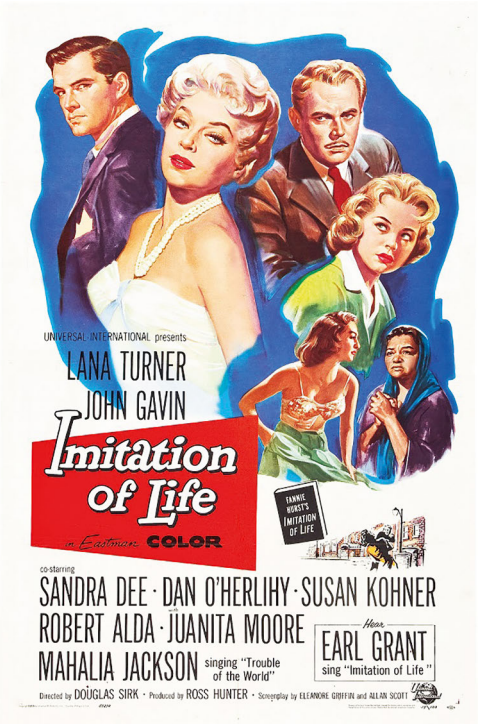
Imitation of Life (1959)

Karin Esders

dir. Douglas Sirk; prod. Ross Hunter; screenplay Eleanore Griffin, Allan Scott; photography Russell Metty; music Frank Skinner. 35mm, color, 125 mins. Universal Pictures, distrib. Universal Pictures.



Courtesy of the Everett Collection

As a most versatile text, *Imitation of Life* has circulated through U.S. culture for many decades both captivating and haunting the American imagination. Based on Fannie Hurst's triumphantly successful serial novel *Sugar House* (1932), it was turned into a book one year later and adapted into film by John Stahl. In 1935, Sterling Brown's critical assessment in *Opportunity* targeted the racist elements of the text and triggered public debates among Black intellectuals, clergy, and audiences alike. Langston Hughes' satirical adaptation *Limitations of Life* premiered in Harlem in 1938; both Zora Neale Hurston's novel *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937) and Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* (1970) devised intricate intertextual ties, citing, refuting, and transforming the earlier sources. In 1959, director Douglas Sirk, who had emigrated from Nazi Germany, rearranged Hurst's novel and crafted a stylish Technicolor box office hit, yielding Universal Studio's greatest profit ever. Since the 1930s, *Imitation of Life* has generated recurring critical attention. Scholars have approached the text as a site of cultural contestation where deep-seated contradictions concerning race, gender, class, and sexuality become excessively obvious and yet are glossed over by a sophisticated *mise-en-scène* that draws attention to the fine-tuned colors, magnificent costumes, and posh settings.

Imitation of Life centers on the relationship between two single mothers, one Black and one white, and their respective daughters. In Hurst's and Stahl's versions, the two widows, after years of struggle, set up a multi-million-dollar pancake empire. Even

though their fortune is based on Delilah's recipe and skill, the white characters cash in the profits, while the Black woman is restricted to a position of devoted domestic. Moreover, she is turned into a public advertising image, painfully reminiscent of the *Aunt Jemima* brand which so successfully commodified the mammy stereotype. As a »surrogate and enabler« (Morrison 51), her character makes possible the white woman's emancipation and success.

Sirk's version relocates the story to the spectacular world of theater and film. Again, the Black woman, Annie Johnson (played by Juanita Moore), has to perform maternal work whereas Lora Meredith (played by Lana Turner) gives up most of her family life as she relentlessly pursues her acting career. Even though *Imitation of Life* starts out as a film about the two mothers, quite imperceptibly it turns into a film about Annie's fair-skinned daughter, Sarah Jane, who is able to pass for white. Describing his specific focus in a 1972 interview, Sirk said: »The only interesting thing is the [Black] angle: the [Black] girl trying to escape her condition, sacrificing to her status in society her bonds of friendship, family etc., and rather trying to vanish into the imitation world of vaudeville« (qtd. in Sirk and Hallyday 130).

This strand of the plot must be read in the context of U.S. American legislation. Way into the 1980s, many U.S. states applied the principle of hypodescent which created the idea that every person who has a Black ancestor is »naturally« Black. Feeding into collective racist fantasies, the »one-drop rule« made it illegal for people of color to identify freely with various ethnic groups and, above all, barred them from white spheres of privilege and personhood. Light-skinned African Americans who tried to »pass« were considered counterfeit or pseudo-whites who used their skin as a camouflage. As Werner Sollors put it, this anti-Black principle »makes one part of a person's ancestry real, essential, and defining, and other parts accidental, mask-like, and insignificant« (249).

While *Imitation of Life* increasingly concerns itself with Sarah Jane's experiences, showing the irritated, appalled, and brutal reactions to her attempts to pass, it both employs and bends the formula of classical family melodrama. Designed as an emotional center full of heartbreak and tears, the split between mothers and daughters so crucial for countless women's films is given a new twist here. After Sarah Jane ran away from the shared household of the two women who want her to choose a respectable career as a teacher for Black children, she instead tries to blend in with her white colleagues and customers in a shoddy vaudeville playhouse—in another town, under a different name. Her mother Annie, who had her traced down, secretly slips into the theater and observes her show. Through her eyes, the spectators see Sarah Jane in her tight-fitting costume, suggestively dancing and lolling about, serving champagne to the men. For her, the imitation of life as an imitation of white (people) seems to be the only way to overcome racial demarcations. Yet the film presents her as an improper mirror image (not »legitimately« white) of the successful Lora Meredith (»properly« white) who has made it in the legitimate theater world.

After the show, in her daughter's dressing room, the prototypical tensions of the maternal melodrama are played out—the daughter wanting to live her own life, the mother not wanting to let her go. However, *Imitation of Life* goes beyond the well-established severing of symbiotic family ties and explores the racist violence these filmic characters have to endure every day but still cannot fully grasp. In order to advance in white society, Sarah Jane must not only deny her pedigree and her past but also

her name, her language, her life. Passing thus becomes a form of social death. This four-minute dressing-room scene plays out the cruelty and intense pain of the two characters who have to individually carry the burden of an anti-Black system. In defending herself against her mother's love, Sarah Jane defends herself against the terrorism of the world, as Fassbinder put it (245). In pulling all the registers of emotional involvement, this scene forcefully engages its spectators with the moral dilemmas brought about by racist structures. And yet, the film still manages to go beyond the personal and give a glimpse into the political realm, even if in a highly stylized manner.

Heart-broken, Annie moves back home and is about to die. Her life-long companion, Lora, seems completely surprised to learn that Annie had a life of her own as a cherished member of the town's Black community and that she has saved enough money for a grand funeral complete with white horses, a carriage, and all her friends. The funeral scene in its emotional, visual, and aural indulgence becomes the pinnacle of the film, and it introduces a political dimension that is quite singular for Hollywood melodramas. It begins in a large church, with Annie's flower-draped coffin, an immense crowd of her community members, her few white companions, and a sizeable gospel choir with Mahalia Jackson singing »Trouble of the World.« Her performance of this gospel brings in an expressive element of Black culture that was for the most part excluded from Hollywood entertainment. Moreover, Lora as well as her daughter and white friends seem to get lost in an all-Black crowd. Instead of listening to Jackson's poignant singing, they are frozen in static and rather impassive poses, perhaps indicating the awkwardness of being the odd ones out. The next shots show the congregation slowly moving forward with hundreds of Black people lining the streets while policemen guard the procession. This sequence can be read as an allusion to the marches of the civil rights movement. In this extremely rare occasion with countless Black extras imposingly marching down the street, the film undoubtedly creates a strong political vision. Black people are claiming public space and public dignity. When Sarah Jane belatedly turns up at the funeral and throws herself onto the coffin, she seems to reach out not only to her late mother but to the community at large. However, in its drive towards closure, the film's last shot shows her firmly in the grip of her white surrogate family, numbing her desperate crying.

References

Fassbinder, Rainer Werner. (1971) 1991. »Six Films by Douglas Sirk.« In *Imitation of Life: Douglas Sirk, Director*, edited by Lucy Fischer, 244-46. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press.

Morrison, Toni. 1992. *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination*. The William E. Massey, Sr. Lectures in the History of American Civilization 1990. London: Picador.

Sirk, Douglas, and Jon Halliday. 1971. *Sirk on Sirk: Interviews with Jon Halliday*. London: Secker and Warburg for the BFI.

Sollors, Werner. 1997. *Neither Black nor White yet Both: Thematic Explorations of Interracial Literature*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.