

Lisa Gotto

Passing and Posing between Black and White

Calibrating the Color Line in U.S. Cinema



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Passing and Posing between Black and White Calibrating the Color Line in U.S. Cinema

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Since its inception, U.S. American cinema has grappled with the articulation of racial boundaries. This applies, in the first instance, to featuring mixed-race characters crossing the color line. In a broader sense, however, this also concerns viewing conditions and knowledge configurations. The fact that American film engages 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 disputing boundaries that pertain to the medium itself. Lisa Gotto examines this constellation along the early history of American film, the cinematic modernism of the late 1950s, and the post-classical cinema of the turn of the millennium.

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

For further information:

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Foreword

Lorenz Engell

We typically like to present new scholarship in order to emphasize that the state of research on a particular topic or object of study is sparse or outdated or that the methodology isn't satisfactory. This, of course, also applies to Lisa Gotto's major study that has now been made available in English, *Passing and Posing between Black and White: Calibrating the Color Line in U.S. Cinema*. But it doesn't capture the core character or the meaning of this work. Because at its core, it concerns the fact that the foundations of our current notions in film studies and cultural theory must be laid even deeper. There is already a plethora of studies on racism in film, transgressions of racial boundaries, and postcolonialism. But, at least for film studies, it is innovative for a study to raise not only thematic or moral but also and above all structural and epistemological questions about such a subject. This is exactly what concerns us here.

The focus of this book is not simply a study of the encoding and articulation of racial boundaries in film, specifically between black and white. Rather, these boundaries are examined in instances in which they are challenged by figures who obscure them. These figures, in the first instance, are understood as intradiegetic characters in the sense of *dramatis personae* – such as it pertains to, for example, the figure of the mulatto in Hollywood film – as well as, and this is the most notable, unusual, as aesthetic figures of the film's diegesis itself and in particular of cinematographic imaging – such as it applies to editing processes and camera work. Furthermore, such figures also extend to sociological and epistemological figurations, such as power and knowledge relations. Finally, this also always concerns figures of concept, perception, and thought.

The dissolution of boundaries thus appears not as a postmodernist theorem, but as a process and practice that has always been effective in U.S. American filmmaking. However, crucial to the heft of this study is the fact

that “blurring of boundaries” and “crossing borders” do not simply mean ending up in a desirable and politically correct state. Lisa Gotto is not interested in making a grand utopian gesture, like proclaiming an all-embracing nomadism, but rather in what she calls the “costs of blurring boundaries,” in the pain, the defeat, the downfall that is levied as a price for crossing borders at the margins of systems based on difference, a price that again and again has to be paid by only a few. The fact that discrimination and forms of violence primarily dominate in the context of racial difference does not mean that the attempts at abolishing them create fewer burdens and distribute them more equitably. This position saves Gotto from an all-too-simple taking of sides and typically untenable binary view of things as “good” or “bad.”

The films that are examined here bear eloquent witness to these complexities, to loss and pain, as well as to commixture and amalgamation. This begins with D.W. Griffith's *BIRTH OF A NATION* (USA 1915). Rarely have syntactic and symbolic forms, aesthetic and ideological features been so densely overlapped and so tightly welded together than in this film. The renowned system of Griffithian editing and framing, which can be interpreted as a binary schema of exclusion, is played out candidly in *BIRTH OF A NATION* as a system of racial difference and racist discrimination. In Griffith, the crossing of boundaries, as practiced by race mixing and borne by the figure of the mulatto, is literally exterminated, faded out in the end, made impossible as a constant threat to the basic binary schema of black and white. Insofar as *BIRTH OF A NATION* obligatorily carries out the formatting of the Hollywood-type narrative film on a massive scale, it can be said – without, in any case, being the last word on it – that U.S. American narrative cinema is rooted in racial discrimination. Instead of deducing a moral devaluation from this, Gotto's study consistently questions the costs of symbolic order and the types of currency in which these are levied, and the costs of the empirical persons who are asked to pay them. This constitutes the political position that is at the basis of this work.

Gotto finds the antidote to Griffith in Oscar Micheaux's film *THE SYMBOL OF THE UNCONQUERED* (USA 1920). She situates this film first within black minority cinema, so-called “all black movies”, which were made by all-black crews and marketed to black audiences. Micheaux also deals with a failing mixed existence beyond the schemata of black and white, and he also portrays the activities of the Ku Klux Klan, albeit from the perspective of black characters who are being persecuted. The confrontation ends also well, only with an inverted omen: the Klan is defeated. Micheaux even uses certain methods of narration, like cross-cutting and the “last-minute rescue,” that are faithful

to the standard set by Griffith. Nevertheless, the inverse formula is not the only thing that separates the two films. Unlike Griffith, Micheaux doesn't address biology – that is, sexual union – as the decisive variable of transference between the races but economy, that is, the economic advancement of the black man. And, unlike Griffith, Micheaux employs diverse genre and narrative figurations whose subcomponents he combines. All of this takes place in an asymmetrical, shaky film style, a practice of incongruence that uses what is available – namely, the hegemonic system of forms à la Griffith – as well as appropriates it for its own purposes. As a result, something like a crossing of boundaries at the margins of the film's system of symbols becomes discernible in Micheaux's style.

In Douglas Sirk's *IMITATION OF LIFE* (USA 1959), Gotto sees quite a different approach from that of classical films. This film as well deals with the failure of a racial crossover. But this failure is captured in forms that no longer draw on an ostensibly natural or naturalizing essentialism that presupposes the black/white difference as one based on biology and endowed by nature. Sirk's language of forms no longer understands itself to be a mere reenactment of a fixed schema present in the social and historical world outside of itself. On the contrary, Sirk emphasizes the stylization and aestheticization of – and shows the artificiality and fabricated nature of – his world of forms and figures. Of particular note here are the elements of coloration and framing. Following the analysis presented here, in Sirk, film is not the imitation of life; it is also certainly not the inverse, that is, something that predetermines or acts as a model for life. In Sirk, when "passing" fails yet again, his stylization of this failure remains as a kind of aesthetic result. Once again, as previously seen in Griffith, what counts is that whatever the characters in the film suffer, the film itself gains as profit; with the major difference that, in the process, Sirk argues not logically and ontologically but aesthetically. Perhaps this is even hinting at a perspective that believes in reconciliation through aesthetics.

John Cassavetes' contemporaneous film *SHADOWS* (USA 1959), although having already been thoroughly interpreted by film theorists, is surprisingly rarely interpreted in the context of racial difference. Here, Gotto's study in fact fills a gap. In doing so, it sets up Cassavetes as a counterpoint to Sirk. It focuses neither on the inclusion of crossing racial boundaries in the film's world of forms, its pictorial stylization, nor on its failure and decline, but on the almost documentary exploration of the objects of racial differentiation, namely the body, their relations to each other, their possibilities and articulations.

The demands of coherency are so diminished that the obligatory foundations of narrative cinema collapse underfoot. The cinema of Cassavetes therefore attempts to return to a state prior to the conventions of Griffith's schematic representation.

The analysis is rounded out by looking at two films at the turn of the millennium. Spike Lee's *BAMBOOZLED* (USA 2000) introduces a new essential feature into the discussion of blurring racial boundaries, that is, the interrogation of the cultural-historical framework within which cinema is able to dig into a transformation of racial antagonism – and its transgression. In doing so, with the minstrel show, Lee brings to light a disturbing entanglement of symbolic order and physical violence. The formal basic elements of the minstrel show are not only deeply rooted in various developments of Western culture, but in a narrower, literal sense, they are even patterned piece-by-piece on the ritual of lynching. Thus, even here, there is a delayed reaction to the simple filmic racism of Griffith; just as the theme of the mask also points to the use of the mask in Cassavetes. The reference point of a racist culture, therefore, is death. Behind the mere differentiation constantly looms a mortal threat which those who are discriminated against can only accept and assimilate into death rituals such as masking and dancing. Consequently, Lee makes transgressing boundaries fail once again, however, he orchestrates this failure as a downfall in an explosion of violence that he simultaneously exposes as a cinematic staging pattern. The highlight of the film, however, lies not in the sheer explosion of violence but rather in how it reflects on movement. Repetition and recurrence of movement on the one hand, and its incessant running in the background on the other hand, are considerably exhibited by Lee and thereby accentuated as the two decisive characteristics of how cinema conceives of movement. A continual running time and its unending repeatability and reproductivity are superimposed like a second layer onto the narrative.

Robert Benton's film adaptation of Philip Roth's *THE HUMAN STAIN* (USA 2003) orbits around the topic of white and whiteness. Here is where Gotto's study most obviously departs from analyzing characters and subject matter. It ultimately turns decisively in a media-critical direction. Along with Richard Dyer, Gotto adheres to the unique connection between photographic media and brightness and whiteness; to white as the standard form of light and as the "neutral position" of lighting. She clearly shows that Benton's film strives for a type of grammar and aesthetic of filmic whiteness beyond all diegesis. This is, at the same time, the film's return to the basic qualities of light and visibility that make it possible in the first place. Nevertheless, this does

not amount to a writing off of photographic media as products essentially saturated with racism. The problem is of course not the photochemical light sensitivity of the material, rather, it arises first from the operation of clear-cut distinction (to paraphrase Karen Barad, it is our cuts that make our epistemic objects and, beyond that, ourselves), and second from the metaphorical ascriptions of epistemic and moral values to black and white, or even of ontological features like nothingness and allness.

Therefore, the costs of blurring boundaries, which Gotto addresses at the outset, seem to regress to the medium that levies them. The black/white contrast, to whose formation film has contributed so much, cannot simply be resolved or subjected to a clever deconstruction or a self-annulment. But by attempting to understand and analyze itself and its racist entanglements, film can in any case contribute to visualizing the costs and limits of blurring boundaries.

The six films discussed do not, however, simply make up a corpus of six different, complementary attempts at the articulation and formation of the problem of overcoming racial boundaries. Rather, they attest to the fact that the cinematic modeling of racial contrast, by means of its exceedance in the three historical sections that the study lays out, follows various self-conceptions of the medium of film. Thus, the first section from 1915 to 1920 concerns the self-assertion and implementation of film as a discursive system of symbols with a clear orientation toward narrative conventions. The development of a fixed canon of differentiation in the form of codified shot sizes, editing rhythms, and image details, is the prerequisite for the hegemony that film would exercise as a cultural form in its classical phase. Whatever does not fit in here must be excluded. On the contrary, the second section, the phase of film's modernization around 1960, concerns the differentiation between film's referentiality to itself and to things outside of itself. Modern film acknowledges that whatever it reflects is placed in relation to itself as a medium and reflected in this way. Thus, modern film does not simply depict situations – or the illusion of them – but all the while depicts its own relation to these situations. Following Jean-Louis Comolli, modern film can be seen as an observation not of reality but of reality-becoming-film. Finally, the film of the turn of the millennium, by that time itself having become a minority and sometimes precarious cultural practice, at least one among many others, negotiates its own development and fabrication as a cultural product; and, at the same time, together with its narratives and problems, it questions the epistemological, semiotic, and also technical presuppositions upon which it

rests itself. Specifically, this becomes clear in the examples analyzed via the basic category of movement in Lee – here, the close connection between the body mechanics of tap dancing and that of image transport in the film apparatus – and the basic category of light in Benton – here, in particular, in the composition of white as the color of light that in itself is not visible.

In this way, Gotto's path of investigation simultaneously and impressively illustrates the path from traditional film studies, which deals with concepts of character psychology, motif analysis, and forms of representation and style, to a conception in the direction of media studies, which reveals the very media concepts of film. However, this thread of argumentation does not just run parallel to the so-called "contentual" or "ideology-critical" that concerns itself with how racism is formatted in film. Both approaches are also not interwoven, as in a neat form-content debate, but they consistently prove themselves to be aspects of one and the same line of argument, which, again for that very reason, is one of media politics in the narrowest sense.

In any case, the following study throws the doors wide open to further considerations. It is not only furnished with an outstanding film studies encyclopedia and methodology, it has also crossed the line toward a film studies that articulates itself in terms of media theory, which reaches far beyond the typical, purely content-oriented discourse, in which the "portrayal of a theme in the film" is typically addressed. It has opened many a great chasm in its comprehensive cultural-historical investigations and its readings of the individual aspects of its subject, and it has found deep, racist foundations in seemingly innocent contexts. What begins as a question about the representation of the mulatto in film, in the end thoughtfully reflects on film – and even then not only on film but on writing and, from a broader perspective, on the shaping of the world in general – as a unity of its possibilities on the one hand and as a structure of the conditions that it imposes and to which it itself nevertheless remains subjected on the other hand. On these terms, Lisa Gotto has revealed racism in a unique, intelligent, and simultaneously disturbing way. Whether from here – and even if it is highly unlikely – a passage into the freedom of the possible, of a *tabula rasa*, or – to use an expression from Spencer Brown – of an "unmarked space" is conceivable, and what the price would be for such a thing, is something even she must leave open-ended at the moment.

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 visibility 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 visibility, 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.

THE BIRTH OF A NATION (David Wark Griffith, USA 1915)

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

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

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

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

The NAACP's protests as well as the president's intervention, however, were not the only political reactions that *THE BIRTH OF A NATION* elicited. Alongside regional premieres, the Ku Klux Klan, having been unmistakably glorified in the film, organized massive parades and ritual celebrations which were often accompanied by violent attacks.⁴ In the subsequent years, *THE BIRTH OF A NATION* was used at Ku Klux Klan rallies as an effective recruitment tool.⁵ In the process, the film unfolded a potential for political impact that sustainably dynamized the racist activities of the Ku Klux Klan: "*Birth's* romantic depiction and glorification of the Ku Klux Klan most certainly contributed to the public's tolerance of Klan criminality and its expansion to its greatest membership ever, about 5 million, by 1924."⁶ Although the NAACP's protests – in which many well-known intellectuals participated⁷ – were not able to hinder the film's extraordinary popularity and dissemination, their campaigns were not ineffective. As a reaction to the controversial discussions

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

One vital element of Griffith's portrayal of history is the repeated use of historical facsimiles that function as a filmic strategy to prove authenticity.¹¹ However, it should not be forgotten that Griffith closely interweaves the depiction of the American Civil War with melodramatic genre formulas. THE BIRTH OF A NATION is not just concerned with the most accurate presentation of historical events possible, even if that is the claim of the film itself. Rather, what is pivotal for the film's effectiveness is the fact that the historical

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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



Figure 1: Silas Lynch and Lydia Brown

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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



Figure 2: *Flora and Gus*

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

21 Doane, *Femmes Fatales*, 222.

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

23 Guerrero, *Framing Blackness*, 12.

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

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

24 Doane, *Femmes Fatales*, 229.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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



Figure 3: Elsie's Rescue

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

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



Figure 4: *The Parade of the Ku Klux Klan*

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

"I think that the much more insidious suppression accomplished by the film is not a missing scene of castration²⁸ but the systematic and much more 'natural'-seeming disappearance of blacks over the course of the film. Griffith's film achieves its power to the extent that it does not appear to be an exhortation to race hatred, but a natural process of heroic rescue that, in the process, just 'happens' to wash the screen 'clean.'²⁹

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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



Figure 5: *The White Ideal*

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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