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

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-

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.

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.

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

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.

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.

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

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.