is inevitably bound to the configuration of passing, since the slippage between varying subject positions makes a clear establishment of the Self impossible. Accordingly, there can be no decision between displaying the real or the false, since passing perforates the distinction of both realms. As a structural dynamic, passing limits the option of a positioning and thus refers back to the processual interminability of cultural designation practices.

The fact that the effect of such a cultural hybridity for those affected is no redemptive liberation, but means being painfully prejudiced in an indelible antagonism, is not least of all connected to the social conditions of the reality surrounding it. The heteronomy inherent in identity is constituted as a polymorphous spectrum of various components; nevertheless, not every element has the same validity. The society in which Sarah Jane must move and assert herself is not a space free of ideology where the game of polysemy could freely unfold. Rather, it is characterized by a binarily encoded mechanism of classification whose hierarchical structure excludes an arbitrary practice of

47 Daniel Bernardi, "Introduction: Race and the Hollywood Style," in *Classic Hollywood, Classic Whiteness*, ed. Daniel Bernardi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2001), xxii.

48 Pamela L. Caughie, "Let It Pass: Changing the Subject, Once Again," *PMLA* 112 no. 1 (1997), 28.

49 Ibid.

designation from the outset. Mary Ann Doane underlines: "Without the extreme polarization and hierarchization of whiteness in relation to blackness, passing would have no affective valence."[50]

Sarah Jane's preference of whiteness over blackness is correspondingly oriented toward the socially dominant system of values that endows both positions with different privileges and thereby translates it into a ranking order. With her aspirations of upward social mobility, Sarah Jane's masquerade at first seems to resemble more a form of assimilatory opportunism than a radical subversion. And even so, her ability to move between two identificatory poles can be assessed as an impulse for an eruption that reaches even further. Marina Heung analyzes Sarah Jane's behavior as a point of condensation in the film, through which suppressed mechanisms of power can be activated and washed up onto the surface: "As a catalytic force in the film, Sarah Jane dismantles the film's basic strategy of displacement and obfuscation by opening up the site where the issues of social hegemony converge."[51] In fact, Sarah Jane can be interpreted as the textual focus of the film – in any case, it should be added that this position can be extended not only to a specific form of social critique but also to the film's formal-aesthetic rhetoric. The imbalance that develops from passing thus acts not merely as an allusion to an individual identificatory dilemma but additionally implies a commentary on a specific film style that features a similarly irritating ambivalence. Sarah Jane's disruptive potential is reflected in Douglas Sirk's fragmented filmic style that constructs a complex grid of relationships and meaning. For although the narrative contains a conventional conflict in terms of classical melodrama, one that erupts in highly emotionally charged family situations, the reference to the outside world is present throughout as a moment of irritation and interruption. By exposing the artificial, Douglas Sirk scratches at a surface which increasingly proves to be a permeable layer. The effect of such a procedure manifests itself in a tension emanating from the pulling force in opposite directions: an aesthetic ambivalence arises, which is superimposed on the diegesis as a bipolar mesh of text and subtext. Against the apparent affirmation of a binarily classified social system, there is a corresponding resistance that unfolds on the level of the mise-en-scène as a stylistic subversion. This narrative-formal complexity has a strong influence on the film's reception, as Elisabeth Bronfen highlights:

50 Doane, *Femmes Fatales*, 241.

51 Heung, "What's the Matter with Sarah Jane," 318.

> "Sierck [sic] offers his audience a fantasy scenario that appears to open up the possibility of escaping the unbearable contradictions of one's own circumstances, but precisely in this pure world of illusion, the viewers find themselves suddenly and relentlessly confronted with the easily recognizable, real, and familiar bottlenecks of their psychological and social reality."[52]

Such a tug-of-war between two opposed poles leaves all aspirations of a well-balanced harmony standing on shaky ground. And even this form of aesthetic passing does not result in the option of being able to decide on one or the other; rather, it involves enduring the conflict of two positions and translating that conflict into a productive dialogue. Elisabeth Bronfen speaks of "an uncanny threshold between two possibilities of reception[53] and explains:

> "We are called on to both unconditionally identify with its exaggerated passions and simultaneously, in our right minds, to analytically enjoy the geometry of contradictions that Sierck plays out. For him, therefore, subversion does not lie in designing a world of uncontradictory actions free of all ambivalences but in the unsettling ambiguity of his cinematic process."[54]

Douglas Sirk's staging techniques construct a filmic structure in which the world of pure illusion no longer functions: he creates a fantasy with points of fracture. The resulting hybrid effect can be seen in the simultaneity of an apparently uncritical appropriation of bourgeois ideology, which is consistent with satisfying an audience's sentimental expectations, and the film-rhetorical presentation of contradictions that cannot be translated into any established grid of interpretation. The *mulatta*'s dilemma finds its aesthetic equivalent in precisely this context: every attempt to devote oneself to an uncontradictory promise of identity must fail, since the resistant trace of the one in the other can neither be denied nor repressed. Accordingly, the gleam of the surface of Imitation of Life itself is not able to blind the viewer –ambivalence always comes up again.

Even in the closing sequence, the confusions and disruptions that have unfolded both thematically and formally throughout Imitation of Life cannot yield a closed *finis*. Instead, the concentration and condensation of the closing sequence show how far the film is from a reconciliatory ending. Laura Mulvey

52 Bronfen, *Heimweh*, 282.
53 Ibid., 283.
54 Ibid.

designates this potential for disruption as a particular aesthetic achievement of melodrama and explains: "The strength of the melodramatic form lies in the amount of dust the story raises along the road, a cloud of over-determined irreconcilables which put up a resistance to being neatly settled in the last five minutes."[55] In the same way, each of the film's conflicts bursts forth in Douglas Sirk's fulminating final chord. Annie's funeral provides the occasion to ultimately depict all of the film's important characters together. It presents the climax of an identificatory crisis as a melodramatic exaltation: Annie's death is the price for Sarah Jane's misguided ambitions.

The sequence begins with a noticeably distorted shot that presents a slanted low angle shot of a church window from its interior. Offscreen, the voice of a female choir member can be heard intoning the spiritual "Trouble of the World." Another slanted shot shows the sanctuary with the preacher, a soloist, as well as the choir located behind them in a long shot. Shortly after, one shot presents the casket covered with white flowers, which, from its position in the middle of the frame, appears oversized. Alternating shots of the female singer and the mourners follow, before the film replaces the interior setting with an exterior setting in a cross-fade. After Annie's casket is transferred in the hearse, a high angle shot shows the street in front of the church lined with numerous members of the congregation. In the middle of the crowd, Sarah Jane suddenly becomes visible and attempts to make her way through to the hearse. In a crane shot, the camera followers her across the street and then shows her breakdown at her mother's casket. The film's final shot belongs to Annie: a high angle shot shows the hearse leaving the picture as well as the crowd of mourners who follow behind it reverently.

Many scholars argue that Douglas Sirk's presentation of the black Baptist congregation at the end of the film opens up a previously suppressed space of negotiation and, in the process, confronts the white world of glamour with its own insubstantiality. Marina Heung interprets the confrontation of interior and exterior space as a filmic strategy of authenticity and explains:

> "In a film in which most of the scenes take place indoors, the opening out of the final scene into the outdoors, combined with the use of objective extreme long shots and panoramic high camera angles, contributes to its pseudo-documentary effect. […] The progression of Annie's cortège through an unconfined exterior terrain provides a retrospective commentary on the

55 Laura Mulvey, "Notes on Sirk and Melodrama," *Movie* 25 (1975), 54.

> 'unreal' and confined existence of the other characters while suggesting Annie's own liberation into a more authentic space."[56]

Richard Dyer also analyzes the closing sequence in relation to a preference of the real over the false and emphasizes the authentic character of the chosen setting: "The final funeral set-piece seems to affirm […] the cultural authenticity of blacks. Above all, the use of Mahalia Jackson (who really is Mahalia Jackson, not someone imitating her) suggests a core of real feeling in black religion."[57] However, the interpretation of a dichotomous opposition of white artificiality and black authenticity is not very convincing – because Annie's and Lora's performances exhibit more commonalities than differences. Marianne Conroy states:

> "It is important to note, however, that the cultural space represented in the funeral scene is not categorially different from the theatrical milieu that Lora inhabits. Rather than constructing the funeral as an example of 'authentic' black folk culture set in opposition to the 'imitation' white world of Broadway theater, Sirk's mise-en-scène instead emphasizes the performance tropes that span both cultural styles: costume, spectacle, choral participation, solo star turns, and intense audience engagement."[58]

In actuality, Annie's funeral turns out to be the culmination of the theme of imitation present throughout the entire film: as a grandiose public spectacle, it seems in no way to be inferior to Lora's stage and film performances. On the contrary, a significant re-assignment of roles occurs, which demotes Lora to the rank of spectator while Annie is placed in the middle of the action. For one, this manifests in the visual shift of dominance at the beginning of the sequence, which combines Lora's displacement to the edge of the frame with the centralization of the casket in the middle of the frame. Moreover, the prudence with which Annie prepares her last great performance indicates a dramaturgical meticulousness that itself appears to surpass Lora's vanity: she has carefully selected numerous details of the ceremony – such as the four white horses in front of the hearse and the musical accompaniment – and stipulated them in her will.

In carrying out her last wishes, Annie comes to the fore as a figure whose acting talents are shifted from the periphery to the center, thus permanently

56 Heung, "What's the Matter with Sarah Jane," 322-323.
57 Dyer, "Four Films of Lana Turner," 205.
58 Conroy, "No Sin in Lookin' Prosperous," 134.

challenging Lora's performative art. For Tag Gallagher, the winner of the competition is clearly identifiable: "Annie, it is clear, 'performs' her character and is a much better actress than vapid Lora. […] Annie's kindness draws its strength from her perpetual humiliation, in the Stepin Fetchit tradition of self-parody – of being not merely a victim of racism but a player in a race-based symbiosis."[59] Gallagher's apt analysis locates Annie's most convincing performances in her inconspicuous fulfillment of the contract of a master-slave-relationship but still disregards the peculiar meaning of her final appearance that adds an important component to her spectrum of performance. The ostentatiously presented opulence, the specifically arranged and staged pageantry at the end of Annie's life, impressively demonstrates how easy it is to switch from one typecast role to the next. Annie's continuously affirmed position of a modest, reserved subordinate is significantly fractured by her final presence. The film shifts the border lines that it itself has drawn and once more uses the dynamic that makes up its center of gravity: the movement of passing. In doing so, it underscores Annie's slippage from subordination into dominance by the choice of setting, which evokes a proximity to other forms of passing. Laura Berlant, in this respect, refers to "black churches and lodges that specialize in, among other things, ritualizing the passing of an individual person from a world where pain is a collective burden."[60]

Still, the carefully indicated declaration of salvation from sorrow and suffering proves itself to be untenable. Directly after Mahalia Jackson's gospel verses, which promise "No more weepin' and wailin'", Sarah Jane's tearful breakdown shows the exact opposite. More than this: a further spectacular public performance takes place, a performance that pointedly disrupts Annie's calculated ceremony. The hysterical vocabulary of gesticulations of shouting and crying, which Sarah Jane uses to make her inner turmoil known, is more than a melodramatic consolidation of a suffering victim. Rather, her exaggerated form of anguished wailing attests to a double eruption: the resistance against a quiet acceptance of the incomprehensible on the one hand and the transference of the experience of loss onto her own body on the other hand. Thus, her pain becomes the experience of a boundary that not only refers to the body, but also to the subject, as the site of limitation. This type of limitation is nothing other than the painful contingency of a fantasized free choice

59 Tag Gallagher, "White Melodrama," *Film Comment* 34, no. 6 (1998), 19.
60 Berlant, „National Brands/National Body," 194.

of identity. The utopia of physical indeterminability confronts its own restrictive limitation at the point where the gap between racial designation and visual norms is closed and society demands visible proof of identity. Lauren Berlant emphasizes: "For light-skinned African-American women, then, the choice of public identity comes to be between two bodies of pain, not two possible modes of relief from indeterminacy."[61]

The interplay of identity-constructing determinants especially comes to the fore in Douglas Sirk's dramaturgy of color, whose system of signification strikingly visualizes the dialogue between the various identificatory poles. Many scholars have emphasized Douglas Sirk's sensibility to color in his films. Frieda Grafe states:

> "He situates his colors in relation to painting and in full awareness of the difference between American and European culture; he knows that in cinema, he is working with colors from lighting and not from paint; he knows the difference between environmental color and local color in cinema; he knows that affective colors in cinema are not exhausted in their symbolic meaning but, through movement, are decisively modified in their functions."[62]

This color consciousness, as explained by Grafe, has often been analyzed in in the context of the characteristic melodramatic form of excessive exaggeration. According to this approach, colors can accentuate the extremely polarized emotional world of the protagonists in a particularly striking way. This method of color-based emotionalization is also used in IMITATION OF LIFE, for example in the staging of the signal color red during the episode of passing in Sarah Jane's school. This makes the final sequence all the more irritating, in which the glaring chromaticism that had previously been present seems to have completely disappeared. Michael Stern mentions "the ironic undercurrent that the dominant funeral black into which all other colors have fed at the end of the film is Annie's color and represents not merely the black of mourning but the racial issue as well."[63] Even when one can fundamentally agree with this observation concerning the visual emphasis of the racial subject matter in the final sequence, Stern's approach remains imprecise. Douglas Sirk does not end the film with a generic color collapse that transforms the spectral into an all-encompassing black. Just as little as one can interpret

61 Ibid., 201.
62 Frieda Grafe, *Filmfarben* (Berlin: Brinkmann & Boose, 2002), 77.
63 Stern, „*Imitation of Life*", 286.

the presentation of the black Baptist congregation as an expression of a semi-documentary approach, the mourners' black clothes cannot be understood as a definitively African-American perspectivation. Rather, what becomes clear is the fact that Douglas Sirk's color-driven staging does not transform the final images into a monochromatic darkness but into a dual spectrum of black and white. This dimorphic form of mutual reference is present in nearly every shot in the sequence: such as in the choir soloist's robes, complete with a white collar; in the white candle placed in front of a dark window opening; in Lora's clothing, which combines a black outfit and black plumed hat with white gloves, a white pearl necklace, white earrings, and a white brooch; in a shot that shows the mourners in front of a white wall covered in a black shadow; in the limousine, whose black exterior contrasts with its exterior's light-colored upholstery, and finally in the hearse, whose black finish is interspersed with white decorations and drawn by four white horses wearing black blinders and bridles. Finally, Annie, the character conceived of by the film as the ground zero of blackness, conceals herself in a white representation in the end: she appears in a white casket covered in a sea of white flowers. Sarah Jane, on the other hand, who has vehemently tried to fight for and defend her white identity, appears to be completely shrouded in an exterior darkness that is accentuated by her black coat, her black shoes, and her black hat.

Sarah Jane's desperate confession of love for her mother is similarly ambivalent: It unfolds as a futile cry of anguish, as a sorrowful confession that Sirk presents in a close-up as a dimorphic image. In the right half of the picture, Sarah Jane's face can be seen covered by her black hair, while the left side is almost completely filled by the casket's white flowers. This clear separation, however, becomes permeable when Sarah Jane physically clasps the casket, nestles up closely against it, and tries to fully envelop it in her arms: one seems to bleed into the other, a stratification that presents the terrains of blackness and whiteness not as distinct realms but as an interwoven mesh. The color-dramaturgical mechanism that had been introduced as a black-and-white tile pattern in the opening sequence escalates to an all-encompassing symbolism in the final sequence: a system of signification that visualizes the indeterminacy of two identificatory poles by reflecting it in color.

In this sense, Sirk's dramaturgy of color can be understood as a strategy that takes on narrative functions but also refers to meanings that lie beyond the immediately identifiable text. Sirk's colors seem to constantly oscillate between the interior and the exterior, between internal and external reference. Silke Egner explains: "Two opposing movements confront each other here: the

Figure 15: The Casket

interruption of the narrative and its simultaneous binding; color autonomy and color meaning in one movement."[64] It is this very ambivalence of concretization and abstraction that makes Sirk's color dramaturgy a predestined level of reflection for the mechanism of racial identification. The resulting complex pattern between the reference to Self and Other is characterized by an instability that unfurls as the disruptive potential for conflict in the final sequence. Martin Deppner declares: "Both poles – dissociation and orientation toward action – taken together and being intertwined, do not bring Sirk's films to a reconciliatory end in terms of aesthetics."[65]

Douglas Sirk's main stylistic device is the appropriation of a radical ambiguity that attempts to break up the supposedly closed universe of Hollywood glamour with different mechanisms of disruption. This includes a type of aesthetic self-referentiality, which, in addition to the contouring produced by the staging of color, is stressed in the final sequence by a specific form of visual staging. Sirk presents this approach in an oddly unmotivated shot that renders the funeral procession through the partially fogged up pane of a shop window: a reflection through a reflection. Even more: in addition to the medium's own blurred view of the events, the glass pane contains another self-

64 Silke Egner, *Bilder der Farbe* (Weimar: VDG, 2003), 43.

65 Martin Roman Deppner, "Zur Farbdramaturgie Douglas Sirks: Kunstrezeption im Spielfilm zwischen Farbautonomie und Farbbedeutung." In *Who's afraid of: Zum Stand der Farbforschung*, eds. Anne Hoormann and Karl Schawelka (Weimar: Universitätsverlag Weimar, 1998), 323.

referential nod that reinforces the theme of passing: a sign that reads "Costume Rentals." All the types of disguise, costuming, and masquerade that the film thematically presents during its runtime ultimately point back to the film itself. It is this form of aesthetic condensation and concentration that leads to the impression that the closing sequence celebrates itself as a cinematic moment rather than conveying the saccharine sentimentality of a melodramatic family story. Fred Camper underlines:

> "The funeral procession of *Imitation of Life* is one of the most transcendently beautiful sequences of any film. Its despair is transcended by the very beauty of the surfaces which the sequence itself celebrates. While certain kinds of real feelings are excluded, the flowers, the shots of the procession through frosted glass, the final high shot, have the beauty of a kind of triumph – the triumph of surfaces over reality, but just as well, the triumph of art over life. If Sirk's films are about their own style, then this sequence is ultimately celebrating its own beauty."[66]

It becomes apparent that Sirk's self-reflective approach stresses the film's formal-aesthetic means as self-sufficient instances of expression– in a form that causes the preceding and the subsequent to becoming increasingly indistinguishable. The relationship between truth and falsehood that Imitation of Life depicts is absorbed into the aesthetic. The artificiality of forms and figures is constantly emphasized, never concealed. The film itself is not a representation of life but the invention of life. In this respect, the structure of original and imitation can only ever be unstable, since every position inverts into its opposite, flips itself and the opposite position in the process, and leads to a proliferation of dialogically operating reflections. Whoever searches for the authentic will only find the artificial.

As difficult as it is to translate the *mulatta*'s racial hybridity into a clearly definable classification of black or white, Sirk's aesthetic grid of devotion to illusion and self-referential resistance seems to be just as inextricable. This is why the multidimensional diversity of the Sirkian system of reference can hardly be reduced to a definitive statement, as Martin Deppner remarks: "The adherence to aesthetic autonomy in the play of patterns and signs is ultimately opposed to the understanding of an artwork as a text that can be interpreted

66 Fred Camper, "The Films of Douglas Sirk," in *Imitation of Life*, ed. Lucy Fischer (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1991), 265.

without remainders. Sirk's films imagine things beyond their own constructions."[67] The film's final images are similarly open-ended: neither the pseudo-familial joining of the protagonists, nor the last shot's final fadeout, nor the overlay of "The End" presented in cursive script are capable of smoothing out the irritations, rifts, and fractures that arise in the film. The supposed promise of a unifying closure must also give way to the unsettling irritation of an unresolvable antagonism. Jackie Byars confirms: "The machinery of closure is there, but it is more than vaguely dissatisfying; it generates more questions than it answers."[68]

Douglas Sirk's film Imitation of Life builds a structural network whose system of meaning catalyzes the productive exchange between various surface systems. The problem of racial representation is obvious in the fact that a matrix constructed in this way is just as permeable as a racist society's ideologically determined understanding of the subject: as a double existence of identificatory and aesthetic visualization that is capable of removing itself from every assurance of clarity.

67 Deppner, "Farbdramaturgie", 324.

68 Jackie Byars, *All That Hollywood Allows: Re-reading Gender in 1950s Melodrama*. (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1991), 258.