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.

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-

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

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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.

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).

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.

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.

> 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.

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.

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

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.

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.

> 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.

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.

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."

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

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

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."

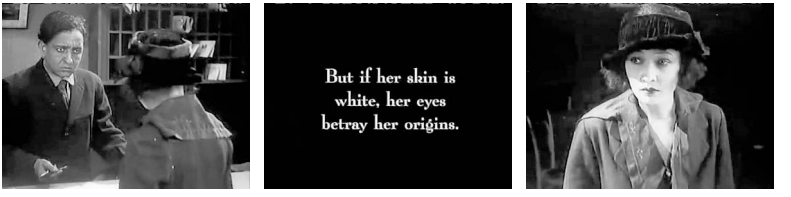

Figure 10: Jefferson Driscoll and Eve Mason

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.

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.

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]

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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.

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.

> 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.

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*.

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.

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.

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.

> 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.

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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.

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.

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.

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.