

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

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, relating, 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

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

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

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

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 resentment 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

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

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

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.

