Foreword

Lorenz Engell

We typically like to present new scholarship in order to emphasize that the state of research on a particular topic or object of study is sparse or outdated or that the methodology isn't satisfactory. This, of course, also applies to Lisa Gotto's major study that has now been made available in English, *Passing and Posing between Black and White: Calibrating the Color Line in U.S. Cinema*. But it doesn't capture the core character or the meaning of this work. Because at its core, it concerns the fact that the foundations of our current notions in film studies and cultural theory must be laid even deeper. There is already a plethora of studies on racism in film, transgressions of racial boundaries, and postcolonialism. But, at least for film studies, it is innovative for a study to raise not only thematic or moral but also and above all structural and epistemological questions about such a subject. This is exactly what concerns us here.

The focus of this book is not simply a study of the encoding and articulation of racial boundaries in film, specifically between black and white. Rather, these boundaries are examined in instances in which they are challenged by figures who obscure them. These figures, in the first instance, are understood as intradiegetic characters in the sense of dramatis personae – such as it pertains to, for example, the figure of the mulatto in Hollywood film – as well as, and this is the most notable, unusual, as aesthetic figures of the film's diegesis itself and in particular of cinematographic imaging – such as it applies to editing processes and camera work. Furthermore, such figures also extend to sociological and epistemological figurations, such as power and knowledge relations. Finally, this also always concerns figures of concept, perception, and thought.

The dissolution of boundaries thus appears not as a postmodernist theorem, but as a process and practice that has always been effective in U.S. American filmmaking. However, crucial to the heft of this study is the fact

that "blurring of boundaries" and "crossing borders" do not simply mean ending up in a desirable and politically correct state. Lisa Gotto is not interested in making a grand utopian gesture, like proclaiming an all-embracing nomadism, but rather in what she calls the "costs of blurring boundaries," in the pain, the defeat, the downfall that is levied as a price for crossing borders at the margins of systems based on difference, a price that again and again has to be paid by only a few. The fact that discrimination and forms of violence primarily dominate in the context of racial difference does not mean that the attempts at abolishing them create fewer burdens and distribute them more equitably. This position saves Gotto from an all-too-simple taking of sides and typically untenable binary view of things as "good" or "bad."

The films that are examined here bear eloquent witness to these complexities, to loss and pain, as well as to commixture and amalgamation. This begins with D.W. Griffith's Birth of a Nation (USA 1915). Rarely have syntactic and symbolic forms, aesthetic and ideological features been so densely overlapped and so tightly welded together than in this film. The renowned system of Griffithian editing and framing, which can be interpreted as a binary schema of exclusion, is played out candidly in Birth of a Nation as a system of racial difference and racist discrimination. In Griffith, the crossing of boundaries, as practiced by race mixing and borne by the figure of the mulatto, is literally exterminated, faded out in the end, made impossible as a constant threat to the basic binary schema of black and white. Insofar as Birth of a Nation obligatorily carries out the formatting of the Hollywood-type narrative film on a massive scale, it can be said – without, in any case, being the last word on it – that U.S. American narrative cinema is rooted in racial discrimination. Instead of deducing a moral devaluation from this, Gotto's study consistently questions the costs of symbolic order and the types of currency in which these are levied, and the costs of the empirical persons who are asked to pay them. This constitutes the political position that is at the basis of this work.

Gotto finds the antidote to Griffith in Oscar Micheaux's film The Symbol of the Unconquered (USA 1920). She situates this film first within black minority cinema, so-called "all black movies", which were made by all-black crews and marketed to black audiences. Micheaux also deals with a failing mixed existence beyond the schemata of black and white, and he also portrays the activities of the Ku Klux Klan, albeit from the perspective of black characters who are being persecuted. The confrontation ends also well, only with an inverted omen: the Klan is defeated. Micheaux even uses certain methods of narration, like cross-cutting and the "last-minute rescue," that are faithful

to the standard set by Griffith. Nevertheless, the inverse formula is not the only thing that separates the two films. Unlike Griffith, Micheaux doesn't address biology – that is, sexual union – as the decisive variable of transference between the races but economy, that is, the economic advancement of the black man. And, unlike Griffith, Micheaux employs diverse genre and narrative figurations whose subcomponents he combines. All of this takes place in an asymmetrical, shaky film style, a practice of incongruence that uses what is available – namely, the hegemonic system of forms à la Griffith – as well as appropriates it for its own purposes. As a result, something like a crossing of boundaries at the margins of the film's system of symbols becomes discernible in Micheaux's style.

In Douglas Sirk's Imitation of Life (USA 1959), Gotto sees quite a different approach from that of classical films. This film as well deals with the failure of a racial crossover. But this failure is captured in forms that no longer draw on an ostensibly natural or naturalizing essentialism that presupposes the black/white difference as one based on biology and endowed by nature. Sirk's language of forms no longer understands itself to be a mere reenactment of a fixed schema present in the social and historical world outside of itself. On the contrary, Sirk emphasizes the stylization and aestheticization of – and shows the artificiality and fabricated nature of – his world of forms and figures. Of particular note here are the elements of coloration and framing. Following the analysis presented here, in Sirk, film is not the imitation of life; it is also certainly not the inverse, that is, something that predetermines or acts as a model for life. In Sirk, when "passing" fails yet again, his stylization of this failure remains as a kind of aesthetic result. Once again, as previously seen in Griffith, what counts is that whatever the characters in the film suffer, the film itself gains as profit; with the major difference that, in the process, Sirk argues not logically and ontologically but aesthetically. Perhaps this is even hinting at a perspective that believes in reconciliation through aesthetics.

John Cassavetes' contemporaneous film Shadows (USA 1959), although having already been thoroughly interpreted by film theorists, is surprisingly rarely interpreted in the context of racial difference. Here, Gotto's study in fact fills a gap. In doing so, it sets up Cassavetes as a counterpoint to Sirk. It focuses neither on the inclusion of crossing racial boundaries in the film's world of forms, its pictorial stylization, nor on its failure and decline, but on the almost documentary exploration of the objects of racial differentiation, namely the body, their relations to each other, their possibilities and articulations.

The demands of coherency are so diminished that the obligatory foundations of narrative cinema collapse underfoot. The cinema of Cassavetes therefore attempts to return to a state prior to the conventions of Griffith's schematic representation.

The analysis is rounded out by looking at two films at the turn of the millennium. Spike Lee's BAMBOOZLED (USA 2000) introduces a new essential feature into the discussion of blurring racial boundaries, that is, the interrogation of the cultural-historical framework within which cinema is able to dig into a transformation of racial antagonism – and its transgression. In doing so, with the minstrel show, Lee brings to light a disturbing entanglement of symbolic order and physical violence. The formal basic elements of the minstrel show are not only deeply rooted in various developments of Western culture, but in a narrower, literal sense, they are even patterned piece-by-piece on the ritual of lynching. Thus, even here, there is a delayed reaction to the simple filmic racism of Griffith; just as the theme of the mask also points to the use of the mask in Cassavetes. The reference point of a racist culture, therefore, is death. Behind the mere differentiation constantly looms a mortal threat which those who are discriminated against can only accept and assimilate into death rituals such as masking and dancing. Consequently, Lee makes transgressing boundaries fail once again, however, he orchestrates this failure as a downfall in an explosion of violence that he simultaneously exposes as a cinematic staging pattern. The highlight of the film, however, lies not in the sheer explosion of violence but rather in how it reflects on movement. Repetition and recurrence of movement on the one hand, and its incessant running in the background on the other hand, are considerably exhibited by Lee and thereby accentuated as the two decisive characteristics of how cinema conceives of movement. A continual running time and its unending repeatability and reproductivity are superimposed like a second layer onto the narrative.

Robert Benton's film adaptation of Philip Roth's THE HUMAN STAIN (USA 2003) orbits around the topic of white and whiteness. Here is where Gotto's study most obviously departs from analyzing characters and subject matter. It ultimately turns decisively in a media-critical direction. Along with Richard Dyer, Gotto adheres to the unique connection between photographic media and brightness and whiteness; to white as the standard form of light and as the "neutral position" of lighting. She clearly shows that Benton's film strives for a type of grammar and aesthetic of filmic whiteness beyond all diegesis. This is, at the same time, the film's return to the basic qualities of light and visibility that make it possible in the first place. Nevertheless, this does

not amount to a writing off of photographic media as products essentially saturated with racism. The problem is of course not the photochemical light sensitivity of the material, rather, it arises first from the operation of clear-cut distinction (to paraphrase Karen Barad, it is our cuts that make our epistemic objects and, beyond that, ourselves), and second from the metaphorical ascriptions of epistemic and moral values to black and white, or even of ontological features like nothingness and allness.

Therefore, the costs of blurring boundaries, which Gotto addresses at the outset, seem to regress to the medium that levies them. The black/white contrast, to whose formation film has contributed so much, cannot simply be resolved or subjected to a clever deconstruction or a self-annulment. But by attempting to understand and analyze itself and its racist entanglements, film can in any case contribute to visualizing the costs and limits of blurring boundaries.

The six films discussed do not, however, simply make up a corpus of six different, complementary attempts at the articulation and formation of the problem of overcoming racial boundaries. Rather, they attest to the fact that the cinematic modeling of racial contrast, by means of its exceedance in the three historical sections that the study lays out, follows various self-conceptions of the medium of film. Thus, the first section from 1915 to 1920 concerns the self-assertion and implementation of film as a discursive system of symbols with a clear orientation toward narrative conventions. The development of a fixed canon of differentiation in the form of codified shot sizes, editing rhythms, and image details, is the prerequisite for the hegemony that film would exercise as a cultural form in its classical phase. Whatever does not fit in here must be excluded. On the contrary, the second section, the phase of film's modernization around 1960, concerns the differentiation between film's referentiality to itself and to things outside of itself. Modern film acknowledges that whatever it reflects is placed in relation to itself as a medium and reflected in this way. Thus, modern film does not simply depict situations – or the illusion of them – but all the while depicts its own relation to these situations. Following Jean-Louis Comolli, modern film can be seen as an observation not of reality but of reality-becoming-film. Finally, the film of the turn of the millennium, by that time itself having become a minoritary and sometimes precarious cultural practice, at least one among many others, negotiates its own development and fabrication as a cultural product; and, at the same time, together with its narratives and problems, it questions the epistemological, semiotic, and also technical presuppositions upon which it

rests itself. Specifically, this becomes clear in the examples analyzed via the basic category of movement in Lee – here, the close connection between the body mechanics of tap dancing and that of image transport in the film apparatus – and the basic category of light in Benton – here, in particular, in the composition of white as the color of light that in itself is not visible.

In this way, Gotto's path of investigation simultaneously and impressively illustrates the path from traditional film studies, which deals with concepts of character psychology, motif analysis, and forms of representation and style, to a conception in the direction of media studies, which reveals the very media concepts of film. However, this thread of argumentation does not just run parallel to the so-called "contentual" or "ideology-critical" that concerns itself with how racism is formatted in film. Both approaches are also not interwoven, as in a neat form-content debate, but they consistently prove themselves to be aspects of one and the same line of argument, which, again for that very reason, is one of media politics in the narrowest sense.

In any case, the following study throws the doors wide open to further considerations. It is not only furnished with an outstanding film studies encyclopedia and methodology, it has also crossed the line toward a film studies that articulates itself in terms of media theory, which reaches far beyond the typical, purely content-oriented discourse, in which the "portrayal of a theme in the film" is typically addressed. It has opened many a great chasm in its comprehensive cultural-historical investigations and its readings of the individual aspects of its subject, and it has found deep, racist foundations in seemingly innocent contexts. What begins as a question about the representation of the mulatto in film, in the end thoughtfully reflects on film – and even then not only on film but on writing and, from a broader perspective, on the shaping of the world in general – as a unity of its possibilities on the one hand and as a structure of the conditions that it imposes and to which it itself nevertheless remains subjected on the other hand. On these terms, Lisa Gotto has revealed racism in a unique, intelligent, and simultaneously disturbing way. Whether from here – and even if it is highly unlikely – a passage into the freedom of the possible, of a tabula rasa, or – to use an expression from Spencer Brown – of an "unmarked space" is conceivable, and what the price would be for such a thing, is something even she must leave open-ended at the moment.