Lisa Gotto

Passing and Posing between Black and White

Calibrating the Color Line in U.S. Cinema

[transcript] FilmStudies

https://doi.org/10.14361/9783839453377 - am 13.02.2026, 21:55:10. https://www.inlibra.com/de/agb - Open Access -

Lisa Gotto
Passing and Posing between Black and White

FilmStudies

https://doi.org/10.14361/9783839453377 - am 13.02.2026, 21:55:10. https://www.inlibra.com/de/agb - Open Access -

Lisa Gotto (Univ.-Prof. Dr. phil.) is Professor for Film Theory at the University of Vienna. Her research and teaching interests include film history, film theory, visual aesthetics, and digital media culture.

https://doi.org/10.14361/9783839453377 - am 13.02.2026, 21:55:10. https://www.inlibra.com/de/agb - Open Access -

Lisa Gotto

Passing and Posing between Black and White

Calibrating the Color Line in U.S. Cinema

[transcript]

https://doi.org/10.14361/9783839453377 - am 13.02.2026, 21:55:10. https://www.inlibra.com/de/agb - Open Access -

Originally published as: Lisa Gotto, *Traum und Trauma in Schwarz-Weiß. Ethnische Grenzgänge im amerikanischen Film*, Konstanz: UVK 2006.
Translated by Rudolph Saliba

Note on Translation: All translations from texts not originally English have been translated by Rudolph Saliba, unless otherwise noted.

The EOSC Future project is co-funded by the European Union Horizon Programme call INFRAEOSC-03-2020, Grant Agreement number 101017536

The free availability of the e-book edition of this publication was financed by the project EOSC Future.

Bibliographic information published by the Deutsche Nationalbibliothek
The Deutsche Nationalbibliothek lists this publication in the Deutsche Nationalbibliografie; detailed bibliographic data are available in the Internet at http://dnb.d-nb.de

This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 (BY) license, which means that the text may be remixed, transformed and built upon and be copied and redistributed in any medium or format even commercially, provided credit is given to the author. For details go to https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/
Creative Commons license terms for re-use do not apply to any content (such as graphs, figures, photos, excerpts, etc.) not original to the Open Access publication and further permission may be required from the rights holder. The obligation to research and clear permission lies solely with the party re-using the material.

First published in 2021 by transcript Verlag, Bielefeld
© Lisa Gotto

Cover layout: Kordula Röckenhaus, Bielefeld
Cover illustration: *Shadows* (John Cassevetes, USA 1959), © Faces Distribution Corp., 5 Erin Place, Hazlet, New Jersey 07730, USA
Printed by Majuskel Medienproduktion GmbH, Wetzlar
Print-ISBN 978-3-8376-5337-3
PDF-ISBN 978-3-8394-5337-7
https://doi.org/10.14361/9783839453377
ISSN of series: 2702-9247
eISSN of series: 2703-0466

Printed on permanent acid-free text paper.

https://doi.org/10.14361/9783839453377 - am 13.02.2026, 21:55:10. https://www.inlibra.com/de/agb - Open Access -

Contents

https://doi.org/10.14361/9783839453377 - am 13.02.2026, 21:55:10. https://www.inlibra.com/de/agb - Open Access -

IV. Appendix

https://doi.org/10.14361/9783839453377 - am 13.02.2026, 21:55:10. https://www.inlibra.com/de/agb - Open Access -

Acknowledgements

This book was originally published in German as *Traum und Trauma in Schwarz-Weiß. Ethnische Grenzgänge im amerikanischen Film* (Konstanz: UVK, 2006). It has been slightly shortened and revised for the English edition.

My special gratitude goes to Rudy Saliba for his diligent and sensitive translation and for being such a smart and witty interlocutor all along the way. Many thanks also to Tony Lytle and Al Ruban of Faces Distribution Corp. for providing the cover illustration, Jan-Hendrik Müller for his detective instinct on all matters of image, Florian Schwarz for his keen eye while setting up the layout, and Sarah Sander for her careful proofreading.

https://doi.org/10.14361/9783839453377 - am 13.02.2026, 21:55:10. https://www.inlibra.com/de/agb - Open Access -

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

https://doi.org/10.14361/9783839453377 - am 13.02.2026, 21:55:10. https://www.inlibra.com/de/agb - Open Access -

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

https://doi.org/10.14361/9783839453377 - am 13.02.2026, 21:55:10. https://www.inlibra.com/de/agb - Open Access -

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.

https://doi.org/10.14361/9783839453377 - am 13.02.2026, 21:55:10. https://www.inlibra.com/de/agb - Open Access -

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

https://doi.org/10.14361/9783839453377 - am 13.02.2026, 21:55:10. https://www.inlibra.com/de/agb - Open Access -

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

https://doi.org/10.14361/9783839453377 - am 13.02.2026, 21:55:10. https://www.inlibra.com/de/agb - Open Access -

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.

https://doi.org/10.14361/9783839453377 - am 13.02.2026, 21:55:10. https://www.inlibra.com/de/agb - Open Access -

Introduction

In light of migrations within a globalized world, border crossings by now seem to have become a widespread, little noticed, even self-evident phenomenon. The great promise connected to the prospect of a world without borders remains nevertheless questionable when, beyond the unlimited, forms of irritation and a lack of orientation make their presence known. The utopian proclamation of having overcome barriers reaches its limit where it is confronted with the costs of blurring boundaries. Where boundaries are crossed, where the undermining of difference as a vague mixing ratio comes to light, an uncertainty takes hold whose threatening nature results from, if nothing else, the undermining of meaningful distinctions. This unsettling potential becomes evident in a constellation that brings the relationship between the body and the forms of institutional power to the forefront – in a mixture that makes the connection of the physical to social power relations as well as their representation as identity guidelines apparent. In a context in which race is understood as a traditional measure of demarcation, the transgression of established boundaries plays a decisive role – and it does this all the more, the clearer the apparently insurmountable spheres are divorced from each other. This is particularly true for the opposition of black and white; for a binary pattern whose particular significance results from its function as a symbolic grid and cultural value system, but which also has far-reaching implications for the construction and interpretation of racial identity.

In engaging with the question of racial boundaries and their transgression, this study focuses on the dichotomy of black and white in the U.S. American context – on the one hand, because it can be seen as paradigmatic from a sociocultural perspective and, on the other hand, because it has produced particularly sharp confrontations and attempts at demarcation. The use of the terms "black" and "white" has substantial consequences for the construction

https://doi.org/10.14361/9783839453377 - am 13.02.2026, 21:55:10. https://www.inlibra.com/de/agb - Open Access -

of racial identities. Here, one should emphasize the concept's binary opposition, which, on the one hand, functions as a point of reference and, on the other hand, can also be exploited as a form of discipline within a racist social order. The desire for differentiation remains a foundational need in the search for meaning, just as the necessity for distinction constitutes an indispensable requirement for conceptual thought. From a societal point of view, it is nevertheless important to note that the marking of the Other also often serves to defame the Other – and that the more the possibility of distinction appears to be threatened, all the more strongly this contouring is asserted.

A figure that makes this connection particularly obvious is the *tragic mulatto*. This refers to the depiction of a biracial character that draws on a long tradition in American cultural history. The term "mulatto" has its origin in the animal world: it developed as a derivation of "mule," that is, a cross between a horse and a donkey. The derivation from zoology makes it obvious that the term is assigned pejoratively but, at the same time, it also points to the problem of making a mixing ratio conceptually comprehensible. Already here, one can sense a telling perplexity that results from the problematic identity of the "half-breed" because it is not clearly definable. The etymology of the word "mulatto" brings out the mixing ratio inherent in the term but, at the same time, also illustrates its constructed character, for the term has never been used as a designation of identity that sees the concepts of black and white as equal in value. Far more common, rather, was the practice of viewing the "mulatto" as a member of the black race, in other words, to integrate him into that same binary schema that he actually transcends. Werner Sollors notes that this approach stood in the way of forming a separate category of 'mixed': "What makes the situation even more complicated is the fact that, given the way in which 'mulatto identity' has often been considered as a (not representative) part of 'black identity', mixed-race self-images have in many cases been 'themed away.'"[1]

1 Werner Sollors, *Neither Black Nor White: Thematic Explorations of Interracial Literature* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 232. Remarkably, this practice has remained until today, as the title of Donald Bogle's classic study shows: *Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies, and Bucks. An Interpretative History of Blacks in American Film* (New York: Continuum, 1997 [1973]). Strikingly, Bogle includes the hybrid "mulatto" in the history of the representation of blackness as a matter of course without commenting on this problematic decision. It is likely that Bogle adopted a characterization of black stereotypes that had been undertaken much earlier, namely Sterling Allen Brown's *The Negro in American Fiction* and *Negro Poetry and Drama* (New York: Atheneum, 1978 [1937]). Al-

https://doi.org/10.14361/9783839453377 - am 13.02.2026, 21:55:10. https://www.inlibra.com/de/agb - Open Access -

In relation to the characterization of biracial identities, this lack of awareness can also be traced back to a social consensus that decisively rejected the introduction of a third category beyond the two poles of black and white. Joel Williamson, in his study *New People: Miscegenation and Mulattoes in the United States*, points to the fact that American census forms constantly required a choice between the options "black" and "white" as racial categories, and that this practice was hardly modified over long stretches of history.[2] The title of Williamson's study mentions the crucial component for the mixing ratio of the two races: the phenomenon of "miscegenation." The term derives etymologically from the Latin verb "miscere" as a term for mixing but, in its contextual usage, first and foremost means race mixing through sex. The fear of precisely this form of border crossing can be characterized as the most stable component of racist discourse, so that the effect or the embodiment of that undesired process, namely the "mulatto", became the extreme of racial hatred. The phobia of miscegenation can be traced back to the fear of diffuse intermixture, that is, to a fear that once again clearly demonstrates the conception of two clearly separated areas that are regarded as pure. Richard Dyer emphasizes: "If races are conceptualised as pure (with concomitant qualities of character, including to hold sway over other races), then miscegenation threatens that purity."[3] For Benedict Anderson, the pathological fear of contaminative race mixing illustrates racism's constitutive characteristic as well as its definitive criterion of distinction: "[N]ationalism thinks in terms of historical destinies, while racism dreams of eternal contaminations."[4]

The term "miscegenation" is imbued with a derogatory bias similar to that of the term "mulatto." In their connection to racist forms of rhetoric, both terms point to a conception of identity that is aware of difference and informed by hierarchy. Many critics have pointed to the fact that the use of such loaded terms is problematic, since it implies an acceptance of racist premises. Lola Young, for example, argues: "All language related to the conjunction of sexual and racial difference is problematic: miscegenation, mulatto, half-caste, mixed race, interracial and so on all carry with them the

though Bogle does not mention Brown, his alignment with Brown's model of dividing the representation of black characters into six basic types is quite clear.

2 See Joel Williamson, *New People: Miscegenation and Mulattoes in the United States* (New York: Free Press, 1980).

3 Richard Dyer, *White* (London, New York: Routledge, 1997), 25.

4 Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, Revised Edition (New York: Verso, 2006), 149.

https://doi.org/10.14361/9783839453377 - am 13.02.2026, 21:55:10. https://www.inlibra.com/de/agb - Open Access -

stigma of racist discourses, suggesting as they do an acceptance of the precepts of separate, biologically determined racial group."[5] The question of what possibilities there are to escape the pejorative connotations of a vocabulary shaped by racism has been answered in several different ways. While some scholars suggest that we should not use the terms themselves at all and instead revert to auxiliary constructions, others emphasize the subversive potential of an oppositional strategy that could confront the originally degrading intention with its own inversion. It remains to be said that the use of a term like "mulatto" can in no way claim a transhistorical validity, for it is dependent on the specific connection to each respective differing contextual condition, on different situational frameworks and loci of articulation. This basic premise also underlies the use of historically loaded terms in this study. Behind this is the view that the use of historically pejorative terms can be justified with clear reference to their conceptual context, which is why their mention will not be avoided. Without doubt, words and concepts can participate in a history of discrimination; without doubt, too, every moment of their use suggests that we are still caught up in supposedly past ideological systems. However, it is precisely the examination of those ideological solidifications that promises an approach enabling us to consider the "mulatto" as the basis of a publicized fiction. In other words: the term "mulatto" says little about the human subject behind it but makes way for numerous inferences about the cultural reflexes that invent and invoke the term. The attempt to designate a complex mixing ratio can thus be considered, beyond the original intent, as its own form of distortion.

As an aesthetic motif, the mulatto topic found its way into American literature in the nineteenth century. In addition to individual minor characters in the anti-slavery literature of the early nineteenth century, James Fenimore Cooper's *The Last of the Mohicans* (1826) is considered the first major treatment. However, a wide dissemination of the mulatto motif occurred only in the transition to the twentieth century, in which a shift in perspective can be observed. While the focus was initially on the depiction of interracial relationships as a reminiscence of the motif of forbidden love, the interest now shifted to their offspring. Central to the staging of the *tragic mulatto* as a literary figure is the thematization of the interracial psyche, whose inner turmoil is staged as a painful burden and an unresolvable dilemma – in any case, nowhere is there

5 Lola Young, *Fear of the Dark: 'Race', Gender and Sexuality in the Cinema* (New York: Routledge, 1996), 87.

https://doi.org/10.14361/9783839453377 - am 13.02.2026, 21:55:10. https://www.inlibra.com/de/agb - Open Access -

a discussion of a liberating experience of blurring boundaries. The most important works of this phase, which reaches into the 1930s, are: Charles W. Chesnutt, *The House Behind the Cedars* (1900), James Weldon Johnson, *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* (1912), both of Nella Larsen's novels, *Quicksand* (1928) and *Passing* (1929), as well as Jessie Fauset, *Plum Bun: A Novel Without a Moral* (1929). One of the central issues in the literary tradition of the *tragic mulatto* is the topic of rival bloodlines. This nuance can be traced back to a regulation enforced during slavery: the so-called "one-drop rule." The rule states that according to law, every American with a single drop of "black blood" is counted as a "colored" person. The topos of fusing bloodlines saliently shows a linkage to the postulate of the purity of races as well as to the fear of contamination. There is also an apparent tendency toward hierarchization connected to such purism, insomuch that the descendants of black ancestors were categorized according to the degree of their blood admixtures. This was manifested in newly constructed terms like "quadroon" or "octoroon", with which persons with a quarter or an eighth of "black blood", respectively, were designated. It should be emphasized that the demand for differentiation and demarcation can be related not only to the dominance of the white ruling class but that the stigmatization of the "half-breed" was also widespread within the black community. As an effect of the desire for a regulation that creates order, evaluative categorizations broke ground interracially as well as intraracially. This process was propelled by the taxonomic efforts within scientific research, as well as in its attempts to physiologize the difference and thereby to provide scientific evidence for it – whereby also here, one can observe an early focus on the study of blood as the primary criterion of race. Against this background, the unification of the irreconcilable represented a transgression of the black-white boundary that was to be opposed, repelled and averted. Where it could no longer be prevented, its effects were regarded as a highly problematic constellation.

The "mulatto" as the embodiment of that constellation, thus, stands for the conflict par excellence: the undifferentiated in differentiation. The literary staging of the mulatto character is markedly oriented in this direction, as the term *tragic mulatto* already implies. The attribute "tragic" clearly expresses the dilemma of the hybrid because the mulatto's situation is tragic in relation to the struggle between two antagonistic forces, as well as with regard to the inevitability of the threat and the insolubility of the painful conflict awaiting him. Werner Sollors emphasizes "that the literature of American slavery, in that respect much like Greek tragedy, dwells on the paradox, the

https://doi.org/10.14361/9783839453377 - am 13.02.2026, 21:55:10. https://www.inlibra.com/de/agb - Open Access -

oxymoron."[6] It is precisely this form of contradictoriness, as an agonizing fate and inescapable experience of limitation, that the figure of the *tragic mulatto* externalizes.

According to Hortense J. Spillers, the mulatto topic appears to have dissipated by the end of the nineteenth century:

> "In an inventory of American ideas, the thematic of the 'tragic mulatto/a' seems to disappear at the end of the nineteenth century. […] It is as though both the dominant and dominated national interests eventually abandoned the vocation of naming, perceiving, and explaining to themselves the identity of this peculiar new-world invention."[7]

Here Spillers is mistaken. The portrayal of mixed-race characters in no way comes to a halt at the end of the nineteenth century, on the contrary. On the one hand, it experienced continued use as a literary motif into the twentieth century (we may refer here to the aforementioned novels by Larsen and Fauset) and, on the other hand, it underwent a significant media-specific modulation. This is because the new medium of cinematography not only adopts the motif of the *tragic mulatto* well-known in and popularized by literature but shifts its aesthetic staging in another direction. What is crucial here – and this is where the concern of this study begins – is that the engagement with racial identity is closely bound to the visual processes of sight and recognition, as well as to its media conditions. Cinematography shifts the implications of racial themes from the discourse on blood, as an internalization, to the visualization of physiognomy, as an externalization. Just as well, the instability of racial classification is addressed in film as a threatening form of destabilization. Nonetheless, this fragility is established differently, that is, as the scrutiny of visual epistemology. The instability elicited by the shift in the boundaries of visibility manifests itself in a form of radicality that transcends the typical model of identity confusion. A hybrid whose race is not visually verifiable not only eludes categorization but also subverts the function of sight as a negotiation of power relations. In the context of a culture whose discursive tradition associates visual metaphors with man's access to knowledge and insight, what thwarts the discerning gaze must be negotiated as an imminent

6 Sollors, *Neither Black Nor White*, 244.

7 Hortense J. Spillers, "Notes on an alternative model – neither/nor," in *The Difference Within: Feminism and Critical Theory*, ed. Elizabeth A. Meese, 165-187 (Amsterdam: Benjamins, 1989), 165.

https://doi.org/10.14361/9783839453377 - am 13.02.2026, 21:55:10. https://www.inlibra.com/de/agb - Open Access -

threat. The visual terminology that is so consistently expressed in the Western cultural tradition, conveys the connotation of knowledge and insight as being connected to vision. The conception of identity can also be assigned to this grid of visually conditioned certification – and this is true particularly in relation to the question of racial identity. Claudia Benthien has pointed to the fact that "the differentiation of 'races' by means of skin color is a classification that radically relies on visuality and that establishes itself exclusively in the gaze."[8] The unsettling potential of the mulatto, which makes modes of perception that seem to have become self-evident appear doubtful, can be placed in precisely this frame of reference. This is due to the fact that what is actually unrepresentable, the in-between of a mixing ratio that replaces the logic of either/or reasoning with a vague both/and, is presented to the gaze on the surface of the mulatto's body – but simultaneously escapes knowing-willing seeing and unambiguous identifications.

Here, the desire of the detective gaze, the wish for unobstructed access to the world and to knowledge, comes up against a barrier that resists what is actually to be brought to light. In this sense, the vague mixing ratio of the biracial figure can be described as perception's blind spot, as a form of crossing racial boundaries that also simultaneously represents the infiltration of established concepts of knowledge. In the tradition of Western discourse relying on visuality, the process of identification is closely connected to the localizing of the visible. The resistance of the visually elusive object correspondingly stands for an unbalanced relationship between sight and power that not only challenges the stability of conventional categorizations but also of perception per se. Nevertheless, the mulatto always remains a figure that is being looked at, that is not capable of escaping the detecting gaze. With regard to the cinematic representation of the mulatto, this applies in several ways, because here is where various constellations of sight converge. It must be kept in mind that visual positions, such as the investigating gazes of intradiegetic film characters, the recording gaze of the camera, and the interpreting gaze of the film audience, do not exist as single categories that can be easily separated from one another but rather form a mélange in which each specific relation, context, or even the perspective on a context can develop. This, in turn, calls attention to the moments of crossover that arise in the act of seeing, when the relation between Self and Other is expressed. For this

8 Claudia Benthien, *Im Leibe wohnen: Literarische Imagologie und historische Anthropologie der Haut* (Berlin: Berlin Verlag, 1998), 169.

https://doi.org/10.14361/9783839453377 - am 13.02.2026, 21:55:10. https://www.inlibra.com/de/agb - Open Access -

reason, this study's point of departure does not primarily involve examining the history of the *tragic mulatto* motif but questions a crossing of boundaries that also translates to visual perception through and with racial transgression. The perception of the Other is thereby understood as a different way of perceiving: as a movement around an in-between, around an interval, around an unclassifiable nuance.

Since its inception, American cinema has grappled with the constellation of identity and difference in a certain way – that is, by reflecting on racial concepts that not only concern visual representation of the Other but also an interrogation of its own media conditions. The fact that American film concerns itself so extensively with the unbalanced relation between black and white is neither coincidental nor trivial to state – it has much more to do with negating boundaries that pertain to the medium itself. That the engagement with identity and difference in American cinema was closely tied to the question of race from its start is, for example, evident in the titles of Thomas Alva Edison's early short films such as Negro Dancers (USA 1895) or Dancing Darkey Boy (USA 1897). In subsequent years, the mulatto motif became a preferred element of staging and a popular subject, for example in In Slavery Days (Otis Turner, USA 1913) and The Octoroon (Sidney Olcott, USA 1913). In many respects, the ultimately groundbreaking success was that of David Wark Griffith's film The Birth of a Nation (USA 1915), which presents the problem of crossing boundaries as an essentially American phenomenon and clearly connects this constellation to racial difference. The question of the affinity between cinematic innovation and racial representation that emerges in Griffith's oeuvre marks the beginning of this study. Along with it, the following films are also examined: The Symbol of the Unconquered (Oscar Micheaux, USA 1920), Imitation of Life (Douglas Sirk, USA 1959), Shadows (John Cassavetes, USA 1959), Bamboozled (Spike Lee, USA 2000) and The Human Stain (Robert Benton, USA 2003).

Obviously, an analysis limited to six films cannot assert any comprehensive representation, which is why the criteria of choosing the films will be mentioned here. Based on the fact that cinema negotiates the phenomenon of racial border crossing in varying ways across different time periods and cultural settings, the point of reference for the present selection consists in the approach to address significant developmental tendencies not exhaustively but in the form of historical points of crystallization. These are reflected in the arrangement of the film examples into three phases. The first points to the early history of American film, the second to the cinematic modernism

https://doi.org/10.14361/9783839453377 - am 13.02.2026, 21:55:10. https://www.inlibra.com/de/agb - Open Access -

of the late 1950s, and the third to the post-classical cinema of the turn of the millennium. Each section includes both Hollywood mainstream films and independent cinema productions in order to both show the range of variation in the topic and to open up a comparative space that allows for a broad spectrum of discussion. Additionally, it should be noted that two of the film directors, namely Oscar Micheaux and Spike Lee, are persons of color, while all the others are white. This reference seems appropriate; not only because all of the filmmakers work in a context that does not allow the question of racial identity to be considered an undecided one, but also because both Oscar Micheaux and Spike Lee designate and position themselves as Black artists. Both do this out of an oppositional understanding of Black cinema that tries to set a self-confident alternative against the dominant white culture. Not least, the structural, institutional, and systemic challenges associated with the formation of Black cinema remain to be considered here as a context – which will be discussed in detail in the respective sections.

The selected films are each exemplary for certain aspects of the field of investigation that converge at a higher level in the question of the conditions and effects of racial boundary crossings in American film. The cinematographic medium is therefore conceived of as a sphere of negotiation of the positions of Self and Other, a sphere that always especially brings to light the moment of unsettledness associated with racial transgression when it engages with its own media specific boundaries. The confrontation of various terrains connected to the crossing of boundaries spans all areas of the medium of film. The encounter of the poles of black and white in the process forms a dichotomous structure of thinking and seeing that can neither be dissolved nor suspended but likely be shifted. Accordingly, the different elements of the discourse on crossing racial boundaries function as distinct qualities involved in a heterogeneous field of complexly linked categories.

Along with this, it should be noted that the realms of Self and Other are not conceivable as characteristics but only as relations: they have no meaning per se but, in a reciprocal relation, continuously produce new meanings. In the interplay of seeing and being seen, the relations between Self and Other are articulated as perpetually new negotiations. The challenge now is to understand and investigate that process – while always keeping boundaries in mind.

https://doi.org/10.14361/9783839453377 - am 13.02.2026, 21:55:10. https://www.inlibra.com/de/agb - Open Access -

I. Conquered – Unconquered

https://doi.org/10.14361/9783839453377 - am 13.02.2026, 21:55:10. https://www.inlibra.com/de/agb - Open Access -

The Birth of a Nation (David Wark Griffith, USA 1915)

David Wark Griffith's status as the leading cinematic artist of his time remains undisputed to this day. Among his historical accomplishments were the expansion of filmic grammar, such as the liberation of the camera from its previous predominantly static position, or the use of elaborate montages to strengthen a genuinely cinematic narration. D.W. Griffith set narrative standards and aided the breakthrough of the then still fledging art of film. One film that is regarded as a key work of film history and the cornerstone of Hollywood cinema stands out in particular: The Birth of a Nation (USA 1915). As early as in 1939, Lewis Jacobs wrote about this work: "It foreshadowed the best that was to come in cinema technique, earned for the screen its right to the status of art, and demonstrated with finality that the movie was one of the most potent social agencies in America."[1]

Noticeably here, Jacobs does not only point to Griffith's pioneering work in cinematic aesthetics but also mentions a further component that is inextricably tied to the immense success of The Birth of a Nation: the assertion of cinema as a social institution. In fact, Griffith's film had already become a political issue during its development stages. After the premiere on February 8, 1915 in Los Angeles, there were nationwide protests from black civil rights activists. In particular, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), founded in 1909, was outraged by the film's racist affront and organized boycotts and protests that resulted in calls for censorship and bans. The Birth of a Nation subsequently became the first Hollywood studio production that was shown in the White House. In order to not jeopardize the New York premiere on March 3, 1915, Thomas Dixon, whose play

1 Lewis Jacobs, *The Rise of the American Film. A Critical History* (New York: Teacher's College Press, 1978 [1939]), 171.

https://doi.org/10.14361/9783839453377 - am 13.02.2026, 21:55:10. https://www.inlibra.com/de/agb - Open Access -

The Clansman[2] was the basis for the film, organized additional screenings for members of the Supreme Court to lobby for support. Due to the protection of President Woodrow Wilson, the film could finally be shown uncensored and on schedule at New York's Liberty Theater. Griffith's film soon became a hit: in the first eleven months, three million people saw the film, that was shown 6,266 times during this period.[3]

The NAACP's protests as well as the president's intervention, however, were not the only political reactions that THE BIRTH OF A NATION elicited. Alongside regional premieres, the Ku Klux Klan, having been unmistakably glorified in the film, organized massive parades and ritual celebrations which were often accompanied by violent attacks.[4] In the subsequent years, THE BIRTH OF A NATION was used at Ku Klux Klan rallies as an effective recruitment tool.[5] In the process, the film unfolded a potential for political impact that sustainably dynamized the racist activities of the Ku Klux Klan: "*Birth*'s romantic depiction and glorification of the Ku Klux Klan most certainly contributed to the public's tolerance of Klan criminality and its expansion to its greatest membership ever, about 5 million, by 1924."[6] Although the NAACP's protests – in which many well-known intellectuals participated[7] – were not able to hinder the film's extraordinary popularity and dissemination, their campaigns were not ineffective. As a reaction to the controversial discussions

2 This was also the initial title for Griffith's film, based on Dixon's commercially successful play from 1905 that developed as an adaptation of the two historical novels *The Leopard's Spots: A Romance of the White Man's Burden 1865-1900* (1902) and *The Clansman: A Historical Romance of the Ku Klux Klan* (1905).

3 See Edward D. C. Campbell, Jr. *The Celluloid South* (Knoxville, TN: University of Tennessee Press, 1981), 59.

4 See Maxim Simcovitch, "The Impact of Griffith's *Birth of a Nation* on the Modern Ku Klux Klan," in *Celluloid Power: Social Film Criticism from* The Birth of a Nation *to* Judgement at Nuremberg, ed. David Platt (Metuchen, NJ: Scarecrow Press, 1992): 72-82.

5 See Linda Williams, *Playing the Race Card: Melodramas of Black and White from Uncle Tom to O. J. Simpson* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001), 128.

6 Ed Guerrero, *Framing Blackness: The African American Image in Film* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1993), 13.

7 Among them were, for example, W.E.B. Du Bois and Booker T. Washington. On the black community's reaction to the film and the numerous political protests, cf. at length Thomas R. Cripps, "The Making of *The Birth of a Race*: The Emerging Politics of Identity in Silent Movies," in *The Birth of Whiteness: Race and the Emergence of US Cinema*, ed. Daniel Bernardi (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1996), 38-55.

https://doi.org/10.14361/9783839453377 - am 13.02.2026, 21:55:10. https://www.inlibra.com/de/agb - Open Access -

surrounding it, the epic film was ultimately shortened by a few sequences,[8] and President Wilson belatedly withdrew his support of the film.

The Birth of a Nation's immense public influence illustrates not only to what extent cinema had established itself as a mass medium but also points to the power of political interference that the new technology possessed. President Woodrow Wilson's famous, albeit apocryphal, exclamation after viewing The Birth of a Nation is one of the most often cited reactions to Griffith's film: "It's like writing history with lightning!"[9] Technical innovation was not the only sensational aspect about Griffith's opus; so, too, was its claim to accurately present American history on the big screen. Thus, contemporary critics were fascinated by the film's historical content, which was often lauded as the first authentic portrayal of historical events. The emotional dynamics of the cinematographic staging of history are particularly observable in a film review of the *Atlanta Journal* in 1915: "Not as a motion picture, nor a play, nor a book does it come to you; but as the soul and spirit and flesh of the heart of your country's history, ripped from the past and brought quivering with all human emotions before your eyes."[10]

One vital element of Griffith's portrayal of history is the repeated use of historical facsimiles that function as a filmic strategy to prove authenticity.[11] However, it should not be forgotten that Griffith closely interweaves the depiction of the American Civil War with melodramatic genre formulas. The Birth of a Nation is not just concerned with the most accurate presentation of historical events possible, even if that is the claim of the film itself. Rather, what is pivotal for the film's effectiveness is the fact that the historical material's complexity is applied to a narrative level that operates on previously

8 According to Fred Silva, the cut scenes made up 558 feet of film material, in which, among other things, a letter from Lincoln is presented in which he casts doubt on racial equality and suggests the deportation of blacks to Africa as a solution to racial conflict. See Fred Silva, *Focus on The Birth of a Nation* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1971).

9 Several film historians indicate the anecdotal character of this remark, for which there is no source to this day. According to Kevin Brownlow's documentary D. W. Griffith, Father of Film (1992), after the film viewing, President Wilson supposedly said: "I congratulate you on an excellent production."

10 Reprinted in: Robert Lang (Ed.): *The Birth of a Nation: D. W. Griffith, Director* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1994), 179.

11 These facsimiles are made up of, for example, extensive passages from Woodrow Wilson's three-volume history of America that are added to the intertitles, or of references to source material that provided Griffith with inspiration for the film's backdrops, e.g. Matthew Brady's Civil War photographs.

https://doi.org/10.14361/9783839453377 - am 13.02.2026, 21:55:10. https://www.inlibra.com/de/agb - Open Access -

established genre conventions, such as the construction of a strict good/bad schema. This becomes obvious right at the beginning of the film. The first frame is announced by the following title: "The bringing of the African to America planted the first seed of disunion." Already the apologetic formulation is striking: neither abduction nor slavery is mentioned. Instead, the quasi-neutral verb "bring" is chosen to describe the abductions. The tendency to falsify history appears as early as within the first few minutes of the film. Griffith shifts the threat to the union of the young nation from the brutality of exploitation to the alleged danger of an ethnic group: the sole presence of the Other, not slavery with its devastating effects, is blamed for America's nationwide dilemma.

A further accentuation is introduced as early as the very beginning of the film: the translation of a Christian eschatology into national terms. The narrative rhythm of The Birth of a Nation has a circular structure, in the course of which a paradise is created, destroyed, and reconstructed. The idyll of the paradisiac Garden of Eden is first presented by the Southern Cameron family's idealized living environment. In the process, Griffith arranges the oppositional juxtaposition of blacks and whites at the level of mise-en-scène in such a way that he contrasts a slave's shaky wheelbarrow with the plantation owner's stately carriage. However, this dichotomy is staged not as a way to aggressively pit the characters against one another but as their harmonious coexistence. This is mainly due to the fact that black characters are presented exclusively as peaceful, happy people who lead a contented life under the supervision and care of the plantation owner. This impression is bolstered by the fact that Griffith conspicuously often places cute animals such as puppies, kittens, and small birds in the shots, which function as visual equivalents for the slaves. Just as with pets, it seems that the slaves are also domesticated savages who, after a successful taming, remain loyal to their master. And just like the animals romping around, the alleged primitiveness of the slaves is choreographed by their song and dance, which is indulgently applauded by the plantation owner's smiling family.

While the encoding of racist subordination in the Southern states suggests the harmony of a paradise, the threat to such an idyll is embodied by the representation of the Northern Stoneman family. Their family structure itself contrasts with the idealized Cameron family because the Stonemans are a fragmented family unit. Instead of both parents, the father alone, Representative Austin Stoneman, is presented as the head of the family. The Stonemans' servants are also juxtaposed with the idyll of the Southern states: instead of

https://doi.org/10.14361/9783839453377 - am 13.02.2026, 21:55:10. https://www.inlibra.com/de/agb - Open Access -

submissive, servile slaves, their servants do not behave peacefully and obediently but rebel against and defy the orders of their masters. This is particularly evident in their body language. With the Camerons, singing slaves cheerfully carry on their work in the cotton fields and interact with the plantation owner exclusively in a bent down posture and with multiple bows. Contrarily, the Stonemans' housekeeper, Lydia Brown, has an entirely different physical dynamic. While Representative Stoneman is consulting with Senate leader Charles Sumner, Lydia struts to and fro in the adjoining room, offers her hand to an imaginary subject for a kiss, and eventually throws her handkerchief to another maid along with a snide gesticulation. Furthermore, and this is crucial, in contrast to the Camerons' anonymous slaves, Lydia is announced in the intertitle with her surname "Brown," which serves as a reference to her mixed-race ancestry. The first visual presentation of the housekeeper solidifies this impression because her skin color appears quite light when compared to the Camerons' dark-complected slaves. Finally, a further reference cements this depiction: the next intertitle explicitly describes Lydia as mulatta.

With this, the chief specter of Griffithian racial ideology is expressed. The suspension of racial unambiguity, the diffusion of bipolar grids functions as a metaphor for menace. The resulting danger lies primarily in the suspension of established classification mechanisms. The mulatto/a thus occupies a position opposed to the dominant discourse: he/she refuses to be affixed at racial poles and, as a result, to be affixed to the hierarchical classification system. In the figure of Lydia Brown, this potential threat reveals itself through misguided ambitions as well as through a malicious maneuver of deception. After Senate leader Sumner has reprimanded the housekeeper for her lack of respect and left Stoneman's house, she glares at him with a face full of hatred and, filled with contempt, spits in his direction. The following sequence is full of hysterical movements: Lydia tugs at her clothes, throws herself on the floor, rips open her blouse, and tilts her head back crying. This behavior has often been interpreted as erotic behavior intended to seduce Stoneman.[12] Griffith's alternating editing, however, suggests a different message. Lydia's actions are alternately combined with shots that present Stoneman studying acts of Congress in his library. This form of visual juxtaposition shows that

12 See for example Cripps, who characterizes Lydia's behavior as an "erotic gesture". Thomas R. Cripps, *Slow Fade to Black: The Negro in American Film, 1900-1942* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 47.

https://doi.org/10.14361/9783839453377 - am 13.02.2026, 21:55:10. https://www.inlibra.com/de/agb - Open Access -

Stoneman acts not as the spectator of an erotic spectacle but that Lydia's performance takes place outside his field of vision. One shot, which shows Lydia's triumphant smile in a close-up, visually foreshadows a calculated strategy of deception. Stoneman leaves the library and notices the housekeeper hunched over at the edge of the frame. In a flash, her facial expression changes from a smile of superiority to pitiful crying, whose effect is not lost on Stoneman. Concerned, he asks her what is wrong, whereby her body language seems to re-narrate a sexual assault by Sumner: the repeated pointing to the door as well as the imitative grabbing at her breasts are clear indications of this. And Stoneman's reaction suggests, in fact, a rather sympathetic understanding for her than his own sexual interest in her. Consoling her, he puts his arm around her and tries to cover up her bare shoulders with the torn blouse. The effect of this incident, which presents Lydia as an unscrupulous trickster and Stoneman as a naïve victim of her intrigue, is commented on by an intertitle: "The great leader's weakness that is to blight a nation." The intertitle hints at a political dimension that not only connotes a foreshadowing of events to come but also confirms the potential threat of the deceptive mulatta who negates authority.

This scenario of a threat is condensed, expanded, and ramped up in the second part of the film through the depiction of the mixed-race character Silas Lynch. Here, the dangerous threat of the mulatto does not solely result from the annexation of white privileges but, above all, is sexually determined. At the narrative level, the mulatto, as a half-breed, acts as a sign of the confusion that comes about through a threatening mixing of the races. In the second half of The Birth of a Nation, this theme intensifies when the mulatto, who as a sexual aggressor threatens to destroy the assumed purity of the white race, is presented as a potential rapist of white women. With this thematic accentuation, Griffith draws on a long tradition of hypersexualization of black masculinity:

> "The 'primitive' had long been associated with uninhibited sexuality and promiscuity and belief in these alleged characteristics combined with fears about interracial mixing and served to make the major cause of anxiety about black people a sexual one. […] Expressions of fears for the future purity and superiority of the white 'race' relating to 'miscegenation' and

https://doi.org/10.14361/9783839453377 - am 13.02.2026, 21:55:10. https://www.inlibra.com/de/agb - Open Access -

> 'race-mixing' were bound to the notion that blood varies from 'race' to 'race' and that the mixing of those bloods is undesirable."[13]

Griffith nevertheless undertakes an important transformation. He stages the sexual threat to white women not in the form of the conventional black-white opposition but projects the figure of the potential rapist onto Silas Lynch, who, as a mulatto, is already a living symbol of a mixed-race union.[14] Even the character's introduction by means of the explanatory intertitle is striking: "Stoneman's protege, Silas Lynch, mulatto and leader of the blacks." Above all, the order of characterization is revealing, since it primarily emphasizes Lynch's racial identity before his function as political leader is mentioned. Furthermore, the use of a "telling name" is noteworthy. It gives Silas Lynch a similarly symbolic surname, like Lydia Brown in the first part of the film, and already mentions the adequate form of punishment before the culprit is first presented onscreen. In order to even more clearly emphasize the potential threat of the hybrid and to continue the established portrait of the mulatto character from part one, Griffith creates a further structural connection via mise-en-scène. In his first appearance at the Stonemans' house, Silas Lynch appears in a shot that shows him together with the housekeeper, Lydia Brown.

13 Young, *Fear of the Dark*, 48.

14 This modification is notable, since it represents a significant deviation from Dixon's novel, in which the freed slaves' political leader is described as a "big buck nigger." Cf. Cripps, *Slow Fade to Black*, 46.

https://doi.org/10.14361/9783839453377 - am 13.02.2026, 21:55:10. https://www.inlibra.com/de/agb - Open Access -

Figure 1: Silas Lynch and Lydia Brown

Both figures parallel each other not only in their racial identity but in their demonic grinning as well.[15] This form of visual positioning produces a context of association that effectively stages the supposed affinity between racial hybridity and sexual manipulation.

To intensify this basic ideological message, Griffith follows it with a sequence that is loaded with melodramatic genre formulas: the pursuit of the youngest Cameron sister by the freedman and soldier, Gus. Mary Ann Doane emphasizes how closely the cinematic staging mechanisms of melodrama are connected to sexual issues:

> "In the cinema, melodrama is a particularly crucial site for the elaboration of sexual questions and dilemmas. Indeed, melodrama has been consistently defined as the cinematic mode in which social anxieties or conflicts are represented as sexual anxieties or conflicts. […] Griffith's projection of the melo-

15 Here there is another deviation from the source material. Although both characters derive from Dixon, they never appear in the same work together: the "mulatto housekeeper" character is taken from the novel *The Leopard's Spots*, the "leader of the blacks" appears in the play *The Clansman*. The combination of both characters, as well as the emphasis of their character congruence, can therefore be traced back to Griffith. See Williams, *Playing the Race Card*, 330, note 23.

https://doi.org/10.14361/9783839453377 - am 13.02.2026, 21:55:10. https://www.inlibra.com/de/agb - Open Access -

dramatic mode onto that of historical spectacle intensifies the articulation of sexual and racial anxieties."[16]

This principle is already evident in the first encounter between Gus and Flora, which Griffith stages as an oppositional confrontation. The sexual danger emanating from Gus is emphasized above all through the appropriation of the voyeuristic gaze by a black person. Whereas Flora appears as the personification of white, youthful innocence in shots that show her carelessly playing around and laughing in the garden at her parents' house, the cross-cut presents a Gus lying in wait, hiding behind a fence so he can observe Flora undisturbed. His bent posture as well as his lecherous facial expression function as indications of a sexually charged motivation, presenting the white girl as a passive object of the gaze and helpless victim, and the black man, contrarily, as an active holder of the gaze and potential rapist.

This situation comes to a head when Flora, against her brother's advice, decides to go for a walk alone in the woods. The setting for the subsequent chase is carefully chosen, since the choice of location already reveals different levels of association that lead to a condensation of Griffith's intended effect. Already here, the name of the youngest Cameron daughter – Flora – implies imagery from nature that acts as an allegory of her virginity and innocence. Furthermore, as a foreshadowing, her name indicates the threat to which she will be exposed later on in the film: defloration.[17] The aesthetic connection to the natural scenery presented in the first part, which forms the background for the depiction of the paradisiacal southern idyll of the Southern States, is also noteworthy. Particularly striking in this context is the transformation of the animal metaphor: the quasi-tamed, pet-like slaves of the first part are contrasted with the aggression potential of the liberated, predator-like slaves of

16 Mary Ann Doane, *Femmes Fatales: Feminism, Film Theory, Psychoanalysis*. New York: Routledge, 1991, 227.

17 The motif of a flower as a sign of untouched femininity is a common topos whose implications D.W. Griffith focused on a few years later in another work. Broken Blossoms, (D.W. Griffith, USA 1919) also concerns a girlish character whose defloration is already alluded to in the title. Brigitte Peucker remarks on the consistent use of the melodramatic scenario of threatened femininity: "Time and again, the twists and turns in Griffith's narrative exist in order to place the woman in the position of greatest danger: faced with many variants on the 'fate worse than death' – with rape, with defloration, and even simply with the abstract threat to her purity – she chooses death." Brigitte Peucker, *Incorporating Images. Film and the Rival Arts* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995), 58.

https://doi.org/10.14361/9783839453377 - am 13.02.2026, 21:55:10. https://www.inlibra.com/de/agb - Open Access -

the second part. The most important signifier for the association with animals is the physique. The unbuttoned shirt reveals Gus's muscular upper body; additionally, his corporeality is emphasized by his tight pants that are only held up around his waist by a cord. This conspicuous staging of the male black body stands in stark contrast to the previously presented claim of political participation, as Linda Williams stresses: "Its peculiar logic was to exaggerate the very quality of masculinity that granted black men the vote. Excessive, hypermasculine corporeality disqualified him to the status of beast."[18]

The sexually motivated threat to the helpless white girl presented by the animal-like attacker, Gus, is subsequently visualized by a chase sequence that shows a revolutionary development in standards of film technology and aesthetics. Lorenz Engell points out:

> "Before Griffith, sequences like this were still being shown in one single shot, in which the interval of time between the two parties was portrayed in real time. Before the pursuers appeared in the picture, those being pursued had already left it, so that for a moment it was left 'empty.' Griffith avoids such empty shots; he methodizes the discovery that a movement does not have to be shown from beginning to end but that viewers can complete it in their heads. This enables a tremendous increase in the density and speed of both movement and action."[19]

This principle is augmented still by the movement-intensive, rapid alternation of shot sizes, such as close-ups, medium close-ups, mid-shots, medium long shots, and long shots, whereby the juxtaposition of already extremely fast-moving shots further accelerates the tempo. With this elaborate composition technique, Griffith reaches an exact equilibrium of the inner movement dynamics and the dramaturgical structure, which causes a tremendous increase in tension. The sequence's climax consists of a shot that presents the preliminary endpoint of the chase. A montage combines close-ups of Flora's anxious face with shots in which Gus, like an ape, climbs up the rocks and approaches the girl further and further.

Backed into a corner, the persecuted girl seems to have no other way out than a deadly leap into the depths. The shot that shows Flora's lifeless body at

18 Williams, *Playing the Race Card*, 104.

19 Lorenz Engell, *Sinn und Industrie: Einführung in die Filmgeschichte* (Frankfurt am Main: Campus Verlag, 1992), 80-81.

https://doi.org/10.14361/9783839453377 - am 13.02.2026, 21:55:10. https://www.inlibra.com/de/agb - Open Access -

Figure 2: Flora and Gus

the foot of the rock is finally followed by a commentary intertitle that characterizes her decision as the result of exemplary virtue: "For her who had learned the stern lesson of honor we should not grieve that she found sweeter the opal gates of death."

In this depiction, the racist antipathy that permeates the film reaches its temporary climax. What is decisive here is the binary structure of the racial schema, which functions as a central and determining factor in the portrayal of the conflict over the young nation. Linda Williams states: "With *The Birth of a Nation* movies became capable of forging a myth of national origin grounded in race to spectacular effect. […] It stages a recognition of virtue through the visible suffering of the endangered white woman."[20] The contouring of the ideal of virtue plays a central role here because Griffith's depiction of sexual intimidation transforms the transgression of race in a significant way. The portentous sexual relationship is shifted from the axis of the white slaveholder as rapist of black women to the axis of the freed slave as sexual aggressor toward white virgins. Mary Ann Doane emphasizes the psychopathological component of this accentuation by interpreting it as compensation for a dwindling potential for power: "Rape undergoes a displacement – from the

20 Williams, *Playing the Race Card*, 100.

https://doi.org/10.14361/9783839453377 - am 13.02.2026, 21:55:10. https://www.inlibra.com/de/agb - Open Access -

white man's prerogative as master/colonizer to the white woman's fears in relation to the black male. This confers upon race relations an extremely intense psychical charge which compensates a white psychical economy for the loss of the physical constraints of slavery or colonialism."[21]

The film's narrative logic makes this shifting and charging clearly visible. The opening depiction of a paradisiacal, ideal state establishes a conception of order that assigns each individual an unquestionable position within a strictly hierarchical structure. With the slave's liberation, this structure, which Clyde Taylor describes as a "racist European concept of the great chain of being,"[22] spins out of control, so that supposedly unanimous conceptions of identity are called into question. Ed Guerrero points to the economic background of the now unstable social structure and interprets the new white protector role as a compensatory answer to a weakened Southern ideal:

> "Adding a psychological dimension to the issue, the insecurity and economic turmoil rampant throughout the postbellum South had undermined the white southern male's role as provider for his family; thus he sought to inflate his depreciated sense of manhood by taking up the honorific task of protecting White Womanhood against the newly constructed specter of the 'brute Negro.'"[23]

In their respective readings of the film, both Mary Ann Doane and Ed Guerrero take as their starting point a deep-seated upset of traditional concepts of masculinity. In The Birth of a Nation, the film-specific manifestation of this crisis appears in a dramaturgically meticulous and elaborate narrative logic that the film uses to explain its own racism as a defensive stance. Central to this is the use of melodramatic genre conventions in the form of a white, female sacrifice, which acts as the initial impetus for the founding of the Ku Klux Klan.

This causal relation is emphasized by an intertitle during one of the first Klan rallies: "Brethren, this flag bears the red stain of the life of a Southern woman, a priceless sacrifice on the altar of an outraged civilization." Conspicuous here is the reference to blood that runs like a red trail runs through the

21 Doane, *Femmes Fatales*, 222.

22 Clyde Taylor, "The Re-Birth of the Aesthetic in Cinema," in *The Birth of Whiteness: Race and the Emergence of US Cinema*, ed. Daniel Bernardi (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1996), 29.

23 Guerrero, *Framing Blackness*, 12.

https://doi.org/10.14361/9783839453377 - am 13.02.2026, 21:55:10. https://www.inlibra.com/de/agb - Open Access -

entire flag. Remarkably, it is not the blood of heroic warriors but the sacrificial blood of a virgin that had to be shed to escape defloration. This shift via the renewed appropriation of blood imagery becomes even clearer in a further intertitle in the sequence: "Here I raise the ancient symbol of an unconquered race of men, the fiery cross of old Scotland's hills," declares Flora's brother, the Klan leader, "I quench its flames in the sweetest blood that ever stained the sands of time!" The reference to blood is paramount, since herein lie the origins of a taxonomy that forms the basis for defining the black-white polarity. Mary Ann Doane explains: "The legal criterion for racial identity in the United States has historically been linked to blood rather than skin. The polarization of white and black ensures that there are no gradations in racial identity – one drop of 'black blood' effectively makes one black."[24] This enables an ideological fixation with serious consequences: the threat of defloration becomes the fear of contamination. This shift results in the following racist logic: Flora's blood is "sweet" because it is pure, and the Klan's founding is justified because it is prepared to combat any attack on white virginity.

The narrative justification of the Klan as a defensive militia is highlighted by several sequences that condense and expand on the theme of a threatening transgression of race. Silas Lynch's harassment of Elsie Stoneman, whose sexual assault is euphemistically termed a "proposal of marriage", is crucial to this justification. In this scene, Griffith noticeably digresses from Dixon's original: "Griffith's other scene of sexual attack in the Elsie/Lynch episode is without parallel in Dixon, or in the history of film, for its depiction of black lust. Indeed, Dixon's novel has no scene depicting Lynch's sexual assault – Lynch does not even ask for Elsie's hand."[25] This deviation is accompanied by another deviation: Silas Lynch's sexual attack is presented in the film as premeditated. It is striking that Griffith demonstrates Lynch's growing political power in the preceding scene, thus establishing a causal link to the sexual subject matter. One of the first official acts of the newly elected South Carolina legislature, where Lynch has now become lieutenant governor, is the passing of a law that legalizes mixed-race marriage. It is important to know that Griffith's depiction of the Reconstruction-era legislature is without any historical basis. His staging of political debates is not an exact, documentary rendition but one of racist defamation. In fact, his cinematic portrayals of legislation are not based on historical sources but on caricatures: "The film's

24 Doane, *Femmes Fatales*, 229.

25 Williams, *Playing the Race Card*, 123.

https://doi.org/10.14361/9783839453377 - am 13.02.2026, 21:55:10. https://www.inlibra.com/de/agb - Open Access -

notorious depiction of black dominance and corruption in the South Carolina State House of Representatives had been based not on governments records or still photography from the period but on a series of political cartoons that caricatured black political participation as inherently absurd."[26]

Lynch's sexual assault on a white woman appears to be an egregious escalation of the conflict that had previously been presented. Again, the white virgin is presented as the pivotal point within a context that defines the freed slave as a political, economic, and, above all, sexual threat. However, Griffith escalates the scenario in order to intensify the film's tension. This has to do with the fact that Silas Lynch, unlike the animal-like Gus, is not dark black but brown. As an ambivalent figure, as an uncanny personification of transgression, the mulatto calls the schema of binary opposition of black and white into question, since by embodying the coexistence and fusion of – in themselves incompatible – parts, he denies the ordering hierarchy and, therefore, the film's inherent ideology. Furthermore, the hybridity visualized by the half-breed's appearance represents the breaking of the taboo of sexual contact between the races. The mulatto's body is unsettling and upsetting in that it exhibits an open sexuality. It represents not the possibility but the result of the crossing of racial boundaries.

Lynch's assault on Elsie is tied to the chase sequence with Flora and Gus in order to make the motif of sexual harassment more dynamic. Of note in Lynch's assault is his closing in on Elsie, which conspicuously emphasizes his body, a depiction that is in stark contrast to the first scene, in which Flora and Gus do not once touch each other. Like Gus, Lynch is first presented as a voyeur who appears to be sizing up his victim with lustful eyes. Unlike before, perpetrator and victim are now located in an enclosed space that limits their range of motion. As soon as Lynch is alone with Elsie, his attempts to get closer to her become more explicit and threatening. Elsie's desperate attempt to flee is immediately thwarted by the door's being locked. In the subsequent shots, a claustrophobia develops that is primarily due to the narrowness of the interior space and that emphasizes the victim's helplessness in a visually effective way.

In the elaborate configuration of the mise-en-scène, one can already see a clear escalation of the situation surrounding the assault. Griffith achieves a

26 Robert Jackson, "The Celluloid War before The Birth: Race and History in Early American Film," in *American Cinema and the Southern Imaginary*, eds. Deborah E. Barker and Kathryn McKee (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 2011), 42.

https://doi.org/10.14361/9783839453377 - am 13.02.2026, 21:55:10. https://www.inlibra.com/de/agb - Open Access -

further intensification of distress through the accumulation of sexual gesticulations that serve as the main elements of both the aggression and the threat. After the first chase through a narrow room, Lynch presses Elsie's white lace dress to his lips, whereupon she fights back while crying. The sexual connotation becomes even more salient in a shot laced with innuendo, in which Lynch sticks his hips out and rubs his thighs. The fact that Elsie knows what these gestures mean can be seen in a counter-cut that shows her arms raised toward the sky and thus illustrates her feelings of panic. In addition, an iris shot accents Elsie's terrified face and her eyes wide open in fear. Lynch reacts with a sneering grin and chases Elsie into the middle of the room. In addition, his increasing brutality is accentuated by the fact that he wildly shakes one fist and beats his chest with the other. After crying out in fear, Elsie faints, whereby Lynch picks her up with a triumphant smile and then presses her tightly to his body.

In a cross-cut, this scene of sexual intimidation and gleeful sadism is conflated with the Ku Klux Klan's arming itself. In doing this, the Ku Klux Klan's function as a heroic savior is already anticipated because the film's cinematic arrangement suggests that assaults on white women were the only thing motivating its actions. By associating shots in such a way, the metrics and rhythms of the filmic staging are further perfected:

> "The editing becomes almost invisible because it seems to be so casual and logical. [...] In this way, Griffith achieves an interplay of formal means with the dramaturgical structure and the ideological fixations that rest on the aforementioned simplistic juxtapositions. Form, content, and meaning form an organically ordered whole."[27]

The montage sequence that culminates in the finale, which presents the Ku Klux Klan as the superior savior and protector of the white race, has been repeatedly praised on account of its formal-aesthetic brilliance and its inner dynamics of motion. However, in judging Griffith's artistic achievements, we must not lose sight of the fact that the film's formal strategies are only effective in relation to its ideological intent. Both levels do not function independent of one another but in a context of relative effect. The new feeling of solidarity and unity, which is portrayed as the young nation's fundamental constant, is primarily constituted by the shared defense against the threatening Other, as

27 Engell, *Sinn und Industrie*, 82-83.

https://doi.org/10.14361/9783839453377 - am 13.02.2026, 21:55:10. https://www.inlibra.com/de/agb - Open Access -

an intertitle underlines: "The former enemies of North and South are united again in common defence of their Aryan birthright."

This stance, which resists each form of racial transgression in order to preserve the white race's supposed purity, manifests itself in an increasing predominance of white signifiers on the visual level. This staging strategy becomes obvious in the scene in which the Ku Klux Klan frees Elsie, the famous "last-minute rescue." As the embodiment of the last-minute rescue, eight Klansmen in white robes immediately enter the room and push Silas Lynch to the left side of the frame until he is almost no longer visible. Even Elsie's father, who is dressed in a black suit, has a marginal position at the right edge of the frame, while Elsie, whose white dress corresponds in color and light-staging with the Klansmen's white robes, is moved into the center of the picture.

Figure 3: Elsie's Rescue

The Klan's subsequent ride through the streets of Piedmont implies a type of visual "purification," a "white-washing" that unmistakably emphasizes the claim of the white race's superiority. Not one of the black characters is present in the shot; instead, the representation of a purely white image evokes the cathartic purification of the imperiled nation.

Griffith's formal strategy of gradually replacing black characters with white characters proves itself to be an effective ideological tool. While the

https://doi.org/10.14361/9783839453377 - am 13.02.2026, 21:55:10. https://www.inlibra.com/de/agb - Open Access -

Figure 4: The Parade of the Ku Klux Klan

black perpetrator's brutal punishment is only implied but not shown in full consequence, the visual erasure of blacks implies a form of discipline that corresponds to the Ku Klux Klan's form of lynch-mob justice. Linda Williams points out:

> "I think that the much more insidious suppression accomplished by the film is not a missing scene of castration[28] but the systematic and much more 'natural'-seeming disappearance of blacks over the course of the film. Griffith's film achieves its power to the extent that it does not appear to be an exhortation to race hatred, but a natural process of heroic rescue that, in the process, just 'happens' to wash the screen 'clean.'"[29]

Griffith's formal-aesthetic staging is designed to establish the unity of the nation by shifting conquest from the territorial to the racial plane. The defining criterion of national unity, therefore, is not the defense of a territory but the subjugation, indeed the erasure, of an ethnic group. This accentuation has

28 Williams is alluding to the report of the film critic Seymour Stern, who thought that he remembered a castration scene as Gus's punishment after a showing of the film in 1933. See Seymour Stern, "Griffith I – '*The Birth of a Nation*,'" *Film Culture* 36 (1965): 114-132.

29 Williams, *Playing the Race Card*, 128.

https://doi.org/10.14361/9783839453377 - am 13.02.2026, 21:55:10. https://www.inlibra.com/de/agb - Open Access -

remained long unconsidered in interpretations of the film that largely concentrate on the evaluation of formal achievements. Clyde Taylor states:

> "If […] the central theme of the work is the unification of national sentiment around the theme of miscegenation as a threat to 'civilization', then the neglect of this theme in the aesthetic dialogue surrounding the film amounts to a curious evasion of the question of meaning. This indifference to meaning explains an extraordinary lapse in the worshipful exegesis of the film's cinematic innovations. It goes unnoticed that virtually all of the films formal achievements – its editing, close-ups, iris shots, manipulation of crowds, camera movements, scenic set-ups, literary titles etc. – are deployed in the cause of aestheticizing and sentimentalizing the principal characters as White people."[30]

One must add that the act of equating humanity with a racial characteristic, that is, whiteness, comes to a head in Griffith. By using melodramatic formulas, the white woman's body becomes the focal point of the white ideal. The white woman appears whiter than white: she is not only virtuous and radiantly beautiful but also immaculately pure. Her perfection is based on her being untouched, on her virginity that is brought to the fore by the color white. A film stylistic example of this type of perception is the photograph of Elsie Stoneman, which visually introduces the character. The viewer's first impression of her is mediated by a static image that acts as an erotic signifier. The photograph first appears during the Stoneman brothers' visit in Piedmont, where it is shown during a walk through the cotton fields and instantly beguiles Ben Cameron. Immediately after seeing the picture, Cameron "finds the ideal of his dreams", as the intertitle has it. The photograph is presented several times in close-up, with a circular aperture visually accentuating the image and clearly directing the viewer's gaze to Elsie Stoneman's face.

The gentle face circled with light-colored curly hair and a wistful look is thus consistent with conventional attributes of beauty, which are further emphasized by the photograph's soft focus. Throughout the entire film, the image circulates not only as an indicator of desire but also as the symbol of a racially determined ideal of beauty, as a sign of moral and racial purity, and as a metaphor for national unity. Mary Ann Doane notes: "The fact that the white woman is represented by a photographic portrait which is displaced, circulates, and gains value within a certain political economy of desire, gives to

30 Taylor, "The Re-Birth of the Aesthetic in Cinema", 22.

https://doi.org/10.14361/9783839453377 - am 13.02.2026, 21:55:10. https://www.inlibra.com/de/agb - Open Access -

Figure 5: The White Ideal

that portrait a symbolic status. […] In *Birth of a Nation*, it is white womanhood which becomes the stake of representational politics."[31]

In Griffith's Birth of a Nation, one can observe and track the process of a politics of differentiation and defamation. The claim to make differences visible and identifiable is apparent in the compositional linkage of melodramatic genre conventions to a pseudo-historical, quasi-authenticating representational style – whereby both ultimately serve the formation of a rigid good/bad dichotomy. At the same time, a trace of resistance arises in the visual mode of representation of racial identities, which permeates the propagated binary schema and indicates the instability and ambivalence of identity construction. This internal conflict is externalized in the figure of the mulatto. As the disruptive factor in the polarization, he attains a special meaning that Griffith extensively stages as a sexually connoted threat. The ambiguity of racial identity finds its most concise expression in the visual representation of biracial characters. Here is where a crisis of the black/white dualism becomes apparent, forming an image that reflects the instability of taxonomy.

The solution to this identity conflict consists of a type of disciplinary action that Griffith develops both narratively and formally. The overcoming of

31 Doane, *Femmes Fatales*, 230-231.

https://doi.org/10.14361/9783839453377 - am 13.02.2026, 21:55:10. https://www.inlibra.com/de/agb - Open Access -

a threat that arises from linking mechanisms of representation and identity takes place at the visual level and consists of a successive emptying of the picture of racial deviations. This process is plainly expressed in the film's final resolution, which transforms the orgy of brutality and terror into a peaceful image of white superiority.

In this regard, the formation and perfection of film-aesthetic techniques is inextricably bound to the forms of visual identity politics and the ideological intentions associated with this politics. Daniel Bernardi notes:

> "Griffith is a pioneer of 'narrative integration' (…) not only because he helped develop parallel editing and other stylistic techniques in support of storytelling, but also because he perpetuated a discourse supported by racist practices – which is to say that Griffith's articulations of style and of race are involved in the same cinematic and discursive processes; pragmatically, they co-constitute the filmmaker's narrative system."[32]

With The Birth of a Nation, D.W. Griffith not only established a stable framework for forms of filmic staging but also laid the foundation for the construction of film stylistic formulae for discrimination. On the one hand, Griffith's narrative system emanates from a fundamentally racist perspective; on the other hand, his aesthetic achievements produce that perspective itself in a condensed pictorial form. It is this simultaneity that grants the film its special place in history.

32 Daniel Bernardi, "The Voice of Whiteness: D. W. Griffiths Biograph Films (1908-1913)," in *The Birth of Whiteness: Race and the Emergence of US Cinema*, ed. Daniel Bernardi (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1996), 104.

https://doi.org/10.14361/9783839453377 - am 13.02.2026, 21:55:10. https://www.inlibra.com/de/agb - Open Access -

The Symbol of the Unconquered (Oscar Micheaux, USA 1920)

Oscar Micheaux is repeatedly named in scholarship as a pivotal figure within a differentiated system of film production and distribution for an African American audience, who – analogous to D.W. Griffith's status as a film pioneer – is designated the "father of African American cinema."[1] Undoubtedly, Micheaux can be considered one of the most ambitious and prominent African American filmmakers of early film history. His "Micheaux Film and Book Company," founded in 1918 and later renamed "Micheaux Film Corporation", was one of the most commercially successful African American enterprises of the time. In all, Oscar Micheaux, whose role comprised his simultaneous capacities as screenwriter, financier, producer, director, and distributor, realized 48 feature films between 1918 and 1940. His characterization as the founding father of African-American cinema, however, is imprecise in the sense that it neglects the productive work of other African American filmmakers whose influence had already taken hold well before Micheaux's career. William Foster had already founded the "Will Foster Moving Picture Company" in 1910, which regularly produced and distributed short films with exclusively African American casts. Other African American entrepreneurs and filmmakers followed: Hunter C. Haynes founded the "Hunter C. Haynes Photo Play Co." in 1914, the brothers Noble and George P. Johnson launched their company "Lincoln Motion Picture Company" in 1916, Virgil Williams founded the "Royal Gardens Studio and Motion Picture Production Company" in 1919,

1 Jesse Algeron Rhines, *Black Film/ White Money* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1996), 23.

https://doi.org/10.14361/9783839453377 - am 13.02.2026, 21:55:10. https://www.inlibra.com/de/agb - Open Access -

Sidney P. Dones the "Democracy Film Corporation" in 1920, and Leigh Whipper the "Renaissance Film Company" in 1921.[2]

The special attention that is paid to Micheaux as an African American filmmaker can be explained primarily by his pioneer status in producing the first feature-length narrative films with an all African American cast. Contrary to his predecessors, whose projects primarily consisted in short, single or double-reel films, Micheaux's films exhibited a more expensive production and a differentiated narrative structure. His first melodrama, THE HOMESTEADER, released in in 1918 with actors from the renowned acting troupe "The Lafayette Players",[3] was noticeably distinguished from his colleagues' one-acts with its eight reels. A further distinctive trait of Oscar Micheaux's filmmaking was the independent production and distribution of his films. Jesse Algeron Rhines notes: "Where Noble Johnson and William Foster had ended up working within the established Hollywood studio system, Micheaux remained independent of the major studios in terms of financing, story input, and distribution and marketing assistance."[4] Ultimately, the thematic accentuations in his films, which dealt with complex socioeconomic questions, represented a significant turn away from established conventions of film entertainment.

Micheaux's fifth film, THE SYMBOL OF THE UNCONQUERED (USA 1929) bears the subtitle *A Story of the Ku Klux Klan*. In the preceding years, Griffith's cinematic apotheosis of the Klan had caused intense political quarrels and sparked a new debate about the racist cult of the Klan. In Micheaux, the importance of the connection to Griffith,[5] as well as to a then current,

2 See Henry T. Sampson, *Blacks in Black and White. A Source Book on Black Films* (London: Scarecrow Press, 1995).

3 The Lafayette Players were one of the most popular African-American acting troupes in the 1910s and 1920s. A thorough description with reference to the establishment of an African-American star system can be found in Francesca Thompson, "From Shadows 'n Shufflin' to Spotlights and Cinema: The Lafayette Players, 1915-1932," in Oscar Micheaux & His Circle: African-American Filmmaking and Race Cinema of the Silent Era, eds. Pearl Bowser, Jane Gaines, and Charles Musser (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2001): 19-33.

4 Rhines, Black Film/White Money, 25.

5 Ronald Green notably emphasizes this conflict and notes: "Micheaux and the leadership of the black community were involved in a pitched battle with D. W. Griffith and his audience." J. Ronald Green, *Straight Lick: The Cinema of Oscar Micheaux* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2000), 1. As evidence, Green cites the choice of a title for Micheaux's third film WITHIN OUR GATES (1929), which, according to Green, rep-

https://doi.org/10.14361/9783839453377 - am 13.02.2026, 21:55:10. https://www.inlibra.com/de/agb - Open Access -

widely discussed political issue, can be seen in advertisements for the film. The *Chicago Defender* announced the premiere of The Symbol of the Unconquered as follows: "See the Ku Klux Klan in action and their annihilation!"[6] One finds a similar advertisement in the *Baltimore African American*: "See the murderous ride of the insidious Ku Klux Klan in their effort to drive a black boy off valuable oil lands – and the wonderful heroism of a traveler to save him!"[7] Explicit references to the Ku Klux Klan were also reflected in reviews of the film. The *New York Age* spoke of "the viciousness and un-Americanism of the Ku Klux Klan which […] is beginning to manifest itself again in certain parts of the United States […]. [The film] is regarded as quite timely in view of the present attempt to organize night riders in this country for the express purpose of holding back the advancement of the Negro."[8] The *Competitor* also notes the film's sociopolitical relevance and affirms:

> "One of the most thrilling and realistic scenes is that of the Ku Klux Klanners, who ride forth 'on the stroke of twelve' to pursue their orgy of destruction and terror. Coming at this time when there is an attempt to revive this post-Civil War force of ignominy and barbarism denounced by the leading people of both races, in speech and editorials, North and South, the effect of disgust and determination are heightened."[9]

Just how important this connection to the present was to Micheaux can be seen in the dramaturgical implementation of the lynching topic. The potential target of the Ku Klux Klan attack is not a former slave who attempts a

---

resents a direct reaction to the first intertitle of Griffith's 1919 film The Romance of Happy Valley that states: "Harm not the stranger within your gates, lest you yourself be hurt." Further connections are not mentioned but are nonetheless possible. For instance, the film's title The Symbol of the Unconquered could indicate an orientation toward an intertitle from The Birth of a Nation that puts the following words in a Ku Klux Klan member's mouth: "Here I raise the ancient symbol of an unconquered race of men, the fiery cross of old Scotland's hills."

6 *Chicago Defender*, November 20, 1920, 6. Quoted in Pearl Bowser and Louise Spence, "Oscar Micheaux's *The Symbol of the Unconquered*: Text and Context," in *Oscar Micheaux & His Circle: African-American Filmmaking and Race Cinema of the Silent Era*, eds. Pearl Bowser, Jane Gaines, and Charles Musser (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2001), 86.

7 *Baltimore African American*, December 31, 1920, 4. Quoted in Ibid.

8 *New York Age*, December 25, 1920, 6. Quoted in Ibid., 87.

9 *The Competitor*, January/February 1921, 61. Quoted in Ibid.

https://doi.org/10.14361/9783839453377 - am 13.02.2026, 21:55:10. https://www.inlibra.com/de/agb - Open Access -

sexual assault on a white woman, as in Griffith, but an aspiring black entrepreneur, whom the profit-hungry Klan members want to kick off of his valuable oil fields. As the film's title already announces, Micheaux focuses not on the history of an inferior victim but on that of a successful resistance against a brutal aggressor. Connected to this theme, on the one hand, is the emphasis on a proudly articulated self-confidence and, on the other hand, the the story of an economic ascent. Micheaux further integrates subcomponents from the popular western genre, whose cinematic conventions he adapts as well as transforms. A clear reference to the western genre is the setting as well as the narrative launching point of the pioneer who attains honestly earned affluence by cultivating newly developed lands. The tension-building element of an attack from without is retained, albeit with a significant new accentuation: the enemies are not "savages", like in the white western film, but the Ku Klux Klan. By appropriating an African American perspective, the conventional framework of being civilized as a genuinely white accomplishment, and being a savage as its opposite, flips, so that the image of brutalization is projected back onto white society.

However, the most concise motif in Micheaux's literary and filmic oeuvre is the theme of race mixing.[10] Building on previously established traditions of narration, Micheaux stages varying dynamics of effect in a complex tableau in which the mixture and superimposition of racial variables is presented both as a sorrowful experience and as a triumphant fantasy of climbing the social ladder. The question of feigned identity, as well as the confusion that results from it within the constellation of characters, represents one of the most well-known and stable genre conventions of the melodrama. Micheaux adopts this paradigm in his films but nevertheless broadens it with a socioeconomic component that is specifically oriented toward an African American audience's expectations.

In The Symbol of the Unconquered, the theme of race mixing is presented within a specific narrative variation, the motif of "passing." This motif entails a form of crossing boundaries wherein "passing," that is, pretending

10 Along with The Symbol of the Unconquered (1920), this topic appears in the films The Homesteader (1918), Within Our Gates (1920), Birthright (1924), A Son of Satan (1924), The House Behind the Cedars (1925), Thirty Years Later (1928), The Exile (1931), Veiled Aristocrats (1932), God's Stepchildren (1937), and The Betrayal (1948), and it also plays a central role in all seven of Micheaux's novels. See Pearl Bowser and Louise Spence, *Writing Himself into History: Oscar Micheaux, His Silent Films, and His Audience* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2000).

https://doi.org/10.14361/9783839453377 - am 13.02.2026, 21:55:10. https://www.inlibra.com/de/agb - Open Access -

to be something else and being recognized as such, is made possible by the visual ambiguity of the hybrid. However, this transgression is bound up in the social hierarchy of racial categorizations, so that passing is synonymous with a black person's crossover into the white sphere and, therefore, into the sphere of social privilege. Judith Butler describes the fascination that originates in such a possibility as follows: "It is the changeability itself, the dream of a metamorphosis, where that changeableness signifies a certain freedom, a class mobility afforded by whiteness that constitutes the power of that seduction."[11] The motif of passing thus presents a type of identity confusion that, as a fantasy of social mobility, involves not only racially determined but also class-structured factors. In The Symbol of the Unconquered, however, passing is not presented as a subversive strategy but with an unequivocally negative connotation. This is shown dramaturgically in the juxtaposition of the protagonist, Hugh Van Allen, with the antagonist, Driscoll, who are both associated with the dream of social mobility but seek to realize this dream in two different ways. Driscoll's decision to present himself as a white person is marked as a perfidious deception that establishes a significant contrast to the sincere work ethic of the hero, Van Allen: "Although Driscoll is motivated by the same drives as the hero […], he acts in unscrupulous ways. He advances his standing, not by hard work and self-denial, but through coercion and deception."[12]

As a projection onto a mixed-race character, Micheaux's embodiment of evil represents a noticeable proximity to Griffith's stigmatizing of the mulatto in the character of Silas Lynch. The crucial difference between the two approaches, however, consists in the moral valuation that justifies the potential threat of racial ambiguity differently in each case. Griffith stages the mulatto as the signifier of a degenerative fusion backed by the fear of a biological infiltration of the white race. On the contrary, Micheaux does not address race mixing primarily as a political issue but presents passing as a form of danger that corresponds with the fear of self-extinction. Driscoll's moral condemnation is not fundamentally connected to his mixed-race ancestry but is based on an attitude of rejection that can be traced back to a lack of group solidarity vis-à-vis black people: "For Micheaux, the problem of miscegenation is not the

11 Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of "Sex"* (New York: Routledge, 1993), 170.

12 Bowser and Spence, *Writing Himself into History*, 160.

https://doi.org/10.14361/9783839453377 - am 13.02.2026, 21:55:10. https://www.inlibra.com/de/agb - Open Access -

mixing of the races but the denial of racial identity and disloyalty that comes from trying to hide one's race."[13]

Despite their differing intentions, both Micheaux and Griffith point to an essentialist logic that links the search for one's racial identity with bipolar models of classification. Thus, Micheaux's cinematic portrayal of passing does not suggest the progressive possibility of the freedom to choose but instead focuses on the process of an intentional deception, which is only made possible by the fact that the antagonist's identity is understood not as an undefined mixture but as a dimorphic form of race. Werner Sollors describes this situation as

> "a moral condemnation of passing on the grounds that it is a form of deception, hence dishonest. Yet this only works as long as it is taken for granted that partial ancestry may have the power to become totally defining. This aspect of passing distinguishes it from true masquerades in which an identity choice need not at all connect with any part of the masked person's particular background. 'Passing' can thus justly be described as a social invention, […] that makes one part of a person's ancestry real, essential and defining."[14]

Sollors denies the configuration of passing any potential for subversion that can be ascribed to other forms of masquerade. By decidedly emphasizing the individual components of mixed-race ancestry, the system of taxonomic models of identification would not be fractured but rather confirmed and solidified. Judith Butler, on the contrary, refers to the universal possibility of irritation of any form of masquerade, through which a clearly definable choice of identity is negated. Because the various determinants of identification always refer to each other, the intended preference of one, as well as the rejection of another, is doomed to failure from the outset. Butler states:

> "If every refusal is, finally, a loyalty to some other bond in the present or the past, refusal is simultaneously preservation as well. The mask thus conceals this loss, but preserves (and negates) this loss through its concealment. . . [I]n effect, it is the signification of the body in the mold of the Other who has been refused. Dominated through appropriation, every refusal fails, and the refuser becomes part of the very identity of the refused, indeed, becomes the psychic refuse of the refused. The loss of the object is never absolute

13 Ibid., 171.

14 Sollors, *Neither Black Nor White*, 249.

https://doi.org/10.14361/9783839453377 - am 13.02.2026, 21:55:10. https://www.inlibra.com/de/agb - Open Access -

> because it is redistributed within a psychic/corporeal boundary that expands to incorporate that loss."[15]

If, therefore, the denial of the Other is a never-ending process of refusal and simultaneous preservation, how and under what conditions is the process of passing able to take place, preferring one option over another and seeking to fix this act both for the subject and for the environment surrounding it?

Driscoll can successfully impersonate a white person not only because he is fair-skinned, but also because he internalizes the norms that constitute whiteness. This act is linked to a form of perception that is structured by the differential organization of values in a society organized around racism, as Judith Butler explains. The act of passing is possible, therefore, "because what can be seen, what qualifies as a visible marker, is a matter of being able to read a marked body in relation to unmarked bodies, where unmarked bodies constitute the currency of normative whiteness."[16] The intentional emphasis on the visual as a necessary prerequisite of encoding and decoding is revealing, not least because it establishes a proximity to cinematic structures of perception. If the act of passing functions as a process of structuring identity via a form of visualization, as seeing and being seen, as acknowledging and denying, as revealing and concealing – what conclusions can then be drawn about film-specific mechanisms of identification?

In The Symbol of the Unconquered, the act of passing is presented as an ambivalent situation that, on the one hand, indicates social mobility but, on the other hand, addresses the danger of isolation and self-extinction in denying one's racial ancestry. Driscoll's strategy of pretending to be white represents the attempt to channel his exterior racial ambivalence by fixing in place a single racial determinant. This decision, however, proves to be not a stabilization of self-confidence but the manifestation of his own insecurity and instability: "Passing highlights an illusory sense of certainty in what is actually an area of social ambiguity and insecurity."[17] In Driscoll's passing, there is no triumph, no final superiority. Instead, Micheaux highlights the malicious calculation of a character who ultimately proves himself to be inferior in the conflict with the protagonist. This characterization appears to be tied to the tradition of stigmatizing biracial characters, but it is nevertheless

15 Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 2006), 67-68.

16 Butler, *Bodies That Matter*, 170.

17 Sollors, *Neither Black Nor White*, 250.

https://doi.org/10.14361/9783839453377 - am 13.02.2026, 21:55:10. https://www.inlibra.com/de/agb - Open Access -

expanded in Micheaux by a narrative commentary that opens up a new frame of reference:

> "In Chenault's intentional, purely calculated passing, we see him as twofaced as well as two-raced, the latter attributable to the former, almost like the duplicitous mulattoes in Griffith's *The Birth of a Nation*, but with the notable difference that in *The Symbol of the Unconquered*, the Jefferson Driscoll character's race hatred is attributed to a trauma, which, while an excuse, is still an attempt to explain his behaviour rather than to attribute it to a racially flawed nature."[18]

In her observations, Jane Gaines alludes to Micheaux's psychologizing character development, which ties Driscoll's ambivalent constitution of identity to traumatic experiences. Within psychoanalysis, trauma is defined as a severe psychic experience that overwhelms the ego and subjects its identity to an eruption with serious consequences. Laplanche and Pontalis characterize this process as an "event in the subject's life that is defined by its intensity, the subject's inability to adequately respond to it, and the shock and permanent pathogenic effects that it elicits in the organization of the psyche."[19] Micheaux stages this scenario in the form of a flashback that directly follows Driscoll's first appearance onscreen. Like Griffith, Micheaux combines the visual introduction of the mixed-race character with an explanatory intertitle that ostentatiously emphasizes the antagonist's racial identity: "Jefferson Driscoll, one of the many mulattos who conceal their origins." The subsequent close-up shows Driscoll's fearfully distorted face, whose frightened expression is additionally emphasized by an iris shot. In the subsequent sequence, the viewer learns the background of Driscoll's obvious insecurity.

The first shot shows Driscoll with a light-skinned woman in the scenery of a summer garden, whereby their facing each other and touching each other's hands suggest the delicate intimacy of a couple. This romanticized idyll, nevertheless, is at the same time staged as a terrain of insecurity and instability. The intertitle that introduces the flashback, "Since that cursed moment," already establishes an atmosphere of fateful danger; furthermore, the contrasting juxtaposition of the woman's white dress and Driscoll's dark suit

18 Jane Gaines, *Fire & Desire: Mixed-Race Movies in the Silent Era* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001), 271.

19 Jean Laplanche and Jean-Bertrand Pontalis, *Das Vokabular der Psychoanalyse* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1999 [1972]), 513.

https://doi.org/10.14361/9783839453377 - am 13.02.2026, 21:55:10. https://www.inlibra.com/de/agb - Open Access -

establishes an opposition based on a dramaturgy of color, which implies a conflictual, rather than balanced, relation between the two characters. This impression is reinforced by the fact that Micheaux follows this with a shot that focuses on the young woman's suddenly irritated facial expression in a close-up, whereby an iris shot draws the viewer's eye to her frantically moving eyes. The cause of this disturbance is demonstrated in a montage that shows, in a quick succession of shots, first a dark-skinned woman on the other side of the street, then the couple in the garden, and finally the woman again, whose initial surprise rapidly condenses into an expression of exuberant joy. But here as well, the demonstration of a feeling of happiness is presented as an ambivalent snapshot, as is made plain by a medium long shot in which an obscure shadow pattern crosses over the woman's face. The extent of the looming catastrophe becomes apparent as the plot continues: beaming with joy and arms wide open, the woman approaches the couple in the garden, and her lips form the words "My son" when she recognizes Driscoll. While his mother hugs and kisses him, the young woman, appalled, throws up her hands in front of her face and hastily exits the scene.

Figure 6: Jefferson Driscoll: A Secret is Revealed

Tying back to the first intertitle, this is followed by an explanation: "In which his mother had involuntarily betrayed the secret of his race". Driscoll's reaction subsequently erupts into a severe, emotional outburst: he berates his

https://doi.org/10.14361/9783839453377 - am 13.02.2026, 21:55:10. https://www.inlibra.com/de/agb - Open Access -

mother, chokes her, and throws her to the ground; then, in a stroke of perplexed helplessness, tears his hair out, raises his arms to the sky gesticulating, and finally throws up his hands in front of his eyes in resignation. The result of this painful experience is explained in the subsequent intertitle: "Driscoll had developed a ferocious hatred for the black race, from which he was born."

In The Symbol of the Unconquered, Driscoll's internalized racial hatred is staged as an elaborate flashback. This dramaturgical tool enables Micheaux to include a past stage in time in the present plot and, therefore, to portray a complex nexus of the effects of various temporal relations that overlap and comment on one another. Dina Ciraulo recognizes a structural aesthetic in this approach that represents a notable deviation from established models of narration:

> "As a structuring device, the flashback breaks up the linearity of the narrative and creates a story that weaves in and out of different moments in time. In opposition to classical Hollywood narratives, which use flashbacks for plot development, Micheaux uses these moments as story digressions, taking the viewer away from the 'official' action of the film and into a background story."[20]

Ciraulo concedes a particular form of cinematic authority to the flashback that interrupts the film's linear plot and enriches the narration with new layers of meaning. If one applies this model to the dynamics of modes of racial representation, Micheaux's filmic staging of trauma can be understood as a site of ambivalence that is produced at the periphery of the closed narration. Lola Young points out the fact that the act of passing itself already involves destabilizing the temporal continuum: "'Passing' requires the denial of temporal continuities: the past, the present and the future represent danger and have to be disavowed and constantly reconstructed."[21] Passing links identificatory ambivalence with a temporal ambivalence, since the self-chosen, self-constructed identity can be located neither in the past, nor in the present, nor in the future. Rather, it is constantly bound to the horror of concealing, denying, and whitewashing. This polyvalent crossing of past and present contexts of designation are reflected in a film-specific way through the form of a flashback. Dina Ciraulo states: "It [the flashback] shows that the past is not

20 Dina Ciraulo, "Narrative Style in Oscar Micheaux's *Within Our Gates*," *Wide Angle* 2, no. 4 (1998), 84.

21 Young, *Fear of the Dark*, 94.

https://doi.org/10.14361/9783839453377 - am 13.02.2026, 21:55:10. https://www.inlibra.com/de/agb - Open Access -

just an individual's set of experiences, nor a singular dominant rendering of events, but a criss-crossing of numerous and diverse conditions over time that affects both the individual and the community."[22] In this context, special meaning is imparted to the moment of remembrance, whose effects, like the pathogenic effects of trauma, develop a superordinate dynamics. Ciraulo explains: "Memory bursts into the present tense of the narrative with material force. That is to say, images that represent memories are not ephemeral or fantastical. Rather memory has a function in the narrative that, while being autonomous, gives resonance and depth to the story."[23] The form of filmic remembrance described by Ciraulo indicates an ambivalent complex of denial and retention, which must be understood as a process of negotiation that is never completed. In Oscar Micheaux, this complex proves to be a conglomeration of acquisition and repudiation, which, on the level of the medium, comes to light in the form of an adaptation and negation of established film standards. Furthermore, this conglomeration is presented in a thematic configuration as a psychic experience that points to the instability and incongruence of models of racial identification.

In The Symbol of the Unconquered, this presentation of the ambivalence of finding one's racial identity is significantly augmented by the portrayal of yet another mixed-raced character. The light-skinned Eve Mason, whose brave, sincere behavior stylizes her as a heroine, acts as a counter-balance to the cunning antagonist Driscoll. Ronald Green describes Micheaux's female characters as follows: "Women in Micheaux's work, as distinct from Griffith's, are characterized by agency, activity, and subjecthood."[24] A comparison to Griffith's female characters is fruitful due to the fact that Griffith, as one of the most successful directors of early film history, established the standardized framework of film characters as well as a starting point for film-specific forms of female idealization. Green explains this system of encoding with respect to the female star Lillian Gish and states:

> "Griffith's Gish [...] represents the flower of aristocratic, bourgeois, and middle-class women who have been martyred (Flora in *Birth*), who might require martyrdom (the young women trapped in the cabin surrounded by black militiamen in *Birth*) or who (preferably) remain racially and sexually unscathed through the agency and intervention of white men and

22 Ciraulo, "Narrative Style", 83.
23 Ibid., 88-89.
24 Green, *Straight Lick*, 8.

https://doi.org/10.14361/9783839453377 - am 13.02.2026, 21:55:10. https://www.inlibra.com/de/agb - Open Access -

> loyal black servants. Gish is the ideal bourgeois marriage partner under the system raised up by Griffith from the ruins of southern aristocracy. Thus, Griffith's and Gish's reconstructed 'southern' woman is an avatar of a previous aristocratic ideal."[25]

The defining criterion within the characterization of female characters in Griffith consists of the stylization of the woman as a potential victim that must be protected and defended. In Birth of a Nation, this principle is conspicuously, distinctly worked out and emotively reshaped by applying it to a national context: Lillian Gish does not only represent the Northern Stoneman family's daughter who is sexually harassed; in addition, she allegorically stands for the young nation threatened by revolts, whose protect is declared to be the highest goal of a value system based on difference. In Griffith, the task of defending national unity is assigned to the virile hero, whose heroic actions are able to protect both the virtuous, white woman and the sense of belonging in American society.

Oscar Micheaux's filmmaking was not without influence from these artistic standards. Micheaux not only evaluated but also adopted many of the cinematic parameters formulated and expounded by Griffith. The prominent depiction and thematic incorporation of the Ku Klux Klan alone represent an impressive example of this principle.

Contrary to Griffith, the adherents to the Klan are not presented as rescuers bringing salvation but as aggressive assailants. Thus, the oppositional good/bad schema is preserved in its melodramatic function on the one hand but, on the other hand, reciprocally reversed in its ideological intentions. This form of transformation and modulation also extends to the constellation of characters. Unlike in Griffith, in Micheaux, the saving of the victim, is not incumbent on a male hero but put into action by the determined Eve Mason, who undermines the audience's conventional expectations: "In this scene Micheaux once again turns the tables on custom and expectation, playing up the anomaly – a black woman in buckskin riding against the Klan on her thundering steed!"[26]

In this context, not only the film aesthetic staging of the Ku Klux Klan in its allusion to Griffith's extensive panoramic shots is striking. Just as well, the quotation of cross-cutting, which combines the endangered victim with her

25 Ibid., 10.

26 Gaines, *Fire & Desire*, 213.

https://doi.org/10.14361/9783839453377 - am 13.02.2026, 21:55:10. https://www.inlibra.com/de/agb - Open Access -

Figure 7: The Attack of the Ku Klux Klan

imminent rescue, is worth nothing. Griffith's artistically elaborate presentation of the "last minute rescue" had set standards of form and style due to its innovative linkage of shots. Micheaux adapts the principle of rhythmic editing from alternating shots, whereby both the bright lighting of the potential victim, Van Allen, and the heightened position of the rescuer on horseback, in the figure of Eve Mason, recall Griffith's filmic staging in The Birth of a Nation. This parallel is completed by a narrative opposition that portrays the Ku Klux Klan not – as in Griffith – as an instance of defensive liberation but as the original aggressor who must be fought against and subdued. It is this form of appropriation and simultaneous innovation that makes Micheaux's cinematic address to an African American audience effective as a political statement, as Pearl Bowser and Louise Spence explain: "By centering the African American experience, he [Micheaux] offered a bold critique of American society. To understand the scope and complexity of this critique, we must see it […] as a political enterprise that both codified the values of the time and attempted to mold them."[27]

Like Griffith, Micheaux shapes his depiction of racial ambivalence by presenting two mixed-race characters: one male, one female. Even the way that

27 Bowser and Spence, *Writing Himself into History*, 164.

https://doi.org/10.14361/9783839453377 - am 13.02.2026, 21:55:10. https://www.inlibra.com/de/agb - Open Access -

the characters are introduced, which leaves no doubt about each one's racial identity,[28] recalls Griffith's narrative system. Unlike in Griffith, however, in Micheaux, the figure of the mulatto/a is not constructed as a general sign of danger or sinister degeneracy but of a polymorphism that can take on both positive and negative traits.

As early as their first meeting, Eve Mason is presented as the protagonist Hugh Van Allen's potential love interest. In the process, both the affectionate gazes and the erotically connoted body language of both characters imply a future relationship between the two.

Figure 8: Hugh Van Allen and Eve Mason

Micheaux stresses this constellation by repeatedly showing both faces turned toward each other in a close-up as well as tender gestures such as the gentle caressing of hands. Still, their developing love does not find any fulfillment for the time being, for Hugh Van Allen is not aware of Eve's racial background and thinks she is white. This identity confusion typical of melodrama, which at first causes one's future love interest to seem unsuitable, is

28 Eve Mason's racial background is depicted in a sequence that shows her at her grandfather's deathbed, an "old negro prospector," identifying her as his "white-skinned granddaughter." Even more explicit is the introduction of the male mixed-race character the announcing intertitle: "Jefferson Driscoll, one of the many mulattos who conceal their origins."

https://doi.org/10.14361/9783839453377 - am 13.02.2026, 21:55:10. https://www.inlibra.com/de/agb - Open Access -

resolved at the end of the film. After several years, Van Allen, who meanwhile has become prosperous due to the oil reserves on his land, receives an official letter that enlightens him about Eve's ancestry: "…and we sent you Miss Eve Mason, who has rendered a great service to the cause of the black race; despite her white skin, Miss Eve is born of black parents. You will be able to give her your contribution without fear. – The Committee for the Defense of the Colored Race." The subsequent shot shows Van Allen's at first surprised, then relieved, facial expression. A further intertitle explains: "Bewildered, Van Allen, who had always believed that Eve was white and had never dared to declare his love for fear of being scornfully rejected, sees the barrier that had separated them fall away."

Figure 9: Happy Ending

Neither Eve's physical gestures of affection, nor her whimsical, enamored gazes, nor her brave actions during a situation that threatens Van Allen could unite the two lovers – only the discovery of her black ancestors can explain the two characters' relationship and represents, therefore, the constituent element of the "happy ending." Again, however, Eve's actions that drive the plot are foregrounded: she is the one who takes the initiative by looking for Van Allen after several years and personally delivering the letter to him. With this narrative approach, the most important criterion of difference between Eve Mason and Jefferson Driscoll is unambiguously highlighted: while Driscoll

https://doi.org/10.14361/9783839453377 - am 13.02.2026, 21:55:10. https://www.inlibra.com/de/agb - Open Access -

seeks to hide his true identity, denies his ancestry and, therefore, proves himself to be disloyal not only to his own mother but also to the entire black race, Eve's pride in her racial background is presented as a noble character trait that is rewarded with the victorious hero's love. Thus, it is not mixed-race descent that is the problem but merely the question of how to deal with it. Micheaux offers a simple answer by creating two opposing paths to a solution: that of an ominous self-denial and that of a triumphant self-affirmation. Within Micheaux's universe, the Self is nevertheless not to be understood as racial ambivalence but as a form of identity that is primarily derived from ancestry, or more precisely, from *black* ancestry. The superimposition of white signifiers is not problematic here, but, rather, the identificatory concentration on these signifiers to the detriment of black variables that must be repressed or rejected. The rigid division into two, distinct spheres of effect, to which the potential for both positive and negative effects are respectively ascribed, corresponds exactly to the good/bad opposition of classical melodrama, only with the difference that Micheaux adapts the intended moral message to the expectations of an African-American audience and transforms the binary schema into such a way that causes the good to appear black and the bad to appear white.

Jefferson Driscoll's cooperation with the Ku Klux Klan represents his neurotic efforts to insure his identity as a white man. To secure this status, he chooses the very form of intimidation and terror that he himself would have to expect were his racial background known to the other Klansmen. Disguising himself with the white robes and helmet of the Klan exhibits a type of masking that makes the constitution of racial identity seem to be a performative exterior. At the same time, paradoxically, the limits of this process become nonetheless obvious and at the very moment when he excludes himself from being black, which is indispensable for the construction of his white identity. The Ku Klux Klan's ideology is defined by the claim to solidify the dominance of a privileged race by subordinating an inferior one. If there is no antagonist to terrorize or discipline, the force of the oppression starts to run out of steam. Those in power must constantly produce their own difference in order to be effective and secure their authority.

Driscoll's ambivalent status of simultaneously being perpetrator and victim, his being trapped between the posture of oppressor and the status of inferiority, destroys the balance of a binary opposition. At the visual level, this ambiguity manifests itself in a mechanism of disruption that causes the image of threatened whiteness to appear fragile. Pearl Bowser and Louise Spence

https://doi.org/10.14361/9783839453377 - am 13.02.2026, 21:55:10. https://www.inlibra.com/de/agb - Open Access -

explain: "Lawrence Chenault's appearance and performance style throughout the film – his chalky make-up; his outlined eyes and arched eyebrows; his tense, often flailing arms and hunched shoulders; the rigidity of his body and the vehemence of his gestures – express a man driven by fear."[29] Micheaux augments this presentation of ambivalence with further commentaries that make not only Driscoll's position as oppressor seem fragile and unstable but also the whole organization of the Ku Klux Klan. Each Klansman introduced by name in intertitles confirms the incongruence of an ideology whose claim to superiority is undermined by the instance of carrying it out. This includes, for example, "Tugi, an Indian fakir" and "The half-breed Philip Clark", a horse thief whose ambivalent identity is additionally stressed by the explicit reference to his booty, "two half-blooded Arabian blacks." Overall, this type of representation evokes a mechanism of compensation that presents the terror of the Klan as an attempt at self-defense, which serves to stabilize the identity for which it strives.

Driscoll's aggression and hostility toward Eve can primarily be explained by the moment of identificatory recognition, wherein lies the fear of being unmasked, the fear that his carefully staged masquerade will be destroyed. In contrast to Van Allen, who initially misinterprets Eve's ethnicity, Driscoll recognizes Eve's racial identity without being made aware of her lineage, as an intertitle from his perspective attests: "But if her skin is white, her eyes betray her origins."

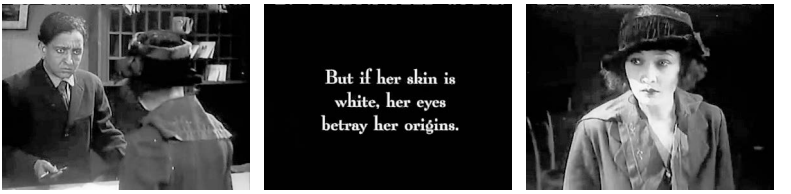


Figure 10: Jefferson Driscoll and Eve Mason

Driscoll's perception evinces a particular type of vision: it is not necessarily Eve's race that is discovered, but blackness itself is shown as being labelled as a recognizable sign of particularity amid the universality of whiteness surrounding it. Contrary to the genre-specific convention of unmask-

29 Ibid., 168.

https://doi.org/10.14361/9783839453377 - am 13.02.2026, 21:55:10. https://www.inlibra.com/de/agb - Open Access -

ing, whereby one's true identity is revealed when one's disguise is torn off, Micheaux's approach entails a portrayal whose subversive potential lies in the discovery of the fact that the supposed mystery is not one at all. Driscoll's reaction implies the institutionalization of a denial – the more distinctly he recognizes the inefficiency of masquerade, the more intensely he strives for its validating effects.

The phenomenon of passing, as it is conveyed in The Symbol of the Unconquered, is most intimately tied to processes of visualization. Jane Gaines connects this aspect to the medium-specificity of spectatorship and states:

> "Passing here is a paradigm for exposing; it is about exposure, about seeing and unseeing, even about overlooking, here in the sense of the inability to see the one race in the other. It is at this point that passing presents itself as a paradigm for spectatorship, for if the practice of passing involves overlooking blackness, viewing race movies as black culture entails overlooking whiteness."[30]

Oscar Micheaux's work as a director of "race movies" with an "all colored cast" explicitly formulates the claim to make the black experience legible for a black movie audience. With this approach, he creates a racially specialized space, which seems to invert the dominant white cinema's racist mechanism of exclusion. Gaines' comparison of this cinematic practice with the performance of a "passer," however, evinces a form of hybridity in which the dialectic of visible and invisible becomes fragile. According to Gaines, if one sees race movies as genuinely black cultural products, one does not act much differently from a passer's audience who is fooled by his or her masquerade. Both cases concern the visual privileging of certain vectors within a conglomeration of racial determinants – of the whiteness in the black and the blackness in the white. In relation to Oscar Micheaux's filmmaking, the question arises as to how the overlooked trace of whiteness in the black is constituted and how it relates to the media aesthetics of race movies.

In fact, Oscar Micheaux's casting and promotional strategies were closely related to the dominant codes of the Hollywood system. Charlene Regester mentions "the physical characteristics Micheaux associated with desirable black man of the time: a light complexion, European facial features (i.e.

30 Gaines, *Fire & Desire*, 271.

https://doi.org/10.14361/9783839453377 - am 13.02.2026, 21:55:10. https://www.inlibra.com/de/agb - Open Access -

straight hair, thin noses and lips), and a relatively tall stature."[31] Micheaux's preferred external attributes established a significant proximity to the standards of the white-dominated star system, whose appeal he would adapt and utilize: "Many of Micheaux's leading male actors, such as Carmen Newsome and Lorenzo Tucker, were chosen in part because they closely paralleled the physical attractions of white stars [...]. It was no accident that Micheaux's male actors were billed as the 'Black Valentinos' or 'Black Gables' of the motion picture screen."[32]

The tradition of using black stereotypes reveals a mechanism of effect, initiated and continuously reproduced by whites, whose function consisted in integrating the category "black" into a narrative system. As objects of humor, black caricatures became a representative norm that was meant to define the demarcation of the "Other" and confirm and stabilize the ideology of white superiority. The appeal of this topos, according to Anna Everett, can primarily be explained by the desire to construct and consume that which is foreign: "We must see the racial discourses in films and all our media for what they are: significations of the return of the nation's repressed ideology of white supremacy replete with its concomitant pleasure in constructing, containing, and ultimately consuming the other."[33] In the face of this discourse, which established the pejorative depiction of black characters as a benchmark and measure of demarcation in relation to the ideological superiority of whiteness, the question arises as to which function such caricatures are able to assume in an altered context of reception, namely that of race movies.

Homi Bhabha explains the problem of contingency of stereotypical representations as follows:

> "The stereotype is not a signification because it is a false representation of a given reality. It is a simplification because it is an arrested, fixated form of representation that, in denying the play of difference (which the negation through the Other permits), constitutes a problem for the *representation* of the subject in significations of psychic and social relations."[34]

---

31 Charlene Regester, "Oscar Micheaux's Multifaceted Portrayals of the African-American Male: The *Good*, the *Bad*, and the *Ugly*," in *Me Jane: Masculinity, Movies and Women*, eds. Pat Kirkham and Janet Thumim (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1995), 177.

32 Ibid.

33 Anna Everett, "The Other Pleasures: The Narrative Function of Race in the Cinema," *Film Criticism* 20, no. 1 and 2 (1995), 37.

34 Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1994), 107.

https://doi.org/10.14361/9783839453377 - am 13.02.2026, 21:55:10. https://www.inlibra.com/de/agb - Open Access -

According to Bhabha, the marking of racial typology in the stereotype takes place in a limited terrain of the fixated, in a space that thwarts the circulation of varying elements of signification through a particular form of arrest. Bhabha assumes, then, that cultural codification by means of negative stereotypes entails a power-stabilizing position within the colonial discourse, a "strategic articulation of 'coordinates of knowledge' – racial and sexual – and their inscription in the play of colonial power as modes of differentiation, defence, fixation, hierarchization."[35] The claim of such a strategy includes the confirmation of an ideological dominance that specifies the white ruler as the superior antecedent and the black subordinate as the inferior successor. The effect of disciplining via stereotyping opens up the possibility of a normative codification that repels and oppresses other forms of cultural articulation. Bhabha notes:

> "The myth of historical origination – racial purity, cultural priority – produced in relation to the colonial stereotype functions to 'normalize' the multiple beliefs and split subjects that constitute colonial discourse as a consequence of its process of disavowal."[36]

Homi Bhabha conceives of the stereotype as an arrested form of representation within a discursive field of identification, whose fixation serves to stabilize the colonial system of rule. Directly involved in this schema is an ideological fixation, a "*fixity* as racism."[37] In the context of Oscar Micheaux's cinematics, the question thus arises whether his functionalization of racial stereotypes entails a mere subjugation of the dominant system of representation or if one can detect approaches that are able to oppose the arrest of signification.

Judith Butler has argued for the possibility that the subject is appropriated not only by terminology but that it itself can appropriate terminology and thereby bring movement into the apparently closed discourse formations:

> "There is no subject prior to its constructions, and neither is the subject determined by those constructions; it is always the nexus, the non-space of cultural collision, in which the demand to resignify or repeat the very terms which constitute the 'we' cannot be summarily refused, but neither can they be followed in strict obedience. It is the space of this ambivalence which

35 Ibid., 105.
36 Ibid., 106.
37 Ibid., 108.

https://doi.org/10.14361/9783839453377 - am 13.02.2026, 21:55:10. https://www.inlibra.com/de/agb - Open Access -

> opens up the possibility of a reworking of the very terms by which subjectivation proceeds – and fails to proceed."[38]

If one applies this statement to Oscar Micheaux's filmmaking, one may argue that Micheaux's appropriation of Hollywood-specific stylistics and aesthetics represents a reproduction of hegemonic power that fails to exactly reproduce something and that, in this failure, creates possibilities of resignifying concepts of injury against their injurious purpose. This approach becomes salient in Micheaux's presentation of racial ambiguity, which can be interpreted as a critical commentary on those norms that structure and stabilize mechanisms of identification.

The explicit focus on passing as an ambivalent act of retaining and denying reveals the absurdity of racist interpretations, to the extent that it seeks to fixate that which itself already represents an imitation of identity construction. Paradoxically, Jefferson Driscoll is able to discern Eve's race with a single look into her eyes, while Hugh Van Allen fails at the task of deciphering Eve's racial identity by means of visual signifiers. Most authors chalk up this narrative incongruence to the demands of melodrama genre conventions. Beyond this explanation, however, it becomes clear that the way Micheaux plays with assigning and rejecting racial attributes lays bare an ambivalence that thematizes the false obviousness of racial images. Oscar Micheaux's cinematic staging, which repeatedly draws the viewer's eye to the eyes of characters in close-ups and iris shots, and which causes the characters' appearances to nevertheless seem obscure and opaque by means of lighting strategies that even out the shades, presents racial identification as an unstable process.

Each identification includes the loss of other identifications, whereby a compulsory approximation of discursive norms is inevitable. Conversely, this process allows the characters to nevertheless destabilize identification, which takes place to the extent that the norm fails to thoroughly determine the subject. The opposition of both mixed-race characters, Eve Mason and Jefferson Driscoll, presents the ambiguity of racial signification as a repeatedly interrupted reading process. Eve Mason, in compliance with the dominant code of representation, is perceived by other characters as white due to her light skin color. Jefferson Driscoll, however, a mulatto just like Eve, opposes these normative requirements of signification, as he decodes her race as a fundamental paradox: "But if her skin is white, her eyes betray her origins." The

38 Butler, *Bodies That Matter*, 124.

https://doi.org/10.14361/9783839453377 - am 13.02.2026, 21:55:10. https://www.inlibra.com/de/agb - Open Access -

first interruption is complemented by a further disruption included in it, and even this disruption proves to have a double meaning, since it applies to two metadiscursive structures. At first, it seems astonishing that Driscoll does not discover Eve's race based on those attributes that, according to a biologistic taxonomy, display racial characteristics, such as frizzy hair or full lips. Instead, his detective abilities rely on an organ that has little relevance as a signifier of racial background and, therefore, is little useful when verifying an assumed identity. Even if Driscoll's interpretation of Eve's identity using her appearance seems to succeed and hit the mark, the irritating implausibility of such a mechanism of recognition remains: the interpretation could just as well be a misinterpretation; the reading process itself is presented as a site of ambivalence that is produced at the limits of discursive legitimacy. If we now relate this process to the perceptual process of racial identification conveyed in Micheaux's film, it becomes clear that the fixation of stabilizing norms is undermined by various mechanisms of movement. Both the thematization of a fragile consistency of interpretation, which confronts the successful interpretation with its own failure, and the implicit reference to meanings that circulate outside of the filmic image set up a recontextualization that makes the fixation of individual determinants within the signification system impossible.

These movements can be simultaneously traced in Micheaux's functionalization and instrumentalization of stereotypical forms of representation. Micheaux's appropriation of exaggerated types from the minstrel tradition have often been interpreted as the articulation of a pathological self-hatred.[39] The proponents of this perspective notably start from a repetitive structure within the adaptation process, from a reproduction of standardized conventions, that a priori excludes any space of autonomy. The staging of black caricatures in The Symbol of the Unconquered shows, however, that Micheaux embeds stereotypes into a context of reception that effects not only an aesthetic appropriation but also, simultaneously, a cultural interaction. For example, the way that the clown-like figure of Abraham is portrayed is reminiscent of the "coon" type, the central object of humor in the minstrel repertoire. Rolling his eyes and making faces, Abraham at first seems to take on the function of comic relief, but the film's narrative nevertheless never acknowledges this portrayal. Abraham's exaggerated, silly body language,

39 Joseph A. Young, *Black Novelist as White Racist: The Myth of Black Inferiority in the Novels of Oscar Micheaux* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1989) and Cripps, *Slow Fade to Black*.

https://doi.org/10.14361/9783839453377 - am 13.02.2026, 21:55:10. https://www.inlibra.com/de/agb - Open Access -

which surprises Eve during the night at Driscoll's hotel, does not amuse but frightens and irritates. Filled with fear and insecurity, Eve backs away from the threatening figure in the dark instead of reacting with amused laughter – and thus enables a type of reception for the viewer that is able to similarly distance itself from the caricature depicted. Pearl Bowser and Louise Spence remark: "Micheaux has constructed the characters on the level of gesture, makeup, dress and performance style as stereotypes but has deliberately given them a narrative function that subverts the stereotype, so that kowtowing to whites becomes not simply servility but an act of betrayal."[40]

By relieving the stereotype of the black comedian of its actual function, a transformation occurs that transfers the effect of a degrading depiction onto an expanded frame of reference. This is not an appropriation of the dominant culture that remains subject to its specifications. Rather, these specifications are reshaped in the process of appropriation by suggesting a capacity for action that can modulate and modify power in and as discourse. This mechanism of resignification becomes even more salient in the reversal of standardized forms of representation in the form of costumes that juxtapose traditional "blackface" with the masquerade of "whiteface." Oscar Micheaux's concept of an "all colored cast," an ensemble of exclusively African-American actors, exhibits a casting strategy that allowed both the black and white characters in his films to be portrayed by black actors. Therefore, not only blackness is revealed as performative but whiteness as well: as a cloak that can be taken on and off and that, due to its externalization, is marked as a disguise. In a figurative sense, even the greatest possible hyperbolization of whiteness, the hood of the Ku Klux Klan, proves to be a mask that hides the black interior behind a white exterior and thus forfeits any claim to an original purity. Through the overt display of this disguise, hegemonic whiteness portrays itself as an ongoing, constantly repeated attempt to imitate its own ideals in order to defend its claim to originality. The subversive potential of performative "whiteface" becomes visible in the arbitrary relationship between the

40 Bowser and Spence, *Writing Himself into History*, 154. Bowser and Spence are not explicitly referring to The Symbol of the Unconquered in their analysis but justify their observations with examples from other Micheaux films. The plethora of examples that they mention suggests that the noted functionalization of the minstrel stereotype does not entail a single staging but a complex strategy that Micheaux continuously presented and modified.

https://doi.org/10.14361/9783839453377 - am 13.02.2026, 21:55:10. https://www.inlibra.com/de/agb - Open Access -

acts, that is, in the possibility of failing at a repetition or of transferring it to a deformation that reveals the effect of racial identity as a politically weak construction.

In any case, it would be imprecise to speak of a mere reversal of standardized norms at the expense of the dominant culture's hegemonic claims. For in that moment in which the black actor disguised as a black person appears next to a black actor disguised as a white person, a double imitation appears that is manifested as a discourse, which occurs within the rules that it has constructed as well as simultaneously defies them. This form of ambivalent depiction can be explained by the concept of mimicry, whose mechanics Jacques Lacan describes as follows:

> "Mimicry reveals something in so far as it is distinct from what might be called an *itself* that is behind. The effect of mimicry is camouflage. . . It is not a question of harmonizing with the background but, against a mottled background, of becoming mottled—exactly like the technique of camouflage practised in human warfare."[41]

Lacan's concept of camouflage illustrates the fact that mimicry does not pursue the goal of a deceptive illusion but establishes a polyvalent depiction that translates the various forms of difference into a conglomeration that both appropriates and denies those differences. This practice of meaning shows how the apparently static effects of symbolic order are prone to subversive repetition and resignification. Because as imitations that shift the meaning of the original, they imitate the mythos of originality itself. Homi Bhabha compares this shift to the mechanism of substituting a fetish and explains:

> "Under cover of camouflage, mimicry, like the fetish, is a part-object that radically revalues the normative knowledges of the priority of race, writing, history. For the fetish mimes the forms of authority at the point at which it deauthorizes them. Similarly, mimicry rearticulates presence in terms of its 'otherness', that which it disavows."[42]

In relation to Oscar Micheaux's varying forms of racial masquerade, this means that the normative meaning of the stereotype is simultaneously activated and deactivated and thereby creates an effect that results in the

41 Jacques Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psycho-Analysis*, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Karnac, 1977), 99.

42 Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, 130.

https://doi.org/10.14361/9783839453377 - am 13.02.2026, 21:55:10. https://www.inlibra.com/de/agb - Open Access -

decentering of power relations. Oscar Micheaux's thematization of the process of racial identification displays an approach that exposes the politics of polarity to a significant disturbance of its equilibrium. Because the fixed sign of the stereotype is freed from its own arrest and set in motion, the question of assimilating cultural meanings into a unifying sign becomes obsolete. In the process, the ambivalence of signification in the space of cultural negotiation of the in-between is revealed at the point of representative articulation of identity as an inextricable intersection of Self and Other.

Since the rediscovery and initial discussions of Oscar Micheaux's oeuvre within film studies, a debate about the assessment of the achievements in form and style in race movies, in general and in Micheaux's films, has developed whose controversial discussions continue to this day. A frequently reiterated position explains Micheaux's achievements in relation to Hollywood film techniques of the time and comes to the conclusion that Micheaux's films are aesthetically inferior in comparison. Thus, Thomas Cripps speaks of an "amateurish, almost naive artlessness,"[43] and Donald Bogle states: "In most cases the Micheaux feature was similar to the Hollywood product, only technically inferior."[44] In recent years, an alternative perspective on Oscar Micheaux's filmmaking has developed, which seeks to reappraise the formal-aesthetic elements within his cinematic practice. Diana Ciraulo notes: "Oscar Micheaux challenges dominant accounts of history and race relations by using an unusual filmic approach to single shots and to larger narrative constructions."[45] Ciraulo characterizes Micheaux's stylistics as documentary in the sense that, like early forms of film at the turn of the century, it enables a distance between the observer and the observed by means of a static camera. The effect of these formal means consists in a form of reality construction that assigns a new place to black everyday life within mass culture and, in this way, critically calls into question the conventional standards of a genuinely white historiography:

> "Like many single shot films of the 1890's, in which a static camera records 'reality,' Micheaux's shots are reminiscent of 'actualities' or documentary style recordings of events. […] The 'reality' Micheaux documents is daily black life and race relations in the United States. The shots testify to a need to create a center space for African Americans in mass culture, and a necessity to hear

43 Cripps, *Slow Fade to Black*, 183.
44 Bogle, *Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies, and Bucks*, 115.
45 Ciraulo, "Narrative Style", 76.

https://doi.org/10.14361/9783839453377 - am 13.02.2026, 21:55:10. https://www.inlibra.com/de/agb - Open Access -

> their stories with some objectivity, so that the 'official' historical accounts of black/white relationships can be called into question."[46]

Ronald Green also argues that Oscar Micheaux's aesthetics represents an orientation toward early film stylistics rather than a more or less unsuccessful assimilation of illusionistic Hollywood standards. He emphasizes: "Micheaux's style might be understood better as a retention of early film traits, from before the advent of glossy illusionism, then as a failed imitation of White Movies."[47] Claudia Bialasiewicz recognizes a potential for resistance in Oscar Micheaux's stylistics, which she sees as connected to the requirements of film producing: "A low-budget film's 'counter-aesthetics,' where its particular strength often lies, is also always bound to a political statement about the conditions of producing."[48] Yet another approach to the formal-aesthetic achievements of early race movies is offered by Jane Gaines, who locates Oscar Michaeux's filmmaking within a discourse of cultural intersection. In doing so, Gaines distances herself from those essentialist approaches that discuss the influence of African American filmmakers exclusively in terms of a desired or failed attempt at assimilation. Instead, she emphasizes an approach that confronts the rigid disjunction of an either/or with the aesthetic juxtaposition of a both/and:

> "Thus I would argue that these films are the most subversive in the very way that they have been claimed to be the most reactionary. While we might want race movies to be both authentically black and formally experimental [...], if they are politically avant-garde, indeed even subversive, it is at the level of the white-like aesthetic, the same aesthetic for which they were so sharply criticized in their time. This is the aesthetic that reintroduces the problem of skin color with every attempt to claim race movies for black culture. [...] Race movies were aesthetic impurities in every sense."[49]

Jane Gaines clarifies the aesthetic claims of race movies in terms of a type of film that mixes form and style, whose potential for subversion can be explained by the alternating interdependence of various artistic approaches.

---

46 Ibid., 79.

47 J. Ronald Green, "'Twoness' in the Style of Oscar Micheaux," in Diawara, Manthia (Hrsg.). *Black American Cinema*, ed. Manthia Diawara (New York: Routledge, 1993), 40.

48 Claudia Bialasiewicz, *Stationen afroamerikanischer Filmgeschichte* (Alfeld, Leine: Coppi, 1998), 45.

49 Gaines, *Fire & Desire*, 272.

https://doi.org/10.14361/9783839453377 - am 13.02.2026, 21:55:10. https://www.inlibra.com/de/agb - Open Access -

According to Gaines, the traces of whiteness in blackness are not only manifested thematically but also in the medium's instance of mediation – on the narrative level, whose preferred object is identity confusion, as well as on the level of formal style, which Gaines describes as "mise-en-scène of mixture."[50]

Race movies can be understood as a political impulse to the extent that they produce racial ambivalences in filmic form whose aesthetics are constituted by the varied combinatorics of different cultural frames of reference. It is not the preference of one over the other that is in the foreground but rather the interdeterminacy of both, which makes it possible to problematize racial binarism. Here, Gaines is pointing to the option of a critical commentary on ideological essentialisms and explains:

> "Just as the existence of the mulatto/a has been discovered as a critique of racial classification, the phenomenon of race movies presents the opportunity for a double-barreled challenge to whiteness as well as blackness. […] Race movies, considered closely, should thwart attempts to form essentialized identities, identities that could be formed only by completely overlooking the look of these films."[51]

Pearl Bowser and Louise Spence also argue that Oscar Micheaux's formal-aesthetic strategies should be considered in the context of an intended political message: "His formal project, the aesthetic strategies he uses, cannot be severed from his moral project."[52] According to this approach, Micheaux's stylistic borrowings from the white mainstream can be interpreted as an ostentatious presentation of power relations: "By exposing the power relations beneath the surface of Black-white relations, the traumatic pain and anguish that are the consequence of white domination, Micheaux tactically and self-consciously rent the surface of the implicit narrative of mainstream representation."[53]

It must be noted, however, that Micheaux's formal aesthetics do not only appropriate forms of representation from mass culture that can be emptied and filled up again. Even the reference to a power relationship which focuses solely on the dominance of hegemonic whiteness remains incomplete as long

50 Ibid., 269.
51 Ibid., 271.
52 Bowser and Spence, *Writing Himself into History*, 143.
53 Ibid., 155.

https://doi.org/10.14361/9783839453377 - am 13.02.2026, 21:55:10. https://www.inlibra.com/de/agb - Open Access -

as it does not include the imbalance of the filmic style and its formal fragmentation. Bowser and Spence's approach is ambiguous in the sense that it resembles an interpretation that conceives of the imitation and transformation of conventional codes as a counter-hegemonic call-to-arms. Nevertheless, what is important is not solely the opposition of a dominant form of rule but the coexistence of appropriation and discardment. Jane Gaines explains:

> "Perhaps to elude any attempt to essentialize it, we could treat this style as more of an ingenious solution to the impossible demands of the conventions of classical Hollywood style, shortcuts produced by the exigencies of economics, certainly, but also modifications produced by an independent who had nothing at stake in strict adherence to Hollywood grammar."[54]

Micheaux's uneven, fragmentary style and his insistence on contradictions and dissonances point to a form of incongruence that opens up a new approach to political discourses in the study of film aesthetics: "Such incongruence (which defines race and class relations in US history) cannot be represented by means of Griffith's 'mechanical parallelism' with its false reconciliation of the irreconcilable."[55] The subversive potential of such an incongruity does not manifest itself in a clearly defined rejection of formal stylistic conventions, but rather in a form of variable knowledge formation that manifests itself as a reintegrative interdiscourse of the established and the modulated. Homi Bhabha notes:

> "The borderline work of culture demands an encounter with 'newness' that is not part of the continuum of past and present. It creates a sense of the new as an insurgent act of cultural translation. Such art does not merely recall the past as social cause or aesthetic precedent; it renews the past, refiguring it as a contingent 'in-between' space, that innovates and interrupts the performance of the present."[56]

The specifics of Oscar Micheaux's formal-aesthetic filmic language can be described and understood neither as a desired imitation of the Hollywood universe nor as an oppositional counter-cinema. Only the recognition of a cultural dynamic that moves between fixation and transposition enables access

54 Jane Gaines, "Fire and Desire: Race, Melodrama, and Oscar Micheaux," in *Black American Cinema*, ed. Manthia Diawara (New York: Routledge, 1993), 64.

55 Ibid., 62.

56 Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, 10.

https://doi.org/10.14361/9783839453377 - am 13.02.2026, 21:55:10. https://www.inlibra.com/de/agb - Open Access -

to a practice that, as an irritating moment, detaches itself from the continuum of established codes. It is precisely this space of intervention in which the preceding is mixed with the present and thus the intersection of cultural forms of articulation becomes visible.

https://doi.org/10.14361/9783839453377 - am 13.02.2026, 21:55:10. https://www.inlibra.com/de/agb - Open Access -

II. Reflections – Shadows

https://doi.org/10.14361/9783839453377 - am 13.02.2026, 21:55:10. https://www.inlibra.com/de/agb - Open Access -

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

https://doi.org/10.14361/9783839453377 - am 13.02.2026, 21:55:10. https://www.inlibra.com/de/agb - Open Access -

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.

https://doi.org/10.14361/9783839453377 - am 13.02.2026, 21:55:10. https://www.inlibra.com/de/agb - Open Access -

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.

https://doi.org/10.14361/9783839453377 - am 13.02.2026, 21:55:10. https://www.inlibra.com/de/agb - Open Access -

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.

https://doi.org/10.14361/9783839453377 - am 13.02.2026, 21:55:10. https://www.inlibra.com/de/agb - Open Access -

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.

https://doi.org/10.14361/9783839453377 - am 13.02.2026, 21:55:10. https://www.inlibra.com/de/agb - Open Access -

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.

https://doi.org/10.14361/9783839453377 - am 13.02.2026, 21:55:10. https://www.inlibra.com/de/agb - Open Access -

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.

https://doi.org/10.14361/9783839453377 - am 13.02.2026, 21:55:10. https://www.inlibra.com/de/agb - Open Access -

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.

https://doi.org/10.14361/9783839453377 - am 13.02.2026, 21:55:10. https://www.inlibra.com/de/agb - Open Access -

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.

---

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.

https://doi.org/10.14361/9783839453377 - am 13.02.2026, 21:55:10. https://www.inlibra.com/de/agb - Open Access -

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

https://doi.org/10.14361/9783839453377 - am 13.02.2026, 21:55:10. https://www.inlibra.com/de/agb - Open Access -

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."

https://doi.org/10.14361/9783839453377 - am 13.02.2026, 21:55:10. https://www.inlibra.com/de/agb - Open Access -

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:

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.

https://doi.org/10.14361/9783839453377 - am 13.02.2026, 21:55:10. https://www.inlibra.com/de/agb - Open Access -

> "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.

https://doi.org/10.14361/9783839453377 - am 13.02.2026, 21:55:10. https://www.inlibra.com/de/agb - Open Access -

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.

https://doi.org/10.14361/9783839453377 - am 13.02.2026, 21:55:10. https://www.inlibra.com/de/agb - Open Access -

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.

https://doi.org/10.14361/9783839453377 - am 13.02.2026, 21:55:10. https://www.inlibra.com/de/agb - Open Access -

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.

https://doi.org/10.14361/9783839453377 - am 13.02.2026, 21:55:10. https://www.inlibra.com/de/agb - Open Access -

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.

https://doi.org/10.14361/9783839453377 - am 13.02.2026, 21:55:10. https://www.inlibra.com/de/agb - Open Access -

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:

https://doi.org/10.14361/9783839453377 - am 13.02.2026, 21:55:10. https://www.inlibra.com/de/agb - Open Access -

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

https://doi.org/10.14361/9783839453377 - am 13.02.2026, 21:55:10. https://www.inlibra.com/de/agb - Open Access -

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.

https://doi.org/10.14361/9783839453377 - am 13.02.2026, 21:55:10. https://www.inlibra.com/de/agb - Open Access -

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.

https://doi.org/10.14361/9783839453377 - am 13.02.2026, 21:55:10. https://www.inlibra.com/de/agb - Open Access -

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

https://doi.org/10.14361/9783839453377 - am 13.02.2026, 21:55:10. https://www.inlibra.com/de/agb - Open Access -

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.

https://doi.org/10.14361/9783839453377 - am 13.02.2026, 21:55:10. https://www.inlibra.com/de/agb - Open Access -

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.

https://doi.org/10.14361/9783839453377 - am 13.02.2026, 21:55:10. https://www.inlibra.com/de/agb - Open Access -

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.

https://doi.org/10.14361/9783839453377 - am 13.02.2026, 21:55:10. https://www.inlibra.com/de/agb - Open Access -

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.

https://doi.org/10.14361/9783839453377 - am 13.02.2026, 21:55:10. https://www.inlibra.com/de/agb - Open Access -

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

https://doi.org/10.14361/9783839453377 - am 13.02.2026, 21:55:10. https://www.inlibra.com/de/agb - Open Access -

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.

https://doi.org/10.14361/9783839453377 - am 13.02.2026, 21:55:10. https://www.inlibra.com/de/agb - Open Access -

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

https://doi.org/10.14361/9783839453377 - am 13.02.2026, 21:55:10. https://www.inlibra.com/de/agb - Open Access -

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.

https://doi.org/10.14361/9783839453377 - am 13.02.2026, 21:55:10. https://www.inlibra.com/de/agb - Open Access -

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.

https://doi.org/10.14361/9783839453377 - am 13.02.2026, 21:55:10. https://www.inlibra.com/de/agb - Open Access -

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.

https://doi.org/10.14361/9783839453377 - am 13.02.2026, 21:55:10. https://www.inlibra.com/de/agb - Open Access -

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.

https://doi.org/10.14361/9783839453377 - am 13.02.2026, 21:55:10. https://www.inlibra.com/de/agb - Open Access -

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.

https://doi.org/10.14361/9783839453377 - am 13.02.2026, 21:55:10. https://www.inlibra.com/de/agb - Open Access -

> "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.

https://doi.org/10.14361/9783839453377 - am 13.02.2026, 21:55:10. https://www.inlibra.com/de/agb - Open Access -

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.

https://doi.org/10.14361/9783839453377 - am 13.02.2026, 21:55:10. https://www.inlibra.com/de/agb - Open Access -

> '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.

https://doi.org/10.14361/9783839453377 - am 13.02.2026, 21:55:10. https://www.inlibra.com/de/agb - Open Access -

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.

https://doi.org/10.14361/9783839453377 - am 13.02.2026, 21:55:10. https://www.inlibra.com/de/agb - Open Access -

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.

https://doi.org/10.14361/9783839453377 - am 13.02.2026, 21:55:10. https://www.inlibra.com/de/agb - Open Access -

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

https://doi.org/10.14361/9783839453377 - am 13.02.2026, 21:55:10. https://www.inlibra.com/de/agb - Open Access -

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.

https://doi.org/10.14361/9783839453377 - am 13.02.2026, 21:55:10. https://www.inlibra.com/de/agb - Open Access -

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.

https://doi.org/10.14361/9783839453377 - am 13.02.2026, 21:55:10. https://www.inlibra.com/de/agb - Open Access -

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.

https://doi.org/10.14361/9783839453377 - am 13.02.2026, 21:55:10. https://www.inlibra.com/de/agb - Open Access -

SHADOWS (John Cassavetes, USA 1959)

John Cassavetes' debut film SHADOWS (USA 1959) was realized as a low-budget independent production in a largely improvised form: with a total amount of approximately $40,000, the film was shot almost exclusively with amateur actors and a largely inexperienced camera crew.[1] The film's modest framework of production was nevertheless not detrimental to its success, on the contrary: the fragmentary film style drew attention, endorsement, and acclaim and put its director in the limelight as a promising independent talent. The film premiered on November 11, 1959 in New York. After another showing as part of the Beat, Square and Cool Festival in July 1960, there was also international interest in SHADOWS: in August 1960, the film was non-competitively shown during the Venice Film Festival and awarded the FIPRESCI Award by the International Federation of Film Critics; in September, there was a special screening at the Cinémathèque Française in Paris; in October, the film was first shown at the London Film Festival and was later included in the London Academy Cinema's program. Both audiences and critics enthusiastically received the film, as the numerous discussions of it in newspapers and journals like *The Times*, *The Observer* and *Sight and Sound* show.[2] Critics especially praised the lifelike immediacy and authenticity that characterized Cassavetes' film: they celebrated a new film aesthetic that was able to realistically portray the big-city life of New York and therefore pose a significant challenge to classical Hollywood cinema. This impression was mainly due to the insert that accompanies the film's final image: "The film you have just seen was an improvisation."

1 Apart from the film actor John Cassavetes, the German cinematographer Erich Kollmar was the only other person present who had experience on professional film sets.

2 See Ray Carney, *Shadows* (London: BFI Publishing, 2001), 7-8.

https://doi.org/10.14361/9783839453377 - am 13.02.2026, 21:55:10. https://www.inlibra.com/de/agb - Open Access -

Already in November 1958, however, Cassavetes had presented a first version of his film at New York's Paris Theater. At this point, the film was already met with approval, in particular for key players in the newly forming American independent film scene. The foremost of these was the filmmaker Jonas Mekas, who awarded Shadows the first Independent Film Award in 1959. In his review praising the film that appeared in the journal *Film Culture* shortly thereafter, Mekas declared: "Cassavetes in *Shadows* was able to break out of conventional moulds and traps and retain original freshness. The improvisation, spontaneity, and free inspiration that are almost entirely lost in most films from an excess of professionalism are fully used in this film."[3] In the following months, Mekas led a committed advertising campaign for the film, which was discussed in several issues of *Film Culture* and *The Village Voice* as well as lauded in lectures and radio discussions as the beginning of a new era of cinema. Many critics and filmmakers joined in this spirit of optimism: the New York avant-garde art scene had found its new champion.

John Cassavetes, however, did not seem to be satisfied with the success of his directorial debut and thoroughly revised the film. He found almost half of the first version (that is, approximately 10,000 meters of film), re-shot eight additional scenes, and worked on the editing for three months: the 60-minute 16mm film ultimately became a 35mm blow-up with an 81-minute runtime. After the second version was shown for the first time in November 1959, there was an intense dispute between Mekas and Cassavetes, carried out as a debate on fundamental principles in *The Village Voice*. Mekas felt deceived and called the revised version "a bad commercial film, with everything that I was praising absolutely destroyed."[4] Cassavetes, on the other hand, fought against being pigeon-holed into a specific cinematic and artistic position and defended his second edition as a necessary aesthetic decision.

In this early phase of reception, one can already see how difficult it is to classify Cassavetes' cinematography within established categories of classification. As a Hollywood actor,[5] Cassavetes was familiar with the practices and

3 Jonas Mekas, quoted in Stephanie Watson, "Spontaneous Cinema? In the Shadows with John Cassavetes«," in *The Naked Lens: An Illustrated History of Beat Cinema*, ed. Jack Sargeant (London: Creation Books, 2001), 55.

4 Mekas, quoted in Ray Carney, *American Dreaming: The Films of John Cassavetes and the American Experience* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985), 35.

5 After a small role in Taxi (Gregory Ratoff, USA 1953), Cassavetes had his first larger role in The Night Holds Terror (Andrew L. Stone, USA 1955). Cassavetes was then tapped for films in which he would embody the figure of the young rebel made pop-

https://doi.org/10.14361/9783839453377 - am 13.02.2026, 21:55:10. https://www.inlibra.com/de/agb - Open Access -

conditions of producing a film at a major studio. He had never made a secret of his negative attitude toward these cinematic practices, which he rejected based on their thematic superficiality and commercial orientation. He was especially critical of the dominant influence of the producer, who did not allow any room for artistic freedom, such as a 1959 article from *Film Culture* entitled "What's Wrong with Hollywood" describes: "In Hollywood, the producer intimidates the artist's new thought with great sums of money and with his own ego that clings to past references of box office triumphs and valueless experience. The average artist, therefore is forced to compromise. And the cost of compromise is the betrayal of basic beliefs."[6] Cassavetes was not the only one who had this attitude in the late 1950s. Nevertheless, he did not want to unconditionally join the call for more artistic autonomy, for rebellious and independently produced films, which the New York avant-garde around Jonas Mekas represented. This is why Mekas established the "New American Cinema" in 1960 without John Cassavetes, one of the most prominent representatives of the then-forming independent movement – not in the least, therefore, because Mekas' venture was seen as a direct reaction to Cassavetes' new version of his film Shadows. Although the agenda of the group, made up of independent producers, actors, and directors, aligned with Cassavetes' own positions in several ways, he did not participate in publishing their manifesto in *Film Culture* in 1961. Even more: despite his skepticism about the Hollywood's rigid system of rules, which he made known several times, he maintained his connections to the major studios. Thus, in the subsequent years, he finished two studio productions, Too Late Blues (USA 1961, for Paramount) and A Child Is Waiting (USA 1963, for United Artists), which had little in common with the principles of independent underground film.

Cassavetes' filmic approach, his cinematic way of expressing himself, is difficult to classify. Some critics have tried to avoid the problem of defini-

ular by James Dean and Marlon Brando, such as in Crime in the Streets (Don Siegel, USA 1956) or Edge of the City (Martin Ritt, USA 1957). The success of these films secured Cassavetes' status as a promising up-and-coming talent and got him further roles in films such as Affair in Havana (Laslo Benedek, USA 1957), Saddle in the Wind (Robert Parrish, USA 1958), and Virgin Island (Pat Jackson, UK 1958). In addition, Cassavetes was involved in approximately 80-100 TV productions from 1954 to 1959.

6 John Cassavetes, "What's Wrong with Hollywood," in *John Cassavetes: Interviews*, ed. Gabriella Oldham (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2016 [1959]), 8.

https://doi.org/10.14361/9783839453377 - am 13.02.2026, 21:55:10. https://www.inlibra.com/de/agb - Open Access -

tion by characterizing Cassavetes as an "auteur,"[7] but even this classification seems vague and insufficient as an attempt at placing him. In this context, it would be just as imprecise to speak of a coherent "style" that distinguishes the director's entire oeuvre: thus, one may agree with Andrea Lang, who explains: "His aesthetic concept is built on the rule of not having any rules and not on repeatedly implemented techniques, which, all together, would result in an aesthetic, a very specific, thorough 'Cassavetes' style."[8]

It is obviously impossible to locate the director and his oeuvre within the established array of definitions, as his individual films seem to particularly resist interpretation. This primarily has to do with Cassavetes' narrative gestures, which elude established narrative techniques and fixed dramaturgical structures. Cassavetes' films develop a loose network of individual observations with several jumps, gaps, and discontinuities. The narrative interrupts its own legibility due to the fact that the plethora of plot situations do not add up to a coherent unity: images remain that are difficult to relate to one another. What Ute Holl says about Faces (John Cassavetes, USA 1968) could essentially be said about every Cassavetes film: "Ascribing a story to it means positing structure, purpose, and meaning, whereas the film is actually testing out how tenable each component is: a meticulous evaluation, whose standard is presented as the filmic itself."[9] Cassavetes' films are not coherent stories but arrangements of images whose consistency and meaning have to be constantly re-developed. What the films have to say is not located within a plot-oriented set of rules but result from the communication of movements and gestures that question filmic limits themselves.

Cassavetes describes how he understands himself as a filmmaker as follows: "The fact is that filmmaking, although unquestionably predicated on profit and loss like any other industry, cannot survive without individual expression."[10] But what kind of filmic expression does "individual expression" have in Cassavetes' cinema, how does it find its way into images, and how is it able to form them and steer them? Cassavetes' films arise from the faces,

7 Jacob Levich, "John Cassavetes: An American Maverick," *Cineaste* 29, no. 2 (1993), 51.

8 Andrea Lang, "Das Privattheater des John Cassavetes: Logos Hollywood und hysterische Form," in *John Cassavetes: DirActor*, eds. Andrea Lang and Bernhard Seiter (Vienna: PVS Verleger, 1993), 22.

9 Ute Holl, "Ein Gesicht ist ein Gesicht ist kein Gesicht: Anmerkungen zur Geschichtlichkeit der Physiognomie im Film," *ÖZG* 14, no. 3 (2003), 50.

10 Cassavetes, "What's Wrong with Hollywood," 7.

https://doi.org/10.14361/9783839453377 - am 13.02.2026, 21:55:10. https://www.inlibra.com/de/agb - Open Access -

voices, and bodies of his actors. His oeuvre has often been described as "acting cinema", as a kind of film that places the actors' expressive abilities above technically elaborate arrangements, as a cinema that focuses on the expressive individual and shifts the artificial to the periphery. This creates the impression of an authentic immediacy in the scenic play, an irritating experience of nearness, that arises from Cassavetes' particular sensibility to acting performances which is able to capture the fleeting nature of small gestures and reflexes. But how exactly is it possible that the smallest movements of the body and the voice operate affectively? Lesley Stern and George Kouvaros suggest a concept that focuses on physical presence as a central aspect of filmic expression, "an understanding of performance in which the focus is on the way energy is deployed and transmitted by and through the body rather than privileging psychological or mimetic principles."[11] With regard to Cassavetes' cinema, it is necessary to clarify where and how these energies move between the poles of acting and camera, how the body's mobility interacts with the affects and effects of film.

In the context of physical movements, Gilles Deleuze speaks both of modes of behavior as well as of the *Gestus* – a term that he takes from Bertolt Brecht, who describes it as follows:

> "We can also speak of a *Gestus*. This is understood to mean a whole complex of individual gestures of the most diverse kinds, together with utterances, that forms the basis of a singular human process and that applies to the overall attitude of all of those who take part in this process (the condemnation of one human being by another, a consultation, an altercation, etc.) or a complex of gestures and utterances that, when it occurs in a single person, triggers certain processes (the hesitant attitude of Hamlet, the confessionalism of Galilei, etc.), or also simply the basic attitude of a person (such as satisfaction or waiting). A *Gestus* illustrates the relations of human beings to each other."[12]

11 Lesley Stern and George Kouvaros, "Introduction: Descriptive Acts," in *Falling for You: Essays on Cinema and Performance*, eds. Lesley Stern and George Kouvaros (Sydney: Power Publications, 1999), 26.

12 Bertolt Brecht, "Gestik," in *Bertolt Brecht. Werke. Große kommentierte Berliner und Frankfurter Ausgabe* Band 23, Schriften 3, ed. Werner Hecht et al. (Berlin/Weimar: Aufbau Verlag; Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1993), 188.

https://doi.org/10.14361/9783839453377 - am 13.02.2026, 21:55:10. https://www.inlibra.com/de/agb - Open Access -

Like Bertolt Brecht, Gilles Deleuze understands the gesture as a complex of utterances but particularly stresses the connection to the body:

> "What we call gest [*gestus*] in general is the link or knot of attitudes between themselves, their co-ordination with each other, in so far as they do not depend on a previous story, a pre-existing plot or an action-image. On the contrary, the gest is a development of attitudes themselves, and, as such, carries out a direct theatricalization of bodies, often very discreet, because it takes place independently of any role."[13]

Deleuze's interest in the "theatricalization of bodies" is not oriented toward an ostentatious depiction alongside the restraints of the narration. He is not concerned with a representational body as the bearer of symbolic expression but with the elaboration of types of behavior that operate beyond the preconstructed narration and that leave it behind or transcend it. In this context, he sees Cassavetes' particular achievement as cinematography in the sense of the "cinema of bodies":

> "When Cassavetes says that characters must not come from a story or plot, but that the story should be secreted by the characters, he sums up the requirement of the cinema of bodies: the character is reduced to his own bodily attitudes, and what ought to result is the gest, that is, a 'spectacle', a theatricalization or dramatization which is valid for all plots."[14]

The story does not produce the characters; the characters produce the story. In the context of Cassavetes' aesthetic, this primarily effects the notion of space: "As a general rule, Cassavetes keeps only the parts of space connected to bodies; he composes space with disconnected bits solely linked by a gest. This is association of images being replaced by formal linkage of attitudes."[15] In doing so, the body, along with its positions and behaviors, becomes an aesthetic element that is capable of arranging the film's visual space: it becomes the central location of coordinating movements. The cinema of the body, however, models not only the spatial but also the temporal dimension of the film, so that a type of image emerges whose fulcrum is formed by the body's gestural stances.

---

13 Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema 2: The Time-Image*, trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Robert Galeta (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 192.

14 Ibid.

15 Ibid., 249.

https://doi.org/10.14361/9783839453377 - am 13.02.2026, 21:55:10. https://www.inlibra.com/de/agb - Open Access -

The body movements and the energies that discharge between the characters are presented in Cassavetes as untreated raw material, so to speak. Neither the image detail nor the editing gives any indication of the direction of the play of gestures, so that the viewer does not receive any stable interpretive instructions but is constrained to navigate between various expressive surfaces. In this sense, the acting cannot have a coherent meaning; rather, the source of meaning feeds on the dynamics of indistinct body movements, on gesticulations, postures, and vocal modulations, on the sum of the individual characters' body language and facial expressions. George Kouvaros speaks of a limiting point that exerts a corrosive, but also simultaneously opening, effect on the film:

> "This limit point involves a conception of cinematic performance driven by expenditures of energy and emotion that surge unpredictably and are generated by the particular force and temporality of the performative engagement. Understood in this way, the activity of performance has a corrosive effect on the film, eating away at its structures, but at the same time, it also opens up the film to a range of different readings, sensations, and temporal configurations."[16]

According to Kouvaros, the act of performance blurs the limits of the film. This has to do with the fact that the gestural movements within the representation neither conform to a stable code nor construct such a code: they transcend conventional systems of meaning. Accordingly, Kouvaros understands the cinematographic performance as a bundle of un-organizable energies that provide their own dimension of expression and thus expand the filmic space of possibility. The capacity for performative expression frays the film at its edges and thereby opens it up for a whole series of different interpretations. Gestural representation thus expands its own frame of reference in an incoherent chain of drafts and formations. In this respect, gestures can be understood as directional vectors of a sequence of movements that is played out within a performatively developed visual space and keeps it in motion.

The visual space of the cinema of the body requires the viewer to pay particular attention because the unpredictability of the body is opposed to the rules of dramaturgy: it forms its own organization; it opposes the directed gaze. The processual movement of dramatic performance is transferred to

16 George Kouvaros, *Where Does It Happen? John Cassavetes and Cinema at the Breaking Point.* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2004), 34.

https://doi.org/10.14361/9783839453377 - am 13.02.2026, 21:55:10. https://www.inlibra.com/de/agb - Open Access -

the dynamics of the visual space, which is presented to the viewer in multiple layers. This imbalance is deliberately held in suspense in Cassavetes' film, as Anja Streiter explains:

> "The camera and editing hold the viewer in the same field of ignorance into which the actor is placed. The shots never give an overview; they always show things too close, too little, too much, too bright, too dark. The editing trims everything that is explanatory, abbreviates the beginnings and endings of scenes, ends a shot when it seems to arrive at an unambiguity, and, in this way, constitutes the image together with the other elements of staging: unknown, fragmented states of behavior, non-encoded moments, an unknown body in lieu of a well-known form. Everything hinders comprehension, everything forces seeing."[17]

What the actors offer in their play of gestures is a balancing out of possibilities; what the viewer perceives is a confusing simultaneity of these possibilities that can neither be abridged nor organized by Cassavetes' filmic language. In the cinema of the body, the resistance of the irreconcilable takes the place of the unifying goal-directedness in the cinema of action. Gilles Deleuze notes: "The obstacle does not, as in the action-image, allow itself to be determined in relation to goals and means which would unify the set, but is dispersed in 'a plurality of ways of being present in the world,' of belonging to sets, all incompatible and yet coexistent."[18]

Deleuze's concept of cinema of the body focuses on the translation and mediation processes inherent in the capability of gestural expression within the filmic image. Here, particular attention is paid to a body's postures and movements; articulations that are especially relevant in the context of John Cassavetes' films. The body is then, on the one hand, the medium of various behaviors that it sets in motion, and, on the other hand, these movements themselves are media operations. This understanding of the body has a particular effect on the character conception of every Cassavetes film. No clearly defined roles are presented, but rather designs that do not conform to any fixed scheme, but rather allow their own genesis to become apparent. In the context of Cassavetes' characters, Robert Buschwenter notes:

---

17 Anja Streiter, *Das Unmögliche Leben: Filme von John Cassavetes* (Berlin: Vorwerk 8, 1995), 26.

18 Deleuze, *Cinema 2*, 203.

https://doi.org/10.14361/9783839453377 - am 13.02.2026, 21:55:10. https://www.inlibra.com/de/agb - Open Access -

> "They don't bring a story with them, rather, they bring it forth: broken, contradictory, and nurtured by their own life. They do not explain themselves with speeches but with the waxing and waning of moods that their bodies and their faces, their gesticulations and their facial expressions, inscribe into the events. Their words are sparks created by the frictions of the gestural, arcs of energy released by the characters, whose accumulator is their bodily existence."[19]

The field of energy that Buschwenter describes, which is diffused between the body's movements, marks the space in which affective correspondences circulate. Here it should be noted that the ephemeral aspect of the gestures cannot randomly vanish, since it is exposed to the intervention of the camera. As fleeting as the body's movements and positionings may seem: the image that captures them always remains. George Kouvaros states: "There is something paradoxical here: the outbursts and gestures that move across the scene and destabilize our reading suggest a one-time-only status. Yet in the cinema, provoked into being and caught by the camera, they are there to be viewed over and over again."[20] It is therefore important to consider the filmic gaze's perspectivizing gesture, which structures the performative act of staging corporeal ambiguity. It involves the apparent immediacy of affect on the one hand and the simultaneously executed reflection of the gesture in the filmic image on the other hand – both are integrative mediums of design in Cassavetes' cinema.

Ivone Margulies argues that the gestural movements enter into a dialogue that overlaps, indeed exceeds, the function and meaning of the characters' verbal form of speech. She classifies this type of communication as "alternate, nonrational language" and explains: "Twitches, mimicry, and noise signals introduce a preverbal, more truthful form of dialogue."[21] According to Margulies, the play of physical gestures can be understood as a preverbal system in the sense that it attains the complexity of an autonomous language. Brian Massumi goes one step further and, unlike Margulies, does not conceive of the effect of the physical affect as "more true" in comparison to verbal

19 Robert Buschwenter, "Das Schauspiel oder die Vermittlung des Scheins durch Wahrheit," in *John Cassavetes: DirActor*, eds. Andrea Lang and Bernhard Seiter (Vienna: PVS Verleger, 1993), 59.

20 Kouvaros, *Where Does It Happen?*, 35.

21 Ivone Margulies, "John Cassavetes: Amateur Director," in *The New American Cinema*, ed. John Lewis (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1998), 294.

https://doi.org/10.14361/9783839453377 - am 13.02.2026, 21:55:10. https://www.inlibra.com/de/agb - Open Access -

language but fundamentally as a more direct and thus faster form of communication and defines this more finely in the following formulation: "The skin is faster than the word."[22] In the process, skin is understood as the central boundary between the body and the outside world, as a significant layer bearing affective intensity, as Massumi describes as follows: "Intensity is embodied in purely autonomic reactions most directly manifested in the skin – at the surface of the body, at its interface with things."[23]

In his theory of the "skin-ego," Didier Anzieu formulates the distinctiveness of skin as a switch point of experiencing the Self and the Other.[24] His central idea is to shift ego-genesis from a purely imaginary scenario into the realm of the somatic because, unlike Lacan, Anzieu does not understand the (mirror-) image as a determined site of subject constitution but ascribes physical self-perception the primary role of creator of the ego-function. In doing so, skin is assigned the position of mediator, since, as a tactile sense organ, it organizes data from the external world and transports them into the inner world in the form of pain and temperature sensations, where they are mentally processed further, for example in the form of emotional assent or defense mechanisms. As a channel of information, skin thus represents an important through-point for both the physical and the mental constitution of the subject. Furthermore, skin is also assigned a significant containment function, since, as a medium of visual representation, it offers a surface structure onto which types of identificatory subjectivity are inscribed: "The Skin Ego is the original parchment which preserves, like a palimpsest, the erased, scratched-out, written-over first outlines of an 'original' pre-verbal writing made up of traces upon the skin."[25] Marie-Luise Angerer expands on this approach to the effect that she understands skin not only as a rigid signifier that carries various indications of self-construction within itself but that it is also able to make the smallest body movements perceptible on its surface. What Angerer designates an "impossibility," that is, the missing perception of gestural movement in a static image, can be experienced through the unique sense modality of skin: "This impossibility – this specific slippage, this only before-and-after of movement as those disposable moments – corresponds to the

22 Brian Massumi, "The Autonomy of Affect," in *Deleuze: A Critical Reader*, ed. Paul Patton (Oxford: Blackwell, 1997), 219.

23 Ibid., 219.

24 See Didier Anzieu, *The Skin Ego*, trans. Naomi Segal (New York: Routledge, 2018 [1985]).

25 Ibid., 105.

https://doi.org/10.14361/9783839453377 - am 13.02.2026, 21:55:10. https://www.inlibra.com/de/agb - Open Access -

affect's autonomy in the sense that the movement inscribes itself into and across the skin."[26]

Therefore, if the skin is faster than the word – if it represents the medium of communication through which nonverbal body language can be transported outwardly, then, with this capability, it offers a predestined space of negotiation for the question of subject constitution. In principle, this applies to each identificatory process, but, in particular, to the question of racial identity. For the expressive power of skin is articulated not only in relation to a tactile stimulus-reaction schema but is also revealed as a visual sign of racial differentiation. Homi Bhabha has succinctly emphasized this function in relation to colonialism. He argues that "'skin' in racist discourse is…a prime signifier of the body and its social and cultural correlates."[27] In turn, its color forms various signs that externalize skin as a guaranteed identity: "The difference of the object of discrimination is at once visible and natural – colour as the cultural/political *sign* of inferiority or degeneracy, skin as its natural '*identity*.'"[28] This type of visibility represents a unique criterion for the articulation of colonial identity. According to Bhabha, it is manifested in an obsession that is comparable to sexual fetishization, but it also differs from this insomuch as the racial fetish, in contrast to the sexual, is no secret but is openly circulated: "Skin (…) is the most visible of fetishes, recognized as 'common knowledge' in a range of cultural, political, and historical discourses, and plays a public part in the racial drama that is enacted every day in colonial societies."[29] Both the sexual and the racial fetish are characterized by the overdetermination of their functions – however, the fetish of skin color, in its obviousness, differs from the hidden, denied replacement object of a sexually motivated fetishization. It thus becomes a signifier that is inexorably inscribed into the body's surface.

The visibility of skin represents a special switchboard for the articulation of self-design because, on the one hand, it forms the visually perceptible interface between the internal and external world of the physical continuum and, on the other hand, the surface system of racial identification, through

26 Marie-Luise Angerer, "Wo trifft der Körper sein Bild?" in *Ohne Spiegel leben: Sichtbarkeiten und posthumane Menschenbilder*, ed. Manfred Fassler (Munich: Wilhelm Fink Verlag, 2000), 306.

27 Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, 117.

28 Ibid., 114.

29 Ibid., 112.

https://doi.org/10.14361/9783839453377 - am 13.02.2026, 21:55:10. https://www.inlibra.com/de/agb - Open Access -

which racist discourse is kept in motion. As a medium of physical expressiveness, skin is additionally the source and destination of gestural sign language, which is revealed as something legible along the line of the skin. The combination of these different functional determinants represents a predestined space of negotiation for the restless search for the Self, which is the core of the film Shadows. Cassavetes' cinema concerns the bundling of all that which escapes a fleeting look – the formation of an energy field, which Gilles Deleuze describes as cinema of the body. The shift of the gestural from the periphery to the center of physical expression unfolds as a movement that can be traced along the surface structure of the skin as a bodily boundary. Ultimately, skin's spectrum of color, as a potential mark of identity, reveals a significant space for staging ambivalences and insecurities as they relate to the theme of self-design – and this all the more urgently when it stands in close relation to the previously mentioned ability of affective articulation.

In 1956, John Cassavetes founded the Cassavetes-Lane Drama Workshop along with his colleague, Burt Lane. The Variety Arts Studio in Manhattan was chosen as their location, which at that time was frequented by various ambitious, up-and-coming directors and actors (among them, for example, Bob Fosse and Frank Sinatra). During irregular business meetings, Cassavetes led theater exercises as well as rehearsed shorter improvised scenes. This included a situation in which a group of ten actors were supposed to depict different reactions to the problem of a mixed-race couple. As basic narrative design, the theme of rehearsal founds its way into the film Shadows, which narrates the problem of identity for three African-American siblings, among them the light-skinned Lelia and Ben. According to Cassavetes himself, the focus on racial subject matter was not supposed to be in the foreground of the film; rather, it was not to be centered around "racial but human problems."[30]

In their analyses of Shadows, several scholars have taken Cassavetes at his word. Thus, for example, Ray Carney states: "And what the film makes abundantly clear is that although Ben and Lelia would undoubtedly blame their problems on racism or others, their only real problems are themselves. Their racial confusions pale in comparison with (and in fact are only as a kind of metaphor for) emotional confusions that have nothing to do with race."[31] Carney disregards the fact that the everyday behavior of Lelia and Ben – as ambiguously they may articulate their own notions of identity – is clearly

30 Quoted in Carney, *Shadows*, 58.

31 Ibid.

https://doi.org/10.14361/9783839453377 - am 13.02.2026, 21:55:10. https://www.inlibra.com/de/agb - Open Access -

characterized by confrontations that unfold along the binary ascriptions of a society based on racism. Carney is not the only one who assumes that racial subject matter does not play a prominent role but, at most, can be considered a secondary aspect. For example, Anja Streiter explains: "Even if the problem of finding identity under the pressure of racism was the initial idea, the film is characterized less by the concrete racial conflict than by a more fundamental problem developed around it: the fragility of self-design, identity as a never-ending problem."[32]

Undoubtedly, "the fragility of self-design" makes up the central fulcrum of the film Shadows – but this still does not explain why Cassavetes chose a clearly racially contoured perspective for depicting this subject matter and preferred it against other possible variations of identity confusion. The possible objection that it could have simply been an accidental, not intended, decision, can be refuted in several ways, since Cassavetes had already shown a sensibility for racial themes during the preparation phase for Shadows. Already a few days after the first improvisation rehearsals, Cassavetes contacted the *New York Times* to search for donors. In a press release written by Cassavetes himself, he described the film's central conflict as a "Negro-white problem" – to which the *New York Times* then published a short article on January 20, 1957. In turn, the article did not go unnoticed: along with a few interested parties from the motion picture industry, the NAACP also offered its support for the film project – albeit with the stipulation that it would have access to the (not yet existing) script, which Cassavetes declined.[33] The fact that Cassavetes was decidedly aware of the cinematic representation of racial themes becomes further apparent in the film work immediately preceding Shadows: namely, Cassavetes' starring role in Martin Ritt's Edge of the City (USA 1957). In it, Cassavetes embodies the character of the young military deserter Axel, who becomes friends with the black rail worker Tommy, played by Sidney Poitier.[34] The story of two men's friendship beyond racial borders was consistently well received and thus appeared to point to a new sensibility to the question of race relations and integration. Considered ex post facto,

32 Streiter, *Das Unmögliche Leben*, 30.

33 See Carney, *Shadows*, 21.

34 Edge of the City is an adaptation of the TV drama *A Man Is Ten Feet Tall*, in which Cassavetes and Poitier had also previously appeared together. The successful collaboration of John Cassavetes and Sidney Poitier was continued a year later with the film Virgin Island (Pat Jackson, UK 1958).

https://doi.org/10.14361/9783839453377 - am 13.02.2026, 21:55:10. https://www.inlibra.com/de/agb - Open Access -

it calls for a more critical evaluation, since the series of "race dramas" of the 1950s worked with highly cookie-cutter depictions of black and white characters.[35] Therefore, their narrative dynamic almost always resulted from the confrontation of a noble black man with a malicious racist, whereby none of the characters are given a more polished character development. The lacking diversity is additionally evinced in the fact that the starring roles were given almost exclusively to *one* black actor: the star Sidney Poitier. Poitier's acting talent is still convincing today, but the concentration of his roles in depictions of a noble, altruistic black man must be seen critically as a one-sided typecast. Donald Bogle, for example, sees Poitier's embodiment of the sacrificial hero in Edge of the City as continuing an old, well-known, highly discriminatory tradition:

> "Oddly, when viewed today, the incongruities and disparities ignored by the audience of 1957 are blatantly apparent. Poitier's character falls into the tradition of the dying slave content that he has well served the massa. His loyalty to the white Cassavetes destroys him as much as the old slave's steadfastness kept him in shackles."[36]

Bogle is referring to the ambivalent attitude of liberal Hollywood cinema of the 1950s. Poitier's star appeal led to more black characters being shown on-screen, and not just as eye-rolling comedians but as cultivated, middle-class citizens. Nevertheless, the repeatedly depicted stoicism with which Poitier's characters patiently bear the injustice directed toward them led more to a reproduction than a revision of old stereotypes. Thus, 1950s Hollywood cinema proved to be essentially more open to questions of integration, but the politics of representation that it chose was not significantly different from already established modes of narration.

Through his work on the social drama Edge of the City, Cassavetes was familiar with the conventional Hollywood dramaturgy of race relations. He saliently formulated his skepticism about this dramaturgy's significance in a situation that was actually planned as a promotional event. On February 13, 1957, Cassavetes was a guest on the WOR radio talk show *Jean Shepherd's Night People* to introduce the then showing film Edge of the City. In fact, however, Cassavetes reported more about his own improvisation rehearsals with

35 Further examples are No Way Out (Joseph Mankiewicz, USA 1950), The Blackboard Jungle (Richard Brooks, USA 1955), and The Defiant Ones (Stanley Kramer, USA 1958).

36 Bogle, *Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies, and Bucks*, 181.

https://doi.org/10.14361/9783839453377 - am 13.02.2026, 21:55:10. https://www.inlibra.com/de/agb - Open Access -

unknown actors than about the grand Hollywood production. While Edge of the City only scratches the surface of its racial subject matter, Cassavetes said that he was looking for a deeper examination of the problems of black and white people, pointing out that he was in the process of working on a form of representation that was less constructed and more immediate and closer to its viewers. Mentioning the financial difficulties of the project, Cassavetes ended his self-promotion with the call that anyone who wanted to see a "real film" with "real people" may support the project with a dollar or two. The reactions to his appearance surprised both the radio station and Cassavetes: within one week, over $2,000 of donations came in from individuals, mostly smaller contributions of $1 to $2.[37] This kind of reassurance provided for a new dynamic for the project. Cassavetes had publicly announced a rejection of Hollywood as well as his aspirations for a new type of film – and was ready to creatively implement this ambition with his first directing role. It is no small detail that the topic of racial identity was to be the film's focus: for a long time, it was the only information about the film that Cassavetes disseminated. Ray Carney's claim that "Cassavetes' understanding of life was colour-blind, class-blind and individualistic"[38] is therefore simply false – since Shadows exhibits a considerable awareness of the relevance of racial differentiation as well as a particular sensibility for its filmic mediation.

Shadows begins with an energetic outburst: a mixture of bodies, movement, music, changing incidences of light, a confusing tangle of various acoustic and visual sensations. The first scene shows a boisterous crowd of young people, both white and black, who are dancing, shouting, and clapping to live music from a jazz combo.

The first shots appear strangely disordered in that they show only fragments – single body parts, cutouts of faces, fragments of space. In addition, the overcrowding of the interior causes an unbalanced image effect. The figures constantly move around next to and across each other, push each other to the side, and are in turn covered up by others: before one can make out a form, another one is shifted to the fore. Moreover, the images themselves begin to move around because they do not consist of static shots but hand camera shots whose unstable perspective additionally complicates the orientation. After a few moments, a figure becomes recognizable, which is notably different from the others: a young man wearing sunglasses pushes himself

37 Tom Charity, *John Cassavetes: Lifeworks* (London: Omnibus Press, 2001).

38 Carney, *Shadows*, 58.

https://doi.org/10.14361/9783839453377 - am 13.02.2026, 21:55:10. https://www.inlibra.com/de/agb - Open Access -

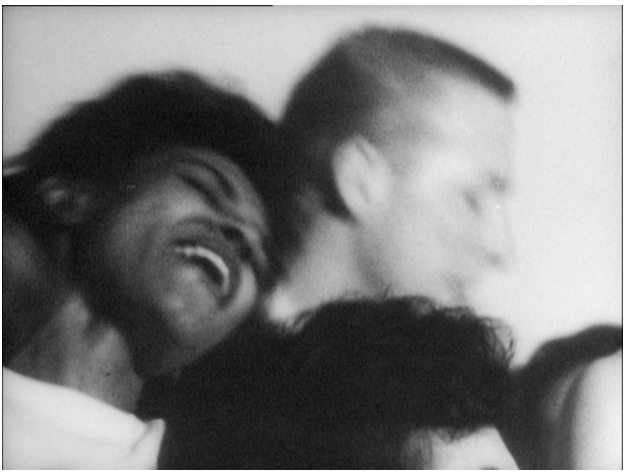


Figure 16: Opening Sequence

through the crowd to the fore, ducks out of the way of the jerking white and black bodies and ultimately forces himself into a corner of the room. In the middle of the dancing, jeering crowd, he is the only figure who is mute and still. If the disinterested face behind the sunglasses comes off as cool and confident at first, this impression is revised in the next moment. Now, the man is not wearing sunglasses, and his facial expressions point more to insecurity than to superiority: his eyes move to and fro anxiously, he twists his lower lip and bashfully moves further and further into the background. The combination of these physical behaviors with the spatial positioning of the figure refers to an uneasiness that can be understood as an uncertain misplacement, as an exclusion in inclusion. In this way, the topic of searching for oneself, even without explanatory dialogue, is already present in the film's first moments: as a nexus of physical movement, noise, and situation.

The figure from the opening titles is later introduced as Ben, who, together with his brother Hugh and his sister Lelia, lives in a small apartment in New York. Externally, the three figures are not discernible as siblings at first sight: unlike Hugh's very dark complexion, Ben and Lelia are so light-skinned that they are identified as white when outside their family unit. All three dabble in the art world, where none of them seems to be particularly successful: Hugh performs as a singer or announcer in third-rate clubs; Ben is a self-proclaimed

https://doi.org/10.14361/9783839453377 - am 13.02.2026, 21:55:10. https://www.inlibra.com/de/agb - Open Access -

jazz musician but is never shown at a rehearsal or a gig; Lelia writes short stories. What connects all three characters is their constantly repeated attempts to make something of themselves in public and to assert their positions as personalities. The confrontation between self-design and external attribution is problematic for all three siblings, and this repeatedly causes uncertainty: Hugh experiences setbacks to his desire to be taken seriously as a singer when he receives offers that are artistically unambitious; Ben's jazz ambitions get lost in aimless nighttime excursions; although Lelia's attempts at writing are advised by her mentor David, her writing does not end up being profitable. Moreover, each one's appearances in the public sphere entail mostly painful experiences: during one of his appearances, Hugh is ridiculed and has to cut off his performance early; Ben repeatedly gets into fights; Lelia's grandstanding as an up-and-coming author becomes a farce at a literature party.

The strained search for a place in society does not only apply to the self-formed image as an artist but also to the construction of racial identity, which is nevertheless presented in a much more subtle way. Compared to the stylizations of each one's performance as an artist, posing as a singer, a musician, or a literary figure, the self-design of the racial subject turns out to be much more inconspicuous. The first two-thirds of the film run without explicit mention of any racial subject matter – Lelia's and Ben's status as light-skinned African-Americans is neither pointedly commented on nor openly problematized. While the films of D.W. Griffith and Oscar Micheaux introduce the mulatto as an uncanny crosser of boundaries from the very beginning, and while Douglas Sirk already develops the ambivalence of mixed-race identity as a basic narrative constant in the first images of his film, Cassavetes seems to give little attention to this theme at first. Even more eruptive is the outburst of a racially conditioned conflict whose subliminal presence reaches the surface of the filmic plot relatively late.

The first open controversy: during a literature party organized by David, Lelia meets his friend, Tony. They flirt with each other and plan to take a walk in Central Park the next day. Following their meeting, Tony invites Lelia to his apartment for a drink, where they spontaneously sleep with each other. A short time later, they are in Lelia's apartment, and a romantic relationship seems to be developing. However, when Hugh comes home and Lelia introduces him as her brother, Tony turns away and declares: "I have to go." Lelia seems to be confused about the cause of his sudden insecurity, as her helpless reaction shows: flustered, she dashes behind Tony to stop him at the doorway. Tony subsequently stammers a few evasive sentences until Hugh comes

https://doi.org/10.14361/9783839453377 - am 13.02.2026, 21:55:10. https://www.inlibra.com/de/agb - Open Access -

up and asks him to leave the apartment. His inflection escalates from an initially calm pitch to a sharp cry to not bother his sister in the future – to which Tony reacts aggressively and grabs Hugh by the shoulders. Before the conflict escalates, Tony hurries down the stairs while Hugh tries to calm his agitated sister.

Figure 17: Lelia, Hugh, Tony

The abruptly erupting tension of this scene has an immediate and unprepared effect. Contrary to conventional narrative patterns, the mixed-raced character's identity dilemma is not depicted as a narrative sensation, whose conflict escalates up to a dramatic climax. What is striking is the fact that Cassavetes presents the motif of passing not as an intentional strategy but as an indiscriminate effect of an outer appearance. Whereas Douglas Sirk presents Sarah Jane's deception as an elaborate plan, the fact that Lelia is identified as white seems almost incidental. In actuality, Lelia does not evince any pronounced awareness of the problem of her mixed-race identity: instead of denying her lineage, as Sarah Jane does, Lelia acknowledges her dark-skinned brother and thus her black heritage – without seeing any risk or challenges in it. Her white love interest's reaction of rejection occurs just as inconspicuously. While Sirk stages Sarah Jane's rejection by her friend Frankie as violent abuse, Tony at first remains calm. Unlike Frankie, who expresses his irritation in the question, "Is your mother a nigger?", Tony at first does not say a

https://doi.org/10.14361/9783839453377 - am 13.02.2026, 21:55:10. https://www.inlibra.com/de/agb - Open Access -

thing that could be a commentary on his emotional state. The scene's escalating tension is unequivocal – however, it is not revealed by the dramaturgy of dialogue but by the actors' body language. Tom Charity compares Cassavetes' form of subtle staging to production techniques at Hollywood studios and notes:

> "In *Shadows*, you can sense the tension between the liberal race drama Hollywood might have made out of it, and the more slippery character piece Cassavetes came up with. The crucial revelation of Tony's racism is conveyed entirely through looks and glances; there's none of the pontification which marks analogous works of the period, like *Edge of the City* or *The Defiant Ones*."[39]

Thus, no pretentious speeches, no dramaturgically elaborate spectacle makes up the scene's effect – instead, sudden movements are presented that give the events their own structure precisely because of their unpredictability. George Kouvaros explains:

> "Already a formal method can be gleaned from these brief, yet telling, early scenes, one in which key moments of emotional transformation occur suddenly – so suddenly, in fact, that the narrative itself seems to have been caught by surprise. And, as a result, the emotion is drawn less from the fictionalized story line than from the physical engagements of the actors. Throughout *Shadows* and the films that follow, the simplest, yet most complicated, acts of everyday social engagement are illuminated through an explicit engagement with performance."[40]

One would have to add that Cassavetes does not present the eruption of a racial conflict as extemporaneous. Although the scenes that precede the emotional outburst in Lelia's apartment do not offer any clearly articulated indices of the budding controversy at the level of dialogue, nevertheless, the performative instances mentioned by Kouvaros shed light, in a subtle way, on the racial dilemma that lies at the heart of the film.

Central to this context is the scene that takes place shortly before the aforementioned conflict in Tony's apartment. Directly after their spontaneous sex, the film shows a conversation between Tony and Lelia in bed that is

39 Charity, *John Cassavetes*, 30.

40 Kouvaros, *Where Does It Happen?*, 8.

https://doi.org/10.14361/9783839453377 - am 13.02.2026, 21:55:10. https://www.inlibra.com/de/agb - Open Access -

not characterized by the lovers' familiarity but by Lelia's painful disappointment. Already here, a conflict begins that Lelia sums up with the statement: "I thought being with you would be so important, meaning so much, and afterwards two people would be as close as it's possible to get. But instead we're just two strangers." As it turns out, their intercourse is Lelia's first sexual experience – and Tony ascribes her insecurities to the fact that she has just lost her virginity. Unable to comprehend the deeper reason for her feelings of injury, he tries to comfort her: "Don't be so upset, sweetheart… Baby, it will be much easier next time." But Lelia's defensive posture and her hopeless statement, "There isn't going to be a next time," not only illustrate Tony's misjudgment, they also hint at an underlying conflict that goes beyond sexual initiation.

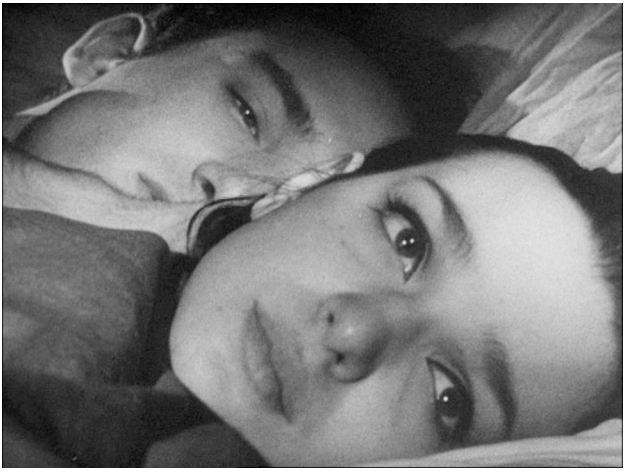


Figure 18: Lelia and Tony

Lelia's discomfort is primarily manifested in physical movements – as something inexpressible that cannot appropriately be articulated in words. Her confusion comes up, for example, in the way she quickly shifts her various physical postures: if, at first, she had snuggled up against Tony's body seeking shelter, shortly after she turns away from him, sits up, takes on a curved sitting posture, moves back and forth, wraps her arms around her body, stretches out only to crouch directly after, fixates her gaze on Tony, only to then stare into an undefined distance. If, at one moment, she seems to be seeking tenderness from Tony, she fends it off in the next instance; if her fa-

https://doi.org/10.14361/9783839453377 - am 13.02.2026, 21:55:10. https://www.inlibra.com/de/agb - Open Access -

cial expression at first seems dreamy, shortly afterwards it seems tense and nervous; if, at first, she tries to verbally explain her emotional state, she then falls into a state of pensive silence. Far from providing a clear, completely interpretable indication of her condition, these moments offer a web of insecurities held together solely by the intensity of the movements she performs. Brian Massumi explains the effect of the affective intensity as follows:

> "Intensity is [...] a nonconscious, never-to-be-conscious autonomic remainder. It is outside expectation and adaptation, as disconnected from meaningful sequencing, from narration, as it is from vital function. It is narratively de-localized, spreading over the generalized body surface, like a lateral backwash from the function-meaning interloops travelling the vertical path between head and heart."[41]

Massumi emphasizes the impossibility of localizing the expressive quality of intensity or of inserting it into a clearly outlined frame of reference. Intensity is autonomous in that it is neither expectable, nor malleable, nor narratively tangible. Closely related to this concept is the way the gesture functions. Similar to the intensity of affect described by Massumi, the gestural is also to be understood as an autonomous, unstructured element that manifests itself beyond intentional comprehensibility. Vilém Flusser, in his attempt to locate the gesture phenomenologically, arrives at the following definition: "The gesture is a movement of the body or of a tool connected to it, for which there is no satisfying causal explanation."[42] Giorgio Agamben goes in a similar direction in his "Notes on Gesture": "Gesture is what in each expression remains without expression."[43]

But as volatile as a gestural movement may occur – it is perceptible to the degree that it is presented as a visually accessible body language. Gilles Deleuze points to the fact that Cassavetes' cinema ascribes particular value to the pre-rhetorical aesthetics of the body, to a sign language that unfolds beyond the spoken word and thereby transcends the narrative construction of the diegesis. But the body is in no way speechless, rather, the space is charged by the circulation of instances of physical expression, which is disseminated

41 Massumi, "The Autonomy of Affect," 219.

42 Vilém Flusser, *Gesten: Versuch einer Phänomenologie.* Düsseldorf/Bensheim: Bollmann, 1991), 10.

43 Giorgio Agamben, "Noten zur Geste," in *Postmoderne und Politik*, ed. Jutta Georg-Lauer (Tübingen: Edition discord, 1992), 105.

https://doi.org/10.14361/9783839453377 - am 13.02.2026, 21:55:10. https://www.inlibra.com/de/agb - Open Access -

across the narrative level as an autonomous system. Brian Massumi argues that this expressive ability is manifested alongside the surface limitation of the body, as a "spreading over the generalized body surface."[44] He designates skin as the substrate of an affective relation that is potentially intangible but nevertheless cutaneously perceptible. Accordingly, the autonomous operation of affective expression, in its lack of direction, cannot be steered but can nevertheless be recognized as a surface manifestation. This means that the immediately operating affect can be observed in the medium of its representation. The processes of the interior – affective movements, moods, postures – are inevitably shifted onto the exterior, onto the skin as a surface of expression. Didier Anzieu describes this relation as follows: "The skin preserves the balance of our inner environment from exogenous disturbances but in its form, texture, colouring, and scars it retains the marks of those disturbances. In turn, however much the skin is said to keep that inner state safe, it is revealed on the surface of the skin for all to see".[45]

It is precisely this internal-external relationship that is developed as an image in the aforementioned sequence. Lelia's postures, superimposed onto her verbal ability to express herself, acquire their own expressive quality on the surface of her skin. The pain that Lelia feels is revealed on her body surface, which is furthermore undressed in this sequence, as a subtle hint at insecurity. In the context of Lelia's first sexual experience, skin represents the site of desire as well as of pain; it is libidinous but also vulnerable. Her nakedness represents both sexual arousal and helplessness. Peter W. Jansen comments on this sensitivity:

> "Pain is the twin of desire; in Cassavetes, they are both experiences of skin. There are not many films that bring up this twinning in such a startling way. In *Shadows*, this succeeds because it is the language of the body, the physical presence of the persons and of images from which emerges the word that only expresses what the skin has already long known."[46]

The few words that Lelia and Tony share only express "what the skin has already long known" – because "the skin is faster than the word". Skin is able to articulate the slightest emotions long before they are commented on by means

44 Massumi, "The Autonomy of Affect," 219.

45 Anzieu, *The Skin Ego*, 18.

46 Peter W. Jansen, "Shadows. 1957/59," in *John Cassavetes*, eds. Peter W. Jansen and Wolfram Schütte (Munich/Vienna: Carl Hanser Verlag, 1983), 62.

https://doi.org/10.14361/9783839453377 - am 13.02.2026, 21:55:10. https://www.inlibra.com/de/agb - Open Access -

of spoken language. The pithiness of expression is presented by Cassavetes as a visualization of an involuntary affect, a movement that can be traced on the surface of the skin.

Physical gestures become an integral part of Cassavetes' cinematic language – instances that operate autonomously on the one hand but whose fleeting nature, on the other hand, is preserved through cinematic mediation. A conspicuous example in the aforementioned sequence is the combination of body language and lighting. In contrast to other rather unevenly lit scenes, here Cassavetes sets distinct accents of light that make Lelia's skin color appear rather dark at first but then very light in the closeups on her face. Her white face sporadically stands out against the surrounding darkness, while in other shots, shadows repeatedly fall on the bodies moving around on the bed. These alternating uses of contrast and shadows, which are accomplished by various lighting effects, present the characters as a clearly structured contour at one point and as an unclear shape at other points. Ivone Margulies notes: "Bodies, masses and shadows obstruct and reshape the image, abstracting parts of it and commanding an even greater interest for what remains identifiable."[47]

Cassavetes' staging leaves some physical movements and gestures in the realm of the uncertain, while others are depicted as more clearly outlined surfaces of identification. The result is an image space that seems ambivalent but whose ambivalence is nevertheless not without direction, because it can be related both to the precarious situation of postcoital dialogue and to the fractures and discontinuities within racial identity, as Cassavetes illustrates with other visual clues. The sequence begins with a shot that shows an African mask hanging on the wall over the bed. Stephanie Watson sees this as a visual metaphor for Lelia's social masquerade that tricks Tony: "This subtly prefigures Tony's later rejection of her because of his racism. It indicates that Tony can only see the social mask or label of identity and the narratives that surround it, and not Lelia's actual identity which he had not 'seen' because he took it for granted that she was white."[48] Watson, however, does not consider that the mask itself is already presented as being split. Only half of it is brightly illuminated, while the other half cannot be seen in the darkness: there is no easily recognizable frame to the mask, and what appears as black on one side is recognizable as white on the other side. Already here,

47 Margulies, "John Cassavetes", 298.

48 Watson, "Spontaneous Cinema?", 66.

https://doi.org/10.14361/9783839453377 - am 13.02.2026, 21:55:10. https://www.inlibra.com/de/agb - Open Access -

one can see the fragility of cultural ascriptions, whose supposed coherence is constantly exposed to the process of different possibilities of negotiation.

Crucial here is the processually unfolding movement of the body on the one hand, one which stretches along the gestural, and, on the other hand, the influence of camera and lighting on the physical play of the actors. Here, both the incidence of light on the body as well as its reflecting retroaction onto the camera image play an important role because the formal act of filming and the performatively developing depictions of the actors do not function independent of one another but drive each other mutually. George Kouvaros notes: "The camera is never just a recording device but more like a provocateur or catalyst setting off a performance, scrutinising it, looking for the possibility of something never seen before but which emerges with strikingly clarity through the act of cinema."[49] The movement of shadows has a prominent place among the effects Kouvaros mentions: as aesthetic formations, they bring out the complex interplay of body, image, and movement. Robert Buschwenter states:

> "On the surface, the broken shadows and the shimmering reflection of the illuminated forms are freed from their outlines in the interplay. They reveal their illusoriness and keep the memory of the bodies alive. The surface is the place that recaptures bodies by making their appearance into a visible reality: in the play of movement created by the immersing bodies with the reflected bodies of light."[50]

The characters' self-exploration is just as processual and inconsistent as their physical gestures. It is subject to the same transformative qualities and experiences the same resistance against coherent attempts at interpretation, as Stephanie Watson highlights: "Cassavetes' desire to show identity to consist process and indirection, is the desire to fragment easy interpretations and definitions, to show that a person, or event, cannot be reduced to a single static definition, or meaning, interpreted in the same way by everyone."[51] Cassavetes' protagonists remove themselves from schematized characterization. Their restless search for the self is presented as an interminable movement alongside possible formations.

---

49 George Kouvaros, "The Cinematic Life of Emotions: John Cassavetes," *Senses of Cinema Online Journal* 5 (2000), no page number.

50 Buschwenter, "Das Schauspiel", 57.

51 Watson, "Spontaneous Cinema?", 64.

https://doi.org/10.14361/9783839453377 - am 13.02.2026, 21:55:10. https://www.inlibra.com/de/agb - Open Access -

But even if Cassavetes' characters cannot be understood as completely coherent figures, their actions are still constantly embedded in a cultural context that affects their apparently free-moving expressiveness. Lelia's encounter with Tony does not solely involve the painful experience of sexual initiation but also the problem of a mixed-race sexual relationship. Frantz Fanon makes this relationship the central focus of his work *Black Skin, White Masks* and pays special attention to the analysis of sexual relationships between the races. In doing so, he does not solely examine the perspective of the dominant, white position but also attempts to comprehend the motives of black sexual partners. With regard to the female subject, he makes the following inventory: "First of all, there are two such women: the Negress and the mulatto. The first has only one possibility and one concern: to turn white. The second wants not only to turn white but also to avoid slipping back. What indeed could be more illogical than a mulatto woman's acceptance of a Negro husband?"[52] Fanon interprets black desire as an attempt to lighten one's skin through sexual contact with white people, an assimilatory desire that he calls "lactification."[53] In Fanon, the possibility of a self-aware counter-project that could oppose the racist symbolism of colonialism with something other than well-known forms of discrimination seems to be, at best, a vague promise. Rather, the notion in the foreground is the fact that "authentic love will remain unattainable before one has purged oneself of that feeling of inferiority [...], that overcompensation, which seem to be the indices of the black *Weltanschauung*."[54] The prospect of demythologizing thought patterns that degrade black people to inferior objects seems further and further away. Instead, Fanon emphasizes that not only the white person, but also the black person, remains trapped in colonial fantasies that require a clear model of dominance and subordination. Thus, he asks the foundational question of

> "whether it is possible for the black man to overcome his feeling of insignificance, to rid his life of the compulsive quality that makes it so like the behavior of the phobic. Affect is exacerbated in the Negro, he is full of rage because he feels small, he suffers from an inadequacy in all human communication, and all these factors chain him with an unbearable insularity."[55]

52 Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, trans. Charles Lam Markmann (London: Pluto Press, 1986), 54.

53 Ibid., 47.

54 Ibid., 42.

55 Ibid., 50.

https://doi.org/10.14361/9783839453377 - am 13.02.2026, 21:55:10. https://www.inlibra.com/de/agb - Open Access -

Consequently, this means that a stable, unencumbered form of sexual relationship between the races is basically impossible – too often, it is determined by the inferiority complexes of black people on the one hand and white people's fantasies of superiority on the other hand. The inability of the black person to form such a relationship for which Fanon argues can thus be traced back to an insurmountable self-hatred that corresponds to the desire for self-dissolution.

Therefore, based on Frantz Fanon's analysis, can Lelia's anxiety about her sexual experience with a white lover be understood as the expression of a structure of desire conditioned by racism, which must necessarily result in the painful effacement of the Self? Perhaps SHADOWS is not so much about interracial desire as such as it is about insecurities conditioned by racism, to which all of those in such relationships are subjected. In any case, it is not only Lelia's obvious discomfort and anxiety that is palpable but also Tony's embarrassment, as well as his inability to appropriately react to the situation. Tony's motivations are just as unclear as Lelia's actions and reactions; just as little as one could characterize Lelia's driving force as a striving for assimilation à la Fanon, Tony's insecurity can be assigned to a clearly defined position. Cassavetes' staging of a mixed-race sexual relationship is outside of the normative politics of representation in the classical Hollywood system: it is expressed neither as a cliché-laden scenario of danger, in the tradition of D.W. Griffith, nor is it expressed as a sublimated transfiguration, like in the integration dramas of the 1960s.[56] Rather, a constellation of problems is presented whose potential for conflict, although palpable, is nevertheless not obvious. Lelia's anxious, constantly changing body postures, Tony's nervous helplessness, the uneven image composition: all of this hints at a seething dilemma that finally erupts in the subsequent sequence in Lelia's apartment.

It must be emphasized, however, that although Cassavetes holds the situation in suspense, he does not leave out the determinants that structure the conflict. This is not only hinted at by the shot of the African mask that opens the sequence but also by Lelia's thrice-repeated statement: "I want to go home." Within the cultural history of the *tragic mulatto*, the articulation of

56 The prime example of this is the depiction of a mixed-race relationship in GUESS WHO'S COMING TO DINNER (Stanley Kramer, USA 1967). Here, the topic of interracial sexuality is pointed to in the marriage of a black doctor (Sidney Poitier) and a white daughter from a well-to-do family (Katharine Houghton), but their love remains completely nonphysical except for a single brief kiss.

https://doi.org/10.14361/9783839453377 - am 13.02.2026, 21:55:10. https://www.inlibra.com/de/agb - Open Access -

the lack of a home, as well as the painful longing for a clearly determined localization, is a preferred topos. In film history, this motif is closely linked to the genre of melodrama, where it has in turn produced its own line of tradition. In fact, in the evenly lit close-ups of Lelia's face, Cassavetes – contrary to his otherwise rather unstable camera style – seems to borrow from melodrama's staging of a search for identity. In this respect, Lelia's gestures can also come across as melodramatic in their self-dramatizations. Anja Streiter notes:

> "The stylized expression of pain makes the pain inflicted by real life into an artificial pain: it is unclear whether this artificiality is an essential component of Lelia's character or an attempt to reinforce the expression of emotions by melodramatic means and add depth to the character in her emotional drives. Should one see a desperate woman here or a woman who is practicing a posture of desperation?"[57]

Streiter shows that the answer to this question is unclear because Cassavetes is unfurling a terrain that implies both the reflection, if not the critique, of melodramatic staging and the acting out of an excessive type of posturing. As vehemently as Cassavetes tries to distance himself from over-stylized types of cinematic dramaturgy, their influence can still be noticeably felt in his work. Just as Lelia, who at first refuses to recognize her mixed-race identity as a problem, cannot move within a space devoid of politics or color, Cassavetes cannot make a claim to a type of filmmaking devoid of context. Anja Streiter states:

> "Whether or not intended, the use of elements of melodrama has an effect on the film's avant-garde style and makes it transparent as a pose: the melodrama and jazz background stylize the characters' hurt and brokenness into a beautiful gesture that lends itself to being identificatory material."[58]

The result of the aesthetic contouring of Shadows described by Streiter is a noteworthy simultaneity of immediate affect and genre-specific framing. The film's processually developing action cannot be divorced from the variables that generate it, and this includes not only "people" but also, in a quite unique way, "cinema." Every type of authenticity, every depiction of emotional expression on the part of the actors, relies on a type of mediation in film that

57 Streiter, *Das Unmögliche Leben*, 37.

58 Ibid., 38.

https://doi.org/10.14361/9783839453377 - am 13.02.2026, 21:55:10. https://www.inlibra.com/de/agb - Open Access -

reveals the interplay of affective performance and filming techniques. This includes, on the one hand, the film's own aesthetic stylistics – camera angle and image detail, mise-en-scène and editing – but also, on the other hand, other influential factors that enrich the material. In the sequence in question, for example, this is the complex of aesthetic conventions of the melodrama genre, which is superimposed onto the diegesis as a shaping element and, therefore, produces a mélange in which one can no longer distinguish a model from its image. And Cassavetes emphasizes this relationship in other places, such as in his choice of setting. Large portions of the film (most of the exterior shots) are situated on New York's 42nd Street, an area that itself is closely tied to the medium of film. On the one hand, the district made famous as "Movie Block," with its numerous movie theaters, represents the location of cinema per se, and, on the other hand, this circumstance has itself become a cinematic topos, a popular, frequently chosen setting whose mythos reaches as far as the title of one of the most successful musicals in film history: 42nd Street (Lloyd Bacon, USA 1933). This is where Cassavetes starts the plot of Shadows: in the world of cinema, complete with its inventory that seems to constantly surround the characters like a subtle commentary.

Already in one of the first scenes, which shows Ben on his way to Hugh's workplace, one sees various movie theaters with their neon signs and placards, for example advertisements for the films Ten Thousand Bedrooms and The Ten Commandments.[59] And it is no coincidence that John Cassavetes' single cameo in his film happens in front of the entrance to a movie theater: in one scene, in which Lelia, deep in thought, looks at the advertisement of Brigitte Bardot in The Night Heaven Fell, she is badgered by a young man, whereby the passerby Cassavetes hurries to her aid.[60] Like in

59 Both films are contemporaneous, large-scale Hollywood productions that therefore represent a significant contrast to Shadows.

60 This sequence is also full of references to the cinematic medium. One sees the neon advertisements and poster announcements of the films The Night Heaven Fell (Roger Vadim, F/I 1958), Man or Gun (Albert C. Gannaway, USA 1958), Desperate Journey (Raoul Walsh, USA 1942), Edge of Darkness (Lewis Milestone, USA 1943), Impulse (Cy Endfield, UK 1954), Naked Paradise (Roger Corman, USA 1957), and Naked Africa (Ray Phoenix, USA 1957). Most noticeably, this scene shows Lelia's obvious admiration of the star Brigitte Bardot, whose pictures she pauses a long time to look at. But the titles of the other films are also revealing, as they seem to point to the film's developing situations like cinema-specific mottos: to Lelia's being in love and its resulting insecurity (The Night Heaven Fell), to Tony's superimposed postures of masculinity

https://doi.org/10.14361/9783839453377 - am 13.02.2026, 21:55:10. https://www.inlibra.com/de/agb - Open Access -

the sequence after Tony and Lelia's sexual affair, in which the dividing line between self-dramatization and external stylization is blurred, the relation between filmic text and context is characterized by intersections and blurs. Intradiegetic and extra-fictional elements seem to blend together in the form of cross-fades, where both the interior and the exterior are difficult to define – especially since Cassavetes presents his type of visual contextualization not as a clearly verifiable process of citation but, at the most, integrates them into the images like a subtle type of accompaniment.

Just as polymorphic is the milieu within which the characters of Shadows embark on the journey to find themselves. All too often, the way they represent themselves and want to be perceived ends up in conflict with the influencing factors around them. Especially in these situations it becomes apparent how difficult it is to develop one's own identity politics in the context of predetermined cultural parameters and how limited an effort of self-expression is that would like to leave out this framing. Ray Carney stresses:

> "*Shadows* recognizes the extent to which no cultural, sexual, or social performance is free, and that personal freedom can never simply be willed into existence. As the Times Square movie houses remind us (and the characters), a particular performance is always related to previous performances, and grows out of them, it can never escape their influence."[61]

Even when the characters repeatedly try to escape the framework surrounding them, they are constantly thrown back onto an impenetrable network of

---

(Man or Gun), to Ben's aimless nighttime wanderings (Desperate Journey), to the abruptly appearing racial subject matter (Edge of Darkness), to the impulsive behavior of several characters (Impulse), to a first-time sexual experience (Naked Paradise), as well as to the knowledge that the problem with this experience is not only extended to the sexual, but also to the racial constitution of identity (Naked Africa). Regardless of whether Cassavetes intentionally placed these references in the film or not, they can be read as an accompanying commentary that seems to reflect on the various facets of Shadows in a fascinating way. In further sequences, film titles are presented that additionally accent the action: shortly after Tony's and Lelia's sexual affair, Tony can be seen in a telephone booth where an advertisement for the film Top Secret Affair (H.C. Potter, USA 1957) can be seen in the background. Furthermore, Hugh's and Rupert's farewell, where they try to give each other hope for the future, is accompanied by an advertisement for the film A Night to Remember (Roy Ward Baker, UK 1958) – a title that is incidentally not only connected to the single situation shown but to the whole film Shadows.

61 Carney, *American Dreaming*, 45.

https://doi.org/10.14361/9783839453377 - am 13.02.2026, 21:55:10. https://www.inlibra.com/de/agb - Open Access -

models and images that is capable of thwarting any attempt at escape. It is thus striking how often the film questions how its own shots relate to each other: seemingly "false" connections and irritating jumps in axes make the images seem shapeless and stand in the way of the viewer's orientation. The characters are also difficult to grasp visually. Often they are cropped by the cadrage and presented as incomplete forms, and as soon as they become visible, they leave the picture again: they run offscreen and are hidden by objects; they are in constant motion, which the camera can hardly follow. But despite this perplexing jumble, one can also recognize moments in which Cassavetes seems to order the confusion by smoothing it out. One indication of this is, for example, the almost contemplative lingering on the African mask that introduces the postcoital dialogue between Lelia and Tony – an impression that seems all the more sustainable since Cassavetes uses the mask motif several times, such as in the sequence that shows Ben in the garden of the Museum of Modern Art, where he is observing different sculptures and pauses at the sculpture of a head that is similar to the African mask in Tony's apartment and that Ben himself calls a "mask." Thus, on the one hand, Cassavetes forces the liberation from technical constraints but, in any case, simultaneously shows how further grids of meaning are generated which are modelled on top of the structure of the images. The formal structure of SHADOWS constantly refers anew to its basic theme of identity constitution, presented as a type of limbo between individual expression and structuring filmic movements. Just as the bodies try to remove themselves from the picture's frame, the characters seem to want to escape the frame of meaning – and both have their limits. Even if Cassavetes advocates the freedom of gestural expression, he does this in a particular formal framework; even if Lelia considers her mixed-race heritage not worth mentioning, she has to learn that it is no trivial matter in the environment of a society structured on racism.

The dilemma of searching for one's identity permeates the entire film. Each character is always trying to uphold his or her outer appearance and maintain his or her own Self as autonomous but are repeatedly confronted by fuzzy nuances that cause the borders of such a self-construction to come to the fore. Therefore, the impartial way that Lelia introduces Hugh as her brother seems to suggest that the initial insecurity about her relationship with Tony has given way to a balanced attitude. But, the deceptive feeling of security and stability gives way to a dramatic confrontation afterwards that again brings the fragility of racial identification to the surface of the action. The next morning, when her brother Ben, who was not present during the

https://doi.org/10.14361/9783839453377 - am 13.02.2026, 21:55:10. https://www.inlibra.com/de/agb - Open Access -

conflict, notices her uneasiness and asks her if she is sick, she can no longer hide her troubled mood. Ben then asks his brother for the reason for Lelia's odd behavior. The latter at first tries to avoid him and finally answers with a statement that outlines the more deep-seated cause of the conflict: "Just a problem with the races, that's all… Nothing you'd be interested in."

Figure 19: "Just a problem with the races"

Hugh's remark is delivered without any kind of dramatic effort; it seems unpretentious, even casual. This is indicated by the claim that Ben is not interested in the conflict, as well as the fact that the problem does not apply to him. Both assumptions prove to be false: Of course Ben, who is just as light-skinned as his sister, has to struggle with the same confusions as Lelia does, and of course the omnipresence of racism, as well as the confrontations that go along with it, cannot be written off as trifles. Even if the level of conversation suggests otherwise, SHADOWS unswervingly insists on this: the main problem is the problem of skin.

Central in this context is the staging of skin as a physical boundary. As a medium of visibility, as well as of affective expression, it presents a form that makes the passage between interior and exterior perceptible. This function is already noticeable in the sequences that address Lelia's identity dilemma – and it remains palpable in Ben. For example, one noteworthy scene shows a private party in the three siblings' apartment. Similar to the opening se-

https://doi.org/10.14361/9783839453377 - am 13.02.2026, 21:55:10. https://www.inlibra.com/de/agb - Open Access -

quence, Ben observes the action from the periphery and comes off as strangely isolated among the laughing, dancing guests. And like in the opening club scene, the reason for his obvious disgruntlement, his noteworthy uneasiness, remains unclear. Contrary to the opening sequence, however, a surprising outburst of emotions occurs during the private party. At one point in the evening, a black woman speaks to Ben who wants to encourage him to participate more in the party. When she touches him and puts her arm around his shoulder, he rejects her: "Don't touch me!" This first reaction is subsequently heightened to an aggressive attack: Ben hits the woman in the face, fights with his brother Hugh and ultimately leaves the apartment hastily.

Figure 20: "Don't touch me"

Peter W. Jansen describes this scene as a situation "whose intensity is of almost painful precision and in which habitus and body reaction tell a story that is itself the story of the film."[62] In fact, the conflict in this sequence can be characterized as a recurring constant in SHADOWS. At first, it is striking how sudden and extemporaneous the emotional outburst is. The fact that the process is not adequately explained, neither at the level of the dialogue nor in the subsequent action, leaves it unclear where Ben's irritation comes from, what may have been the reason for his aggression, or where the underlying causes

62 Jansen, "Shadows", 61.

https://doi.org/10.14361/9783839453377 - am 13.02.2026, 21:55:10. https://www.inlibra.com/de/agb - Open Access -

are to be sought or found. Instead, the film shows how the unpredictability of an impulse unfolds not as a constructed narrative element but as an undulating movement of energy. Furthermore, the sudden mood swing, which hangs over the images like a fleeting irritation, points to an emotional confusion that can be articulated solely affectively, which can therefore not be explained in words. Jansen interprets Ben's behavior as follows: "He pushes her away […] because he noticeably cannot handle her touch: his reaction is immediately physical; since it is not verbally explained, it is unclear whether Ben reacts to her black skin […] or to the woman herself."[63] Jansen's interpretation could be supplemented, however, to the extent that the scene encompasses a certain mode of simultaneity: Ben reacts both to the black skin as well as to the woman herself. More precisely: he reacts in the form of a rejecting gesture to that which, as a mediation through a medium, enables physical contact with the Other (the woman/blackness), i.e. the moment of touch. Here, skin acts very clearly as the surface of the identity problem, since it is the medium of tactile physical contact, where the perception of Self and the Other come together in the mode of touch. This results in a multiply duplicated effect: on the one hand, skin makes up a shield to the outside world that surrounds the Self like a protective or constricting shell, and, on the other hand, it is permeable in the sense that it is basically able to transport sensations, both pleasant and unpleasant. And touch is a further ambivalent doubling process because it represents the reciprocity of touching and sensing, which come together in mutual physical contact. Elisabeth Grosz describes this mode of perception as "double sensation" and explains:

> The information provided by the surface of the skin is both endogenous and exogenous, active and passive, receptive and expressive, the only sense able to provide the "double sensation." Double sensations are those in which the subject utilizes one part of the body to touch another, thus exhibiting the interchangeability of active and passive sensations, of those positions of subject and object.[64]

In contrast to the visibility of the skin, which results from the distance of observation, in the moment of touch the skin is contacted as a sensory organ and thus exposed to a confrontation from which it cannot retreat. In

63 Ibid., 62.

64 Elisabeth Grosz, *Volatile Bodies: Toward a Corporeal Feminism* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1994), 35-36.

https://doi.org/10.14361/9783839453377 - am 13.02.2026, 21:55:10. https://www.inlibra.com/de/agb - Open Access -

one sense, tactile contact makes up the intersection between the Self and the Other and thus represents a type of ambivalence that is capable of reflecting the mixed-race person's identity dilemma several times over. Here, skin stands for a medium of conjunction that calls difference itself into question and opens up its own terrain of non-demarcation. Ben's helpless, defensive behavior indicates that the question of racial identification can be seen as being in correspondence with this fundamental function of ambivalent perception of the Self and the Other. For, on the one hand, the ambiguity of his exterior represents a visual equivocation that must be gauged again and again in the public sphere: his skin is a medium of visibility exposed to a general interrogation without being able to defend itself. On the other hand, skin can be reached in a direct way through touch, in a way that confronts the subject with the reciprocity of touch and being touched. During the party, Ben tries to avoid the people around him and thereby tries to escape their gaze directed toward him. However, the moment he is physically touched, there is something inevitable about the encounter with the Other: it occurs in the form of immediate physicality, as a subject-object confrontation that Ben unequivocally perceives as a threat.

If one includes the racial marking of the skin in this process, the physically sensed perception appears all the more painful because the physical shell no longer offers sufficient protection against the outside world; on the one hand because of its tactile penetrability, and on the other hand because of its color permeability. Claudia Benthien has carefully highlighted the different cultural repertoires of meaning of light and dark skin, respectively. She points out that

> "a long physiognomic and literary tradition analogizes lightness and transparency of skin with sensibility and a positive translucency of emotions. Since very dark skin (from a 'white' perspective) is interpreted as impenetrable, changing less visibly and therefore not semiotizable, it is often understood as concealing something – it becomes a *hide* in a literal sense. Also, the fact that *color* originates from the Latin verb *celare* (to hide) hints at such a collective notion, according to which pigments are understood as the substances of the body surface that both cover and conceal."[65]

If one applies this cultural tradition of ascription to the mixed-race person's identity dilemma, Ben's situation seems even more precarious. Since unlike his black counterpart, whose shell offers a protective space to hide, Ben's light

65 Benthien, *Im Leibe wohnen*, 205.

https://doi.org/10.14361/9783839453377 - am 13.02.2026, 21:55:10. https://www.inlibra.com/de/agb - Open Access -

skin appears as an inadequate limitation, since its transparency perpetually pushes the possible translucency of emotions (such as turning red or pale) up to the skin's surface. Ben experiences this insecurity conveyed by his skin in several ways: as a visual ambiguity whose potential for double signification does not allow a clear selection of the components of meaning, as an ambivalent experience of touch that thwarts his attempts to escape, and as a dangerously permeable transparency that enables unwanted insights into the dynamic processes of emotion. In this complex relationship, the body surface appears as a locus of pain, making the drama of the search for identity perceptible as painful self-experience. Skin acts as the place where the interior and the exterior are transmitted, it refers to the correlation of visual and tactile sensations, and it appears as a surface that can equally enshroud and uncover one's fragile ego.

After the fight and the subsequent getaway from the apartment, Ben is shown alone on a street at night. Right before he enters a bar, he pauses and recites the following verse: "Mary had a little lamb, whose fleece was white as snow. And everywhere that Mary went the lamb was sure to go." Shortly afterwards, the film itself seems to pause when it shows Ben's face in a noticeably out-of-place close-up: the shot has a retarding effect but also simultaneously emphasizes what has been said, which thus has a brief echo before Ben hurries down the bar's steps. At first, the formulation "white" can be associated with Ben's self-chosen racial identity: unlike his brother Hugh, whose party guests are overwhelmingly black, Ben's circle of friends consists exclusively of young, white men. Ben is also "white as snow" or at least perceived as such in public. Moreover, Ben cannot simply put on and take off his whiteness at will; it follows him wherever he goes: either as a devoted lamb or as a light shadow. In fact, this shadow seems to take on a life of its own exactly when Ben tries to suppress or deny it. But just as little as he is able to escape the examination of his skin in the public sphere (whether in a visual or tactile way), just as little can he escape the racial contouring that forms and constructs his identity. Therefore, skin appears as an instance of subjective experience as well as of others' perception of it; it can be perceived from a visual distance but can also make itself felt as sensitive proximity. As a shell surrounding the body, it acts as a sign of demarcation. It surrounds the subject but, at the same time, nevertheless reveals it as a contact surface. Ben's desperate attempts to separate the one from the other, to modify the surface in the form of selections, must therefore fail: the shadow cannot be gotten rid of.

https://doi.org/10.14361/9783839453377 - am 13.02.2026, 21:55:10. https://www.inlibra.com/de/agb - Open Access -

At the end of his book *Black Skin, White Masks*, Frantz Fanon asks "Superiority? Inferiority? Why not the quite simple attempt to touch the other, to feel the other, to explain the other to myself?"[66] The answer in Cassavetes' SHADOWS is: because touch is painful, because it has to be and because it will remain so. This is indicated by the aggression that Ben develops after he fails to defend himself from the woman's touch. On the one hand, his pain is articulated as a sorrowful self-perception and, on the other hand, as a type of reciprocity that he wants to ward off but cannot avoid. The inclusion of the Self as the exclusion of the Other becomes fragile at the point where it encounters its permeable boundary: skin.

John Cassavetes' film end at the same place it begins: in the realm of the uncertain, one which offers no definitive message. The shadows that give the film its title structure its images and simultaneously abstract parts of them: they offer possibilities of orientation only to break them apart in the next instance. Cassavetes presents his characters just as ambivalently, characters whose sudden outbursts and changes of direction confront our expectations of coherence with an oscillating variety. This type of fragmentary character development, as well as the corresponding impression of a loose, variable plot structure, has been repeatedly characterized as improvisation. Stephanie Watson notes: "As Cassavetes discovered with the first version of SHADOWS, which was largely unscripted, life can only be seen as being an experience of process and improvisation in re-presentational/re-produced form, if the film-making process is planned out in such a way as to 'appear' to have not taken place."[67] If one applies Watson's interpretation to the actors' performances, it follows that the repeated disruptions and fractures of the types of behavior shown do not spring from a coherent filmic dramaturgy but portray the reproduction of life itself: improvisation is therefore not to be understood as a primarily artificial skill but as the basic existence of each individual. Robert Buschwenter states: "When the actors improvise their roles, they do this primarily because they are portraying persons who are improvising their lives – or, from another perspective: because, as actors, they are tasked with playing out situations that they have learned to improvise from their own lives."[68]

Cassavetes emphasizes this connection by giving his characters the same names as the actors who play them: the character Lelia in SHADOWS is played

66 Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, 321.

67 Watson, "Spontaneous Cinema?", 61.

68 Buschwenter, "Das Schauspiel", 65.

https://doi.org/10.14361/9783839453377 - am 13.02.2026, 21:55:10. https://www.inlibra.com/de/agb - Open Access -

by Lelia Goldoni, Ben by Ben Carruthers, etc. In this gesture, many authors recognize a type of authenticity that closely resembles the documentary type. Thus, for example, Gilberto Perez states: "No fictional method has more of a documentary flavor than the way of making movies devised by John Cassavetes."[69] It should be noted, however, that although Cassavetes' cinema seeks a proximity to the non-contrived, to immediate experience, it still cannot be prematurely equated with real life. Cassavetes relies on authenticity and verisimilitude on the one hand and cinematic imagery on the other hand – but not in the form of a distinct antagonism but rather as an interwoven network. In this context, it is crucial to recognize that a stable difference between the world and film cannot be discerned at all but that they – in the form of an exchange relationship – connect and complete one another. Already in 1969, Jean-Louis Comolli engages with this relation in *Cahiers du cinéma* and explains:

> "In aesthetic terms it would seem that for a particular (experimental) fringe of contemporary cinema, the traditionally separate and even opposing fields of 'documentary' and 'fictional' films were interpenetrating more and more and intermingling in innumerable ways. It is as if they were involved in, and involved, a vast process of exchange, a reciprocal system where reportage and fiction alternate or conjugate within one and the same film, react upon, break down and modify each other, until finally it is perhaps impossible to choose between them."[70]

Comolli ascribes a potential to this kind of cinema that leads to a lasting break with conventional standards of filmic representation. It is precisely amateurish experimentation, which refuses to be professionalized and does not eliminate the uncertainties and instabilities that arise, but allows them to become an integral part of the image, that is capable of revolutionizing cinema. In this sense, the real is not to be understood as something that precedes film and is represented by it but as something that is produced in the first place through the formative intervention of film: "A new and powerful link binds the cinema to the experienced, binds them and articulates them into one and the same *language*. Life is no longer 'represented' by the cinema. The cinema

69 Gilberto Perez, "Imperfection," *Senses of Cinema Online* 16 (2001), no page numbers.

70 Jean-Louis Comolli, „The Detour Through the Direct." In: *Realism and the Cinema*, edited by Christopher Williams, London: BFI, 1980, 225. First published in *Cahiers du cinéma* 209 and 211, February and April 1969.

https://doi.org/10.14361/9783839453377 - am 13.02.2026, 21:55:10. https://www.inlibra.com/de/agb - Open Access -

is no longer the image – or the moral – of life. Together they speak to each other and produce each other through and within that speech."[71] The effect of such a re-definition of filmic representation, which Comolli designates *direct cinema*, is a new kind of scrutiny and, therefore, a modification of classical cinema's narrative conventions. At the same time, the "direct" is not to be understood as a self-contained movement in the sense of a clearly definable stylistic direction but rather as a field of the indefinite: "*Direct cinema* is not therefore the place where meanings and forms are fixed, rather that of their greatest *instability*, their ceaseless experimentation, with all that that entails of tentative groping in the dark, reversals, surprises and paradoxes."[72] When applied to the characters in Shadows, this means that their connection to the real, and to the filmic form that fictionalizes it, cannot be categorized in the sense of a hierarchization: one does not come before the other; they are mutually dependent.

In the search for self, the characters are necessarily always border crossers. In Gilles Deleuze, this implicates "that the character has ceased to be real or fictional, in so far as he has ceased to be seen objectively or to see subjectively: it is a character who goes over crossings and frontiers because he invents as a real character and becomes all the more real because he has been better at inventing."[73] With this seemingly paradoxical formulation, Deleuze outlines a change within filmic representation that he locates historically in the 1960s; as examples, he cites John Cassavetes' *cinéma direct* as well Jean Rouch's *cinéma vérité*. In this terrain, the break occurs "not between fiction and reality, but in the new mode of story which affects both of them."[74] The bearers of this new mode of story are the characters, who set in motion a new type of processual identity constitution: "What cinema must grasp is not the identity of a character, whether real *or* fictional, through his objective and subjective aspects. It is the becoming of the real character when he himself starts to 'make fiction,' when he enters into 'the flagrant offence of making up legends.'"[75] Cassavetes' filmmaking does not produce any images that offer stable insights or narrative resolutions. His camera chooses neither a

71 Ibid., 233.
72 Ibid., 237.
73 Deleuze, *Cinema 2*, 151-152.
74 Ibid., 150.
75 Ibid.

https://doi.org/10.14361/9783839453377 - am 13.02.2026, 21:55:10. https://www.inlibra.com/de/agb - Open Access -

subjective nor an objective perspective. Rather, its vanishing point is the borderline between both, which is manifested in relation to the characters in a type of articulation that Deleuze calls "free indirect discourse."[76] Accordingly, the point is not to assign the camera a clearly definable position, or, in other words, to decide between the role of the neutral observer or a subjective perspective on the characters. The characters are not seen from the outside but, rather, incorporate their own vision into the film image. They move within a borderland that no longer connects the subjective and the objective in an oppositional juxtaposition but in a communicative relationship. Both poles are components of the image, but they exist only as markers of a border that is constantly stepped over so that it may be made visible as a border: "What has to be filmed is the frontier, on condition that this is equally crossed by the film director."[77] Deleuze applies this position to Cassavetes' SHADOWS and states:

> "In *Shadows* it is the two white Negroes who constitute the frontier, and its perpetual crossing in a double reality which is no longer distinguishable from the film. The frontier can be grasped only in flight, when we no longer know where it passes, between the white and the black, but also between the film and the non-film; it is characteristic of film to be always outside its marks, breaking with 'the right distance,' always overflowing 'the reserved zone' where we would have liked to hold it in space and time."[78]

Following Deleuze, SHADOWS can be understood as a manifestation of border crossing: as an interrogation and transgression of distinctions, among them, not only the opposition of subjective and objective but also that of real and fictitious as well as of black and white. However, this border itself cannot be determined, it can only be perceived as receding and only under the condition of its own overcoming. In this context, what is especially important is the "in-between" that Deleuze does not so much see as a process of characterization but primarily situates at the film's temporal level. This aspect makes up an important factor for what Deleuze calls the "cinema of bodies." According to Deleuze, Cassavetes' filmmaking distinguishes itself by transporting time onto the body: "The attitude of the body is like a time-image, the one which

76 Ibid., 148.
77 Ibid., 154.
78 Ibid.

https://doi.org/10.14361/9783839453377 - am 13.02.2026, 21:55:10. https://www.inlibra.com/de/agb - Open Access -

puts the before and the after in the body, the series of time".[79] Here, the "series of time" is not to be understood as a chronological succession but as a moment of simultaneity of various temporal levels, as a paradoxical coexistence of elements that actually contradict each other and that does not just briefly show up but is expanded out to be its main requirement. Deleuze calls this type the third "time-image," which he describes as follows: "The third [time-image] concerns the *series of time*, which brings together the before and the after in a becoming, instead of separating them; its paradox is to introduce an enduring interval in the moment itself."[80] According to Deleuze, there is a period of time that occurs between moments that leads to a break in the empirical passage of time, which is capable of dissolving chronological succession and, therefore, the separation between before and after. "Becoming" is therefore central, not the completion of various developments, but their persistence in the form of a procedural proliferation. One can apply these ideas to Cassavetes' cinema in the sense that it formulates a type of simultaneity that is unique to all Cassavetes characters: they are located both inside and outside the diegesis without being able to be reduced to one of these areas; they are constantly testing the range of one in comparison to the other – as an incessant form of crossing boundaries. In this way, Cassavetes creates a kind of aesthetic unclosability that does not provide any definitive markers but merely loose ends and open breaking points, thus unfolding an independent film terrain beyond rigid drawing of boundaries.

The topic of finding oneself coalesces in an aesthetic mélange in which style and content cannot be divorced but mutually reflect each other in their function. Anja Streiter stresses that "[i]n this space, there can only be an infinite sequence of designs that make it possible to live with the unanswered questions by constantly articulating them anew."[81] The unfinished dominates over prefabricated and thereby creates new leeway for the interaction of the Self and the Other. Here, the filmic staging functions along mise-en-scène and editing as an artificial process of selection, but one whose borders are permeable, one that remains open to resistances that cannot be kept out of the images but create their own conditions. Trinh T. Minh-Ha notes:

79 Ibid., 195.

80 Ibid., 155.

81 Streiter, *Das Unmögliche Leben*, 23.

https://doi.org/10.14361/9783839453377 - am 13.02.2026, 21:55:10. https://www.inlibra.com/de/agb - Open Access -

> "Although each film in itself already represents a type of arranging and finalizing, every conclusion can resist its own conclusions and open itself up to other conclusions in order to emphasize the interval between the openings and thereby create a space in which the meaning remains fascinated by that which escapes and transcends it."[82]

Cassavetes' cinema accumulates fragments of reality and impressions of fiction into a multilayer filmic web: the result is vacillating images that remain open to decisions and meanings, whose sole message is the missing message. The existential dilemma of the mixed-race character thus comments on, as it were, the search for a connection between life and form, between content and style. Matthias Kraus emphasizes:

> "Therefore, self-reflection in Cassavetes can be understood as an interactional and procedural relationship at various levels: as the self-constitution of a physical ego in the demarcation of space, as a reflection of this identity construction through the form and as a staging practice of communicative acts between the characters."[83]

The incompleteness of the characters and the principal openness of the filmic staging cannot be divorced from each other: both denote a process of self-exploration that Cassavetes outlines as a field of the possible, as a layer that consists of alternating voices, expressions, and roles, among which none is more veritable or more central than the other. Being fundamentally interminable, this mode cannot be understood as a form of "being" but, as Deleuze argues, as one of "becoming," as a state that can only be perceived as processually unfolding. In the same way, the camera in Cassavetes' films does not act as an instrument of reproduction but as one of formation, as Matthias Kraus stresses: "The camera in Cassavetes is not tasked with discovering or constructing identities but with provoking a fiction that processes identities."[84] In this way, every single filmic image carries the potential of a transmutation within itself: it is capable of forming and deforming, it opens up diverse possibilities and eversions that carry the interior to the exterior and can cause

82 Trinh T. Minh-ha, "Die verabsolutierende Suche nach Bedeutung," in *Bilder des Wirklichen: Texte zur Theorie des Dokumentarfilms*, ed. Eva Hohenberger (Berlin: Vorwerk 8, 1998), 322-323.

83 Matthias Kraus, "American Ways of Life: Reflexiver Pragmatismus bei John Cassavetes," *Augen-Blick* 31 (2000), 51.

84 Ibid., 53.

https://doi.org/10.14361/9783839453377 - am 13.02.2026, 21:55:10. https://www.inlibra.com/de/agb - Open Access -

this process to turn in the opposite direction in the next moment. The film displays itself as a site of physical affects and thus remains open to all those sudden movements and gestures that go beyond the script.

The importance Cassavetes attaches to the integration of the unplannable as a prerequisite for his own cinematic expression can already be seen in the production history of the film SHADOWS, a production history which itself tells a story of hesitation, revisions, and fractures. What many of his colleagues and a number of film critics have interpreted as weakness and lack of balance is the real strength of Cassavetes' cinema: a bundling of transformative qualities that spreads as a texture of disorientation both in and beyond the film images. Perhaps the difficulty of this continuous shifting of boundaries lies precisely in the fact that it does not take place solely as a painful experience of the film characters, but is also transferred to the viewer in a painful manner. Trinh T. Minh-Ha states:

> "A subject that refers to him/her/itself as processual, a work that reveals its own formal characteristics or its own nature as a work, must therefore upset our sense of identity – that is, the familiar distinction between one's own and the other, because the latter is now no longer in a recognizable relationship of dependence, derivation, or appropriation. In the process of ego construction, the ego also loses its security and begins to falter. The paradox of this process is its fundamental instability; an instability that brings to light the disorder intrinsic to every order."[85]

In the face of the impossibility of a rigid drawing of boundaries, there is nothing left for both Lelia and Ben, as well as for the viewer, to do than to try to endure the permeability of their (film) roles and, in the process, to not repress the disorder of their constantly re-invented subjectivity, but to permit it as a multiform play of shadows.

85 Minh-ha, "Die verabsolutierende Suche," 322.

https://doi.org/10.14361/9783839453377 - am 13.02.2026, 21:55:10. https://www.inlibra.com/de/agb - Open Access -

III. Blackface – Whiteface

https://doi.org/10.14361/9783839453377 - am 13.02.2026, 21:55:10. https://www.inlibra.com/de/agb - Open Access -

Bamboozled (Spike Lee, USA 2000)

Spike Lee's filmmaking has been the source of much controversy since his international breakthrough. Although celebrated and admired by many scholars, Lee has also been confronted with political accusations of having a socially segregationist position due to his concentration on black themes and characters. For example, the black essayist Stanley Crouch caused a great stir when he once characterized Spike Lee's film style as "Afro-Fascist Chic" in a *Village Voice* article and compared the aesthetics of his films to that of Leni Riefenstahl's oeuvre.[1] Debates such as this are typically ignited by Lee's cinematic oeuvre as well as by his own self-presentation. One of Lee's trademarks is the way he connects his films with images, terminology, and slogans from the tradition of the black liberation struggle.[2] This approach reached its zenith in the

1 See Stanley Crouch, "Do the Race Thing: Spike Lee's Afro-Fascist Chic." *The Village Voice* (June 20, 1989): 73-76. Although less polemical, similar critiques are offered by, for example, bell hooks and Ed Guerrero, who primarily take exception to Lee's hostile depiction of interracial romantic relationships. See bell hooks, *Yearning: Race, Gender, and Cultural Politics* (Boston: South End Press, 1989) and Ed Guerrero, "Spike Lee and the Fever in the Racial Jungle," in *Film Theory Goes To The Movies*, eds. Jim Collins, Hilary Radner, and Ava Preacher Collins (New York: Routledge, 1992): 170-181.

2 Similar references can be found in almost every Spike Lee film, such as, for instance, the quote from *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, by the black novelist Zora Neale Hurston, that opens Lee's She's Gotta Have It (USA 1986), quotes from Martin Luther King, Jr. and Malcolm X at the end of Do the Right Thing (USA 1989), or statements of James Baldwin, who is quoted by the dying Pierre Delacroix at the end of Bamboozled (USA 2000). Moreover, Spike Lee often includes references to black victims of violence, such as in the form of dedications, like in Do the Right Thing (USA 1989) or Jungle Fever (USA 1991). Perhaps the most obvious position can be found in Spike Lee's own production company: the name "Forty Acres and a Mule" refers to the United States government's broken promise to provide an economic foundation for freed slaves, namely by providing each 40 acres of land and a mule.

https://doi.org/10.14361/9783839453377 - am 13.02.2026, 21:55:10. https://www.inlibra.com/de/agb - Open Access -

advertising campaign for his film Malcolm X (USA 1992), when Lee repeatedly used Malcolm X's early militant and radical rhetoric, called for a day off from school for all black children in the country in order to see the film, and sometimes completely rejected questions from white interviewers.[3] The film's opening sequence alone, a montage of documentary footage of Rodney King's mistreatment, as well as images of a burning US flag whose tatters ultimately form a giant X, caused an uproar. The political ambition of such depictions has solidified Spike Lee's presence in the public consciousness. Thus, as director Saul Landau states: "Lee, more than a talented filmmaker, has become an unapologetic troublemaker."[4]

With his film Bamboozled (USA 2000), Spike Lee had already caused some irritations in the run-up to its premiere. When it became known that Lee planned a film that would resurrect the tradition of minstrel shows, indeed even show actors in blackface, many were greatly outraged. Because none of the major studios wanted to finance the project, Lee completed the film as a low-budget production costing only $8 million. Researching for the film also proved difficult because not every film excerpt that Lee wanted to use as references for the Hollywood tradition of blackface was granted by rights holders.[5] When Lee's production company provided the *New York Times* with photos for

3 In fact, Lee's engagement with the controversial black leading figure of Malcolm X can be seen as one of the points of crystallization that still sparks criticisms of Lee's films. While he has been accused of having his own shallow commercial interests in mind in reference to his film project Malcolm X (Lee's company, Forty Acres and a Mule, made millions with the sales of merchandise such as baseball caps, T-shirts, posters, and other memorabilia emblazoned with an "X"), Lee was able to secure the support of the most important black media giants. After publicly condemning the planned edits and changes called for by Warner Brothers studios, which was financing his project, celebrities such as Michael Jordan, Magic Johnson, Janet Jackson, Bill Cosby, Tracy Chapman, and Prince offered financial support so that Lee could finish his project the way that he envisioned it. The title of the film Bamboozled is also a Malcolm X reference, stemming from a speech wherein Malcolm X address how America's black population had been cheated out of their freedom: "You've been hoodwinked. You've been took. You've been led astray, led amok. You've been bamboozled." This speech also appears in Spike Lee's film Malcolm X.

4 Saul Landau, "Spike Lee's Revolutionary Broadside," *Cineaste* 26, no. 2 (2001), 11.

5 For example, Time Warner refused to provide clips that show Bugs Bunny in blackface, obviously so as not to damage their own product. Additionally, in one interview, Lee hinted that Disney withholding cartoons that feature blackface to this day. See Gary Crowdus and Dan Georgakas, "Thinking about the Power of Images: An Interview with Spike Lee," *Cineaste* 26, no. 2 (2001): 4-9.

https://doi.org/10.14361/9783839453377 - am 13.02.2026, 21:55:10. https://www.inlibra.com/de/agb - Open Access -

the advertising campaign right before the film premiered, it refused to print images that showed actors with blackened faces, arguing that the images were too racist and insulting to appear under the banner of the *New York Times*. Although the film was floated as a satire, several critics vehemently opposed the minstrel depictions and, therefore, a repetition and revival of racist traditions of entertainment.

BAMBOOZLED tells the story of a painful form of crossing racial boundaries. The protagonist, Pierre Delacroix, a black screenwriter, is presented from the very start as a deeply divided figure. Although he is successful in his career, his ambitions to write sophisticated television series about and for the upper black middle class cannot be enforced against his superior, the TV producer Dunwitty. Under pressure from Dunwitty to churn out a TV show that conforms to the commercial interests of the TV broadcasters, Delacroix presents his concept of "The New Millennium Minstrel Show", which processes the most successful form of entertainment at the turn of the century, blackface.

Figure 21: "The New Millennium Minstrel Show"

However, Delacroix's calculated plan of making the TV channel's executives think with the use of openly defamatory depictions of black stereotypes does not work. The show is produced and becomes a surprise success and one of the most popular shows in the country. Torn between the promises of the white establishment – prosperity, notoriety, recognition – and the demands of the black community – responsibility, loyalty, integrity – Delacroix ultimately breaks down in his inner struggle between two positions, which

https://doi.org/10.14361/9783839453377 - am 13.02.2026, 21:55:10. https://www.inlibra.com/de/agb - Open Access -

the film characterizes as irreconcilable. Thus, the film follows the pattern of the *tragic mulatto* tradition, which focuses on a character's feelings of being divided, one whose agonizing slippage between two racial poles ultimately requires a choice of one or the other.

The protagonist's name already points to his inner conflict: he changes his birth name, Peerless Dothan, to "Pierre Delacroix" – a name that represents a calamitous type of "crossing" (*la croix*). At the same time, the shortened form of this name, "Dela," which Pierre is called by most of the other characters, refers to the delocalization of its bearer, as Michael Rogin argues: "Called Dela, his moniker invokes a French title of nobility without his family seat; de la is the lord from nowhere."[6] Already the name change is presented as a failed attempt of a freely chosen self-positioning: Dela's self-designation leads astray, for the name indicates all the more clearly that which the torn subject is trying to hide: the nothingness and nowhere of its own identity. Dela's name change is paralleled by a similar act from Sloan's brother Julius: he insists on only being called "Big Blak Afrika", since, as a "slave name," the name Julius has been forced upon him.[7] Also, the characters try to cement their self-chosen identity on the level of idiom, which confronts the businessman Delacroix's affected, smug accent with the broad ghetto slang of the Mau Maus. A statement from Dela's father Junebug, to which Dela objects, shows the fact that Dela's effort to speak with a pronounced, albeit over-stylized diction is seen by the members of the black community as a betrayal of his own heritage: "Nigger, where the fuck did you get that accent?" When Dela answers that he does not particularly appreciate the word "nigger," his father responds with the joke: "I say 'nigger' a hundred times every morning – it keeps my teeth white."[8]

---

6 Michael Rogin, "Nowhere Left to Stand: The Burnt Cork Roots of Popular Culture," *Cineaste* 26, no. 2 (2001), 15.

7 The other members of the militant black music gang "The Mau Maus," of whom Julius is the leader, follow suit. Their names are "Hard Blak," "Smooth Blak," "Jo Blak," "Mo Blak," "Double Blak," and "One-Sixteenth Blak."

8 Spike Lee cites his own position on the use of the racist "N-word" at one point in the film. After Delacroix has asked his boss Dunwitty, who justifies his usage of the term "nigger" with a reference to his high esteem of the black race, to not use that term in his presence because of its racist implications, Dunwitty explains: "I don't give a goddamn what that prick Spike Lee says, Tarantino was right: nigger is just a word." Lee's position is argued again in the soundtrack to BAMBOOZLED, when Stevie Wonder's song "Some Years Ago" complains about a social climate "where it's ok to play with the word 'nigger.'"

https://doi.org/10.14361/9783839453377 - am 13.02.2026, 21:55:10. https://www.inlibra.com/de/agb - Open Access -

While Junebug leaves no doubt about his view of the incompatibility of races, Dela feels nothing but contempt for his father, as he clarifies in a voice-over: "Did I want to end up where he was? Hell, emphatically, no!". Here, too, a classic motif of the *tragic mulatto* tradition can be found: the denial of one's family, which is also evident in Dela's hostile attitude towards his mother, whose criticism of his TV show Dela interprets as contempt for his professional success. Furthermore, the film accentuates the identity problem with visual references, such as when the very beginning shows how Dela covers himself with a thick layer of white shaving cream during his morning routine. Here, "white" metaphorically represents the ambition of a model of white identity, perhaps even more so because Dela uses the shaving cream to shave not only his beard but his whole head and thus remove his curly hair. At the same time, this shot announces the main theme of BAMBOOZLED: the question of how to go about the entertainment tradition of blackface, in which all the characters must position themselves throughout the film. For the defamatory blackening of the face is inextricably connected to a less ostentatious, but because of this, no less effective, form of brightening the face – both mechanisms seem to be constitutive of a type of racist entertainment that has been alive for centuries in the United States.

Lee's engagement with racist-tinged terms and images is staged as a multilayer nexus of references, in which a narrative that initially seems conventional becomes a complex discursive network with documentary subcomponents,[9] self-reflective cinematic quotations,[10] and extradiegetic commentary.[11] They all meet in the main axis of the film: the problematization of the

9 This includes, for example, a clip from TV coverage of the O.J. Simpson trial integrated in the film, which Lee includes as an example of a racial spectacle conveyed by a medium.

10 There are two noticeable quotations that address the medium of television as a machine of corruption. First, Spike Lee dedicates BAMBOOZLED to the author Budd Schulberg, who wrote the script to A FACE IN THE CROWD (Elia Kazan, 1956). In addition, Lee includes several references to NETWORK (Sidney Lumet, USA 1976), among them the exclamation taken from Lumet's TV character Howard Beale: "I'm sick and tired and I am not going to take it anymore!".

11 This primarily concerns Lee's casting strategy, which included casting the TV screenwriter, actor, and producer Damon Wayans in the role of Pierre Delacroix. Wayans is one of the founding figures of the 1990s Fox sketch comedy show *In Living Color*, which was one of the most successful and simultaneously controversial American TV series of the 1990s. While both the writers and the producers described the comedic intention of the show as "parody" and "satire," many critics took issue with the over-the-top char-

https://doi.org/10.14361/9783839453377 - am 13.02.2026, 21:55:10. https://www.inlibra.com/de/agb - Open Access -

practice of blackface in minstrel shows as well as its legacy in both Hollywood cinema and contemporary mass entertainment. It is precisely this element that interests Spike Lee: the staging of ostentatiously displayed black bodies as a specific characteristic of the practice of representation that is inextricably bound to American popular culture. In BAMBOOZLED, the engagement with the complex system of a structure marked by racism, whose determining factor consists in its visual accessibility, is a significant principle; indeed, it is elevated to a decisive media operation that aligns the production of American entertainment to this day.

With such an open display of a blackness made mask-like and graphic, Lee refers to a form of representation that draws on a long tradition of theater and cinema. The performative moment that comes into play here is interpreted by many scholars as a transcultural hybrid phenomenon, whose subversive potential is capable of transcending racially defined binary positions. For example, in his study of the phenomenon of the minstrel show, Eric Lott states: "It should hardly seem strange that miscegenation is suggested (if in oblique and displaced form) in accounts of white men's fascination with and attraction to black men and their culture, for these are accounts in which the cultures merge."[12] Susan Gubar offers another perspective, arguing that the practice of the blackface is not so much intended to blur boundaries, but rather to draw them rigidly. Racial confusions and diffusions, that is, those mixing ratios Lott speaks of, could be robbed of their disruptive effect by the ostentatious display of blackened skin as a visual marker:

> "Indeed, blackface itself might be considered as a symbolic defense against such (inevitable) complications. Since it may be impossible to 'tell' if a person is actually of black decent – especially in the context of the 'one drop rule' (defining a person with just one 'drop' of 'black' blood as racially Other) – complexion is neither an infallible nor a stable index of race, while blackface

acters who were reminiscent of the typified characters from the minstrel tradition. The basic thematic constant of the film BAMBOOZLED is, in a sense, authenticated by the reference to the production history of the TV show *In Living Color* and thus integrated into a larger debate on media mechanisms of racial representation politics.

12 Eric Lott, *Love and Theft: Blackface Minstrelsy and the American Working Class* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 57.

https://doi.org/10.14361/9783839453377 - am 13.02.2026, 21:55:10. https://www.inlibra.com/de/agb - Open Access -

assures audiences that difference is visible, always encoded in the same way, skin-deep."[13]

Hence, the practice of blackface can be interpreted as a type of attempted defense against anxiety, during which the feared mixing of blood is substituted by racial masquerade. As a "symbolic defense," it proves to be a strategy that seeks to ward off the danger of contaminating the white race in the process of visual separation. In this sense, one may argue that blackface, in its emphasis on visuality, forces a certain direction within racial identification: what is not expressly recognizable is hyper-visualized. In fact, a type of multiplication takes place the moment a surface (the skin) is superimposed and enriched by another surface (the mask). Blackface then turns into a congealed blackness: a racist form of knowledge with the guarantee of visibility. Gubar interprets this type of representative violence as a mechanism of racist disciplining, which implies a significant similarity to another brutal ritual of subjugation: lynching. The association of both forms of punishment, the "connection between the physical violence of lynching and the mimetic violence of blackface",[14] is explained by the analogy to a similarly structured visual spectacle. This connection becomes apparent in the extremes of the arsenal of images that the minstrel tradition has constructed. Gubar explains: "Blackface performances can be considered as a symbolic rite of scapegoating, the flip side of lynching: burnt cork instead of charred flesh, the grin and the grimace of pain, bulging eye balls, and twitching limbs or stiffness of body parts."[15]

Gubar's observation, which recognizes the convulsive agony of the lynched person in the twitching body of the minstrel performer, which sees the distorted facial features of the strangled person reflected in the comic's bulging eyes, and which discerns the burned flesh of the fire victim replicated in the soot, is captivating – especially because, in both cases, it is dealing with an essentially American form of racially structured mass entertainment. Here it is not only the thrust of the intended message nor the blatant display of white superiority that is comparable but also the type of performance, in the form of a public spectacle. Dora Apel highlights the fact that several cases of lynching were announced and staged as major community events:

13 Susan Gubar, *Race Changes: White Skin, Black Face in American Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 65.

14 Ibid., 78-79.

15 Ibid., 78.

https://doi.org/10.14361/9783839453377 - am 13.02.2026, 21:55:10. https://www.inlibra.com/de/agb - Open Access -

> "From 1882 until at least 1981, almost 4,800 African Americans were killed by extralegal means – tortured, shot, hanged, or burned to death. […] At times, newspapers ran headlines announcing lynchings in advance, railroads ran special excursion trains to the sites or added extra railroad cars, and schools were let out for the day. These were community events like carnivals and street fairs."[16]

Furthermore, one should note that the newly developed methods of communication and broadcast of the twentieth century played an important role for the entrenchment of the semantics of lynching in the public consciousness. The effect consisted in a type of reanimation of racist disciplining, which launched a specific ritualization driven by the media, as Jonathan Markovitz argues:

> "Twentieth century lynchings by mass mobs, or 'spectacle lynchings' […] should be understood not as barbaric relics of a bygone age but as a 'peculiarly modern ritual' that relied upon virtually every form of communication and transportation technology. […] Even more important than the thousands of people who attended and participated in mass lynchings, though, were the much larger regional and national audiences who learned about these lynchings from newspapers, postcards, books, pamphlets, and even […] radio announcements."[17]

Dora Apel also emphasizes this relationship and describes the discourse of lynching practices funneled through the media as an effective amplifier of racist oppression in the United States:

> "Lynching became the most glaring, inescapable, and enduring symbol of racist oppression in the United States and was purveyed by increasingly sophisticated media technology to ever more blood-chilling effect. While evolving into more legally sanctioned forms of persecution by the late 1930s, the widely disseminated visual discourse of lynching became nearly as potent as lynching itself because of its ineluctable reinforcement of white supremacist tyranny."[18]

---

16 Dora Apel, *Imagery of Lynching: Black Men, White Women, and the Mob* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2004), 23.

17 Jonathan Markovitz, *Legacies of Lynching: Racial Violence and Memory* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2004), xxvi.

18 Apel, *Imagery of Lynching*, 221.

https://doi.org/10.14361/9783839453377 - am 13.02.2026, 21:55:10. https://www.inlibra.com/de/agb - Open Access -

Additionally, Markovitz points to the fact that the dissemination of lynching images increased at precisely the same point when the number of actual cases of lynching decreased, which significantly reinforced the mechanisms of racist oppression and surveillance:

> "In important ways, the power of spectacle lynchings actually increased as their frequency declined, since modern communication technologies made it possible for images and narratives of lynchings to be disseminated to ever-larger audiences. Because representations of lynching worked to extend and magnify the surveillant functions and the terror of the mob, they should be understood not as entirely separate entities from lynchings themselves but as key components of the power of the practice."[19]

A similar structural dynamic can be observed in the practice of minstrel shows. At the point when stage performances from minstrel troupes began to dwindle, the depiction of blackface characters was updated by the developing medium of film. Susan Gubar states: "Despite the common assumption that minstrelsy declined at the turn of the century, it profoundly influenced America's first movies and musicals, raising questions about the degree to which these apparently new and innovative genres contained and sustained conventional structures of oppression."[20] The answer could be as follows: the scope of a racist disciplinary mechanism is not repressed or weakened by the transfer from one form of mediation to another; rather, a shift takes place that leads to a specific media charging of representation.

The brutality of racist mass spectacles finds a violent outlet in the images of Bamboozled. At the end of the film, violence erupts in a horrifying catastrophe: the radical group of the Mau Maus kidnaps the actor Manray because of his participation in the offensive "New Millennium Minstrel Show" and, as punishment, carries out a cruel execution that is livestreamed on the Internet. Shortly thereafter, the police raid the Mau Maus' quarters and kill all but one member of the militant group. At the same time, Delacroix also must die: in the final confrontation with his assistant Sloan, he succumbs to a fatal shot from her gun. Several critics have seen this orgy of violence as the film's greatest weakness. For example, Armond White interprets the film's final act

19 Markovitz, *Legacies of Lynching*, xxviii.
20 Gubar, *Race Changes*, 55.

https://doi.org/10.14361/9783839453377 - am 13.02.2026, 21:55:10. https://www.inlibra.com/de/agb - Open Access -

as an exuberant spectacle without a genuine message and an example of the "sensationalism that is Lee's specialty."[21]

Indeed, Lee's excessive portrayal of violence, the obsession with the motif of dying that permeates the film, is striking. However, rather than having to do with a general sensationalism, it has much more to do with the staging of blackface as a racist form of entertainment and oppression that Lee ties to the aesthetics of death. In the process, different components and sources of association are linked to a dense network of references that reflect the motif's complexity within a specific media formation. Therefore, it has not so much to do with dying per se but with the relationship between death and racial representation in the cinematographic image. Lee confronts this cinematically mediated type of racial representation with its own origins: with the spread of blackface masquerade as a structural element of American film history. Bamboozled is permeated with cinematic quotations that recall the continuation of the minstrel tradition in the medium of film, among them, for example, clips from The Birth of a Nation (D.W. Griffith, USA 1915), The Jazz Singer (Alan Crosland, USA 1927), Babes in Arms (Richard Rodgers, USA 1937), Jezebel (William Wyler, USA 1938), The Great Lie (Edmund Goulding, USA 1941), Holiday Inn (Mark Sandrich, USA 1942), Duel in the Sun (King Vidor, USA 1946), Show Boat (George Sidney, USA 1951) – films that, on the one hand, feature white movie stars who perform in blackface (for example, Judy Garland, Bing Crosby, and Al Jolson) and, on the other hand, black actors whose repertoire of gestures is clearly oriented toward figures well-known in minstrel shows (for example, Mantan Moreland as Coon or Hattie McDaniel as Mammy). This type of citation reaches its climax in the film's final montage. Here, Lee bundles and condenses a universe of caricatures that visualizes the recurring patterns of the minstrel tradition: a grinning mouth, bulging eyes, twitching dance moves, subservient bows. These are film images that, rather than being "leading" motifs [*Leit*motive], end up as motifs of suffering [*Leid*motive] similar to images of lynching victims.[22]

---

21 Armond White, "Post-Art Minstrelsy," *Cineaste* 26, no. 2 (2001), 13.

22 When Spike Lee conjures up memories of the victims of lynching in his staging of minstrel characters in Bamboozled, he is building on his previous look into the pathology of race relationships and the violence that results from them – since an engagement with racist scenarios of oppression is one of the central focuses in his earlier films as well. It suffices to mention two examples which clearly tie the theme of lynching to a critique of modern racism. Lee's 1989 film Do the Right Thing shows the violent death of a black resident of the ghetto, Radio Raheem, in a way that establishes a clear

https://doi.org/10.14361/9783839453377 - am 13.02.2026, 21:55:10. https://www.inlibra.com/de/agb - Open Access -

Michael Rogin describes this kind of representation as an uncanny funeral ceremony: "We viewers of the film are buried alongside him [Delacroix] under the return of the racial repressed."[23] Lesley Stern similarly argues: "The repetition of roles and performative tropes is overwhelming. The ghosts of Hollywood return to haunt us. […] These gestures, like wandering homeless ghosts, take up residence in alien bodies, there to play out the repetition that is their destiny."[24] Stern's interpretation explains the re-staging of film images as a dynamic of transmission. He understands the visually mediated

similarity to images of lynching. While a police officer abuses Radio Raheem with his baton, the camera focuses on his feet, which suddenly lift off the ground. His legs, helplessly struggling in the air, illustrate a victim's last twitching movements – until they ultimately go limp and signal the death of the lynching victim. The black community's commentary which is articulated thereafter, "It's murder; They did it again; Just like they did Michael Stewart," ultimately refers to a real victim of police brutality, namely the black graffiti artist Michael Stewart who died from strangulation while in custody of the New York City Police Department. Furthermore, the setting of the film, namely the area around "Sal's Pizzeria," establishes an intended similarity to the Howard Beach case, i.e. the Queens neighborhood where the black Michael Griffith was attacked and brutally beaten by a group of white teenagers after visiting a pizzeria in 1986. (Cf. Spike Lee and Lisa Jones, *Do the Right Thing*, New York: Fireside, 1989, 24.) The group subsequently chased Griffith onto the highway, where he was struck by a vehicle and killed. The case received national attention, which led New York mayor Ed Koch to publicly denounce the crime as a form of "modern lynching." (Cf. Markovitz, *Legacies of Lynching*, 46.) Lee's 1991 film JUNGLE FEVER also features a recontextualization of lynching. The black architect Flipper Purify's father, drawing on the practice of lynching enforced during slavery, comments on the interracial relationship between Flipper and the white secretary Angie Tucci as follows: "White man say to his woman, baby, you are the flower of white southern womanhood, too holy and too pure to be touched by any man […]. And if any nigger so much as look at you, I'll lynch his ass." Lee connects the same film with another real victim of racist violence; namely the black teenager Yusef K. Hawkins, to whom the film is dedicated and whose photo can be seen during the opening of JUNGLE FEVER. Hawkins was murdered by an armed group of white teenagers in the Brooklyn neighborhood of Bensonhurst in 1989 after they had found out that a white girl had invited black guests to her birthday party. In fact, there was no such invitation – Hawkins had not been on the way to the party but was going to view a car that was for sale. (See Douglas Martin, "About New York: Racial Hatred through Fresh Eyes," *New York Times*, February 15, 1992.) A collection of Lee's interview comments on the currency of racist violence can be found in Spike Lee and Cynthia Fuchs, *Spike Lee: Interviews* (Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi, 2002).

23 Rogin, "Nowhere Left to Stand", 15.

24 Lesley Stern, "Putting on a Show, or the Ghostliness of Gesture," *Lola* 5 (2002), http://www.lolajournal.com/5/putting_show.html.

https://doi.org/10.14361/9783839453377 - am 13.02.2026, 21:55:10. https://www.inlibra.com/de/agb - Open Access -

arsenal of stereotypical movements as a return of sign complexes that are, as it were, relocated through the transfer to "alien bodies": the corporeality of the characters in BAMBOOZLED is superimposed by the performance of their predecessors from the history of Hollywood. Building on Susan Gubar's argument, who sees the practice of blackface as a reflection of lynching, this process can be understood as a structure doubled within itself: as an actualization of an actualization. The repetition of gestures so clearly emphasized in the final montage – the physical rhythm, the vocal intensity, the distorted facial features that appear in black stereotypes – is staged as the presence of an uncanny revenant, as a return of the dead in the form of the undead.

Visually mediated disciplinary measures, such as the spectacle of lynching or blackface, can be understood as attempts to repeat the violence perpetrated on the enslaved through symbolic re-stagings in order to solidify its own claim to oppression. Such attempts fail, however, at the very moment when the repetition becomes visible as overcompensation. Susan Gubar stresses: "The phrase 'repetitive lynchings' sounds like a case of overkill and is meant to be-cause, as Virginia Woolf once put it in a different context, 'it is far harder to kill a phantom than a reality' and the fictitious nature of this celluloid specter kept it alive, creeping back to haunt the white imagination."[25] This context of consolidation seems to play a notable role in the filmic signification of blackness. Thus, Tania Modleski asks:

> "Is it not the case that the threat of monstrosity – that is of black monstrosity – has been present [...] as a consequence of the decision to make it an allegory rather than to treat the situation of blacks directly? And has not the tendency of films from the early days of cinema to cast white people in black face served a similar function – i.e., to suggest that blackness may be so monstrous it can only be signified but not directly represented?"[26]

Modleski's argumentative starting point is the practice of the blackface frequently demonstrated in the early stage of Hollywood cinema: it is precisely this form of racist performance that Modleski wants to see understood as allegory, not as representation. But does the circumstance of a performative displacement of significant blackness provide a sufficient explanation for the functional mechanism of blackface, and is this type of portrayal of blackness

25 Gubar, *Race Changes*, 57.

26 Tania Modleski, *Feminism Without Women: Culture and Criticism in a "Postfeminist" Age* (New York, London: Routledge, 1991), 118.

https://doi.org/10.14361/9783839453377 - am 13.02.2026, 21:55:10. https://www.inlibra.com/de/agb - Open Access -

on top of whiteness the main element of the racist scenario acted out in blackface?

Already in 1958, Ralph Ellison had pointed to the fact that the racist caricature of blackface constructs a kind of type whose most important characteristic consisted in the unique way of stylizing what is depicted: "This mask, this willful stylization and modification of the natural face and hands, was imperative for the evocation of that atmosphere in which the fascination of blackness could be enjoyed, the comic catharsis achieved. The racial identity of the performer was unimportant, the mask was the thing."[27] In fact, many black artists had continued the repertoire of staging established by minstrel shows – and, as Ellison stresses, with the same effects that were set in motion by their white colleagues.[28] According to Ellison, the decisive factor was not the application of a black layer onto a white undercoat but the mask itself, or more precisely, its specific form and peculiarity: "The mask, stylized and iconic, was once required of anyone who would act the role – even those Negroes whose natural coloration should, for any less ritualistic purposes at least, have made it unnecessary."[29] With this, Ellison is addressing the type of staging that is also at the core of Spike Lee's BAMBOOZLED: the hyperbolization of blackness, whose expressiveness does not primarily refer to a black/white stratification but which achieves its effect in the stylization of the mask itself.

27 Ralph Ellison, "Change the Joke and Slip the Yoke," in *Shadow and Act*, ed. Ralph Ellison (New York: Vintage, 1995 [1958]), 49.

28 Along with the popular white minstrel ensembles, there have always been successful black troupes. The most famous African American blackface performers included Ernest Hogan, who became known under the stage name "The Unbleached American," as well as Bert Williams and George Walker, who announced themselves in their programs as "Two Real Coons". Spike Lee's BAMBOOZLED directly cites this practice, as Manray and Womack also appear under the label "Two Real Coons." Another quotation shows that Lee leaves no doubt as to how this type of minstrel performance should be understood, namely not as a subversive testing of the limits of color but as a forced relapse into a highly degrading practice of a racist culture industry. In a conversation between Sloan and Manray, the latter explicitly points out the fact that black performers at the beginning of the twentieth century were forced to appear in blackface because this type of performance was the only way to gain entry into the white-dominated entertainment industry. In this context, Bert Williams is mentioned as a prominent example.

29 Ellison, "Change the Joke and Slip the Yoke," 47.

https://doi.org/10.14361/9783839453377 - am 13.02.2026, 21:55:10. https://www.inlibra.com/de/agb - Open Access -

In Bamboozled, Lee repeatedly visualizes the putting on of the blackface mask as an extensive make-up ritual. This process is expressed particularly clearly in a sequence that is presented exactly in the middle of the film.

Figure 22: Putting on the Blackface Mask

The sequence begins with a top shot of a make-up pot, in which, keeping with Sloan's instructions "to keep the ritual the same," the soot from the burnt cork is mixed with water into a viscous paste. The following shot shows Womack's face in a close-up: it is only half lit, so that the depiction is reminiscent of a silhouette rather than of the image of an entire face. The next shot depicts Womack's colleague, Manray, whose mirror shows his double-reflected face. Following this, Womack is seen again as a divided shape, because the chosen framing makes only one half of the figure visible. This shot and the subsequent shot, a high angle shot of Womack's face in the dark, show the careful application of the layer of soot. After a shot of Manray, who is also presented while applying make-up from a low-angle shot, the camera follows forward to focus on Womack's double-reflected, half made up face. This is followed, as a structural repetition, by another top shot of the make-up pot. The next shot shows a face in profile, of which only the nose and one eye are clearly visible: because both the image's foreground and background are extremely dark, the area of the face seems to disappear almost completely into darkness. Two shots then follow that show Manray and Womack as two images facing one another: while Manray, on the right side of the frame, looks to the left, Womack, whose profile is shown in a close-up, looks to the right. Then, there are two more shots that first show Manray and then Womack; both are close-

https://doi.org/10.14361/9783839453377 - am 13.02.2026, 21:55:10. https://www.inlibra.com/de/agb - Open Access -

ups in a half-profile, and both faces are now almost completely covered by the black makeup. The following shots depict the gradual completion of the masquerade: this includes putting on pieces of costumes, such as white gloves and a black top hat, as well as applying brashly red lipstick. The last shots of the sequence show the completed transformation of Manray and Womack into the characters Mantan and Sleep 'n Eat: not only the makeup, but also their gestures and facial expressions, as well as their gloved hands up in the air, their widely opened eyes and, ultimately, the programmatic exclamation, "Showtime!", illustrate their conversion.

Spike Lee's film-aesthetic staging visualizes a process of transformation that turns the multidimensional characters Manray and Womack into the flat minstrel characters Mantan[30] and Sleep 'n Eat.[31] The effect of such a ritual metamorphosis is expressed particularly clearly in the framing and editing. Lee often shows the faces in profile shots, as silhouettes, as incomplete sections. All of these shots reveal and cloak things at the same time. They form an image and simultaneously leave the viewer in the dark over the back of the image – in short: they evoke the functional mechanism of the mask. During the broadcast of the "New Millennium Minstrel Show", its author, the veritable make-up artist Pierre Delacroix, describes his feelings in a voice-over: "I was feeling a little like Dr. Frankenstein." As a filmic foreshadowing, this quote points to a creature who begins to gain independence and is in danger of slipping from his creator's grasp. The success of the "New Millennium Minstrel Show" escalates into an enthusiastically celebrated form of retro-racism, which ultimately claims numerous victims. Just like the monster created by Frankenstein, Delacroix's uncanny masked creation is connected to a paradox: it is static and moving at the same time. This becomes clear, for example, in a shot in which the rear view of the three-dimensional figure Manray can be seen in the foreground, while the two-dimensional mirror image of the stage mask Mantan is presented in the background. Even though Lee's editing seems to emphasize the increasing dominance of the mask – for example, through the increasing number of shots that show only the reflection of the

30 The name is supposed to be reminiscent of the actor Mantan Moreland (1902-1973), who had numerous roles as an eye-rolling "coon" and comical servant in the 1930s-40s. See Bogle, *Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies, and Bucks*, 72-75.

31 The actor Willie Best became famous under the name "Sleep 'n' Eat" in the 1930s. Bogle describes the racist caricature with which Best became associated as a classic "darky image: the coon is content as long as he has enough to eat and a place to sleep." Bogle, *Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies, and Bucks*, 71.

https://doi.org/10.14361/9783839453377 - am 13.02.2026, 21:55:10. https://www.inlibra.com/de/agb - Open Access -

mask, but not the person wearing it placed in front of the mirror – the mask cannot be regarded as an independent being: it remains bound to its wearer, whose movement is what sets the unmoved in motion.

This connection represents a fundamental ambivalence whose scope Reinhard Olschanski describes as follows: "The mask does not only refer to the disguise and representation of the face as a special zone of the body but to an entire body construct, the wearer of the mask. And this results in a multilayer interplay: man and mask refer to one another."[32] In this context, the rigidity of the mask can be associated with a state of immobility with a state of immobility, which is in opposition to the wearer's vitality, but which is nonetheless closely related to it. As a phenomenon of vacillation, the mask stands for the transitional terrain between life and death, a reference that becomes all the more apparent when considered in the context of the death mask. Reinhard Olschanski states:

> "Death is one of the conditions that co-determines the perception of masks by giving the face mask-like, stiff characteristics. The inertia of a dead face reoccurs in the stiffness of the mask and pushes the masked being into a field of tension between life and death. Conversely, seeing the dead contains something of the urgency that is characteristics for the appearance of the person wearing a mask."[33]

The death mask stands for a significant immobilization: the dead's facial expressions are exhibited in their mask-like character and, at the same time, as a mask, removed. The exposure of the dead body reveals the ambivalence of absence (of life) and presence (of death), which the mask affirmatively repeats in its fundamental simultaneity of presence (a face) and absence (no face). But it is not only the oscillation between stasis and movement that is crucial for the particular effect that unfolds in this context. The reference to death is additionally emphasized by the specific materiality that comes into play in the death mask:

> "In its very materiality, the mask represents the unsettling change of the animated human body into inanimate matter. While the effect of other masks, isolated from use, sometimes adapts itself to the effect of mere things, the death mask has a unique characteristic due to its very thingness. It adheres

32 Reinhard Olschanski, *Maske und Person: Zur Wirklichkeit des Darstellens und Verhüllens* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2001), 47.

33 Ibid., 80.

https://doi.org/10.14361/9783839453377 - am 13.02.2026, 21:55:10. https://www.inlibra.com/de/agb - Open Access -

> to the reversal that has occurred and repeatedly occurs in perception: the reduction of the human body to a 'thing,' to dead matter."[34]

The shift described by Olschanski articulates itself particularly clearly in the blackface mask because the soot visually exemplifies its relation to death both in the form of its material and in its color. Spike Lee reflects on this relationship by not solely presenting the ritual of an actor blacking his face but, rather, prefacing it with the production of the materials used, that is, the burning of the cork to achieve the blackness. The reversal in the field of tension between life and death is thus shown not as a distinctly localizable or temporalizable act but, far more, as a context of movement understood as a processual succession of repetitions. There is no definitive conclusion evoked here but a structure in which effacing simultaneously represents resurrecting in an altered form.

Contrary to the cultural tradition of the aestheticized death mask, which does not cruelly distort the face of the dead but rather makes it appear dignified, Lee's presentation of the blackface mask is not concerned with the image of the peacefully departed. Beyond an ennoblement, which would include the beauty of the moment of rest in the depiction of the dead, Lee focuses more on the image of a mask meant to frighten, in which violence and terror prevail. It therefore seems appropriate to add a further component to the complex associations that resonate in the depiction of a blackface mask: namely, the repulsive effect of an image that is well-known from the practice of torture. Because here, too, the mechanism of the mask has a functional use that is transferred onto both the disciplinarian (the masked torturer) and to the disciplined (the masked victim). Reinhard Olschanski explains:

> "The anonymization that the perpetrator takes on by masking himself, like the deindividualization that he forces on his victim, contributes to the transgressing of moral boundaries: to not perceive the subjected party as a person and to not be seen himself as a morally accountable person – the mask's function of transcendence is, in both cases, that of a crossover into terror."[35]

Here, it must be emphasized that the masking of the perpetrator can take on additional functions in the context of racist disciplinary measures: one would have to mention the masks of the Ku Klux Klan, which, along with

34 Ibid., 82.
35 Ibid., 80.

https://doi.org/10.14361/9783839453377 - am 13.02.2026, 21:55:10. https://www.inlibra.com/de/agb - Open Access -

the anonymization of the perpetrator, are also conducive to the fear-inducing exposition of an executive branch that projects the appearance of being lawful. In this type of mask, the concealment of the individual and the display of the instance of revenge have an equal coexistence. In Spike Lee's BAMBOOZLED, however, more important than the thematization of the perpetrator is the figurative form of the victim as well as the specific form of the mask with which it is performed for the disciplinary gaze of the audience. According to Olschanski, the effect is the following:

> "The mask-like deindividualization also has an external and exclusionary function. It designates the victims, aiming not least at the fact that they are turning this process of designation against themselves in a self-destructive way. The deindividualization also aims to destroy a self-image that enables the individual to articulate his or her claims to respect and recognition."[36]

The masking of the victim implies a unique form of degradation in the concealment of the individual. It evokes a transgression of established schemata of identification and, in doing so, negates the uniqueness of the subject. Even more: not only the claim to respect but also the entitlement to human dignity is undermined in such a configuration – a mechanism that comes to light in the minstrel mask's gesture of subjugation, as Ralph Ellison notes: "Its [the mask's] function was to veil the humanity of Negroes thus reduced to a sign, and to repress the white audience's awareness of its moral identification with its own acts and with the human ambiguities pushed behind the mask."[37]

Spike Lee reflects on this connection by combining – indeed, visually analogizing – the virtual violence that the degrading image of a minstrel mask bears with a very concrete form of violence culminating in the death of those involved in the process of image degradation. This can be seen, for example, in the execution sequence, which creates a visual linkage in the parallel editing of excerpts from the "New Millennium Minstrel Show" and shots of the brutally tortured Manray, in which one form of violence seems to react upon the other. Therefore, physical injury is to be understood as the effect of a profound violation by the image, as a mechanism that exposes the fundamental effect of a structure in which the destruction of one's self-image catalyzed by the mask reaches its climax in the definitive annihilation of the individual.

36 Ibid., 78.

37 Ellison, "Change the Joke and Slip the Yoke," 49.

https://doi.org/10.14361/9783839453377 - am 13.02.2026, 21:55:10. https://www.inlibra.com/de/agb - Open Access -

This connection is again taken up in the film's final image. The last shot shows the distorted face of the stage character Mantan, whose clenched grin the soundtrack comments on with a quote from Dela's father, Junebug: "Always keep 'em laughing!"

Figure 23: "Always keep 'em laughing!"

During the conflict-laden confrontation between father and son that takes place in the middle of the film, Junebug had already declared: "You know what I always told you: Every nigger is an entertainer." A shocking statement: the raison d'être of African-Americans, Junebug implies, consists in the satisfying of a sadistic need for entertainment, in the affirmation of a feeling of superiority that is ultimately confirmed in the reduction of the living individual to a ridiculous stock character.

In the film's final image, every trace of carelessness and harmlessness gives way to a cruel basic message. At this point, the clown's face freezes into an ugly grimace, into a fright mask, whose effect the viewer cannot escape. Reinhard Olschanski explains: "In a unique way, fright masks are designed for the moment of their appearance. […] Before we know who or what it is, the threatening aspect of the appearance is revealed. Distorted facial features, a torn mouth or protruding eyes inevitably leave their mark."[38] It is precisely the elements listed by Olschanski that Spike Lee emphasizes most clearly in his montage of Hollywood film excerpts that precedes the final picture, and which he highlights in a condensed form in the final shot of Mantan's face:

38 Olschanski, *Maske und Person*, 48.

https://doi.org/10.14361/9783839453377 - am 13.02.2026, 21:55:10. https://www.inlibra.com/de/agb - Open Access -

images of horror that look back on their own history in "Hollywood's Hall of Shame" and are brought back into the viewer's consciousness in an unsettling way.

These images unfold their threatening atmosphere not least with a suction effect, which is accentuated by the torn open mouth as an uncanny gorge.

Figure 24: Open Mouth

This abyss is reflected as a recurring moment in almost every image in the film: whether as an oversized mouth in the stage decorations of the "New Millennium Minstrel Show", as the coin slot on a blackface piggy bank figurine, or in the form of the torn open mouths of the slaves onstage and onscreen into which chicken legs and pieces of watermelon disappear. As eerie openings that follow each smirk, their gullets threaten to devour the audience itself. In this context, there is also a significant connection to death, which refers back to the motif tradition of the wide-open mouth in folk culture. Mikhail Bakhtin explains: "[T]he gaping mouth […] is, of course, related to the lower stratum; it is the opening gate leading downward into the bodily underworld. The gaping mouth is related to the image of swallowing, this most ancient symbol of death and destruction."[39] The open throat can fundamentally be understood as a threatening abyss, as an opening that leads into a dark depth, from which there is no escape.

The reversal expressed by the mask bounces the film back onto itself. It presents it as an image machine whose production is structured by absorption, but whose devouring also always simultaneously initiates a spitting out. Two elements are crucial here, and both can be considered in close relation to the motif of death: the moment of immobilization and the moment of movement. The paradoxical simultaneity of stasis and movement is already epitomized in the motif of the death mask – and, in a further step, it is applied to the technique of cinematography. Because the death mask's ambivalence

39 Mikhail Bakhtin,*Rabelais and His World*, trans. Helen Iswolsky (Bloomington, IN: University of Indiana Press, 1984), 325.

https://doi.org/10.14361/9783839453377 - am 13.02.2026, 21:55:10. https://www.inlibra.com/de/agb - Open Access -

is not solely constituted by the previously mentioned identification of presence and absence, it is further manifested as an image of stiffness from the perspective of a revitalization. The mask provides a form in which the depiction does not appear as a fixed thing but which itself has found access and duration; it presents itself as an image that keeps death in the world of the living.

In media theory, this connection was applied to the effects of the technical image early on. André Bazin begins his 1945 essay "The Ontology of the Photographic Image" with the following basic premise: "If the plastic arts were put under psychoanalysis, the practice of embalming the dead might turn out to be a fundamental factor in their creation."[40] Bazin's formulation hints at a type of conservation that he finds realized in the art of photography. The peculiar immobilization of a context of movement that the photographic image undertakes at first is thereby transferred into a new context of life: the photograph drains the life from its object and, at the same time, grants eternal life to this moment through a conservation. Roland Barthes also comments on the connection between life and death in the process of medialization in his *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*; he sees "an interior future of which death is the stake"[41] in photography. Bazin finds another link ultimately in the crossover of photography to film, and here, too, he uses a metaphor that evokes the image of an embalmed dead person; nonetheless, here it is that of a dead person who, through the movement of the image, himself starts moving: "Now, for the first time, the image of things is likewise the image of their duration, change mummified as it were."[42]

It is this very movement of the dead that Spike Lee imagines – and from a perspective that reveals a link to racist formations in the rhythm of the cinematography. Already in the film's second sequence, the relationship between race and media structures, or more precisely, between color and time, is addressed. After a conference, the TV producer Dunwitty asks his writer, Pierre Delacroix, if he knows the meaning of so-called "C.P. Time." Delacroix responds with a definition of the abbreviation and explains: "C.P. Time is colored people's time: the stereotypical belief that Negroes are always late,

40 André Bazin, "The Ontology of the Photographic Image," in *What Is Cinema?: Volume I*, ed. and trans. Hugh Gray (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), 9.

41 Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Hill and Wang, 2010), 96.

42 Ibid., 15.

https://doi.org/10.14361/9783839453377 - am 13.02.2026, 21:55:10. https://www.inlibra.com/de/agb - Open Access -

that Negroes have no sense of time – time: except when it comes to music and dance, then you can set your watch to them." With this explanation, the film points to a context that far exceeds Dunwitty's concept of a broadcasting schedule being a categorization of racially different consumer needs. Rather, at the heart of Delacroix's statement is a dynamic described as specifically racist, which not only influences the dramaturgy of Delacroix's "New Millennium Minstrel Show", but which can also be applied to the film Bamboozled as a rhythmized structure.

The main attraction in Delacroix's show consists of carefully choreographed dance numbers from the "New Millennium Minstrel" Ensemble, led by Mantan, who acts as an "uneducated Negro with educated feet" (as Delacroix's advertisement states). But dance does not just play an important part within the onstage terrain of the "New Millennium Minstrel Show". Even in the offstage reality of Bamboozled, tap dancing is staged as the main element – such as in the portrayal of the "Street Stepshow," with which the street performers Manray and Womack earn money before their TV careers, in the casting scene in Dunwitty's office, in which the conference table turns into a stage, in the sequences in the dance studio where Manray leads the rehearsals for the show, and finally in the execution sequence, in which the Mau Maus stage Manray's death as a "Dance of Death" and announce it on the Internet with the banner "FEETS DO YOUR STUFF."[43]

Figure 25: Tap Dancing

43 The African-American actor Mantan Moreland became famous with the exclamation "Feets! Do your stuff!" – exclaimed every time he exited a scene. One sequence presents tap dancing as a type of harbinger of death before the execution, in which Dela, in recognition of Manray's credits in the "New Millennium Minstrel Show", gives him the last tap shoes that belonged to the great African-American film actor Bill "Bojangles" as a gift and gives them to him with the following words: "In fact, he died with those on his feet."

https://doi.org/10.14361/9783839453377 - am 13.02.2026, 21:55:10. https://www.inlibra.com/de/agb - Open Access -

Tap dancing does not only come up as a recurring motif that helps to characterize a specific character in the film, it additionally seems to lie above the diegesis as a structural element, as a dynamizing form that is closely tied to the film's mechanics itself. Jodi Brooks describes the relation between tap dancing and cinema as follows:

> "Tap and cinema [...] have had an odd and sometimes brutal kinship, which is not simply a result of the place of tap in film. It also arises from the place of film in tap, or more specifically the ways that ideas of the camera-projector apparatus and the moving image in general seem to underlie and infuse some forms of tap-dancing."[44]

Brooks' observation establishes a basic analogy between the dancer's physical movement and the cinematographic apparatus's mechanical movement – an observation that is all the more visible when one applies it to the movement of the dance steps in the movement of the film image:

> "In tap, the click of the taps can appear to animate the body's movements, recalling and playing with ideas of the machinic. This effect can be even more pronounced in screen tap, where the sound of the taps can serve to suggest or mimic the suppressed sounds of the camera-projector apparatus. Screen tap, in short, would appear to be a privileged site for playing with the temporality of the filmic image and its 'compulsory' movement."[45]

The link between sound and movement described by Brooks, which she sees in the coinciding of audible dance steps and inaudible film mechanics, takes on another dimension in Bamboozled through the thematization of race. It is not solely the reflection of a genuinely filmic dynamic that is crucial here but its specific linkage to forms of racial performance. In no small way, this is made apparent by an extradiegetic reference that comments on and enriches the events in the film, so to speak, from outside, that is, the casting of the actor Savion Glover as the character Manray. Glover is not only a famous dancer, who achieved great success with his own Broadway show, "Bring in da Noise, Bring in da Funk," he is moreover one of the founders of a movement in New York that for years has worked to free tap dancing from the white image of Hollywood musicals and again establish it as a black dance form. The agenda

44 Jodi Brooks, "Ghosting the Machine: The Sounds of Tap and the Sounds of Film«," *Screen* 44, no. 4 (2003), 358.

45 Ibid., 358.

https://doi.org/10.14361/9783839453377 - am 13.02.2026, 21:55:10. https://www.inlibra.com/de/agb - Open Access -

behind the movement is to expose the African-American roots of American popular culture and thereby to save what has been repressed. In BAMBOOZLED, Spike Lee's overall theme, the black struggle for freedom, is connected to a cultural reflection that visualizes the confrontation of two racial poles, white versus black, as a media-coded structure. Lee extends the mediation of this reflection to both the visual and the acoustic level of the film, which he correlates with one another in a unique form of rhythm. In the process, it is not the general technical history of rhythmic movement that is in the foreground but its racial dimension: the color of sound in the rhythm of images.

Jodi Brooks addresses this structure by ascribing a heightened form of audibility to the performances of black dancers in classical Hollywood musicals: "One of the peculiar side-effects of the placement, function and audibility of these dance numbers is that African-American tap dancers, while generally sidelined in a film's storyline, often seem to be the most audible dancers in the films in which they appeared."[46] Brooks justifies this heightened audibility, on the one hand, with the basic scarcity value of black characters in classical Hollywood cinema and, in addition, with a special form of physical performance that is achieved by staging black dance as a physical spectacle. In fact, Spike Lee accentuates the dance numbers throughout BAMBOOZLED with a specific type of staging. All of the minstrel show interludes were filmed on 16mm, whereas the rest of the film was shot on digital MiniDV camcorders. Unmistakable in sight and sound, the minstrel performances stick out from the narration surrounding them: not only the colors of the stage costumes and decorations seem brighter, more unreal, more penetrating, the film's soundtrack also brings the dance numbers to the fore. All of the background noises are cut out when the dancers take the stage; no unwanted movement seems to exist beyond dance steps: as soon as the dance begins, everything else in the picture becomes silent and immobile. While the film's frame narrative implies realistic mobility in the shots from the mobile hand camera, the "New Millennium Minstrel Show"'s static shots seem to resemble a strictly choreographed, indeed almost compulsory movement. In this context, minstrel show reveals itself as a continuum whose inalterable structure dictates the immobility of the movement. The tapping generates beats that the film seems to organize itself around; the traditional movement of minstrel shows produces the film's movement, which appropriates and continues the prescribed pattern. The powerful effect of the model on the image seems unbroken – until

46 Ibid., 367.

https://doi.org/10.14361/9783839453377 - am 13.02.2026, 21:55:10. https://www.inlibra.com/de/agb - Open Access -

one moment, when Lee again showcases the medium of the rhythm, the possibility of a rupture. It is the sequence that shows Manray's last appearance on the TV show; this time, however, not in the familiar habitus of "Mantan" but as the uncostumed Manray, who shouts out his protest against the corrupt television regime and dances in front of the cameras.

Of particular importance in this context is the fact that the critique is articulated in the form of a rhythmic dance. This dance acts not only as a marker of the crisis situation in the narrative; it also comments on the rhythmic structure that simulates the minstrel tradition and the practice of blackface in classical Hollywood cinema – a structure that Manray seems to subdue in its own exaggeration. This is made by apparent by an ecstatic tap dance whose escalating dynamics is in danger of shaking up the image itself. Jodi Brooks analyzes this moment as follows:

> "This dance sequence is both precise and frenzied, with Manray's/Glover's body moving at such a pace that his movements appear as a series of brush strokes: the image, it seems, cannot keep up with the speed of this body and his moves seem to scar the image with gashes of colour. Performed in what seems to be (at least) quadruple time, this dance not only attempts to outstep the minstrel show's cooning beat but also to blast it asunder."[47]

The sequence described by Brooks is introduced by a mock breakdown that the film replicates in three short shots of the same content: Manray's body is show falling to the ground, first in a yellow, then in a blue, and lastly in a red tint. If the movement of the clicking tap steps can be understood as mimicking the movement of frames through a projector, as Brooks suggests, then Manray's last jerking dance points to a flicker effect that causes the projected image to tremble and shake. In the collapse of the body, the image, and the image body, then, lies simultaneously the collapse of the system – an attempt that must fail because the system, as the film shows us, cannot be knocked off balance by such a brief irritation. It is able to recover and regenerate in order to then come out of the moment of rupture all the more strongly.

This is evinced by a further movement that is superimposed onto the film's images as a structuring element: it is the movement that closes the film and does not allow itself to be suppressed in the closing credits. Through an uncanny animation of toy figures, their mechanical movement strikingly visualizes the unquenchable driving force of racist image production. Spike Lee

47 Ibid., 372.

https://doi.org/10.14361/9783839453377 - am 13.02.2026, 21:55:10. https://www.inlibra.com/de/agb - Open Access -

highlights this connection when he breathes new life into the inanimate material of the tin and porcelain toys – and he does this not only by incorporating the static figures into moving film images, but he does this also with a ghost-like process of its own, which again saliently stages the motif of the revenant as the living dead. After Manray's execution, a sequence is included in which the puppets are freed from their rigidity and move toward Delacroix. Delacroix's trepidation about Manray's murder, which has just been shown on TV, is commented on with a close-up on one of the toys, whose unmoving face suddenly takes on a malicious grin. It is the so-called "Jolly Nigger Bank," a piggy bank in the form of a black figure, who, with a lever, transfers coins from its outstretched hand into the grotesquely wide-open mouth. Smirking and rattling, the figure moves closer to Delacroix, who, in a frantic outburst of helplessness, attempts to knock down all the figures off the shelves and destroy them.[48] But his desperate outcries of "Stop it! Leave me alone!" are not able to counter the power of the collection of images that he himself has assembled – once begun, the movements continue unabated all the way to the end credits, where the rolling eyes and twitching arms and legs of the toy dolls are perpetuated as an endless form of automatism.

The mediation of an automated sequence of motion through the medium of cinematography represents a marked moment of reflection. Spike Lee's

48 This sequence is noticeably similar to a scene from Ralph Ellison's novel *The Invisible Man* (1947). There, it is the nameless narrator who destroys a grotesque blackface piggy bank, a "cast-iron figure of a very black, red-lipped and widemouthed Negro" (Ralph Ellison, *The Invisible Man*, (New York: Vintage 1952 [1947]), 320). Since it is not his property, the next day he tries to inconspicuously throw the pieces away – but he fails every time he tries to. First, a woman forbids him to throw away his garbage in her garbage cans, then he is followed two blocks by a man who thinks that he lost the bundle of shards that he left behind and is trying to return it to him. Every attempt to destroy the odious image, and rid himself of it, must fail because the tradition of blackface is a stubborn companion that is not easily repressed. This is further shown in other parts of the novel, such as when the "invisible man" observes how his black colleague, Tod Clifton, is selling dancing sambo dolls on the street – every one of them an uncanny figure, "which some mysterious mechanism was causing to move up and down in a loose-jointed, shoulder-shaking, infuriating sensuous motion" (Ibid., 432). As the "invisible man" finds out, even the most repulsive symbol of degradation cannot be repressed; it even shows up where it would have to be decisively rejected – within the black community. Both motifs are presented as alienating quotations in Spike Lee's BAMBOOZLED, where the reference to the dangerous effects of images that keep racism alive is, so to speak, transported along with it.

https://doi.org/10.14361/9783839453377 - am 13.02.2026, 21:55:10. https://www.inlibra.com/de/agb - Open Access -

racially contoured images of automata associate the mechanical movement of the blackface tradition with a rhythm that turns out to be a deadly form of animation. For, on the one hand, the minstrel show means the death of the individual, and, on the other hand, it means a type of eternity that is achieved by constant repetition. It is therefore only consequential that the last images in the film are populated by mechanical figures – for they represent a sequence of movements that does not tolerate any interruption, a sequence of movements, which, once set in motion, expands as an inalterable functional mechanism.

The dynamics of this automatism in the course of American film history is shown directly before the end credits – in the aforementioned montage of film and cartoon excerpts that present the loaded image values as an inextinguishable eternity. What is remarkable here is that the clips are not sorted chronologically or according to genre but that they are arranged by movement: in this way, the sequence of subcomponents from sound and silent films, television shows, and cartoon series show a structure that have a stable rhythm. Furthermore, the images are held together by a similar motif: twitching dance movements are followed by devouring mouths, followed by wide-open eyes, then a broad grin, and finally a gesture of subjugation that is repeated several times, which is articulated as an incessantly servile "Yes, sir" and "Yes, ma'am." The rhythmized violence that closes out the film is thus to be understood as a gesture that reanimates and therefore updates the racism inherent in the image.

For Spike Lee, the question of racial identity is linked to the question of how to go about contouring and calibrating the racial image. In the process, he refers to the dangers and to the costs that are connected to the flow of racist images. The central focus is Lee's attitude toward degrading and defamatory modes of presentation, which finds an important point of reference in the formation of the minstrel show. The hegemony of the white entertainment industry – Lee clearly shows this – is based on the production of antagonistic images that act out the heritage of minstrel show in the form of a disciplinary mechanism. Pierre Delacroix's complicity within this exercise of power is not presented as a liberating moment of transgression but as a repeated confirmation of racial difference, which solidifies and corroborates existing boundaries. The marking of such a boundary with methods of visual discipline is a type of appropriation of power that is only achieved by violence and terror and that entails the agonizing death of the individual. For the reanimation of defamatory gestures and movements proves to be parasitic to the degree that

https://doi.org/10.14361/9783839453377 - am 13.02.2026, 21:55:10. https://www.inlibra.com/de/agb - Open Access -

it is able to take possession of foreign bodies and update traditional forms of humiliation with media mechanisms of transmission. Spike Lee's BAMBOOZLED shows how the process of producing racist images continues in a reflection on relations of movement. In doing so, the evocative power of the images sheds light on its own figurations and rhythmizations – and it is presented thereby as a dynamic whose impact in reference to the formation of racial identity has a lingering resonance.

https://doi.org/10.14361/9783839453377 - am 13.02.2026, 21:55:10. https://www.inlibra.com/de/agb - Open Access -

The Human Stain (Robert Benton, USA 2003)

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

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

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

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

https://doi.org/10.14361/9783839453377 - am 13.02.2026, 21:55:10. https://www.inlibra.com/de/agb - Open Access -

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

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

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

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

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

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

https://doi.org/10.14361/9783839453377 - am 13.02.2026, 21:55:10. https://www.inlibra.com/de/agb - Open Access -

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

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

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

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

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

https://doi.org/10.14361/9783839453377 - am 13.02.2026, 21:55:10. https://www.inlibra.com/de/agb - Open Access -

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

Figure 27: Registration Card

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

https://doi.org/10.14361/9783839453377 - am 13.02.2026, 21:55:10. https://www.inlibra.com/de/agb - Open Access -

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

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

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

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

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

6 Ibid., 194.

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

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

https://doi.org/10.14361/9783839453377 - am 13.02.2026, 21:55:10. https://www.inlibra.com/de/agb - Open Access -

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

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

Figure 28: White Landscape

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

9 Ibid., 94.

https://doi.org/10.14361/9783839453377 - am 13.02.2026, 21:55:10. https://www.inlibra.com/de/agb - Open Access -

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

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

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

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

10 Philip Roth, *The Human Stain* (New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 2000), 22.
11 Roland Barthes, *Mythologies*, trans. Annette Lavers (New York: The Noonday Press, 1991 [1957]), 56.
12 Ibid.

https://doi.org/10.14361/9783839453377 - am 13.02.2026, 21:55:10. https://www.inlibra.com/de/agb - Open Access -

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

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

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

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

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

https://doi.org/10.14361/9783839453377 - am 13.02.2026, 21:55:10. https://www.inlibra.com/de/agb - Open Access -

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

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

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

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

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

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

https://doi.org/10.14361/9783839453377 - am 13.02.2026, 21:55:10. https://www.inlibra.com/de/agb - Open Access -

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

https://doi.org/10.14361/9783839453377 - am 13.02.2026, 21:55:10. https://www.inlibra.com/de/agb - Open Access -

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

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

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

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

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

22 Ibid.

https://doi.org/10.14361/9783839453377 - am 13.02.2026, 21:55:10. https://www.inlibra.com/de/agb - Open Access -

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

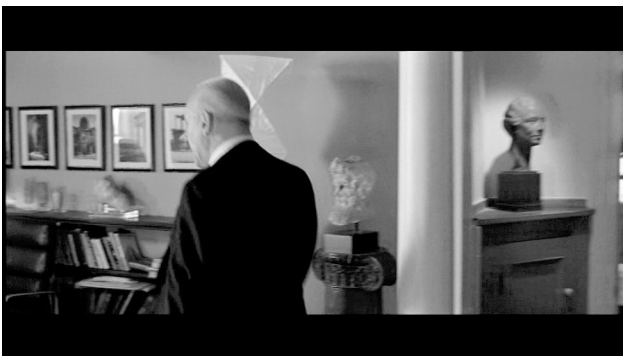


Figure 29: White Sculptures

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

https://doi.org/10.14361/9783839453377 - am 13.02.2026, 21:55:10. https://www.inlibra.com/de/agb - Open Access -

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

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

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

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

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

https://doi.org/10.14361/9783839453377 - am 13.02.2026, 21:55:10. https://www.inlibra.com/de/agb - Open Access -

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

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

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

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

https://doi.org/10.14361/9783839453377 - am 13.02.2026, 21:55:10. https://www.inlibra.com/de/agb - Open Access -

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

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

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

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

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

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

https://doi.org/10.14361/9783839453377 - am 13.02.2026, 21:55:10. https://www.inlibra.com/de/agb - Open Access -

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

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

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

31 Ibid.
32 Ibid.

https://doi.org/10.14361/9783839453377 - am 13.02.2026, 21:55:10. https://www.inlibra.com/de/agb - Open Access -

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

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

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

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

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

https://doi.org/10.14361/9783839453377 - am 13.02.2026, 21:55:10. https://www.inlibra.com/de/agb - Open Access -

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

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

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

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

34 Ibid., 128.

https://doi.org/10.14361/9783839453377 - am 13.02.2026, 21:55:10. https://www.inlibra.com/de/agb - Open Access -

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

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

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

35 Ibid., 128.

https://doi.org/10.14361/9783839453377 - am 13.02.2026, 21:55:10. https://www.inlibra.com/de/agb - Open Access -

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

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

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

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

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

https://doi.org/10.14361/9783839453377 - am 13.02.2026, 21:55:10. https://www.inlibra.com/de/agb - Open Access -

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

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

37 Dyer, *White*, 44.

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

https://doi.org/10.14361/9783839453377 - am 13.02.2026, 21:55:10. https://www.inlibra.com/de/agb - Open Access -

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

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

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

40 Ibid., 39.

https://doi.org/10.14361/9783839453377 - am 13.02.2026, 21:55:10. https://www.inlibra.com/de/agb - Open Access -

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

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

https://doi.org/10.14361/9783839453377 - am 13.02.2026, 21:55:10. https://www.inlibra.com/de/agb - Open Access -

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

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

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

https://doi.org/10.14361/9783839453377 - am 13.02.2026, 21:55:10. https://www.inlibra.com/de/agb - Open Access -

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

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

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

45 Ibid., 97.

https://doi.org/10.14361/9783839453377 - am 13.02.2026, 21:55:10. https://www.inlibra.com/de/agb - Open Access -

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

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

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

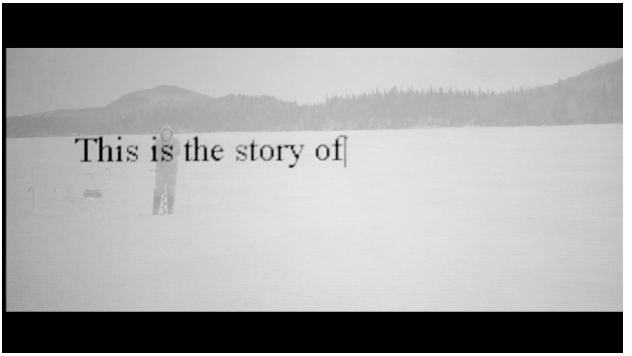


Figure 30: White Screen

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

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

https://doi.org/10.14361/9783839453377 - am 13.02.2026, 21:55:10. https://www.inlibra.com/de/agb - Open Access -

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

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

https://doi.org/10.14361/9783839453377 - am 13.02.2026, 21:55:10. https://www.inlibra.com/de/agb - Open Access -

Conclusion

There is something inherently disconcerting about encountering border zones. Where the border is not clearly demarcated, where the separateness of the respective terrains can perhaps be presumed but not clearly determined, numerous ambivalences are disseminated: here and there come together instead of separating from one another; inside and outside no longer function as disparate positions but as an inextricable interpenetration. In this study, the phenomenon of crossing racial borders has been considered as a process that exposes the interpenetration of gazes as a type of visual condensation. As an ambivalent figure of diffusion, the "mulatto" presents the traversal of an identification system concentrated on the gaze. In the tradition of Western thought, the concept of the subject is tied to a discourse based on notions of knowledge and power. Identifying the Other in this context always means subjecting him or her to an inquiring, discerning gaze. Being subjected to the gaze, however, is also considered the first act of becoming a subject, because the process of seeing sets in motion a visual identification that enables and solidifies the constitution of identity. Self-design can thus not be thought of in isolation but is constantly taking place as an experience of the relationship to the Other. Furthermore, seeing itself is inseparably connected with the Other: The Other is the very condition of the gaze, the prerequisite for it not to go into the void.

Engagement with the question of racial identification and representation provides a specific space of negotiation for this complex interactive relationship – because, on the one hand, it can be understood as a type of cultural confrontation of Self and Other and, on the other hand, because it lends itself to being analyzed as a visual process that draws attention to the constructions of the Self and the Other as an alternating relation of sight. In this study, the encounter of the poles of black and white have been analyzed as a predestined scenario of this relation, a binary schema that can be seen both as a

https://doi.org/10.14361/9783839453377 - am 13.02.2026, 21:55:10. https://www.inlibra.com/de/agb - Open Access -

cultural system of meaning and a specifically racial grid of identification. In this context, it should be noted that in a society organized around racism, the question of racial difference is connected to a particular type of hierarchization. Under these conditions, the encounter of black and white is to be understood as negotiation of the relationship between the marginalized and the included, which can be traced in the differentiating, relationing, and contextualizing of racially encoded nexuses.

Cinema stands for a media-specific realm of possibility for a racially contoured perceptual perspective, because, as a visual medium, film provides specific pathways through which to explore the representation zone of identity and difference. In this study, the interdependence of Self and Other has been analyzed on the basis of six examples selected from the history of American film that condense the problem of this encounter into a complex of motifs of inquisitive and evasive gazes. The focus was on the consideration that film, in its engagement with the visual mediation of racial identity, always reflects on its own media conditions as well. Consequently, the question was when and how film itself can become a border crosser – and this not only in relation to the border crossing in film (as film-aesthetic staging of a particular motif), but also the border crossing of film (as negotiation of its own conditions and possibilities).

The study's point of departure is D.W. Griffith's groundbreaking work The Birth of a Nation (USA 1915). In Griffith, transgression takes place in a type of boundary crossing that can be conceived of, in a formal sense, as the revolutionary expansion of established film practices. Griffith's liberation of the camera from its previous predominantly static position and his perfection of the editing system as a narrative principle are among the early technical-aesthetic innovations of film history. The inner logic of the Griffithian system of images, which by and large became Hollywood's system of images, is characterized by dichotomies. These dichotomies refer to the opposition of close-up and long shot, the contrasts in space as a differentiation of inside and outside as well as above and below, and, in addition, the differentiation of simultaneity and posteriority, which are realized as a distinction between parallel and successive editing. Griffith's cinematic system primarily functions through the mechanics of exclusion and negation. However, this logic does not take place in a space free of ideology but is significantly tied to the engagement with racial difference, which is the film's central fulcrum.

Griffith quite obviously connects the binary system of black and white to a hierarchization presented in the narrative as if it were an original system of

https://doi.org/10.14361/9783839453377 - am 13.02.2026, 21:55:10. https://www.inlibra.com/de/agb - Open Access -

order. In this structure of assigned positions, in this system in which everyone knows his or her place, the mulatto/a appears to be the most threatening disturbance. As a figure of ambivalence, as the uncanny personification of crossing boundaries, he or she calls into question the schema of binary opposition. Furthermore, the hybridity that becomes visible in the physical exterior of the mixed-race person represents the breaking of the taboo of sexual contact between the races. The mulatto's body is thus threatening to the degree that it represents the intersection between the prohibition and its transgression. In several aspects, this type of mixing ratio represents an unreasonable demand for the gaze. Because the embodiment of incompatible parts being next to and in one another denies itself the organizing function of the hierarchy and thereby the ideology inherent to the film. Its climax seems to undermine the logic of differentiation itself: the perception of the mixture seems impossible. The solution that The Birth of a Nation settles on consists of a type of visual discipline that has the goal of subduing the incommensurable. It does not involve the marginalization or domestication of the Other but its erasure – a visual annihilation that occurs when the image is emptied of racial deviation.

This type of defamation, which Griffith ties to the founding myth of the American nation, has not remained unchallenged. The title of Oscar Micheaux's film The Symbol of the Unconquered (USA 1920) already points to its counter-project, which presents the supposedly "conquered" as invincible. The film's focus is an engagement with a unique form of challenging racial boundaries: passing. Racial passing is made possible by the racially ambiguous appearance of the mixed-race person. As a figure of the undifferentiated, the "mulatto" represents a mixing ratio that presents the possibility of taking both a black and white identity, nevertheless not simultaneously but as a choice between one or the other. Because this type of transgression takes place in the context of a racist hierarchy, the choice is predominantly in favor of crossing the border from blackness into the realm of whiteness because it entails social ascension and an increase in privileges. Micheaux's perspective, which can be understood as promoting black self-awareness, rejects this type of identity shift: in The Symbol of the Unconquered, passing is not depicted as a subversive strategy but has an unequivocally negative connotation. Passing is thus presented as a form of deception that corresponds with the denial of one's racial identity and the fear of erasing blackness. In the process, the moral condemnation of the passer is not principally attributed to his or her mixed-race ancestry but is

https://doi.org/10.14361/9783839453377 - am 13.02.2026, 21:55:10. https://www.inlibra.com/de/agb - Open Access -

interpreted as a self-alienated adaptation to the white norm, which must be rejected as a lack of solidarity toward the black community.

This approach evinces the fact that the search for one's racial identity remains bound to a bipolar model of classification. In Micheaux as well, who attempts to decisively turn against the racist implications of racial categorization, the realm of the undecided remains a threat: the in-between can be a middle but never make up its own center. Here Micheaux's film practice is to be understood as an aesthetic form that both confirms and refutes this connection. As a director who conceives of his films as *race movies* with an "all colored cast" for a primarily black audience, he seems to be tying himself to a logic that solidifies and stabilizes the binary system of racial identification. At the same time, he also undermines the mechanism of opposition by concentrating the interpenetration of various positions in a filmic form that allows for a varied combination of different cultural frames of reference. The unevenness of his style, his many breaks and inconsistencies, draw the gaze toward an incongruence that gains significance not only in relation to the chosen motif but also in a formal sense.

The instabilities that developed from the break between classical and modern film can be seen in a film that situates the question of crossing racial boundaries in the crossover zone between the established and the modulated: Douglas Sirk's melodrama Imitation of Life (USA 1959). The core of the film concerns the engagement with a type of imitation that is related both to the identities of the various characters in the film and the identity of the film itself. Sirk is particularly forceful in presenting the dilemma of the light-skinned Sarah Jane, whose mixed-race identity is depicted as a painful form of delocalization and agonizing disorientation. Her demand to be white, articulated throughout the film, corresponds on the one hand to the desire to rise in her social status, but on the other hand also to her longing to be anchored in one identity, which, as a fixed safe haven, promises security and stability. In the process, Sirk not only addresses the rejection of a black role attribution dictated by the racist social order, but also ostentatiously emphasizes the performative aspect of racial identity constructions that the film addresses through the structural fabric of recognition and misrecognition.

The game of deception of the various types of appropriating the Self and the Other, the numerous variations of imitation, are masterfully continued in an elaborate referential system of extradiegetic references – a crossing of boundaries that accounts for the unbalanced relation between reality and its imitation as well as its filmic representation. By depicting the fringes of filmic

https://doi.org/10.14361/9783839453377 - am 13.02.2026, 21:55:10. https://www.inlibra.com/de/agb - Open Access -

illusion, Douglas Sirk achieves a degree of self-reflection which redirects the overall motif of imitation from a narrative function to the thematization of the *dispositif* of cinema. Far from presenting a closed illusionary space, he instead constructs a system of correspondence between innerfilmic and extrafilmic spaces of discourse, which causes the coherence of the diegesis to seem fragile by means of resolute references to the exterior. The entire framework of original and imitation turns out to be highly unstable, since each position inverts into the other, and the possibility of a hierarchization is excluded from the outset. The close tie between this form of correspondence between inside and outside, Self and Other, and the question of crossing racial boundaries is shown not least in Sirk's dramaturgy of color, which strikingly brings the dialogue between the poles of black and white to light. In doing so, Sirk stages a reciprocal system of references that makes the interdeterminacy of the two identity positions black and white visible as a color reflection: no vague gray is presented, no fusion, but a form of stratification that clearly emphasizes the interrelation of both racial determinants. Thus, the problem of racial representation is negotiated in a type of visualization that critically questions not only the self-image of a racist society but also the constancy of the cinematic illusion, presenting both and the other as an ambivalent experience of boundaries.

A highly different approach is seen in John Cassavetes' film from the same year, SHADOWS (USA 1959). Cassavetes' fragmentary style remains puzzling in a fascinating way. Rather than a continuous succession of narrative elements that coalesce into a coherent plot, Cassavetes' films offer a loose network of individual observations with several jumps, gaps, and discontinuities. In this way, the narrative proves resistant to its own legibility: images remain that are difficult to relate to one another. The racial tension in which Cassavetes' debut film SHADOWS is embedded has hardly been addressed in research. When it is mentioned at all, it is reduced to an ancillary aspect that does not play a crucial role as a point of reference for the Cassavetes aesthetic. This study attempts to bridge this gap by analyzing the relationship between racial identification and its processual visualization. The decisive factor here is the fact that the communication of movements gestures that distinguish Cassavetes' film must be considered in close connection to the problem of racial identity – as an ensemble that questions both the limits of the racial subject and of the film itself. Gilles Deleuze's concept of the cinema of bodies builds an important point of reference here. Deleuze is concerned with the unfolding of positions and attitudes that operate beyond the preconstructed

https://doi.org/10.14361/9783839453377 - am 13.02.2026, 21:55:10. https://www.inlibra.com/de/agb - Open Access -

narrative, that abandon it or transcend it. In Deleuze, the body, complete with its movements and behaviors, becomes an aesthetic category that is capable of realigning the film's image space. In the process, the cinema of bodies models both the spatial and temporal dimension of the film, so that an image type develops whose axis is formed by the body's gestural postures.

Of vital importance here is a type of physical interaction, a play of movements, within which energies circulate that are capable of structuring the image space. In this study, I have related Deleuze's concept of the cinema of bodies with an outline of a cinema of skin. I understand skin as the main boundary between the body and the outside world, as a substrate of the affective intensity that is able to make the smallest physical movements perceptible on its surface. Importantly, the expressive power of skin is not only articulated in relation to a tactile stimulus/reaction schema, it also shifts into view as a visual sign of racial differentiation. Skin's visibility represents a unique switchboard for the articulation of self-design because, on the one hand, it forms the visually perceptible interface between the subject's inside and outside world, and, on the other hand, it also forms the relation to the surface system of racial identification. As a medium of the ability for physical expression, skin is additionally the source and destination of gestural postures. The combination of these different factors represents a predestined space for the study of crossing borders and boundaries as an aesthetic principle. The decisive factor here is the bundling of transformative qualities that is disseminated as a texture of disorientation in and beyond film images.

Spike Lee's BAMBOOZLED (USA 2000) is situated at the pivotal point of upheaval between the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, addressing this upheaval by titling the main element of its plot the "New Millennium Minstrel Show." The film tells the story of the sitcom writer Pierre Delacroix, who, under pressure from his superiors to develop a TV show that reflects the production company's commercial interests, conceives the "New Millennium Minstrel Show" as a TV-specific rehash of the tradition of blackface. Delacroix wants his show to be understood as a form of satire that forces its audience to reflect on its openly defamatory depiction of black people. But his plan fails: the success of the show does not result from its viewers' ability to reflect on it but from the perpetuation of all the racist ressentiment that Delacroix actually wanted to combat in the first place. Caught between the white establishment's promises – prosperity, notoriety, recognition – and the black community's demands – responsibility, loyalty, integrity – Delacroix ultimately snaps in his inner struggle between two positions, which the film

https://doi.org/10.14361/9783839453377 - am 13.02.2026, 21:55:10. https://www.inlibra.com/de/agb - Open Access -

characterizes as racially determined spheres of influence. The focus of Spike Lee's film is the complex relationship between images with racist connotations and the resulting problem of racial representation and constitution of identity. Central to this is the cultural dynamics of the minstrel show. It can be considered as a type of racist discipline that implies a significant proximity to another brutal rite of subjugation, that of lynching. The association of both racist forms of entertainment is based on the analogy of a similarly structured visual spectacle. This relationship becomes apparent in the excesses of the arsenal of imagery that the minstrel tradition has developed: the minstrel performer's jerking body represents the twitching agony of someone who is being lynched, the comedian's bulging eyes recall the distorted facial expressions of someone who is being strangled, and the soot that is part of the masquerade is reminiscent of the lynching victim's burnt flesh.

The particular stylization and contouring of blackface that Lee implements within his engagement with the visual discourse on racist forms of discipline can furthermore be interpreted as a way of transgressing boundaries, a transgression whose path of transmission initiates a specifically cinematic process of reflection. It is important to note that Lee closely connects the staging of blackface as a racist form of entertainment and oppression to the aesthetics of death. The repetition of the same old, same old that Spike Lee features in the final montage – the bodily rhythms prominent in black stereotypes, the vocal intensity, the distorted facial expression – is staged as the presence of an uncanny revenant, as a return of the living dead. The motif of death has another point of reference in the ostentatious featuring of the masking inherent to blackface. For the mask's rigidity can be associated with a state of immobility that opposes the liveliness of the person wearing it. As a phenomenon of transcendence, the mask represents the transitional zone between live and death. Two elements are significant here: the moment of stillness on the one hand and the moment of movement on the other hand. Lee transfers both elements to the technique of cinema. This becomes clear in the association of two movements that are introduced as a structural filmic principle. First, the movement of the clicking tap dance steps mimics the movement of frames through a projector. In addition, the presentation of the minstrel show as an automated process is relevant. It associates the mechanical movement of the blackface tradition with a rhythm that turns out to be a deadly vivification. For, on the one hand, blackface minstrelsy means the death of the individual; on the other hand, it also means the insinuation of an eternity that is achieved by constant repetition. The

https://doi.org/10.14361/9783839453377 - am 13.02.2026, 21:55:10. https://www.inlibra.com/de/agb - Open Access -

racism transmitted through and perpetuated by the images thus illustrates a process that reveals a close tie to racially contoured formations in the rhythm of the cinematic image.

Robert Benton's film The Human Stain (USA 2003) focuses on the protagonist Coleman Silk's attempt at a radical self-transformation as he denies his African American heritage in favor of constructing a white identity. The idea of self-determination to which Coleman adheres nevertheless reaches its limit where the inextricability of identity comes to light as an amalgamation of individual decisions and social constraints. The ambition of self-discovery cannot be thought beyond racist regulation, because within racist society the social being perpetually remains subject to a racial typecasting. The requirements of racial identification undermine the choice of the "in-between," it demands a decision that urges the undefined to be defined. Coleman's self-liberation is thus simultaneously a kind of self-restraint: the liberation he desires, the assertion of a free ego, ultimately leads to the reduction of the subject to a disciplinary project of self-control. The key here is the engagement with a type of whiteness that manifests as a specific race as well as an abstract ideal.

This form of whiteness, that is assigned such a prominent position in Benton's film, stands for a substantial as well as transparent quality, a texture that is capable of disseminating a dazzling, suggestive network of relations. This comes up, for example, in the film's numerous references to the imagery of ice and snow. As a formless form, whiteness here refers to the counterplay of drawing and blurring boundaries, to the reciprocity of concretization and abstraction. It remains to be noted that the cultural valorizations of whiteness are also operative for racial difference: the idealization of whiteness is accompanied by the idealization of the person classified as white. The perception of skin color is notably characterized by this interdependence: rather than the different shades of light and dark, it is the separation into black and white in the foreground here, which, as a system of differentiation, significantly facilitates the formation of categories. The link between the complex of meaning and the medium of cinematography is especially manifested in relation to lighting technology. For its development was not undirected, but oriented itself from its beginnings to culturally established norms, from which the formation of cinematic standards did not remain uninfluenced. The white person, as well as the question of what filming techniques would put him in the best lighting, was always the concern of technical innovation. In The Human Stain, the condensation of whiteness is featured as a complex that reveals, in

https://doi.org/10.14361/9783839453377 - am 13.02.2026, 21:55:10. https://www.inlibra.com/de/agb - Open Access -

the film-aesthetic staging, the connection of the white body with the symbolic qualities attributed to it. This type of projection further implies the possibility of reflection – that is, when film negotiates whiteness both as a medium of blurring boundaries and as a means of solidification and discloses this kind of simultaneity within itself.

The films analyzed in this study have been examined in relation to the question of the media conditions of crossing racial boundaries. The consideration of this context is not only capable of fostering an understanding of the problem of racial identity construction but, furthermore, of deepening the engagement with film-aesthetic formations of liminal experiences concentrated on the act of seeing. In doing so, the gap between the visible and the invisible proves to be a productive intermediate space that explores border zones as its own site of reflection. Because this space is porous at its edges, it is not so much a delimitable terrain as it is the location of ambivalence itself. The manifold moments of irritation that come into view in the context of racial transgressions can be understood as ruptures that apply to the process of perception itself. Thus, the engagement of film with the question of crossing racial borders also always initiates the calibration of the medium's own borders – whereby this border must be thought of not as a clearly definable marker but as a constant displacement: as a zone that is capable of eluding limiting definitions through its own dissolution of boundaries.

https://doi.org/10.14361/9783839453377 - am 13.02.2026, 21:55:10. https://www.inlibra.com/de/agb - Open Access -

IV. Appendix

https://doi.org/10.14361/9783839453377 - am 13.02.2026, 21:55:10. https://www.inlibra.com/de/agb - Open Access -

Bibliography

Affron, Charles. "Performing Performing: Irony and Affect." In *Imitation of Life*, edited by Lucy Fischer, 207-215. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1991 [1980].

Agamben, Giorgio. "Noten zur Geste." In *Postmoderne und Politik*, edited by Jutta Georg-Lauer, 97-107. Tübingen: edition discord, 1992.

Anderson, Benedict. *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, Revised Edition. New York: Verso, 2006.

Angerer, Marie-Luise. "Wo trifft der Körper sein Bild?" In *Ohne Spiegel leben: Sichtbarkeiten und posthumane Menschenbilder*, edited by Manfred Fassler, 303-311. Munich: Wilhelm Fink Verlag, 2000.

Anzieu, Didier. *The Skin-Ego*, translated by Naomi Segal. London: Routledge, 2018 [1985].

Apel, Dora. *Imagery of Lynching: Black Men, White Women, and the Mob.* New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2004.

Bakhtin, Mikhail. *Rabelais and His World*, translated by Helen Iswolsky. Bloomington, IN: University of Indiana Press, 1984.

Barthes, Roland. *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*, translated by Richard Howard. New York: Hill and Wang, 2010.

___. *Mythologies*. Translated by Annette Lavers. New York: The Noonday Press, 1991 [1957].

Bazin, André. "The Ontology of the Photographic Image." In *What Is Cinema?: Volume I*, edited and translated by Hugh Gray, 9-16. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005.

Benthien, Claudia. *Im Leibe wohnen: Literarische Imagologie und historische Anthropologie der Haut.* Berlin: Berlin Verlag, 1998.

Berlant, Lauren. "National Brands/National Body: *Imitation of Life*." In *The Phantom Public Sphere*, edited by Bruce Robbins, 173-208. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997.

https://doi.org/10.14361/9783839453377 - am 13.02.2026, 21:55:10. https://www.inlibra.com/de/agb - Open Access -

Bernardi, Daniel. "The Voice of Whiteness: D. W. Griffith's Biograph Films (1908-1913)." In *The Birth of Whiteness: Race and the Emergence of US Cinema*, edited by Daniel Bernardi, 103-128. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1996.

___. "Introduction: Race and the Hollywood Style." In *Classic Hollywood, Classic Whiteness*, edited by Daniel Bernardi, xiii-xxvi. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2001.

Bhabha, Homi K. *The Location of Culture.* New York: Routledge, 1994.

Bialasiewicz, Claudia *Stationen afroamerikanischer Filmgeschichte.* Alfeld, Leine: Coppi, 1998.

Bogle, Donald. *Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies, and Bucks: An Interpretative History of Blacks in American Films.* New York: Continuum, 1997 [1973].

Bowser, Pearl and Louise Spence. "Oscar Micheaux's *The Symbol of the Unconquered:* Text and Context." In *Oscar Micheaux & His Circle: African-American Filmmaking and Race Cinema of the Silent Era*, edited by Pearl Bowser, Jane Gaines, and Charles Musser, 81-96. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2001.

___. *Writing Himself into History: Oscar Micheaux, His Silent Films, and His Audience.* New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2000.

Brecht, Bertolt. "Gestik." In *Bertolt Brecht. Werke. Große kommentierte Berliner und Frankfurter Ausgabe*, Band 23, Schriften 3, edited by Werner Hecht et al. Berlin/Weimar: Aufbau Verlag; Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1993):187-188.

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

___. "Ghosting the Machine: The Sounds of Tap and the Sounds of Film." *Screen* 44, no. 4 (2003): 355-378.

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

Brooks, Xan. "The Human Stain." *Sight and Sound* 14, no. 3 (2004): 44-46.

Brown, Sterling Allen. *Negro Poetry and Drama / The Negro in American Fiction.* New York: Atheneum, 1978 [1937].

Buschwenter, Robert. "Das Schauspiel oder die Vermittlung des Scheins durch Wahrheit." In *John Cassavetes: DirActor*, edited by Andrea Lang and Bernhard Seiter, 57-76. Vienna: PVS Verleger, 1993.

Butler, Judith. *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of "Sex."* New York: Routledge, 1993.

https://doi.org/10.14361/9783839453377 - am 13.02.2026, 21:55:10. https://www.inlibra.com/de/agb - Open Access -

___. *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. New York: Routledge, 2006.

___. "Lana's 'Imitation': Melodramatic Repetition and the Gender Performative." *Genders* 9, no. 3 (1990): 1-18.

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

Campbell, Edward D. C. Jr. *The Celluloid South*. Knoxville, TN: University of Tennessee Press, 1981.

Camper, Fred. "The Films of Douglas Sirk." In *Imitation of Life*, edited by Lucy Fischer, 251-267. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1991.

Carney, Ray. *American Dreaming: The Films of John Cassavetes and the American Experience*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985.

___. *Shadows*. London: BFI Publishing, 2001.

Cassavetes, John. "What's Wrong with Hollywood." In *John Cassavetes: Interviews*, edited by Gabriella Oldham, 7-8. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2016 [1959].

Caughie, Pamela L. "Let It Pass: Changing the Subject, Once Again." *PMLA* 112, no. 1 (1997): 26-39.

Charity, Tom. *John Cassavetes: Lifeworks*. London: Omnibus Press, 2001.

Ciraulo, Dina. "Narrative Style in Oscar Micheaux's *Within Our Gates*." *Wide Angle* 2, no. 4 (1998), 75-91.

Comolli, Jean-Louis. "The Detour Through the Direct". In Williams, Christopher (ed.) *Realism and the Cinema*, edited by Christopher Williams, 225-243. London: BFI, 1980 [1969].

Conroy, Marianne. "'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*, edited by David E. James and Rick Berg, 114-137. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1996.

Cooper, James Fenimore. *The Last of the Mohicans*. Ware: Wordsworth, 1995 [1826].

Courtney, Susan. "Picturizing Race: Hollywood's Censorship of Miscegenation and Production of Racial Visibility through *Imitation of Life*." *Genders* 27 (1998): 1-46.

Cripps, Thomas R. "The Making of *The Birth of a Race*: The Emerging Politics of Identity in Silent Movies." In *The Birth of Whiteness: Race and the Emergence of US Cinema*, edited by Daniel Bernardi, 38-55. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1996.

https://doi.org/10.14361/9783839453377 - am 13.02.2026, 21:55:10. https://www.inlibra.com/de/agb - Open Access -

___. *Slow Fade to Black: The Negro in American Film, 1900-1942*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1997.

Crouch, Stanley. "Do the Race Thing: Spike Lee's Afro-Fascist Chic." *The Village Voice* (June 20, 1989): 73-76.

Crowdus, Gary, and Dan Georgakas. "Thinking about the Power of Images: An Interview with Spike Lee." *Cineaste* 26, no. 2 (2001): 4-9.

Deleuze, Gilles. *Cinema 2: The Time-Image*, translated by Hugh Tomlinson and Robert Galeta. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997.

Deppner, Martin Roman. "Zur Farbdramaturgie Douglas Sirks: Kunstrezeption im Spielfilm zwischen Farbautonomie und Farbbedeutung." In *Who's afraid of: Zum Stand der Farbforschung*, edited by Anne Hoormann and Karl Schawelka, 302-334. Weimar: Universitätsverlag Weimar, 1998.

Doane, Mary Ann. *Femmes Fatales: Feminism, Film Theory, Psychoanalysis*. London: Routledge, 1991.

Dyer, Richard. "Four Films of Lana Turner." In *Imitation of Life*, edited by Lucy Fischer, 186-215. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1991.

___. *White*. London, New York: Routledge, 1997.

Egner, Silke. *Bilder der Farbe*, Weimar: VDG, 2003.

Ellison, Ralph. "Change the Joke and Slip the Yoke." In *Shadow and Act*, edited by Ralph Ellison, 45-59. New York: Vintage, 1995 [1958].

___. *The Invisible Man*. New York: Vintage, 1952 [1947].

Engell, Lorenz. *Sinn und Industrie: Einführung in die Filmgeschichte.* Frankfurt am Main: Campus Verlag, 1992.

Everett, Anna. "The Other Pleasures: The Narrative Function of Race in the Cinema." *Film Criticism* 20, no. 1 and 2 (1995): 26-38.

Fanon, Frantz. *Black Skin, White Masks*, translated by Charles Lam Markmann. London: Pluto Press, 1986.

Fauset, Jessie. *Plum Bun: A Novel Without a Moral*. Boston: Beacon Press, 2002 [1929].

Fischer, Lucy. "Three-Way Mirror: *Imitation of Life*." In *Imitation of Life*, edited by Lucy Fischer, 3-28. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1991.

Flitterman-Lewis, Sandy. "*Imitation(s) of Life:* The Black Woman's Double Determination as Troubling 'Other.'" In *Imitation of Life*, edited by Lucy Fischer, 325-335. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1991.

Flusser, Vilém. *Gesten: Versuch einer Phänomenologie.* Düsseldorf/Bensheim: Bollmann, 1991.

Franco, Dean J. "Being Black, Being Jewish, and Knowing the Difference." *Studies in American Jewish Literature* 23 (2004): 88-103.

https://doi.org/10.14361/9783839453377 - am 13.02.2026, 21:55:10. https://www.inlibra.com/de/agb - Open Access -

Gaines, Jane. *Fire & Desire: Mixed-Race Movies in the Silent Era*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001.

___. "Fire and Desire: Race, Melodrama, and Oscar Micheaux." In *Black American Cinema*, edited by Manthia Diawara, 49-70. London: Routledge, 1993.

Gallagher, Tag. "White Melodrama." *Film Comment* 34, no. 6 (1998): 16-27.

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

Grafe, Frieda. *Filmfarben*. Berlin: Brinkmann & Bose, 2002.

Green, J. Ronald. *Straight Lick: The Cinema of Oscar Micheaux*. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2000.

___. "'Twoness' in the Style of Oscar Micheaux." In *Black American Cinema*, edited by Manthia Diawara, 26-48. London: Routledge, 1993.

Grosz, Elisabeth. *Volatile Bodies: Toward a Corporeal Feminism*. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1994.

Gubar, Susan. *Race Changes: White Skin, Black Face in American Culture*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1997.

Guerrero, Ed. *Framing Blackness: The African American Image in Film*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1993.

___. "Spike Lee and the Fever in the Racial Jungle." In *Film Theory Goes to The Movies*, edited by Jim Collins, Hilary Radner, and Ava Preacher Collins, 170-181. New York: Routledge, 1992.

Halliday, Jon. "Sirk on Sirk." In *Imitation of Life*, edited by Lucy Fischer, 226-231. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1991.

Hegel, Georg Wilhelm Friedrich. *Aesthetics: Lectures on Fine Art, Volume II*, translated by T.M. Knox. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975.

___. *Phenomenology of Spirit*, translated by A.V. Miller. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977.

Heung, Marina. "'What's the Matter with Sarah Jane?': Daughters and Mothers in Douglas Sirk's *Imitation of Life*." In *Imitation of Life*, edited by Lucy Fischer, 302-324. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 302-324.

Holl, Ute. "Ein Gesicht ist ein Gesicht ist kein Gesicht: Anmerkungen zur Geschichtlichkeit der Physiognomie im Film." *ÖZG* 14, no. 3 (2003): 50-67.

hooks, bell. *Yearning: Race, Gender, and Cultural Politics*. Boston: South End Press, 1989.

Jackson, Robert. "The Celluloid War before The Birth: Race and History in Early American Film." In *American Cinema and the Southern Imaginary*, edited by Deborah E. Barker and Kathryn McKee, 27-51. Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 2011.

https://doi.org/10.14361/9783839453377 - am 13.02.2026, 21:55:10. https://www.inlibra.com/de/agb - Open Access -

Jacobs, Lewis. *The Rise of the American Film. A Critical History.* New York: Teacher's College Press, 1978 [1939].

Jansen, Peter W. "Shadows. 1957/59." In *John Cassavetes*, edited by Peter W. Jansen and Wolfram Schütte, 55-63. Munich/Vienna: Carl Hanser Verlag, 1983.

Johnson, James Weldon. *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man*. New York: Dover Publications, 1995 [1912].

Kouvaros, George. "The Cinematic Life of Emotions: John Cassavetes." *Senses of Cinema Online Journal* 5 (2000).

___. *Where Does It Happen? John Cassavetes and Cinema at the Breaking Point.* Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2004.

Kraus, Matthias. "American Ways of Life: Reflexiver Pragmatismus bei John Cassavetes." *Augen-Blick* 31 (2000): 36-54.

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

Lacan, Jacques. *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psycho-Analysis*, edited by Jacques-Alain Miller, translated by Alan Sheridan. New York: Karnac, 1977.

___. "The Mirror Stage as Formative of the *I* Function." In *Jacques Lacan: Écrits. The First Complete Edition in English*, translated by Bruce Fink, 75-81. New York: Norton, 2006.

Landau, Saul. "Spike Lee's Revolutionary Broadside." *Cineaste* 26, no. 2 (2001): 11-12.

Lang, Andrea. "Das Privattheater des John Cassavetes: Logos Hollywood und hysterische Form." In *John Cassavetes: DirActor*, edited by Andrea Lang and Bernhard Seiter, 11-28. Vienna: PVS Verleger, 1993.

Lang, Robert (Ed.). *The Birth of a Nation: D. W. Griffith, Director.* New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1994.

Laplanche, Jean and Jean-Bertrand Pontalis. *Das Vokabular der Psychoanalyse.* Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1999 [1972].

Larsen, Nella. *Passing*. New York: Modern Library, 2002 [1929].

___. *Quicksand*. New York: Penguin, 2002 [1928].

Lee, Spike and Cynthia Fuchs. *Spike Lee: Interviews,* Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi, 2002.

Lee, Spike and Lisa Jones. *Do the Right Thing,* New York: Fireside, 1989.

Levich, Jacob. "John Cassavetes: An American Maverick." *Cineaste* 29, no. 2 (1993): 51-53.

Lott, Eric. *Love and Theft: Blackface Minstrelsy and the American Working Class.* New York: Oxford University Press, 1995.

https://doi.org/10.14361/9783839453377 - am 13.02.2026, 21:55:10. https://www.inlibra.com/de/agb - Open Access -

Macho, Thomas. "Shining oder: Die weiße Seite." In *Weiß*, edited by Wolfgang Ullrich and Juliane Vogel, 17-28. Frankfurt am Main: Fischer, 2003.

Marcus, Greil. "Philip Roth's *U.S.A.*" *The Threepenny Review* 83 (2000): 18-21.

Margulies, Ivone. "John Cassavetes: Amateur Director." In *The New American Cinema*, edited by John Lewis, 275-306. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1998.

Markovitz, Jonathan. *Legacies of Lynching: Racial Violence and Memory.* Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2004.

Martin, Douglas. "About New York: Racial Hatred through Fresh Eyes." *New York Times,* February 15, 1992.

Massumi, Brian. "The Autonomy of Affect." In *Deleuze: A Critical Reader*, edited by Paul Patton, 217-239. Oxford: Blackwell, 1997.

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

Minh-Ha, Trinh T. "Die verabsolutierende Suche nach Bedeutung." In *Bilder des Wirklichen: Texte zur Theorie des Dokumentarfilms*, edited by Eva Hohenberger, 304-326. Berlin: Vorwerk 8, 1998.

Modleski, Tania. *Feminism Without Women: Culture and Criticism in a "Postfeminist" Age.* London: Routledge, 1991.

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

Mulvey, Laura. "Notes on Sirk and Melodrama." *Movie* 25 (1975): 53-56.

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

Olschanski, Reinhard. *Maske und Person: Zur Wirklichkeit des Darstellens und Verhüllens.* Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2001.

Omer-Sherman, Ranen. 2002. *Diaspora and Zionism in Jewish American Literature: Lazarus, Syrkin, Reznikoff, and Roth*. Waltham, MA: Brandeis University Press, 2002.

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

Perez, Gilberto. "Imperfection." *Senses of Cinema Online* 16 (2001).

Peucker, Brigitte. *Incorporating Images. Film and the Rival Arts,* Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995.

Regester, Charlene. "Oscar Micheaux's Multifaceted Portrayals of the African-American Male: The *Good*, the *Bad*, and the *Ugly*." In *Me Jane: Masculinity, Movies and Women*, edited by Pat Kirkham and Janet Thumim, 166-183. London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1995.

https://doi.org/10.14361/9783839453377 - am 13.02.2026, 21:55:10. https://www.inlibra.com/de/agb - Open Access -

Rhines, Jesse Algeron. *Black Film/ White Money.* New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1996.

Rogin, Michael. "Nowhere Left to Stand: The Burnt Cork Roots of Popular Culture." *Cineaste* 26, no. 2 (2001): 14-15.

Roth, Philip. *The Human Stain.* New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 2000.

___. *Reading Myself and Others.* New York: Vintage, 2001 [1975].

Safer, Elaine B. "More Stains than One: Film and the Adaptation of Philip Roth's *The Human Stain*." *Studies in American Jewish Literature* 23 (2004): 160-165.

Sampson, Henry T. *Blacks in Black and White. A Source Book on Black Films.* London: Scarecrow Press, 1995.

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

Silva, Fred. *Focus on The Birth of a Nation.* Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1971.

Simcovitch, Maxim. "The Impact of Griffith's *Birth of a Nation* on the Modern Ku Klux Klan." In *Celluloid Power: Social Film Criticism from* The Birth of a Nation *to* Judgement at Nuremberg, edited by David Platt, 72-82. Metuchen, NJ: Scarecrow Press, 1992.

Smith, Valerie. "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.

Sollors, Werner. *Neither Black Nor White: Thematic Explorations of Interracial Literature.* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997.

Spillers, Hortense J. "Notes on an alternative model – neither/nor." In *The Difference Within: Feminism and Critical Theory*, edited by Elizabeth A. Meese, 165-187. Amsterdam: Benjamins, 1989.

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

Stern, Lesley and George Kouvaros. "Introduction: Descriptive Acts." In *Falling for You: Essays on Cinema and Performance*, edited by Lesley Stern and George Kouvaros, 1-35. Sydney: Power Publications, 1999.

Stern, Lesley. "Putting on a Show, or the Ghostliness of Gesture." *Lola* 5 (2002), http://www.lolajournal.com/5/putting_show.html.

Stern, Michael. "Imitation of Life." In *Imitation of Life*, edited by Lucy Fischer, 279-288. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1991.

Stern, Seymour. "Griffith I – *'The Birth of a Nation.'*" *Film Culture* 36 (1965): 114-132.

https://doi.org/10.14361/9783839453377 - am 13.02.2026, 21:55:10. https://www.inlibra.com/de/agb - Open Access -

Streiter, Anja. *Das Unmögliche Leben: Filme von John Cassavetes.* Berlin: Vorwerk 8, 1995.

Taylor, Clyde. "The Re-Birth of the Aesthetic in Cinema." In *The Birth of Whiteness: Race and the Emergence of US Cinema*, edited by Daniel Bernardi, 15-37. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1996.

Thompson, Francesca. "From Shadows 'n Shufflin' to Spotlights and Cinema: The Lafayette Players, 1915-1932." In *Oscar Micheaux & His Circle: African-American Filmmaking and Race Cinema of the Silent Era*, edited by Pearl Bowser, Jane Gaines, and Charles Musser, 19-33. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2001.

Tischleder, Bärbel. *Body Trouble: Entkörperlichung, Whiteness und das amerikanische Gegenwartskino.* Frankfurt am Main: Stroemfeld, 2001.

Universal Pictures. "*Imitation of Life*: Production Notes." In *Imitation of Life*, edited by Lucy Fischer, 183-185. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1991.

Watson, Stephanie. "Spontaneous Cinema? In the Shadows with John Cassavetes." In *The Naked Lens: An Illustrated History of Beat Cinema*, edited by Jack Sargeant, 55-68. London: Creation Books, 2001.

White, Armond. "Post-Art Minstrelsy." *Cineaste* 26, no. 2 (2001): 12-14.

Williams, Linda. *Playing the Race Card: Melodramas of Black and White from Uncle Tom to O.J. Simpson.* Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001.

Williamson, Joel. *New People: Miscegenation and Mulattoes in the United States.* New York: Free Press, 1980.

Young, Joseph A. *Black Novelist as White Racist: The Myth of Black Inferiority in the Novels of Oscar Micheaux.* New York: Greenwood Press, 1989.

Young, Lola. *Fear of the Dark: "Race," Gender and Sexuality in the Cinema.* New York: Routledge, 1996.

https://doi.org/10.14361/9783839453377 - am 13.02.2026, 21:55:10. https://www.inlibra.com/de/agb - Open Access -

Filmography

Negro Dancers (Thomas Edison, USA 1895)
Dancing Darkey Boy (Thomas Edison, USA 1897)
In Slavery Days (Otis Turner, USA 1913)
The Octoroon (Sidney Olcott, USA 1913)
The Birth of a Nation (David Wark Griffith, USA 1915)
The Homesteader (Oscar Micheaux, USA 1918)
Broken Blossoms (David Wark Griffith, USA 1919)
The Romance of Happy Valley (David Wark Griffith, USA 1919)
Within Our Gates (Oscar Micheaux, USA 1920)
The Symbol of the Unconquered (Oscar Micheaux, USA 1920)
Birthright (Oscar Micheaux, USA 1924)
A Son of Satan (Oscar Micheaux, USA 1924)
The House Behind the Cedars (Oscar Micheaux, USA 1925)
The Jazz Singer (Alan Crosland, USA 1927)
Thirty Years Later (Oscar Micheaux, USA 1928)
The Exile (Oscar Micheaux, USA 1931)
Veiled Aristocrats (Oscar Micheaux, USA 1932)
42nd Street (Lloyd Bacon, USA 1933)
Imitation of Life (John M. Stahl, USA 1934)
God's Stepchildren (Oscar Micheaux, USA 1937)
Babes in Arms (Richard Rodgers, USA 1937)
Jezebel (William Wyler, USA 1938)
The Great Lie (Edmund Goulding, USA 1941)
Desperate Journey (Raoul Walsh, USA 1942)
Holiday Inn (Mark Sandrich, USA 1942)
Edge of Darkness (Lewis Milestone, USA 1943)
Duel in the Sun (King Vidor, USA 1946)
Angelitos Negros (Joselito Rodríguez, MEX 1948)

https://doi.org/10.14361/9783839453377 - am 13.02.2026, 21:55:10. https://www.inlibra.com/de/agb - Open Access -

The Betrayal (Oscar Micheaux, USA 1948)
No Way Out (Joseph Mankiewicz, USA 1950)
Show Boat (George Sidney, USA 1951)
All I Desire (Douglas Sirk, USA 1953)
Taxi (Gregory Ratoff, USA 1953)
Impulse (Cy Endfield, UK 1954)
The Night Holds Terror (Andrew L. Stone, USA 1955)
The Blackboard Jungle (Richard Brooks, USA 1955)
A Face in the Crowd (Elia Kazan, USA 1956)
Crime in the Streets (Don Siegel, USA 1956)
Affair in Havana (Laslo Benedek, USA 1957)
Edge of the City (Martin Ritt, USA 1957)
Naked Africa (Ray Phoenix, USA 1957)
Naked Paradise (Roger Corman, USA 1957)
Ten Thousand Bedrooms (Richard Thorpe, USA 1957)
The Ten Commandments (Cecil B. De Mille, USA 1957)
Top Secret Affair (H. C. Potter, USA 1957)
A Night to Remember (Roy Ward Baker, UK 1958)
The Night Heaven Fell / Les Bijoutiers du Clair de Lune (Roger Vadim, F/I 1958)
Man or Gun (Albert C. Gannaway, USA 1958)
Saddle in the Wind (Robert Parrish, USA 1958)
The Defiant Ones (Stanley Kramer, USA 1958)
Virgin Island (Pat Jackson, UK 1958)
Imitation of Life (Douglas Sirk, USA 1959)
Shadows (John Cassavetes, USA 1959)
Too Late Blues (John Cassavetes, USA 1961)
A Child Is Waiting (John Cassavetes, USA 1963)
Guess Who's Coming To Dinner (Stanley Kramer, USA 1967)
Faces (John Cassavetes, USA 1968)
Network (Sidney Lumet, USA 1976)
She's Gotta Have It (Spike Lee, USA 1986)
Do The Right Thing (Spike Lee, USA 1989)
Jungle Fever (Spike Lee, USA 1991)
Malcolm X (Spike Lee, USA 1992)
D. W. Griffith, Father of Film (Kevin Brownlow, USA 1992)
Bamboozled (Spike Lee, USA 2000)
The Human Stain (Robert Benton, USA 2003)

https://doi.org/10.14361/9783839453377 - am 13.02.2026, 21:55:10. https://www.inlibra.com/de/agb - Open Access -

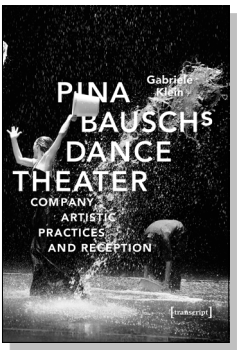
List of Figures

Figure Sources

Figure 1-5: The Birth of a Nation (David Wark Griffith, USA 1915), screenshots taken from DVD.
Figure 6-10: The Symbol of the Unconquered (Oscar Micheaux, USA 1920), screenshots taken from DVD.
Figure 11-15: Imitation of Life (Douglas Sirk, USA 1959), screenshots taken from DVD.
Figure 16-20: Shadows (John Cassavetes, USA 1959), screenshots taken from DVD.
Figure 17-25: Bamboozled (Spike Lee, USA 2000), screenshots taken from DVD.
Figure 26-30: The Human Stain (Robert Benton, USA 2003), screenshots taken from DVD.

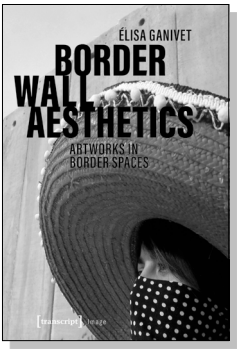
https://doi.org/10.14361/9783839453377 - am 13.02.2026, 21:55:10. https://www.inlibra.com/de/agb - Open Access -

Cultural Studies



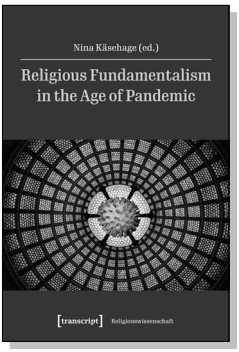
Gabriele Klein
Pina Bausch's Dance Theater
Company, Artistic Practices and Reception

2020, 440 p., pb., col. ill.
29,99 € (DE), 978-3-8376-5055-6
E-Book:
PDF: 29,99 € (DE), ISBN 978-3-8394-5055-0



Elisa Ganivet
Border Wall Aesthetics
Artworks in Border Spaces

2019, 250 p., hardcover, ill.
79,99 € (DE), 978-3-8376-4777-8
E-Book:
PDF: 79,99 € (DE), ISBN 978-3-8394-4777-2



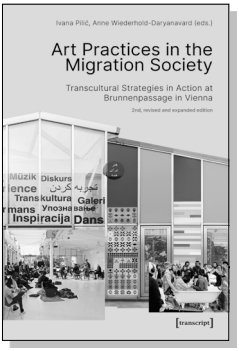
Nina Käsehage (ed.)
Religious Fundamentalism in the Age of Pandemic

April 2021, 278 p., pb., col. ill.
37,00 € (DE), 978-3-8376-5485-1
E-Book: available as free open access publication
PDF: ISBN 978-3-8394-5485-5

All print, e-book and open access versions of the titles in our list are available in our online shop www.transcript-publishing.com

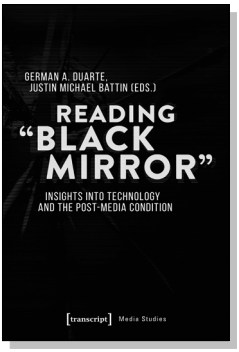
https://doi.org/10.14361/9783839453377 - am 13.02.2026, 21:55:10. https://www.inlibra.com/de/agb - Open Access -

Cultural Studies



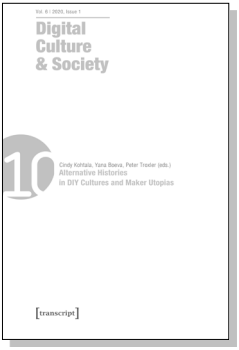
Ivana Pilic, Anne Wiederhold-Daryanavard (eds.)
Art Practices in the Migration Society
Transcultural Strategies in Action at Brunnenpassage in Vienna

March 2021, 244 p., pb.
29,00 € (DE), 978-3-8376-5620-6
E-Book:
PDF: 25,99 € (DE), ISBN 978-3-8394-5620-0



German A. Duarte, Justin Michael Battin (eds.)
Reading »Black Mirror«
Insights into Technology and the Post-Media Condition

January 2021, 334 p., pb.
32,00 € (DE), 978-3-8376-5232-1
E-Book:
PDF: 31,99 € (DE), ISBN 978-3-8394-5232-5



Cindy Kohtala, Yana Boeva, Peter Troxler (eds.)
Digital Culture & Society (DCS)
Vol. 6, Issue 1/2020 –
Alternative Histories in DIY Cultures and Maker Utopias

February 2021, 214 p., pb., ill.
29,99 € (DE), 978-3-8376-4955-0
E-Book:
PDF: 29,99 € (DE), ISBN 978-3-8394-4955-4

All print, e-book and open access versions of the titles in our list are available in our online shop www.transcript-publishing.com

https://doi.org/10.14361/9783839453377 - am 13.02.2026, 21:55:10. https://www.inlibra.com/de/agb - Open Access -