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# Celluloid Blackness

Race, Modernity, and the Conflicted Roots of  
American Cinema (1915-1939)

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Colby College



## **For Joann**

### **Acknowledgments**

First of all, I want to thank my mother and father. My mother, who raised me with love and taught me what to read and how to write, has given more than I could ever say. My father has left me with a passion for history and a desire to tell good stories. I would also like to thank David Lubin, my friend and mentor in Rome, London, and Uncle Arthur's basement, who taught me to gaze at everything. Finally, I would like to thank my miraculous advisor Margaret McFadden, a kind, patient, and dedicated individual, without whom this study could never have been made. Thank you all.

## Introduction: "The Problem of the Twentieth Century"

In a full page interview in the *New York Times* on May 29, 1912, the Swiss psychiatrist Dr. Carl G. Jung told the American people, "It seems to me that you are about to discover yourselves. You have discovered everything else- all the land of this continent; all the resources, all the hidden things of nature."<sup>1</sup> Jung used the interview to address the American people, at a moment which he somehow recognized as crucial in the development of human civilization. America, the "tragic" country which he struggled to comprehend, would soon become the harbinger of the modern era.<sup>2</sup> In a city unlike any other, Jung was addressing a country, and a world, on the cusp of a new age.

The two decades following Jung's interview saw some of the most rapid and dramatic changes in the history of mankind. America gave birth to all the elements of the modern world: the mass-produced automobile, the airplane, the skyscraper, chain stores, mass communication, practically all the things that define our lives to this day. But beyond this material transformation, Jung recognized a change in the culture's conception of itself. Most importantly the self discovery that Jung referred to was inextricably tied to America's racial dynamics:

In America the Indians do not influence you now; they have fallen back before your power, and they are very few. They influenced your ancestors. You, today, are influenced by the Negro race, which not so long ago had to call you master. In the North the Negro's present

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<sup>1</sup>Carl Jung, "American Faces its Most Tragic Moment," *New York Times*, 12 May 1912, Magazine Section, 2.

<sup>2</sup>*Ibid*, 3.

influence is not great. In the South, where they are not given opportunities equal to white race, their influence is very great. They are really in control. I notice that your Southerners speak with the Negro accent; your women are coming to walk more and more like the Negro... The Southerners treat one another very courteously, but they treat the Negro as they would treat their own unconscious mind if they knew what was in it. When I see a man in a savage rage with something outside himself, I know that he is, in reality, wanting to be savage toward his own unconscious self.<sup>3</sup>

In the two decades following the interview, the influence that Jung discussed would rise to the forefront of American culture. Jung maintained in 1912 that the importance of African Americans in the North was not yet substantial, but, as I will elucidate in this study of popular cinema, the presence of blacks in the North during the decades of the 1920's and 1930's became essential to the way in which white Northerners understood their own cultural existence.

In 1910 roughly 90% of the black population still lived in the states of the old Confederacy. By 1920, with the Great War over, more than 454,000 blacks had migrated to the North. During the boom years of the 1920s these numbers expanded exponentially by an additional 749,000 migrants. The depression years of the 1930s saw 400,000 more black migrants.<sup>4</sup> The massive demographic change of these years represented the beginning of the most dramatic mass migration of any ethnic or racial group in American history.<sup>5</sup> This movement from the rural South to the urban North would continue for much of the twentieth century, coming to an end in the early 1970s.<sup>6</sup> But the migration registered its greatest cultural impact during the decades of 1920s and 1930s. It was a time when many white Americans were confronted for

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<sup>3</sup>Ibid, 2.

<sup>4</sup>Susan Ware, *Holding Their Own* (Boston: Twain Publishers, 1982), 12.

<sup>5</sup>Ann Douglas, *Terrible Honesty: Mongrel Manhattan in the 1920s* (NY: Farrar, Straus, Giroux), 73.

<sup>6</sup>Nicholas Lemann, *The Promised Land* (NY: David McKay Co., 1992), 15.

the first time with a powerful new presence in their lives, one which called into question their own behavior and attitudes.

The great African American migration coincided with several dramatic developments in social thought in America and Europe. By the early 1920s the revolutionary theories of the Austrian psychoanalyst Sigmund Freud were widely disseminated amongst culturally literate Americans, and by the late 1930s his ideas had fully penetrated the mainstream of American life.<sup>7</sup> More than any other nation, America embraced the thinking of Sigmund Freud as wholesale commodity. His description of the unconscious mind as a "primitive" id cloaked behind a repressive facade of the conscious world resonated with white intellectuals. In the Freudian model the id was the source of instinctual impulses, while the ego, the controlling part of the psyche, was most in touch with external reality, and the super ego was the part of the psyche formed through the internalization of the moral standards of parents and society. Freud believed that the ego and the super ego were locked in a tragic struggle with the freedom of the id. The most important result of Freud's entrance into American thought is that sexuality came to be viewed as the central and driving force of the human experience, whereas before American intellectuals had been most concerned with codes of social comportment. His theories outlined a clear passage from the prudish morality of the Victorian era into the seemingly emotional and sexual honesty of the Modern era.

But it was not only intellectuals who felt the influence of Freud. Popular culture exalted Freudian concepts as part of a new philosophy of sexual freedom. Passing over the more subtle and complex aspects of his work, magazines, movies, popular drama, and radio all embraced Freud's

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<sup>7</sup>Douglas, 123.

notions of female repression, family sexual drama, and conflicted civilization.<sup>8</sup> *Good Housekeeping* told its white readers that the sex instinct "seeks every kind of sensory gratification... If it gets its yearning it is as contented as nursing infant. If it does not, beware! It will never be stopped except with satisfactions."<sup>9</sup> Americans became remarkably introspective, examining their own feelings and emotions, determining to heal their self-inflicted wounds and free themselves from the chains of the ego and the super-ego. More than anything, white Americans were looking for an alternative self.

The dynamic quality of America's racial landscape was ripe for Freudian interpretation. White Northerners, frustrated by the repressive rhythms of industrial life and the strict codes of Victorian behavior, latched on to the growing black presence in their midst as an visceral embodiment of Freud's id. The racially ambiguous writer Jean Toomer described this white vision of blackness as "symbolic of the subconscious penetration of the conscious mind."<sup>10</sup> The dominant culture began to envy the psychological freedom of black life. Blacks were thought to be more in touch with their true selves, more removed from the repressive constraints of civilization.

This white attraction to black culture played itself out most notably in New York City. By 1930 one in nine people in Manhattan was African American. A vast majority of these blacks lived in Harlem, which by the end of the 1920s had become almost exclusively African American. Harlem blossomed in a full scale renaissance of art, music, and literature during the decade. Although few white people lived in Harlem, many of New York's

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<sup>8</sup>John D'Emilio and Estelle Freedman, *Intimate Matters: A History of Sexuality in America* (NY: Harper and Row, 1988), 225.

<sup>9</sup>Ibid, 225-226.

<sup>10</sup>Douglas, 115.

most important white citizens hovered on the periphery of the district and obsessed over its creations. Prominent socialites like Carl Van Vechten made careers out of promoting, imitating, and exploiting Negro art and lifestyle.<sup>11</sup>

Many white New Yorkers went "slumming" in Harlem by immersing themselves in black night life. Slumming was an escapist fantasy, which was constructed and exaggerated to meet the emotional yearning of white patrons. Whites thought of slumming as a temporary binge of debauchery. In a certain sense, white people went into Harlem in search of an innocence which had been lost in the offices, classrooms, and factories of their world. They were trying to go back to a childhood moment, before the onrush of financial concern and moral obligation. One white devotee of black culture wrote, "It is ... the feeling for life which is the secret of the art of the Negro people, as surely as it is the lack of it, the slow atrophy of the capacity to live emotionally, which will be the ultimate decadence of the white people."<sup>12</sup>

This attraction to blackness coincided and, in many ways, connected with another, seemingly opposite, social outlook on black culture. The Negro migration also triggered a deep fear and anxiety in white society. The years during and after the Great War saw some of the worst racial violence in the nation's history. Full scale race riots, which involved mostly white on black violence, touched off in major cities across America. Some of the most vicious riots took place in the summer of 1919, as angry whites turned on African Americans as scapegoats for the economic hard times following the war. Blacks were an even more obvious target than communists as the "Red Scare" swept the nation. In 1917, the worst riot in American history took

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<sup>11</sup>David Lewis, *When Harlem was in Vogue* (NY: Alfred A. Knopf, 1981), 98.

<sup>12</sup>Ethel Mannin, *Confessions and Impressions* (NY: Doubleday, 1930), 157.

place in East St. Louis, leaving nearly two hundred blacks dead and six thousand without homes.<sup>13</sup>

The years following the Great War also saw the reactionary emergence of a revitalized Ku Klux Klan led by William J. Simmons. The dramatic social changes of the period made the Klan's call for traditional American values and racial solidarity appealing to many white Americans. During the decade of the 1920s the Klan gathered millions of recruits and reached new heights of political power.<sup>14</sup>

During this period, a number of Social Darwinist theories gained wide circulation through a series of popular studies, such as Grant Madison's *The Passing of the Great Race* (1915), Lathrop Stoddard's *The Rising Tide of Color* (1920), and Maurice Muret's *The Twilight of the White Races* (1925).<sup>15</sup> These texts capitalized on fears that the white race would soon be over-run by "inferior" but rapidly growing darker races. Tom Buchanan, the careless aristocrat in F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* (1925) is a big fan of these books of racial apocalypse: "Civilization's going to pieces. I've gotten to be a terrible pessimist about things... The idea (of the books) is if we don't look out the white race will be— will be utterly submerged. It's all scientific stuff; it's been proved."<sup>16</sup>

One of the most important cultural developments of this time period was the emergence of Hollywood cinema as both an art form and the most popular means of entertainment in America. It is not surprising that when Tom Buchanan drives Gatsby's car into New York City on a hot summer day, the first place he wants to go is the movies. By the end of the 1920's three out

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<sup>13</sup>Lewis, 9.

<sup>14</sup>David Chalmers, *Hooded Americanism: The History of the Ku Klux Klan* (NY: New Viewpoints, 1976), 33.

<sup>15</sup>Douglas, 49.

<sup>16</sup>F. Scott Fitzgerald, *The Great Gatsby* (NY: Scribner, 1925), 14.

of four Americans went to the movies at least once a week.<sup>17</sup> Americans came to love and understand cinema as a public window on their shared values and desires. The movie theater was a valuable space in the modern world; it was place where one could see without being seen, where one could exist in a crowd without being hustled or confused. Going to the movies was both a collective and a private experience. Unlike European cinema, Hollywood rarely strove to challenge the audience with harsh realism or radical politics. Instead, Hollywood gave them what they wanted. MGM founder Samuel Goldwyn's famous motto became the eternal doctrine of American film: "The public is never wrong."<sup>18</sup>

This is not to say that Hollywood film could not be progressive or conservative, but rather that its politics were carefully encoded into seemingly non-political narratives. The ideological messages were seldom exclusive or didactic, in fact polysemy was essential to a film's success, but almost always there was a dominant message, which invariably had some political meaning.

Given this formula of indirect politics, it is ironic that the seminal moment in Hollywood's nativity was a harsh and divisive film of racial politics. David Wark Griffith's *Birth of a Nation* (1915) was one of the most important films ever made. For the first time a film unified all the elements of the cinematic alphabet: cross-cutting, the close-up, the tracking shot, the fadeout, effect lighting, and virtually every other visual and narrative technique that is used by Hollywood to this day. By synthesizing the full range of cinematic methods, which heretofore had been had been applied haphazardly and without conceptual organization, Griffith in effect created a

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<sup>17</sup>Douglas, 20.

<sup>18</sup>Ibid, 189.



new form of narrative art. Letters were combined into words, words were arranged into sentences, and suddenly a new visual language was born. The film critic James Agee wrote, "To watch his work is like being witness to the beginning of melody, or the first conscious use of the lever or the wheel; the emergence, coordination, and first eloquence of language; the birth of an art: and to realize that this is all the work of one man."<sup>19</sup>

Indeed, the film style which Griffith invented was in many ways the perfect art form for the modern world. Perhaps the largest achievement of *The Birth of a Nation* was its ability to find meaning for the individual within the context of the mass. The film allowed the audience to conceive of time and space in ways that other narrative forms (drama, literature) had never achieved. For example, in one scene we are shown the huddled and static image of a mother and child on a grassy bluff, which is intercut with the swarming mass of an advancing army. These two elements are at first juxtaposed against each other with direct cuts, until finally the camera moves across grassy bluff with the mother and child and reveals the teeming army in the valley below. With this sequence the audience learns to appreciate the simultaneity of events and the inherent connection of the individual (even in the domestic realm) with the public mass. The technical concept of cross-cutting is inseparable from the message it is employed to convey, and as we will see, this marriage of artistic technique and social ideology is even more pronounced in the context of the film's racial agenda. More than anything, editing is the single element which separates film as a distinct art form. And the editing which Griffith developed offered an appealing lesson in modern existence that resonated most powerfully with urban Northerners, whose frantic lives called for a new understanding of the self in society.

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<sup>19</sup>James Agee, *Agee on Film* (Boston: Twain Publishers, 1958), 313.

*The Birth of a Nation* was the first genuine motion picture event. The film was received as form of middle class entertainment. For the first time, people bought two dollar tickets and sat in respectable theaters, which had been booked exclusively for the event. Before *The Birth of a Nation*, movies were lowbrow spectacles, which were seen in nickelodeons or crowded storefront establishments. Griffith's film brought motion pictures into the popular mainstream. It cost more money than any other film to make, but it became so popular with the general public that the investment was returned many times.

The plot of *The Birth of a Nation* comes from Thomas Dixon's reactionary novel *The Clansman*. The epic story involves two families, the Stoneman family of Pennsylvania and the Cameron Family of South Carolina. The film tracks their parallel connection to the events before, during, and after the American Civil War. The nearly three-hour narrative traces the transformation of the southern white culture from an idealized antebellum utopia, through the agony and tyranny of reconstruction, and finally to the restoration of white supremacy realized by the heroic ride of the Ku Klux Klan. Austin Stoneman is a deficient northern senator, whose "weakness" for his mulatto housekeeper leads him to institute a dangerous policy of reconstruction in the defeated South, which places whites "under the heel of the Black South."

Stoneman selects a mulatto man named Silas Lynch as the symbolic leader of the new program. Lynch will later betray Stoneman by unleashing sexual anarchy and violent disorder, and by forcing marriage on Stoneman's daughter Elsie. Elsie's true love is the surviving son of the southern family Ben Cameron, the heroic "little colonel." After Ben's little sister is forced to throw her self off a cliff in order to escape the sexual advances of Gus, a black

"renegade" rapist, Ben organizes a cavalry of hooded Klansmen to avenge the southern women and restore political and sexual order. Gus is hunted down and executed, the white family is rescued from angry black hordes, and finally Ben and Elsie resolve their differences and realize their true love. The North and South is symbolically reunited under the banner of racial solidarity as the Cameron family join a northern family in log cabin to fend off the chaotic blacks. In the end the old order is restored as the black rule is dismantled and cross-regional white supremacy is reestablished.

Film critics have long sought to separate the artistic endeavors of *The Birth of a Nation* from its reactionary and racist political content.<sup>20</sup> This is a mistake. The film can not be understood from a technical and artistic perspective, without an understanding of the ideology which the cinematic techniques are employed to convey. The form and content are inextricably wedded to each other and it is naive to try to separate them. Griffith chose the title of his film out of a belief that the true beginning of the national existence was the reactionary dismantling of radical reconstruction in the South. When asked why he used the title *The Birth of a Nation*, he responded, "Because it is. . . the real nation has only existed in the last fifteen or twenty years. . . The birth of a nation began with the Ku Klux Klans, and we have shown that."<sup>21</sup> But there was also a second meaning to Griffith's title, because on a certain level the film itself was intended and received as a kind of national birth. The film was released in 1915, on the fiftieth anniversary of the end of the Civil War. As the primary struggle of the Civil War was to arrive at a new understanding of race in American society at the

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<sup>20</sup>Michael Rogin, "The Sword Became a Flashing Vision..", *Ronald Reagan, The Movie: and Other Episodes in Political Demonology* (Berkeley: The University of California, 1987), 189.

<sup>21</sup>Ibid, 192.

end of its first century of existence, so too did Griffith offer race as the central issue of society, fifty years later, at the beginning of the modern era.

*The Birth of a Nation* is essentially a white man's journey into blackness. In other words, the film is a descent through the primal realms of the director's own imagination. Griffith constructed an adventurous and dangerous world of chaos, which his white protagonists are forced to confront, and in some ways appropriate, before they can finally conquer. Griffith wanted the film to be a kind of rite of passage for the white race. The social order can not be restored until we have seen the whites themselves as emotionally threadbare, responding impulsively, descending to carnal violence.

Let us consider the scene in which the burly white workman goes into the black saloon in search of the renegade Gus. First the heroic figure confronts a large muscular black man. The two men stand chest to chest, staring each other down, posturing in a visceral confrontation. Then suddenly they are at each other, pouncing and flailing, like two embattled animals. The entire saloon erupts into a vicious fray with the intruding stranger as tables and bottles fly through the air. The white man has stepped out of himself. He is not constrained by decorum or rules. This fight has no rules. The white man physically overcomes his assailants one by one. His shirt is ripped off, and his bare chest is revealed. Finally the defeated black men lie broken on the floor, and the triumphant white man grabs the fugitive and hauls him out of the dark saloon into the light. Suddenly the heroic figure is struck down by a pistol shot in the back, like some feral lightning blast from the dark saloon.

Like the Greek hero Orpheus he has descended into Hades to reclaim a woman's virtue, and like Orpheus he is struck down on the brink of success.

He is punished for his lack of self control, defeated by the blackness he has allowed himself to inhabit. Perhaps a modern comparison is appropriate. In William Faulkner's *Absalom, Absalom!* (1936) Thomas Sutpen and his white companions are drawn to the vicious slave fights in his dimly lit barn: "The white faces on three sides, the black ones on the fourth, and in the center two of his wild negroes fighting, naked, fighting not as white men fight, with rules and weapons, but as negroes fight to hurt one another quick and bad." This is the world that Griffith's burly workman is destroyed by. Faulkner's Sutpen, like the nameless white man in Griffith's film, pays a price for allowing himself to surrender to blackness. One night Sutpen's wife Ellen discovers her husband locked in one of the bloody struggles in the barn: "Ellen seeing not the two black beasts she had expected to see but instead a white one and a black one, both naked to the waist and gouging at one another's eyes as if they should not only have been the same color, but should have been covered in fur too."<sup>22</sup> After Ellen learns that her husband has brought along their two young children as voyeurs, she vows never to forgive him.

That same Dionysian instinct that led Sutpen to bring his children to the barn that night, which he tells his wife she will "never understand," lies just beneath the surface throughout Griffith's film.<sup>23</sup> The censors cut out many revealing scenes in *The Birth of a Nation*, but none more so than the ritualistic castration and execution of Gus. According to contemporary critics, Griffith employed some of his most striking editing and composition in this scene. After the Klan declares Gus guilty, the punishment is portrayed by synchronized cuts between a hooded Klansman thrusting with a small sword

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<sup>22</sup>William Faulkner, *Absalom, Absalom!* (NY: Random House, 1936), 29-30.

<sup>23</sup>*Ibid.*, 30.

and the bloody agonized countenance of Gus, all to the rhythm of the storm sequence from Beethoven's *Pastoral Symphony*. Once again the technical treatment of the scene is bound up inextricably with the racial message. Here is the description by one critic: "In flash-cuts, the Klansman's hand now plunges and rises, plunges and rises, again, again, and still again, on each down-beat of the timpani, all within a few frames of film. On the final thunder-crash of the series, there is a final flash of the castrated Negro's pain-racked face and body. Gus is dead."<sup>24</sup> No wonder the censors were disturbed. This a terrifying sequence which takes us deep into the shadowy domain of the director's imagination. One can not help recall Jung's words to the American people: "When I see a man in a savage rage with something outside himself, I know that he is in reality, wanting to be savage toward his own unconscious self."<sup>25</sup>

Many Northern critics of lynching recognized a parallel loss of control displayed by both the white mobs and the black rapists they sought to punish. Ray Stannard Baker published an article in 1905, which maintained:

Nothing more surely tends to bring the white man down to the lowest level of the criminal negro than yielding to those blind instincts of savagery which find expression in the mob. The man who joins a mob, by his very acts, puts himself on a level with the negro criminal: both have given way to brute passion. For if civilization means anything, it means self restraint; casting away self-restraint the white man becomes as savage as the negro.<sup>26</sup>

But this loss of control is the very thing that intrigues Griffith. Like many white artists of the Modern Era, Griffith tries, probably unconsciously, to transform the dominant society's conception of civilization. Life in the

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<sup>24</sup>Rogin, 218.

<sup>25</sup>Jung, 2.

<sup>26</sup>Gail Bederman, *Manliness & Civilization: A Cultural History of Gender and Race in the United States, 1880-1917* (Chicago: The University of Chicago, 1995), 52.

modern world would be infused by manly passion, ferocious and unrestrained by Victorian etiquette. Gail Bederman suggests that white men, by obsessing over the chaotic black male, were "investigating new visions of what 'masculinity' might be, unfettered by civilization."<sup>27</sup> Griffith expresses this repressed desire through flashes of violent fantasy, while on the surface the ideology of his film upholds the old standards of civilization and order.

When Griffith was casting the film, he had initially planned to use the voluptuous Blanche Sweet in the role of Elsie Stoneman. However, early in the production, while he was filming the scene in which Elsie is forcibly abducted by Lynch, Griffith decided that Sweet's presence was not vulnerable enough; he wanted the juxtaposition of black on white to be sordid and extreme. He decided to try the childlike Lillian Gish as Elsie. Gish recalls, "I was very blonde and fragile-looking. The contrast with the dark man evidently pleased Mr. Griffith, for he said in front of everyone, 'Maybe she would be more effective than the mature figure I had in mind.'"<sup>28</sup>

Griffith bestowed great care on Lillian Gish as a cinematic image. Once again, the director's artistic technique is conceived in the service of his racial ideology, as he actually invented new modes of lighting to create a kind of luminous white glow in the person of a southern lady.<sup>29</sup> For an audience sitting in a dark theater the cold white light would literally shine through her. When Ben looks at her miniature portrait, he considers her the "ideal of his dreams," and he is always checking his pocket to make sure she is still there. Griffith wanted her character to be like a fine crystal, balancing tantalizingly close to the edge.

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<sup>27</sup>Ibid, 49.

<sup>28</sup>Lillian Gish, *The Movies, Mr. Griffith, and Me* (NJ: Englewood Cliffs, 1969), 133.

<sup>29</sup>Richard Dyer, "A White Star," *Sight and Sound* 3 (August 1993): 23.

Griffith, like many southern men, loved the idea of the delicate white female, partially because of the of the inherent instability of such a figure. The danger that the black assailant posed to the white woman was something that inevitably appealed to Griffith, despite his narrative attempts (the ride of the Klan and the restoration of the old order) to deny it.

The most obvious example of Griffith's modern fantasy boiling over the confines of his narrative agenda is Gus's execution sequence. At the beginning of the scene the Little Colonel emerges holding a chalice of his sister Flora's blood. He soaks a flag in the blood and the title reads: "Brethren, this flag bears the red stain of the life of a Southern woman, a priceless sacrifice on the altar of an outraged civilization." The censors have left this moment in the film, but because the execution frames have been removed, the bizarre quality of the juxtaposition is lost. Griffith actually wants, perhaps subconsciously, to unite the spilled blood of Flora and Gus within the same ritualistic scene. Griffith is drawn precariously near to the most daunting taboo of the South, the mixture of black and white blood.<sup>30</sup> The director's fantasy has skipped the bounds of his own ideology. Historian Jacquelyn Dowd Hall, describes this cloaked attraction to the black rape of white women:

By setting white women apart as asexual guardians of morality, men could pursue acquisition and expansion secure in the knowledge that they were not abandoning the values of civilization. By projecting onto blacks the animal within, the buried parts of themselves could be objectified and controlled. But this separation from spontaneous emotional life and heterosexual love generated longings, fantasies, and fears that could never be kept altogether at bay. The result was a society prey to visions of violent, immoral possession. The image of black over white, of a world turned upside down, symbolized the ever present danger of the return of the repressed, of a regression to a primitive natural world of sexuality and violence.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>30</sup>Rogin, 221.

<sup>31</sup>Jacquelyn Hall, *Revolt Against Chivalry* (NY: Columbia University Press, 1974), 148.



Griffith is undeniably drawn to the idea of the black rapist. The image of a defenseless child-woman in the grips of a savage black man provides a kind of drunken thrill, a distinct pleasure that is accompanied by a hysterical, uncaring loss of control. It is a kind of orgasmic escape, but later there is guilt and retribution, which is embodied, in Griffith's case, by orderly columns of mounted Klansmen. Indeed, the heroic ride of the Klan is a epic purge, but not of the black threat so much as of the white society's own compunction for allowing its self to surrender to its libidinous fantasies. In the end the Klan is pure. Its ravenous nature has disappeared beneath the fantastic symmetry of the ride.

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Even a film as pointed and didactic as *The Birth of a Nation* is a product of mixed motivations and desires. Racism is an easy thing to recognize and proclaim in our society, but the true test is to find the tortured roots below the surface. The frozen image of Lillian Gish tangled in the arms of a hulking black man amounts to a labyrinth of meaning, which can not be understood through simple explanations.

*The Birth of a Nation* is a monumental moment in American cinema, and its influence on the institution of Hollywood cannot be overestimated. On a certain level, every single American film has to respond to Griffith's technical and thematic vision. Hollywood could never again address race as a national issue without operating in the context of Griffith's ideology. One of the legacies of *The Birth of a Nation* is an American cinema which holds race as a formative mystery. Just as the earliest American literature formed its cultural identity through the white man's relationship with Indians (as seen

in captivity narratives and the novels of James Fenimore Cooper), so too does early American cinema negotiate a new national identity based on the complexities of the African American image in the white imagination.<sup>32</sup>

The purpose of this study is to examine those complexities as seen in a limited number of American films from the 1920s and 1930s, decades which I will argue are most crucial in understanding American culture in the twentieth century. In this paper I hope to move beyond the simplicity of condemnation and stereotype identification. The films which sprung from the legacy of *The Birth of a Nation* represent a dynamic and highly complex racial ideology. It is an ideology which far too often has been misunderstood and oversimplified.

*The first section of my paper will examine the ways in which the popular tradition of blackface minstrelsy was revived and reorganized in early Hollywood musicals, specifically Al Jolson's *The Jazz Singer* (1927) and Eddie Cantor's *Kid Millions* (1934). The second section will focus on King Vidor's *Hallelujah* (1929) as a representative of the all-black musicals that were made at the beginning of Hollywood's sound era. The third section will examine the ways in which inter-racial contact was portrayed during the depression years, specifically in the plantation films of Shirley Temple (*The Littlest Rebel* (1935) and *The Little Colonel* (1935)), and the Kerns and Hammerstein musical *Show Boat* (1936). The fourth and final section will explore the phenomenon of racial coding as seen in the legendary films *King Kong* (1933) and *Gone With the Wind* (1939).*

The one constant that all of these films have is the fundamental conflict of their nature. If we look hard enough we can see the contested field

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<sup>32</sup>Leslie Fielder, *Love and Death in the American Novel* (NY: Stein and Day, 1966), 179.

of the white imagination, that same contradictory dyad of attraction and repulsion, which played itself out across the entire cultural landscape. This paper is dedicated to the study of that introspective struggle for the personal identity of white America.

In 1903 the great black intellectual William DuBois gazed ahead to the vast century before him, and wrote, "The problem of the twentieth century is the problem of the color-line- the relation of the darker to the lighter races of men."<sup>33</sup> If DuBois could have anticipated the emergence of cinema as a central expressive form of the modern world, he would not have been surprised by the things that were projected across the silver screens of America. Because as DuBois understood, "The history of the world is the history not of individuals, but of groups, not of nations but of races, and he who ignores or seeks to override the race idea in human history ignores or overrides the central thought of all history."<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>33</sup>Lewis, 6.

<sup>34</sup>Ibid, 7.

# I

## Blackface

Blackface minstrelsy was the most popular form of public entertainment in nineteenth-century America. This performance ritual, which featured formulaic comedy and musical routines performed by white men masquerading as a variety of black stereotypes, reached the height of its popularity in the tense years (1840's and 1850's) leading up the election of the first Republican administration and the secession of the Confederate states from the union.<sup>1</sup> Minstrelsy was initially a way of managing complex feelings of racial anxiety brought about by the national crises surrounding slavery.

After the Civil War, minstrel shows adapted their formats to meet the expanding range of popular tastes. The shows were always popular in the North, but following the war, the practitioners of minstrelsy had to orient their style to appeal to the vast groups of European immigrants who came to form the working core of Northern cities. The minstrel show had to compete with new forms of working class entertainment: variety shows, musical comedies, "girlie" shows, and even genuine African American performing troupes. By the turn of the century minstrelsy had lost its distinctive identity as a performance genre, as most its characteristic features were appropriated by the diverse framework of the vaudeville circuit.<sup>2</sup> Blackface routines became component parts of a larger variety show format, which spoke to

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<sup>1</sup>Eric Lott, *Love and Theft: Blackface Minstrelsy and the American Working Class* (NY: Oxford University Press, 1993), 9.

<sup>2</sup>Robert Toll, *On With the Show: The Century of Show Business in America* (NY: Oxford University Press, 1976), 105.

many issues facing working-class Americans. The Minstrel show lost its centrality as a genre at a time in the late nineteenth-century, when racial tensions lessened in the minds of white Americans, thanks to the institution of Jim Crow legislation and the dismantling of liberal reconstruction policies.

But even as minstrelsy seemed to be fading as a cultural institution, its enduring legacy in the white imagination remained. The act of whites masquerading as blacks expressed profound desires and social longings, which can not be dismissed as merely a monolithic effort to oppress blacks in America. Minstrel songs like "Oh! Susanna" and "Camptown Races" are deeply imbedded in our collective consciousness to this day. The blackface image shaped the representative imagination of writers, artists, and critics in all strata of American society. Walt Whitman loved minstrel shows because he saw in them a struggle to express a distinctive national character. He called the crude performances "American opera."<sup>3</sup>

The historian Eric Lott, in his book *Love and Theft: Blackface Minstrelsy and the American Working Class*, argues that the minstrel phenomenon was a way for white industrial-age workers to manage their own class anxiety and fear of black competition, while at the same time express a genuine interest in African American culture cloaked behind a facade of grotesque parodies.<sup>4</sup> This duality of purpose and motivation is very similar to the conflicted racial feelings expressed by Hollywood films in the 1920s and 1930s. These films responded to a similar set of racial anxieties as the original ante-bellum blackface shows. Northerners in the years leading up to the Civil War were contemplating an uncertain future, which would entail the end of slavery and the subsequent influx of emancipated slaves. In

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<sup>3</sup>Lott, *Love and Theft...*, 89.

<sup>4</sup>Ibid, 6.

fact, as I have mentioned, the reality of this mass demographic change did not actually come to pass until our crucial years of the twentieth century. As a result, Hollywood, still in its nativity in the 1920s and 1930s, set about to reorganize the blackface tradition with an altered agenda for the modern world. This is not to argue that minstrelsy was responding to an identical set of cultural anxieties at the beginning of the Modern era as it had during the years leading up the Civil War, because clearly these periods were dissimilar in many ways, but rather I merely want to suggest that minstrelsy is a cultural form that has reemerged at specific historical moments in American history when the country's racial dynamics were thrown off balance, and the hierarchies and racial codes of comportment were called into question. The beginning of the Great Migration was one of these times.

When a white man puts on a black mask he is not trying so much to portray or represent black people as he is trying to reconnect with a lost part of himself. Minstrelsy reduced blacks to childlike figures, but it also demonstrated a white desire for that constructed state of innocence. One minstrel performer explained his attraction to blackface: "Born theoretically white, we are permitted to pass our childhood as imaginary Indians, our adolescence as imaginary Negroes, and only then are expected settle down to being what we really are."<sup>5</sup> When blackface appeared in film, the white actors always left a ring of white skin unblackened around their mouth. The audience knew they were looking at a white person in disguise, and the white line around the mouth served as a constant reminder of the internal conflict that was being addressed. The actor's face was literally a portrait of transgression, which expressed the emotional duality of the white audience. The deception of the minstrel disguise was not the principal appeal, because

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<sup>5</sup>Ibid, 53.

the audience never really lost sight of the fact that they were watching the performance of a white man, but rather the main attraction was the image of his white ego in collision with the blackness of his insurgent self.

From the earliest minstrel shows, the audience was a crucial part of the blackface ritual. Urban workers left their rigid world behind when they attended a blackface performance. The shows became notorious for the unruly behavior and violent outbursts of the spectators. The New York Astor Place riot of 1849 was an extreme example. A bloody fray broke out between police and working class audience members, when the Astor Place Opera House replaced its usual minstrel show with high-brow performance of *Macbeth*. The intensity of the violence, which left 22 dead and 150 wounded, was a sign of the nervous state of class relations in America, but it was also a measure of the emotional investment that the audiences gave to the blackface masquerades.<sup>6</sup>

There is an 1833 lithograph engraving of the minstrel T.D. Rice performing his wildly popular "Jump Jim Crow" for an overflow audience in the Bowery Theater in New York City. The audience of the theater has actually become the spectacle. T.D. Rice is standing the center of the stage performing his dance, but the audience is putting on a show of its own. The spectators are fighting and dancing in the aisles. Many people have actually overflowed onto the stage, shattering the boundary between performance and reality. This kind of raucous and ferociously democratic display was highly unusual in the Anglo-Saxon roots of American culture.<sup>7</sup>

This uncontained spirit is one of the things that minstrelsy passed on to vaudeville and eventually to film. The translation of the blackface

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<sup>6</sup>Ibid, 66.

<sup>7</sup>Toll, 83.

tradition into Hollywood was encapsulated by a single film, the Warner Brothers production of *The Jazz Singer* in 1927. Al Jolson's portrayal of a Jewish cantor's son who becomes a blackface vaudevillian sealed his reputation as "The World's Greatest Entertainer" and marked a new chapter in American popular culture.<sup>8</sup> The film is a landmark in Hollywood history as the first feature film to use spoken dialogue. Although the new technique is only used in a few scenes, the tremendous success of *The Jazz Singer* marked the beginning of the end of silent films in America. By employing what was by then a nostalgic blackface image, the film offers a progressive vision of modernity. The new medium of talking film reinvents and reinvigorates the older, dying form of minstrelsy with a whole new set of meanings for the modern world.

*The Jazz Singer* is the story of a young Jewish man named Jackie Rabinowitz, whose love of jazz music provokes the wrath of his orthodox father, and eventually causes him to leave his home to pursue a career in show business. The family break-up is especially hard for Jackie because his love of black jazz music is rivaled only by his intense love for his mother. After he leaves New York he changes his name to the non-ethnic Jack Robin. Eventually, after years away from home, he becomes a successful vaudeville musician, thanks to the help of a beautiful young dancer named Mary Dale. Jack's brilliant stage performances win him the admiration of audiences, and finally he is asked to return to his home town of New York to perform in a "chance of a lifetime" Broadway production. When Jack arrives in the city he goes to visit his parents' home, and while he is proclaiming his unrelenting love for his mother, his father walks into the room and launches into a

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<sup>8</sup>James Fisher, "Rediscovering the Art of Al Jolson: The Films of 'the World's Greatest Entertainer,'" *Popular Music and Society* 17, (fall 1993): 19.



vicious indictment of his son. Jack returns to the theater only to be told, on the eve of the dress rehearsal, that his father has fallen desperately ill and will not be able to perform his duties as cantor for the traditional day of atonement ceremony. Jack is torn between his career in the theater and his religious duty to replace his father as cantor. Finally Jack decides to sing in his father's place and miss the opening night of the Broadway show. When the old cantor hears his son's voice, he dies, presumably with forgiveness in his heart. His father's death allows Jack to resume his jazz singing career without alienating himself from his beloved mother. In the final scene Jack sings the legendary blackface song "My Mammy" to an adoring audience, which includes his mother and his girlfriend Mary.

Jack uses blackness to escape from the homogeneity of his ethnic community into the mass culture of mainstream America. This use of blackface minstrelsy as an Americanizing ritual was nothing new. Many of the nineteenth-century minstrel performers were first or second generation European immigrants. Blackface was a way of displacing their own feeling of otherness, while at the same time locating their desire to assimilate with a distinctly American cultural image.<sup>9</sup> Like Ben Cameron in *The Birth of a Nation*, the ideal of Jack's dreams is a non-ethnic blonde-haired American girl. His journey into blackness is his method of achieving that dream. When he first applies his blackface paint, Mary Dale is hovering over him, encouraging him, and delighting in his appearance. He is able to shed his ethnic identity, and make himself suitable to the Anglo girl, ironically by embracing an image that is the antithesis of whiteness.

Jack's appropriation of blackness also allows him to manage and gain control over what psychologists would describe as an unhealthy relationship

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<sup>9</sup>Lott, *Love and Theft...*, 96.

with his mother. *The Jazz Singer* was released at a time when the Freudian explication of the Oedipal conflict was gaining wide circulation throughout the culture, as seen in popular magazines and plays, as well as the fiction of writers like James Thurber and Sherwood Anderson.<sup>10</sup> The idea of the family romance (a boy's sexual attraction to his mother, and his subsequent hostility towards his father) had by this time gained wide public exposure. As a result, viewers of the film would have found Jack's anguished relationship with his family to be amusing, and perhaps strange, but certainly not surprising.

At the beginning of the film, when Jack is a young boy, he allows his entire presence to be consumed by his mother's strength. After his father whips him for performing "raggy time music" he falls into her protective arms, desperately clinging to her, and weeping against her breast. The only force that can pull him away from her side is his love of black music. He is able to make a clean break from her by running away to pursue a career. The next time we see him he is grown man singing on a stage "3,000 miles away," and he is surrounded by admiring women. His cocksure stage presence is a marked contrast to his weakness in the previous scene. When he calls out to the audience in the first spoken words in Hollywood history, even though he has yet to apply his blackface, it is the voice and dialect of a self assured black man: "Wait a minute, wait a minute! You ain't heard nothing yet!"

When Jack returns to visit his family in New York, he has gained control over his Oedipal complex. His language and mannerisms are overtly sexual, but there is a kind of comic detachment in his words, as if he is not only declaring his love for his mother but also making fun of her: "I'm going to take you to Coney Island. We'll ride the shoot the shoot and the dark mill.

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<sup>10</sup>Ann Douglas, *Terrible Honesty: Mongrel Manhattan in the 1920s* (NY: Farrar, Straus, Giroux), 124.

Ever been on the dark mill? Well with me it's all right. I'll kiss you and hug you, you'll see if I don't." His mother is passive and shy, she can only respond in splintered phrases. Unlike before, Jack is in control now. When he starts to play one of his jazz songs, she is speechless in the face of his music.

In the middle of Jack's performance of "Blue Skies," his father appears in the background and suddenly drives a stake into the film with one word: "STOP!" Immediately we are yanked back into the orbit of silent pictures, away from the lively world of black music and sound production. The father's voice is the dull and emotionally vacant sound of European civilization. It is the voice of the past. Jack has escaped from this world, by allowing his existence to be infused by black culture. His father's face is cold and expressionless. We are told, "For those whose faces are turned toward the past the years roll by unheeded, their lives unchanged." When his father celebrates his birthday, everyone gives him the same gift (a white prayer shawl), because he has no variety in his life, and none of his acquaintances could think of anything better to give him. Jack, on the other hand, is alive, and his world is constantly evolving. But as we learn when the father brings an end to "Blue Skies," Jack's world of modernity can not exist while the old world is still able to impose itself. The old order (silent film/ traditional whiteness) must give way to modernity (talking pictures/ appropriated blackness). The two kingdoms can not coexist. Jack, like Oedipus, must kill his father. And in a sense, he does.

One of the most striking scenes in film is when Jack applies his blackface mask for the first time. This is the moment when he decides to stick with his career in show business instead of visiting his sick father. The film withholds the blackface image throughout the narrative, and finally unveils it at this climactic moment for dramatic effect. The scene begins with Jack

sitting at a make-up table in his dressing room. When his girlfriend Mary enters the room wearing a white chorus girl outfit with a towering feather plume on her head, Jack slowly begins to apply his blackface paint. Mary stands in back of him, intently staring at him, looming over him, and finally advising him on his disguise. The effect of the composition is unusual. As his blackface mask takes shape, his presence next to Mary is weakened and emasculated. She towers over him with her high phallic head dress, as he begins to glance around the room meekly. Suddenly Jack is overcome by guilt. When he stands up and looks into the mirror, he sees not his own blackened countenance but rather that of his father standing in the temple. At once, the full complexity of the blackface image is brought home. For Jack, the racial disguise is both an agent of power and a crippling transgression. It is both a lively aesthetic and a threatening infringement. At this moment, Jack bemoans the violence he has done to his heritage, while at the same time, he glimpses the fantastic potential of his escape, represented by the beautiful white girl standing next to him.

When Jack looks up from his chair at the table, his expression conveys the essential duality of the black image in the white mind. His expression alternates from an ominous scowl to a wide jovial smile, then back to the scowl, and finally back to the smile. He is straddling the cross-roads of his identity, bursting forth and then withdrawing, as with an infant's game of peek-a-boo. His visual relationship to white girl alters dramatically with each shift of his emotional countenance; when he scowls we see him as the threatening black male, looming dangerously next to the defenseless white girl, but when he shifts to the smile, he suddenly becomes the harmless Sambo, ready to sing for her or tell her a story. These dramatic transformations between stereotypical tropes of blackness might actually be

received as expressions of his conflict as a white man, because as I have mentioned, the audience is never fully taken by the blackface disguise, and whatever impressions are conjured by the act are always received with an eye towards their white creator.

Not only does this scene express the confusion of white identity, it also works to both empower and diffuse the taboo image of miscegenation. When Jack looks up at her with his threatening scowl, Mary's vulnerable whiteness (pale skin, white outfit, blonde hair) is dramatically highlighted. But when his face changes to a smile his presence is softened and feminized under her; we can feel her substantial power over him. The scene, probably unconsciously, destroys the notion that miscegenation and inter-racial exchange was categorically rejected by white society. The black image in the white mind has never been monolithic. There has always been confusion.

More than anything, *The Jazz Singer* demonstrates that white Americans were trying to articulate, in Lott's words, a new "structure of racial feeling," which not only codified tropes of blackness, but also allowed whites to redefine themselves.<sup>11</sup> Al Jolson's blackface masquerade creates a tangible image of something that many whites felt they had buried or lost within their own beings. It was like a shadow. The opening title of the film reads: "In every living soul, a spirit cries for expression. Perhaps this plaintive, wailing song of jazz is after all the misunderstood utterance of a prayer." Indeed, blackness was an American confessional, a place where the "soul" of white folks was freed from the guilt and miserable contrition of its ego. More than anything the blackface ritual was act of disclosure, a way for whites to find the locus of their collective identity, by revealing their innermost secrets.

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<sup>11</sup>Lott, *Love and Theft*..., 6.

The Warner Brothers souvenir program from the 1927 premier of the *The Jazz Singer* portrays the two heads of Jack Robin.<sup>12</sup> The white head is floating in the fore-ground; it wears a stern, almost pallid expression as it stares vacantly outwards. The blackface head, on the other hand, is lowered in the background like a shadow of the other. The black head explodes with emotion. The eyes are bulging in wonderment, and a broad white toothed smile stretches across the face. Here is the lost child of civilized America.

The blackface phenomenon represents a certain desire to recapture the libidinal freedoms of infancy—biologic impulses, rash behavior, wallowing in excrement, and so forth. It is masked exhibitionism. The burnt cork make-up is a unconscious resistance to the cleanliness principle of civilization. Witness little Shirley Temple's grotesquely smeared blackface sequence in *The Littlest Rebel* (1935), which leaves her looking like a filthy piglet. Blackface is a public display, which allows both the performer and the audience to circumvent the social repressions of maturity. Sigmund Freud writes: "It is easy to observe the inclination to self-exposure in young children. In cases in which the germ of this inclination escapes its usual fate of being buried and suppressed, it develops in men into the familiar perversion known as exhibitionism."<sup>13</sup>

*The Jazz Singer* is a distinguishing product of its age. Coming at the height of the roaring twenties, the film insists that the immigrant son can do it all and have it all. The ending of the film, like the age in which it was conceived, is based on implausible dichotomies: Jack can both conquer and maintain his Oedipal complex; he can live in the future while embracing the

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<sup>12</sup>Michael Rogin, "Blackface, White Noise..." *Critical Inquiry* (Spring 1992): 433.

<sup>13</sup>Sigmund Freud, *Jokes and Their Relationship to the Unconscious* (NY: W.W. Norton, 1960), 26.

past. There is nothing that will stand in his way. When his mother sees him perform in blackface for the first time she says: "He's not my boy any more, he belongs to the world now." But Jack's god-like triumph testifies that nothing is lost forever; every border may be crossed and then re-crossed. In the final scene of the film, he stands on the stage in blackface and sings "My Mammy," while both his modern shiksa girlfriend and his traditional Jewish mother look on adoringly. Jolson was "the world's greatest entertainer," because he reached out with those white gloves to grab at everything. He was the poster boy of an over-invested society. With the stock-market crash of 1929, and the onset of the Great Depression, Jolson's star began to fade.<sup>14</sup> The white public lost confidence in Jolson's brand of blind optimism, but as we shall see, it did not lose its faith in the symbolic properties of blackness.

In the early years of the Great Depression, Eddie Cantor, a son of Russian Jewish immigrants, emerged from the vaudeville circuit to become one the most popular film and radio stars in America. Cantor's chameleon antics allowed him to slide easily between racial and ethnic identities, and his effeminate acting style challenged stable gender roles. Unlike Jolson, Cantor's persona was always ironic and at times even cynical. His characters did not achieve success by following the established channels like Jack Robin; instead Cantor's heroes operated on the periphery of society, scratching and improvising their way to happiness. From the beginning of his screen career, Cantor's audience came to expect at least one blackface routine in each of his films. These minstrel productions were often the most memorable and accomplished parts of what were otherwise mediocre films.

A blackface number in a Cantor film often fit into the narrative as a literal escape from the responsibilities of the character's real identity. Cantor

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<sup>14</sup>Fisher, 21.

was able to evade his enemies, or discover some secret, by using blackface as a disguise. But there was also a tragic quality to his blackface persona. He could never fully externalize his sexual virility and emotional freedom like the real black performers, and because of his minstrel disguise he could not connect intimately with the white performers. In many ways, the blackface charade worked as an embodiment of modern loneliness and urban alienation. By humorizing this sense of emotional displacement, Cantor allowed men and women of the Depression era to subdue their own feelings of inadequacy. When Cantor put on blackface he was often a man without direction, who, even in the midst of a crowd, seemed to be terribly alone.

One of Cantor's characteristic minstrel performances takes place in *Kid Millions* (1934). Cantor is a passenger on a luxury liner, who dons blackface to perform in a shipboard "Minstrel Night." As he is applying his burnt cork make-up, he looks up with a frustrated expression at a smiling black man who is an employee of the ship. Cantor speaks for the thwarted satisfaction of white America, when he says to the black man: "This stuff is tough to put on and take off. You know you're lucky!" For a moment the black man looks surprised, but then a wide knowing grin appears on his face. Is this simply a compliant movie smile, or is there some measure of irony involved? I see this man as a bemused witness, content in his silent removal from the repressions and neuroses of the white world. I see him like Aunt Hager from Langston Hughes' *Not Without Laughter* (1930), who feels sorry for white people because, "something inside must be aggravatin' de po' souls. An' I's kept a room in ma heart fo' 'em, cause white folks needs us, honey, even if they don't know it."<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>15</sup>Langston Hughes, *Not Without Laughter* (NY: Collier Books, 1969), 181.



The minstrel show begins with a little black boy, the younger of the renown Nicholas Brothers, singing a song about coming of age, about a passage into sexuality: "I want to be a minstrel man/ I've always been a minstrel fan/ I want to dance just like a dandy/ And sing the song about my sugar candy." He is answered by a full chorus of scantily clad white women, who are rolling their eyes ecstatically, and virtually worshipping at the altar of black masculinity: "We always love a minstrel man/ He thrills us like no other can."

When the blackfaced Eddie Cantor takes the stage, he is introduced with all the nostalgic trappings of an old time minstrel show. There is a formal interlocutor, who banters back and forth with Cantor, discussing the difference between "poetry" and "prose." Thanks to his casual manner, Cantor comes out on top in the exchange, and he wins the canned laughter of the chorus girls. At this point, Cantor begins to sing the sentimental Irving Berlin love song "Mandy." As he sings, Ethel Merman, a white woman dressed in a white tuxedo, begins to dance with him. In the film, Merman plays a crook, who is masquerading as Cantor's mother (even though she is younger than him) in order to steal the money that Eddie is inheriting. Their dance is indeed a bizarre sight. Throughout the film, we have seen extended gags about the Oedipal complex, as Eddie sits on his impostor mother's lap, rolls around on the floor in her arms, and kisses her repeatedly. But now that Eddie is in blackface the situation has changed. They are dancing with each other, but the juxtaposition of black and white is so extreme, that they are not permitted to look into each other's eyes, in fact most of time they are holding on from behind, not even facing each other. By blatantly keeping them at arms length, the film seems to be pointing out the twin taboos of American sexuality, incest and miscegenation. Cantor is stranded between worlds. He

can win the laughter and admiration of the chorus girls as long as they are kept at a distance, but intimacy with a white woman, much less his mother, seems to be expressly forbidden.

This point is made abundantly clear when a white couple joins the dance at the front of the stage. Unlike Cantor and Merman, this man and woman are locked in a passionate gaze into each other's eyes. As the song ends on a climactic note, the white couple pulls into a tight love embrace. At the same time the camera pulls into a tight close up on their faces, literally excluding Cantor and Merman from the frame.

As we glide into this white embrace, the lights fade and the entire sequence floats off strangely into some ante-bellum utopia. Suddenly we are transported through a direct cut to the misty deck of a river boat on the Mississippi, full of lovely Southern belles, with corsets and hoop skirts, and tall Southern gentlemen, with top hats and bow ties. Depression audiences were not meant to question this inexplicable transition, they would simply drift off into the soft and wonderful dream. This world is miraculously perfect. Every woman has a man, and every man has a woman. There is no sadness, no pain, and certainly no thirty per cent unemployment. Everyone is young and in love. All the racial and gender hierarchies, which were being threatened during the Depression, are now intact. For a moment, we have entered a realm without darkness, without Freud's death instinct or pleasure principle. "With your head on my shoulder," they sing to each other, and they tell themselves how marvelous their world is, with its friendly sounds in the night, soft winds blowing, the crickets chirping, and of course "the darkies" to "sing us a Southern lullaby." The summer stars are shining. "What a place to be, for you, for me." It is immaculately beautiful. Unquestioned peace....

Smack! As suddenly as we drifted off, we are pulled back again to the contemporary masquerade, with the pounding tambourines of the chorus girls, and smiling black face of Eddie Cantor. The lie could never last. The white couple are still staring into each other's eyes. They do not want to abandon the fantasy. The transition back to the blackface routine is not a relief, but rather it is a painful reminder of white America's crises of identity. Eddie tries to pull the couple apart several times, until finally they relent and fall back into the performance, surrendering their ante-bellum fantasy. The modern minstrel show addresses all the anxieties and pains of reality, which this couple wishes to deny. Eddie Cantor's blackface is the embattled portrait of white America, with all its alienation and sorrow.

Finally Cantor begins to dance along side the Nicholas Brothers, the young black boy Fayard and his older brother Harold. The two brothers alternate back and forth, tapping out spectacular rhythms and dance steps. Cantor is standing between them, and each time he tries to start his own tap routine the brothers grab on to him, forcing him to merely observe. As the black dance numbers become progressively more athletic and accomplished, a disappointed frown appears on Cantor's face. He can not compete with this unrestrained world of blackness, and yet he is not content in the white world.

At last the two black performers point to Cantor, signaling his turn to dance, but instead of launching into a tap shuffle, Cantor slinks backwards out of the frame. The screen is evacuated and left to the blacks. For a full half minute, we are treated to wave upon wave of their virtuosity, as the chorus girls stare on intently in the background. Eddie Cantor's emasculated retreat symbolizes white America's inability to escape from its own ego through the appropriation of blackness. Unlike Al Jolson, he seems to recognize the hypocrisy of his own cultural depredation.

Blackface minstrelsy has long been dismissed as a unified assault by the dominant white society on African Americans. While the blackface image has undoubtedly done cultural damage to black people (a fact that will never be in question), it is a mistake to oversimplify the motivational impulses behind the institution. As I have shown, the nineteenth-century minstrel image that was reorganized with the birth of sound cinema does not express a set of dogmatic convictions, as some have claimed, but rather it represents a confused and lonely quest for self identity within civilized society. Minstrelsy is in Eric Lott's words "less a sign of absolute white power and control than of panic, anxiety, terror, and pleasure."<sup>16</sup>

As society entered the modern era, both the horror and freedom of primitive life began to fade from reality. The railroad of technology and science had encircled the globe, and all the caves and mysteries of nature had been buried in the rubble. As Freud maintains in *Civilization and its Discontents* this process of sublimation created a profound longing within society for an instinctual existence.<sup>17</sup> This anti-social desire triggered exceptional dread, guilt, and hostility. As a result, blackness became a kind of public metaphor, a common beacon, which white society endowed with its deepest fears and its wildest fantasies.

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<sup>16</sup>Lott, *Love and Theft...*, 6.

<sup>17</sup>Sigmund Freud, *Civilization and its Discontents* (NY: W.W. Norton & Co., 1961), 79.

## II

### All Black

In 1922 the novelist Sherwood Anderson wrote in a letter to his friend H.L. Mencken: "Damn it, man, if I could really get inside the niggers and write about them with some intelligence, I'd be willing to be hanged."<sup>1</sup> This sentiment was shared by many of the white artists, critics, and writers of the Modern era.

They were intrigued by what they saw as the honest spirituality of black life, something which their own Calvinist roots had withheld from them. The prominence of technology and science in the modern world left an emotional vacuum in their lives, which made the religious fervor of black culture appealing. The white moderns were also fascinated by the apparent indifference that blacks showed to the all-consuming pressures of capitalism; African Americans seemed to exist without compromise, unfettered by commodity or financial obligation. Perhaps more than anything, the white moderns were captivated by the informality of black social life and family structure, which seemed to free them from the claustrophobic decorum of Victorian America. Black Americans appeared to be immune to the dense web of psychological turmoil that spiraled out of the isolated nuclear family. The basic Freudian premise of the family romance did not seem to apply to the extended family networks of black society.<sup>2</sup> As we saw in *The Jazz Singer*, blackness represented an escape from the psychological morass of white America.

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<sup>1</sup>David Lewis, *When Harlem Was In Vogue* (NY: Alfred A. Knopf, 1981), 99.

<sup>2</sup>Ann Douglas, *Terrible Honesty: Mongrel Manhattan in the 1920s* (NY: Farrar, Straus and Giroux), 95.

The writer Hart Crane was haunted by two parallel nightmares. In the first dream, he discovers the dismembered body of his own mother, and in the second dream he becomes transfixed by the huge penis of a naked black man standing on the banks of a river. As the historian Ann Douglas maintains in her book *Terrible Honesty: Mongrel Manhattan in the 1920s*, this connection between the matricidal destruction of the old order and the powerful emergence of blackness was in fact one of the essential components of modernity.<sup>3</sup>

As Hollywood entered the new era of sound production, the centrality of blackness in the modern imagination was made clear by a series of all-black musicals that were conceived by white producers and directors and intended for a mostly white audience: *Hearts in Dixie* (1929), *Hallelujah* (1929), *Green Pastures* (1935), and *Cabin in the Sky* (1944). These films broke with the limiting trend of backstage musicals and star-studded extravaganzas. They were among the first sound films to explore the lives of ordinary people living ordinary lives. At the time, they were received by both black and white critics as well-intentioned efforts by liberal forces in the entertainment business to portray African Americans in a positive light. The impulse of these filmmakers was similar to that of the white "negrotarians" (Zora Neale Hurston's word) of New York, who sought to promote the art, literature, and music of black Harlem.<sup>4</sup> But as we shall see, this apparent generosity was more the result of voyeuristic curiosity and white cultural introspection than of genuine racial hospitality.

Hollywood's all-black musicals were notable for the continuity of their images and themes. It was as if they had been spawned from the seed of a

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<sup>3</sup>Ibid, 267.

<sup>4</sup>Lewis, 98.

common vision, which in a sense they had. The biggest novelty they offered the film-going public was the fervent intensity of their protagonists. The audience was drawn into a world of pure emotion, where both children and adults experienced pain, sadness, and happiness with complete honesty. It was passage into infancy, where a child could stare upwards at the world, laughing or crying with the full intensity of his heart. The characters in these films never had a sense of being analyzed or critically observed by each other like the participants of a Victorian melodrama. Events were experienced without the filtering mask of civility, without consideration for social appearance or decorum.

Hollywood's all black musicals also portrayed the dark side of this emotional honesty. At moments the attractive veneer of black life disappeared and a frightening image of chaos took over. The characters themselves were constantly battling their own primitive instincts. The threat of uncontrolled sexuality and violence lay just beneath the surface, and the trope of a black man fighting off the devil was almost always a central theme. Many of these films sought to narratively reverse the trend of the Great Migration, by portraying the urban North as a domain of iniquity and temptation, which the black characters eventually reject in favor of the honest simplicity of the rural South. White audiences were fascinated by the unchained desires and appetites of the black characters, but they were also a little disturbed. Many theaters refused to book the films, for fear they might spark violent outbursts or emotional disturbance. One critic of King Vidor's *Hallelujah* (1929) confirmed the duality of attraction and fear that the black

image held in the white mind; he found the "barbaric, weird, fantastic" quality of the film "oddly fascinating and sometimes oddly repellent."<sup>5</sup>

*Hallelujah* (1929) was one of the first, and certainly one of the most accomplished, of these black cast musicals. King Vidor, the white director, who like Griffith, was a Southerner by birth, had long "nurtured a secret hope" to make a film about the black culture which held a central place in his childhood memories. Vidor admitted, "The sincerity and fervor of their religious expression intrigued me, as did the honest simplicity of their sexual drives. In many instances the intermingling of these two activities seemed to offer strikingly dramatic content."<sup>6</sup> As we shall see, Vidor combines these seemingly disparate elements to illustrate what many whites saw as the dual quality and consequence of black emotion. The film reveals both the danger and the inherent freedom of blackness.

The central character of *Hallelujah* is Zeke, the eldest son of rural cotton farmers. When Zeke leaves the safety of his family home to take the family crop to market, he is immediately tempted by a crafty dance hall girl named Chick, who lures him into a hedonistic juke joint full of smoke, drink, and raw sexuality. After Zeke is tricked out of the family money by Chick and a gambler named Hot Shot, a vicious fight breaks out in the room, leaving Zeke's brother lying dead on the floor. When Zeke returns home without the crop money, carrying the dead body of his brother, he decides to become a preacher after asking for forgiveness and communicating with God through an angel riding in a "snow white chariot" wearing a "snow white robe."

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<sup>5</sup>Thomas Cripps, *Slow Fade To Black: The Negro in American Film* (NY: Oxford University Press, 1977), 249.

<sup>6</sup>King Vidor, *A Tree is a Tree* (NY: Harcourt, Brace and Co., 1952), 175.



In his new role as an itinerant preacher Zeke successfully converts many sinners into the "house of the Lord," including the temptress Chick. After Zeke baptizes Chick in a ceremony full of spiritual ecstasy, the fervor of his religious beliefs is easily transferred into carnal desire. Eventually, Zeke abandons his life as a preacher and runs away with Chick, taking a job at a saw mill. When Zeke discovers Chick with her old partner Hot Shot, he chases them through the woods and eventually kills Hot Shot, after Chick dies from falling out of the buggy, in which the couple fled. When Zeke is released from prison for Hot Shot's murder, he returns to his simple country home, thus restoring the pre-industrial order of the beginning of the film.

In his essay "Reification and Utopia in Mass Culture" the Marxist critic Fredric Jameson maintains that Hollywood films concerning specific ethnic or racial communities (i.e. the Italian Mafia of *The Godfather* series) often provide the mainstream white society with a Utopian vision of community, in which narrative dilemmas are resolved through the collective strength of the family: "The dominant white middle-class groups... find in the ethnic and racial groups which are the object of their social repression and status contempt at one and the same time the image of some older collective ghetto or ethnic neighborhood solidarity."<sup>7</sup> As a result these ethnic or racial groups "are not only the object of prejudice, they are also the object of envy." This Utopian fantasy is only plausible because the dominant culture is able to situate itself apart from the racial or ethnic other, thus removing any direct cerebral connection between themselves and the fantasy. In other words, the narrative of the black other becomes a dream passage, through which the

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<sup>7</sup>Fredric Jameson, "Reification and Utopia in Mass Culture," *Signatures of the Visible* (NY: Routledge, 1992), 32-33.

white person might live vicariously, apart from himself or herself, free from the demands of capitalism and the moral repressions of society.

The central family of *Hallelujah* provides this Utopian world, pristine and welcoming to the white middle-class dreamer, but the director puts a torch to these Elysian fields of collectivity by showing how the emotional freedom of black life leads to depravity and lust, ultimately counteracting the solidarity of community. The simple cotton farm, a wood shack on a tenant contract, comes to us as a pure space of happiness. But as Zeke moves away from this immaculate center, the collective idealism of home falls away, and his libidinal self breaks forth.

In the first scene of the film, we see Zeke holding a string of individual ribbons, each one a reminder of the gifts he will buy for his family when he sells the cotton at market. As Zeke's fingers move down the string, the family laughs and jokes with each other. They know they will not get all the things on the string, but they are still happy because they feel spiritually connected to each other. Aside from a joke about black illiteracy, this scene is idealizing the collectivity of the black family. They are literally tied to a common stripe, held together by the strength of the eldest son as he ventures into the world. They have picked their cotton and brought it together in a common wagon. But tragically, Zeke can not redeem his family's trust. He is stuck down in the market place and consumed by his own libido. As he tells us before he leaves, the terror comes from inside. It is hiding in the blackness: "It looks like the devil's in me here tonight."

At the beginning of the film, Vidor carefully constructs the informal atmosphere of the country home as both an amusing contrast and an appealing alternative to the structured family life of white America. When a little black boy jumps up on the dinner table to dance, the white audience

would have laughed at the preposterous absurdity of using the family dinner table as dance floor, but at the same time there is something subversively appealing in the over-throw of authority inherent in such an act. To dance on the dinner table trivializes and disempowers one of the most potent symbols of the family hierarchy, and in turn the social order. By humorizing this over-throw of authority, the scene both mollifies and aggravates the white fear of hierarchical disorder. A little black boy dancing on a dinner table seems like a harmless image, but there is also something unnerving, and perfidiously tantalizing (similar to "women on top" male fantasies), which viewers might not have been able to put their fingers on. This subversive appeal exists along side a more conservative reaction to the scene, which is one of amusement at the spectacle of the "little dancing darky," and the absurdity of the black culture that would allow such a breach of decorum.

Similarly, when an aging couple arrive on the scene asking to be married, after already having produced eleven children, we laugh because the moment is intended to be comic (Zeke's father says, "Seems to me the damage is already done.") It plays on the audience's feeling of superiority to this familiar stereotype, but on another level the audience envies this careless attitude towards the rigid social institution of marriage. The love that these two people feel for each other seems entirely genuine, and the spontaneity of their marriage almost makes it feel more honest. When the bride says to one of her children, "come on up here and be your pappy's best man" we are touched by the simplistic beauty of the moment. The director does not want to keep the audience at a distance; he wants the viewers to surrender themselves into the character's lives just as they would with any other Hollywood production. And the casual loving atmosphere of this country world is undoubtedly part of the attraction. It is happy pre-industrial picture

of family life, intended for an audience which had lost its sense of community and family cohesiveness in the modern industrial lifestyle of the city.

As in the female dominated realm of Victorian domesticity, the central figure of the Negro family is the mother. But aside from her domestic centrality, Vidor's "mammy" is the virtual antithesis of the cold, passionless, and spiritually repressed mothers of Victorian America. She holds her family together with emotional vigor and uncalculated verbosity. She is like a mythical Earth mother, who is attuned to the slightest variations within her wild and natural kingdom. When Zeke and his brother fail to return from the cotton market, she begins to moan and sing with undisguised apprehension. She does not conceal her emotions like one of Faulkner's white mothers. Her little children gather around her, both comforting her and drawing strength from her with their slow rhythmic mantra: "Mammy, Mammy, don't cry, Mammy, Mammy."

This cosmic energy that radiates from Mammy is also seen when she sings the children to sleep at night. One by one they lie down across her lap like the *Pieta* Jesus, and instantly they fall asleep and are carried off to bed. Later in the film, the conniving Chick curiously misappropriates this sleep inducing power by singing Zeke to sleep, so that she can escape in the buggy with Hot Shot. This contrast of good intentions and bad intentions is a perfect example of how the mythical black earth talents are seen by whites as both appealing and dangerous.

Mammy's unrestricted spirituality and elemental humor embody, in many ways, what the white moderns saw as the perfect maternal attributes for the new age. They felt the old Victorian order was holding them back, and, as with Hart Crane's matricidal dream and *The Jazz Singer's* patricidal

narrative, the old order must be destroyed. *Hallelujah*, however, also shows the dark side of the new order. The 1920s was a era characterized by a generational conflict, which many saw as a threat the very fabric of society, and many felt, as Chick's assumption of Mammy's power testifies, that the wild freedom of modernity was not all good. There was darkness at the core. As we shall see, the modern world of blackness that King Vidor constructs in *Hallelujah* is constantly teetering on the edge of chaos.

The film draws a thin line between atavism and civilization. The black religious experience becomes a border land between the good hearted emotion of the communal family and the nefarious depravity of the external world, specifically Northern cities. Zeke actually personifies this contested boundary of good and evil. In the beginning of the film, when his childhood friend Missy Rose starts to play the organ, Zeke's eyes open wide and his whole body begins to shake. He slowly stretches his arms out towards the girl, and his own muscles strain against themselves. He tries to suppress his passion by keeping his feet anchored to the floor, but suddenly his arms break free and he grabs hold of her, pulling her towards him and kissing her recklessly. Zeke repeats this wrestling match with himself throughout the film, each time surrendering to the dark side.

After Zeke's epiphany, the community church becomes a field of battle between his atavistic tendencies and his honest spirituality. At one point, while he is preaching to the congregation, Zeke actually begins to shadow box with an imaginary devil. He tells Missy Rose: "I don't want to give in, but he just keeps clawing and pulling after me all the time." When the congregation breaks into ecstatic song, Zeke is overcome by the ardor of the moment. Once again, it is music (i.e. Missy Rose's organ playing, Chick's juke joint singing) which triggers his loss of control. As the people are marching around the

room, swinging their arms wildly, and singing "I belong to that man," Zeke walks down from the pedestal, through the crowd, and chases Chick out the door of the church into the dark woods. Music is the one element of black culture that had penetrated the white society more than any other, therefore it is interesting that Vidor presents black music as the most discernible agent of chaos. This decision on the director's part suggests that the emotional stability at question, the real internal struggle, may have been, in reality, a measure of the white society's own conflicted image of itself, a emotional portrait of a society in transition from the rigid order of the Victorian era to the relative chaos of modernity.

The passage from spiritual ecstasy to wanton desire is echoed in an earlier scene when Zeke baptizes Chick in the river. As he dunks her in the water, she starts to shriek and moan orgasmically: "Hit me brother Zeke! Hit me good!" Zeke picks up her writhing body and carries her out of the river into a dark tent on the shore. Setting her down on a cot, he starts to kiss and hug her passionately. Finally, Mammy comes into the tent and pulls Zeke off of Chick, telling the still moaning girl: "You got more licking than what's good for you!"

Ironically, Zeke's most complete surrender to his primitive instincts occurs when he kills Hot Shot, the symbolic representative of the corrupting urban North. This is undoubtedly the most striking and disturbing scene of the film. When Chick dies in Zeke's arms, after having fallen out of Hot Shot's buggy, Zeke stops talking, and a cold blank expression appears on his face. Suddenly, for the first time in the film, the viewer is cinematically alienated from Zeke. He has become a frightening monster. As he tramples wordlessly after Hot Shot through primeval swamps and woods, we experience the chase from Hot Shot's perspective. We feel the horror of the

pursuit. King Vidor used crazy sound effects to add to this sense of fear. The director writes:

The thought stuck me— why not free the imagination and record this sequence impressionistically? When someone stepped on a broken branch, we made it sound as if bones were breaking. As the pursued victim withdrew his foot from the stickiness of the mud, we made the vacuum sound strong enough to pull him down into hell. When a bird called, we made it sound like a hiss or a threat of impending doom, rather than a bird call. These sounds were all in the mood of threatening death and added immeasurably to the dramatic climax of the film.<sup>8</sup>

Vidor later described this memorable climax as a "relentless, evenly measured pursuit through an eerie swamp."<sup>9</sup> For white viewers of the film it was a journey to the heart of darkness. The frightening thing about the scene is the cold precision with which Zeke hunts down and kills his victim. We have come to know him throughout the film as a friendly spirited man, and his emotional transgressions have, until this point, seemed essentially harmless. By suddenly revealing this methodical violence, the film constructs a vision of primitive brutality that civilization seeks to repress. Vidor wants to "free the imagination" to show white viewers what was hidden below the surface of this black culture they were so interested in.

At the time *Hallelujah* was made, Sigmund Freud was publishing material which insisted that every civilized human was in some sense denying the existence of his true self. "The element of truth behind all this, which people are so ready to disavow, is that men are not gentle creatures who want to be loved, and who at the most can defend themselves if they are attacked; they are, on the contrary, creatures among whose instinctual endowments is to be reckoned a powerful share of aggressiveness." The

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<sup>8</sup>Vidor, 183.

<sup>9</sup>Ibid, 183.

truth, as Freud saw it, "reveals man as a savage beast to whom consideration towards his own kind is something alien."<sup>10</sup> If viewers of Vidor's film were disturbed or frightened by Zeke's descent into carnal violence, it may have been because they caught a glimpse of something lurking in themselves, like Conrad's Kurtz when he sees "the horror" of his own dark heart.

The best solution that Vidor offers to mollify this terrifying chaos is a kind of extreme segregation. There is not a single white person in the entire film. The country home is like an independent nation, completely removed from any vestige of white society. On the other hand, the city (symbolized by the cotton market, the dance hall, and the saw mill) is rife with symbols of social interchange between the races. On the wall of the juke joint is a photograph of Zora Neale Hurston, a black writer with white sponsors. Hot Shot, the film's most corrupt and immoral character, is the only person in the film who speaks with a distinctively Caucasian accent. Any reminder of the interaction between the races, whether it be Hot Shot's accent or a portrait of the Harlem Renaissance, is portrayed by the film in a negative light.

The film draws a stark contrast, not only between the values of the northern cities and the values of the rural South, but also between those African Americans that are striving to enter the white world and those that remain committed to the segregated black world. The white Baptist preacher John Roach Straton encapsulated the kind of separatist ideology which informed the basic narrative structure of *Hallelujah*: "The more the negroes live to themselves and the nearer they remain to the simple life which formerly characterized them, the better they are, while the more they scatter

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<sup>10</sup>Sigmund Freud, *Civilizations and its Discontents* (NY: W.W. Norton & Co. Inc., 1961), 58-9.



as a race and the closer they come in contact with our civilization and the more they endeavor to take it on, the worse they become."<sup>11</sup>

Fredric Jameson argues that, along with their utopian functions, films about ethnic or racial minority groups often have a socially conservative message encoded into their narrative framework. The story line of *Hallelujah* comes full circle; the same homogenous community that is introduced at the beginning of the film is restored at the end. The ending is happy, despite the fact that no economic or social improvements have come to this rural black family. They learn to be content with nothing. It takes the course of the film for the film's protagonist to realize that he is not meant to leave home in search of something better.

Why is this narrative process of home/away/home appealing to white viewers in 1929? Jameson writes: "The drawing power of the works of mass culture has implied that such works cannot manage anxieties about the social order unless they have first revived them and given them some rudimentary expression."<sup>12</sup> In the case of *Hallelujah*, the white audience is able to work through, not only its own personal conflict of ego vs. id, but also its conflicted social view of blacks in society.

The new life that Zeke starts with Chick is symbolic of the black migration out of the rural South and into the northern cities. In contrast to his quiet pre-industrial work in the cotton fields, in his new life he operates a frightening power saw, which slices entire trees into processed boards. When Zeke moves away from his family, he does the very thing he warned his parishioners against in his sermons. The railroad was a public symbol of the northern migration. In Zeke's sermons he uses that same railroad as a

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<sup>11</sup>George Fredrickson, *The Black Image in the White Mind* (NY: Harper and Row, 1971), 271.

<sup>12</sup>Jameson, 30.

symbol of damnation. On one occasion, he stages an elaborate train production in order to get across his religious and social message. While Zeke shuffles along the podium like an engine along the tracks, his family members provide the other sound effects (whistles, bells) of a passing train. Zeke tells the congregation: "The cannonball express is leaving for Hell twice a day. I'm talking to all you sinners out there who are on that train."

Zeke gets on the train himself when he abandons his ministry. The film can not manage the audience's fear of the black migration without first addressing it. Zeke's migration and subsequent return leads the white audience through a narrative cycle, which allows for a satisfying resolution in the end. The film symbolically puts an end to the black migration. For an African American audience the ending is instructional. The grass is not greener on the other side of the fence. So keep out.

But I believe that Zeke's joyful home-coming does more than simply preserve the social political order. The ending of the film upholds a pristine space in the American imagination. The pre-industrial South becomes a timeless lost home for men and women who had never even been below the Mason-Dixon line. The black country people are constructed in a way that mirrors the sensual freedoms of infancy, and the country-side itself becomes a kind of elemental space, a land of smooth flowing rivers and gentle valleys, free from the structures of moral corruption and greed. The Old South is like a simple childhood memory of the innocent days before the onrush of machinery, rent payments, heartless work yards, and urban alienation.

Dixie is a formative trope of American film. When Zeke rides the river boat back to the old cotton farm, thousands of white Americans rode along with him, trying to recapture a bygone part of themselves. The film ends with the old minstrel tune, which comes to us like a summer lullaby:

"Going home, going home/ I'm a going home/ Work's all done, cares laid  
by/ I'm a going home."

### III

## Black and White

As we have seen, Hollywood, from its earliest creations, recognized race as an issue that was central to America's conception of itself. However, in the films we have examined thus far, American cinema was honestly unable to address the significance and consequence of inter-racial contact. This reluctance on the part of Hollywood to portray a cultural dialogue between blacks and whites is not representative of reality. Despite the extreme segregation of both southern and northern society, blacks and whites were forced to communicate and interacted with each other on a daily basis, both in the work place and on the street. This was a social reality in northern cities from the earliest days of the Great Migration. Antagonism existed alongside curiosity.

In *The Birth of a Nation*, blacks and white collide in violent conflict, but contrary to objective truth there is no direct exchange of cultural material. In the all-black musicals like *Hallelujah*, the presence of whites has been excised entirely, and as a result the relative fusion of the cultures can only be understood by inference. In the black-face films like *The Jazz Singer* this cultural exchange is acknowledged, if only circuitously, through the symbolism of minstrelsy. No film was able to address directly the social realities of a multi-racial society.

It is not surprising that Hollywood had such difficulty representing any kind of genuine interplay between blacks and whites. The fear of miscegenation was one of the central concerns of American society. This anxiety was difficult to reconcile with the essential nature of film as an

expressive medium, because from the earliest days of cinema the movie screen has been a field of sexuality, a fact which has been accepted by filmmakers with varying degrees of honesty.

Sex appeal has always been the most important characteristic of any film actor or actress. Every person that enters the movie frame is, on some level, connected both emotionally and sexually with the other people on the screen. Seemingly innocent cinematic relationships have often contained elements of libidinal desire. As Fredrick Jameson observes, "The visual is essentially pornographic, which is to say that it has its end in rapt, mindless fascination... Pornographic films are thus only the potentiation of films in general, which ask us to stare at the world as though it were a naked body."<sup>1</sup>

If cinema was essentially a sexual medium, then the location of blacks and whites within the same movie frame became a difficult prospect, to say the least. The tremendous threat engendered by even tacit images of miscegenation can not be over-estimated. In 1924 when the black actor Paul Robeson kissed the hand of the white actress Mary Blair in Eugene O'Neil's play *All God's Chillun*, the entire nation was outraged and New York newspapers warned of rioting in the streets.<sup>2</sup> Inter-racial sex had a cultural weight which reached far beyond societal custom, because as I will show, its meaning and significance was deeply rooted in the collective subconscious of the dominant society. Blackness was an archetypal vision which, as Jung suggested, inhabited the very dreams of white America.

As we have already seen, southern whites were beset with the idea of the black rapist. This obsession was not, as some have argued, part of a consciously organized system of social oppression, but rather it was more the

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<sup>1</sup>Fredrick Jameson, *Signatures of the Visible* (NY: Rutledge, 1992), 1.

<sup>2</sup>Ann Douglas, *Terrible Honesty: Mongrel Manhattan in the 1920s* (NY: Farrar, Strause, Giroux, 1995), 102.

result of an acute psychological condition which literally enveloped the entire society. As some cultural historians have pointed out, the fear of black brutes stemmed largely from a subconscious effort to off-set the feelings of guilt caused by the white legacy of violence and racial tyranny. The historian George Fredrickson writes:

In order to deserve the kind of treatment he was receiving in the United States..., the black man presumably had to be as vicious as the racists claimed; otherwise many whites would have to accept an intolerable burden of guilt for perpetrating or tolerating the most horrendous cruelties and injustices. But in seeing blacks as bad enough to deserve what they got, racists undoubtedly conjured up a monster that was capable of frightening its creators and driving them to new frenzies of hatred.<sup>3</sup>

Perhaps the psychological explanation runs even deeper. The exceptional sexual virility of black men was a central element of southern mythology. The fear and veneration that the entire patriarchal culture had for the size and power of the black penis resembles most closely the Freudian circumstance of a young boy feeling frightened and hopelessly inadequate after seeing his grown father's penis for the first time. Freud maintains that this moment is connected to the male fear of castration, and the only escape seems to be, as in *The Jazz Singer*, to kill the father.<sup>4</sup> In a very real sense, the racial ideologies of the American South re-articulated this principal childhood castration anxiety, and subsequent hostility.

It is important, however, to understand that the white fixation on the sexual danger of blacks was not confined to Southern white males. While some northern editorial writers criticized southern lynching policies, the vast

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<sup>3</sup>George Fredrickson, *The Black Image in the White Mind: The Debate On Afro-American Character and Destiny, 1817-1914* (NY: Harper & Row, 1971), 282.

<sup>4</sup>Sigmund Freud, *Civilization and its Discontents* (NY: W.W. Norton & Co., 1961), 79.

majority of northern newspapers perpetuated the brutish image of the black male with sensational descriptions of rape incidents and vigilante activities. A turn of the century article in the *New York Times* stated that rape was "especially, and with reason dreaded at the South, and to which the African race is particularly prone."<sup>5</sup> Many of the northern women who fought to procure universal suffrage, which was finally achieved in 1920 with the passage of the 19th amendment, did so by playing to the nation's fear of black men. W. E. B. Dubois believed that "the negro race has suffered more from the antipathy and narrowness of white women both North and South than from any other single source."<sup>6</sup>

Whether or not this is true, it is clear that the complicated image of blackness in American imagination was constructed by the entire white nation, regardless of geography and gender. White sexual anxiety was the primary impetus for the institutional system of segregation throughout the country, which was mirrored by Hollywood films.

But as we will see, this rigid system of separation spawned its own set of cultural anxieties. The reality of whites and blacks interacting on a daily basis, while being separated by institutional barriers in all areas of public life, created a tense atmosphere of mistrust, which many whites feared would lead to social chaos. As one Baltimore lawyer warned, "the process of segregation" which removed blacks from "the direct influence of the whites" would cause the black population to become "more and more aggressive."<sup>7</sup>

This fear is undoubtedly connected with the nervous reaction that many viewers had to *Hallelujah* and other all black films. The image of a

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<sup>5</sup>Gail Bederman, *Manliness & Civilization* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1995), 47.

<sup>6</sup>Douglas, 257.

<sup>7</sup>Fredrickson, 268.

black community existing autonomously, removed from any kind of restraining presence of whites, was a disturbing prospect. Hollywood needed to find a way of representing inter-racial contact in a safe, non-threatening manner, which assuaged both the white fear of black sexual violence as well as the cultural insecurity attached to pure segregation. But Hollywood also needed mixed race films for another, more socially subversive reason. While the idea of miscegenation was one of the most daunting taboos of American culture, it also was a grand avenue for Dionysian transgression, if only through the subconscious domain of movie fantasy. Black and white was a delirious combination which Hollywood found difficult to resist.

With the onset of the Great Depression, this subversive fantasy formed a dark underbelly of American Cinema, while on the surface, Hollywood set about the serious business of maintaining the country's delicate social structure. Soothing allegories and utopian resolutions became the order of the day. Representing a safe image of racial and class harmony was more important than ever, as the binding fabric of American society was splitting apart in all directions. Hollywood needed an all purpose adhesive.

The movie industry recognized this critical necessity, and in one of the great ironies of social engineering, Twentieth Century Fox placed the monumental task of uniting the embittered nation squarely in the lap of a little curly headed girl. Shirley Temple was five years old in 1934 when she first exploded into the American imagination. For the next four years, Shirley reigned as the single most popular box office attraction in all of Hollywood, eclipsing the likes of Clark Gable, Gary Cooper, Bette Davis, and Ginger Rogers.<sup>8</sup> While the country suffered through the worst years of the Depression, Shirley Temple became a mental tonic, whose screen image was

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<sup>8</sup>Ephraim Katz, *The Film Encyclopedia* (NY: Harper Perrenial, 1994).



constructed to assuage cultural anxieties and moderate conflicting sociological realities.

In 1935 Shirley Temple starred in two films, *The Little Colonel* and *The Littlest Rebel*, which were set in the old South, a landscape which by now had become the most serviceable province of Hollywood mythology. Shirley's co-star in both of these films was Bill Robinson, the legendary black tap dancer. With the ethereal rapport between these sublime performers, Hollywood had finally discovered a method of representing inter-racial contact. The players in these films mingle with each other, like bizarre apparitions, in a world that has been assembled to the smallest detail. It was a complex equation, and below the smiling surface of childhood innocence, was an involved dialogue of cultural expropriation and perverse sexuality.

*The Little Colonel* is set in Kentucky in the 1870's, and it tells the story of a little girl whose father is a northerner named Jack Sherman (presumably unrelated to William Tecumseh) and whose mother is a southern belle named Elizabeth. They have returned with their daughter to her native State of Kentucky, where unfortunately Elizabeth's own father, a former Confederate Colonel, refuses to accept his daughter's marriage to a Yankee ("The war will never be over for me and mine.") The grumpy "Old Colonel" lives by himself on an old plantation, which is populated by faithful black servants, including Walker (Bill Robinson) and Mom Beck (Hattie McDaniel). In the course of the narrative Shirley makes friends with every single black person in the film, both young and old. She also manages to convince the Old Colonel to recognize his own stubbornness and eventually settle his differences with his daughter and her husband. Shirley's father becomes very ill after being hoodwinked out of his money by dishonest carpetbaggers. He is helpless to save his wife and child from financial ruin. In the end the Old

Colonel rides to the rescue, after being summoned by Shirley, capturing the treacherous men and restoring Jack Sherman's money and patriarchal authority. The film ends with the happy image of a united and financially secure family, which in the midst of the Depression would have been magnificent sight to behold.

*The Littlest Rebel* tells a similar story of a family reaching a happy state of settlement, after being threatened with dissolution and ruin. This second film actually begins before the Civil War, and like *The Birth of a Nation* it traces the wartime hardships of a white plantation family in the South. Shirley's father is a captain in the Confederate army, who is arrested as a spy when he comes home to visit his sick wife, who eventually dies from her illness. Shirley charms a Yankee colonel into allowing her father to escape with her to Richmond. On the way to the Confederate capital her father is captured again. Both he and the Yankee colonel who allowed him to escape are sentenced to death. Shirley and a black slave named Uncle Billy (Bill Robinson) must raise money, by singing and dancing, for a trip to Washington to ask President Lincoln to pardon the two condemned men. When they visit Lincoln in the White House, Shirley and Uncle Billy charm the President with their honest ingenuousness, and the Great Emancipator pardons both Shirley's father and the Yankee officer. The film ends with Shirley's smiling face sandwiched between the loving gaze of the northern colonel and the southern captain.

This closing image is representative of Shirley Temple's primary function in many of her films. She operates as a consoling bridge between two seemingly disparate worlds. In *The Little Colonel* and the *The Littlest Rebel* she symbolically unites not only the North and the South, but also the old and the young, the rich and the poor, the powerful and the meek, and of

course most notably the black and the white. She works as a kind of quixotic angel, flitting amongst the adults, freeing them from all their fears and meanness.

In the first scene of *The Littlest Rebel*, Shirley is celebrating her birthday party with a roomful of her white friends. The party is interrupted by Shirley's mother, who calls her daughter away to visit with her "other friends." Shirley leaves the spoiled group of white children as they bicker amongst themselves in the grand dining room. She walks out into fresh open air of the day to receive the birthday greetings of a large group of black children. Unlike her greedy white companions, clustered in the stuffy interior, demanding more ice cream and cake, Shirley's black friends are friendly and entirely selfless in her presence. They present her with a black baby doll as a birthday gift. Shirley holds the black doll in her hands, and with a big smile, declares: "This is the very nicest present I got."

Thus the film begins with Shirley Temple bridging the crevasse between the cultures. She observes the contrasting attitudes between her white friends and black friends, and she declares her allegiance to black side, by elevating the little black doll as her most prized gift. In *The Little Colonel* she repeats this effort to raise her black companions to her equivalent status, or nearly equivalent. When her grandfather sees her walking along a road with her black friends, he offers to drive her home in his buggy. He wants to leave to the little "pickaninnees" in the road, but Shirley refuses to go with him unless he allows her friends to attach their little cart to the back of the buggy. Finally they all drive down the road together, with the little black children trailing along in the rear.

These films insist that black people and white people must not be entirely removed from each other. The two worlds must be attached in a

controlled and hierarchically secure framework, as with the buggy and the cart. Shirley is always the catalyst for this union, and as we will see, her methods of inter-racial dialogue allow her, not only to solidify the social hierarchy, but also to usurp the positive elements of blackness for herself, and symbolically for her entire race.

At her birthday party in *The Littlest Rebel*, Shirley appropriates the selfless attitude of her black friends, by graciously accepting their gift. By doing so she is able to rise above the greed and pettiness of her white friends and enjoy the uncalculating pleasure of honest affection. Thus, when Shirley stands on the porch with the black baby doll in her hand, she has not only gained possession of a material representation of blackness (the doll), she has also possessed what the film constructs as an essentially black outlook on life: lighthearted emotional honesty.

As the critic James Snead points out, Shirley repeats this process of appropriation throughout the films, most notably in the famous staircase dance from *The Little Colonel*. As Snead observes, "the staircase dance prefigures the pattern of every subsequent Temple/Robinson number: Robinson demonstrates an aspect of black culture, and Shirley imitates it."<sup>9</sup>

Shirley has been forced to live at her grandfather's house to avoid her father's contagion. The Old Colonel's grumpy attitude upsets Shirley, and at night she becomes cantankerous and refuses to go up the stairs to her bedroom. Her frustration is a reaction to the cold and lifeless atmosphere of the colonel's house, which when juxtaposed with the animated demeanor of the black servants makes a critical statement about the mechanical banality of the white nation.

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<sup>9</sup>James Snead, *White Screen, Black Images: Hollywood From the Dark Side* (NY: Routledge, 1994), 56.

After her grandfather tells Walker to put her to bed, the entire atmosphere brightens the moment he disappears, leaving Walker and Shirley alone. Walker says to Shirley: "Will you go (up to bed) if I show you a brand new way to go up stairs?" Shirley, who is yet unschooled in the carefree style of Walker's art, replies: "How can there be a there be a new way to go up stairs?" With that, Walker begins a fantastic tap dance up and down the staircase to the rhythm of Confederate army music. As Walker shuffles, and hops, and puffs his way up and down the stairs in a wonderful spectacle of pure delight, Shirley stands at the base of the stairs, looking on appreciatively. Shirley gazes at Walker's amazing performance, with the same wide-eyed wonderment as the white novelist Mary Austin, who saw in Bill Robinson "the great desideratum of modern art, a clean shortcut to areas of enjoyment long closed to us by the accumulated rubbish of the culture route."<sup>10</sup> He glides across the hard wood steps, physically transforming the ordinary monotony of ascending and descending into a fresh journey of discovery, a "brand new way." (This ability to transform the ordinary into something fresh and interesting is replayed in *The Littlest Rebel*, when the simple minded servant James Henry meditates on the question: "Why is a shoe called a shoe?") Finally, Walker concludes his dance, and on the final tap of his dance Shirley declares: "I want to do that!"

Now, in one of the most memorable moments in Hollywood history, the grown black man and the little white girl begin to dance with each other. It is hard to know what makes this image so compelling, but its visual power undoubtedly works on multiple levels. On the surface, the spectacle is appealing to the white audience because it disempowers, or even emasculates, the black man by paring him with an obviously pre-sexual white girl. His

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<sup>10</sup>Douglas, 93.

innocuous presence is the key to this surface appeal. Later we will examine a more seditious level of meaning inherent in this sequence. But for now it is enough to see Bill Robinson and Shirley Temple through the superficial innocence of the white imagination. They are two harmless children playing on the staircase.

It is important, however, to point out that they are dancing in synchrony rather than in harmony. Shirley has observed and now she is merely imitating. The dance is not meant for mutual fulfillment, because this is clearly a one sided cultural exchange. Shirley, as the juvenile representative of white civilization, wants to possess what he has: "I want to do that!" Walker is a kind of minstrel creation, in the sense that his entire cinematic existence is constructed to meet the constitutional needs of white society. If Hollywood was insisting that racial interchange was essential, then it is important to understand that the cultural commerce was entirely one-sided. Like the black children at Shirley's party, Walker presents Shirley with the essence of blackness, while expecting nothing in return.

In fact, Shirley Temple's appropriation of blackness is even more disproportionate, because not only are the trappings of white culture (education, wealth, freedom) not offered in return, but the confiscated elements of black culture are assumed to such a degree that Shirley actually holds blackness apart from blacks, and eventually reverses the equation by teaching blacks how to be black. It is a brutal charade of Machiavellian deception, but the impulse is not consciously insidious. It stems from a profound sadness at the heart of white civilization.

This is a generation of white American popular culture, which needed to produce black performers like Bert Williams who actually wore blackface in order to gratify the specifically constructed image that whites were longing

for.<sup>11</sup> This desire to instruct blacks on how to be black points to the fact that whites were not entirely satisfied with the job African Americans were doing in creating an image of the primitive other, removed from the strictures of civilization. Blackness was a cultural obsession for white society. If it could not be supplied, then it must be created.

The sequence in *The Little Colonel* when Shirley attends a black baptism is a perfect example of how the film allows the white culture to appropriate aspects of blackness, while at the same time demonstrating the instructional process in which the assumed elements are removed from their cultural origin. "Exclusionary emulation" is the term that Snead uses to describe this process: "the principle whereby the power and trappings of black culture are initiated while at the same time their black originators are segregated away and kept at a distance."<sup>12</sup> After blackness is arrogated it must then be reassembled in a format which reinforces the hierarchical order, while concurrently satisfying the primitive longings of white society. After Shirley witnesses the spectacle of the river baptism, she reenacts the ritual with two of her black companions in a murky pool.

Shirley is in complete control. She has witnessed the black ritual, and now she makes it her own. She holds it apart from the black culture she has taken it from. She insists that the little black child be dunked over and over again in the muddy water, each time demanding: "Are you saved? Are you saved?" Shirley is the sole minister and director; her black friends can only enact her ceremonial instructions. This is the second time in the film that Shirley and her black friends wallow in filth, thus demonstrating the infantile pleasures which Freud insists are so appealing to civilized man.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>11</sup>Ibid, 328.

<sup>12</sup>Snead, 62.

<sup>13</sup>Freud, *Civilization and its Discontents*, 40.

Shirley's mastery over her friends (The film later uses a military analogy, Shirley: "I'm the colonel and you're my men") solidifies the hierarchical structure, while her earthy indulgence speaks to the carnal discontents of white society.

The initial baptism scene is filmed as a kind of atmospheric dream sequence, not unlike the misty river boat dance in *Kid Millions*. It is one of those Depression Era moments, when a Hollywood film drifts off into extreme delusion. Shirley is brought to the baptism, holding hands with Mom Beck and Walker, and when they reach the river bank, she is the only white person at the ceremony. The singing faces appear like phantoms in the dense fog along the shore, and as the service reaches its melodic climax the full 20th Century Fox orchestra joins the proceedings.

Like the idiot boy Benjy, in William Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury* (1929), Shirley enters into the black spiritual consciousness.<sup>14</sup> The African American church represents an effectual escape from the oppressive guilt and sadness of white society. In Faulkner's novel, Benjy terminates his amorphous wailing, which signifies the inexpressible grief and pain of his family, when he hears the spirited black preacher begin his sermon. Benjy, like Shirley, leaves his tortured white family behind and finds, if only temporarily, a serene happiness in the bright atmosphere of the black church. Meanwhile Benjy's mother, like the Old Colonel, sits home alone in the dark house with the shades drawn and the Bible face down on the floor.<sup>15</sup>

This white longing for black spirituality is one of the underlying themes of modern literature, but it is also perhaps the dominant impulse behind the all black musicals like *Hallelujah*. Almost of all of these films

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<sup>14</sup>Snead, 53

<sup>15</sup>William Faulkner, *The Sound and the Fury* (NY: Random House, 1929), 367.



explore the black religious experience as their central material. But white spiritual yearning is not the only impelling force which made *The Little Colonel* and *The Littlest Rebel* so popular with the viewing public. Some have argued that Shirley Temple's irresistibility was not as wholesome as it might seem. As Shirley is leaving the baptism with Mom Beck and Walker, she looks up at the two adult blacks, and coquettishly asks: "Will (the baptism) wash my sins away?" A big smile appears on Mom Beck's face, and she replies, with a hint of irony, "Why you ain't got no sins. You a little angel!"

This kind of exchange, rife with sensual implication, is not unusual in a Shirley Temple movie. In 1937 the English writer Graham Greene was brought before the British High Court of Justice, for implying in a review of one of Shirley's films that the child star's screen presence was inherently sexual: "Infancy with her is a disguise, her appeal is more secret and more adult."<sup>16</sup> At the time, Greene's article, which appeared with the provocative heading "Sex and Shirley Temple," was deemed too obscene to be read allowed in court, but in retrospect Green's accusations actually seem quite perceptive, judging from the strange visual scenarios of *The Little Colonel* and the *The Littlest Rebel*.

In *The Little Colonel*, when the Old Colonel brings the soaking wet girl home from her mock baptism, he tells the servant Maria to dress her in one her mother's old outfits. Thus begins a succession of scenes in which Shirley is reduced to little more than a visual fetish. Maria tells Walker to leave the room so Shirley can undress: "We don't want no men around here." The next time we see Shirley she is cloaked in miniature southern belle attire, complete with petticoat and bonnet. The black servants are standing around

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<sup>16</sup>Bret Wood, "The Lolita Syndrom" *Sight and Sound*, June 1994, 32.

admiring her appearance. Maria says to Walker: "Did you ever in all your born days see anything like that?" Walker responds, with wide eyed enthusiasm: "Looks like the old house ain't going to be lonesome no more."

Shirley then walks into the living room where her grandfather is sitting by himself. Shirley begins to play the giant harp and sing: "There's nothing half as sweet in life as love's young dream." As she sings the romantic love song, the Old Colonel stares at her with a broad smile. Then in a bizarre moment, Shirley's grandmother, the Old Colonel's deceased wife, is super-imposed next to the harp in Shirley's place. The Old Colonel's association of the little girl with his former love interest is not unusual in Shirley's films. She is always paired with aging men, who through her fetishistic presence are able recapture their youthful ability to love.

But Shirley's licentious appeal is not limited to *The Old Colonel*. If only on a subconscious level Shirley's screen image raises the intoxicating possibility of combining the taboos of miscegenation and pedophilia. This forbidden potentiality would not be without its lascivious appeal. As Freud writes:

The feeling of happiness derived from the satisfaction of a wild instinctual impulse untamed by the ego is incomparably more intense than that derived from sating an instinct that has been tamed. The irresistibility of perverse instincts, and perhaps the attraction in general of forbidden things finds an economic explanation here.<sup>17</sup>

When Shirley and Walker dance with each other, they are breaking through the restrictive barriers not only of race but also of civilized concepts of sexuality. It is hard not to read their relationship on a certain libidinous level, as Walker looks Shirley in the face and says: "You look scrumptious," before leading her into a physically demanding tap routine.

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<sup>17</sup>Freud, *Civilization and its Discontents*, 26.

The famous staircase dance in *The Little Colonel* is a perfect example of how the Temple/Robinson combination contained subliminal elements of sexuality. Audiences were spellbound by the image of the little white girl and the grown black man holding hands, staring into each other's eye, and marching up and down the stairs in unison. As Snead observes:

Without warning, though with great conceptual cushioning, we witness the (in the context potentially explosive) spectacle of male and female, black and white, old and young dancing in exquisite concert, a black male's way of tricking a reluctant white female into bed. Spectators could savor their deepest fantasies and the their worst fears in one and the same image.<sup>18</sup>

When Old Colonel enters the scene, demanding, "What's going on here?" the spell is suddenly broken. Shirley and Walker are embarrassed to be caught, and they scamper up the stairs together to escape the Colonel's wrath. In this moment we feel the dramatic contrast between the lifeless white demeanor of the Old Colonel and the vivacious black attitude of Walker and Shirley. But as Snead points out, there is also a feeling of arrested transgression, as if the black slave and the white girl have been caught in some morally deviant activity. The shame that Shirley and Walker feel as they hasten up the stairs, extends in turn to the film viewers, who by this moment have surrendered themselves to the nebulous fantasy.

Shirley Temple's plantation films were, more than anything, an attempt by Hollywood to meet the public need for mass representations of inter-racial dialogue. Shirley is a figure through whom the audience can live vicariously. She is able to shatter barriers of decorum, while still maintaining her youthful innocence. She is a white character who safely adopts the soul and demeanor of a black character. In *The Littlest Rebel* she actually dons blackface at one point to escape detection by Union soldiers, and later when

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<sup>18</sup>Snead, 57.

her mother dies, the slaves identify with her by singing "Sometimes I Feel Like a Motherless Child."

But her primary narrative function in these films is to spread that spirit of blackness to the patriarchal figures of power. In *The Little Colonel*, on the two occasions that Shirley ends up bemired in mud, she extends the black muddiness to Old Colonel, first by throwing clods of mud on his white suit, and later by using his white sheets in her mock baptism. Her grandfather is furious, and he questions her essential whiteness: "When am I going to see you look like a little girl should look, all fresh and dainty as a flower?" But as his heart begins to warm to Shirley, it is the black servant Walker, to whom he chooses to confide his change of attitude: "Walker, I'm an old fool." Subsequently, when he decides to accept his daughter's northern husband and rescue his family from financial disaster, the revelation is as much racial as anything else. Shirley has successfully endowed him with her emotional honesty and passion for life, which both films construct as essentially black qualities.

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In 1936, the year after Fox's hugely successful Shirley Temple films, Universal Studios released *Show Boat*, another film about the Old South, which was based on the Edna Ferber novel and adapted from the Hammerstein/Kerns musical. *Show Boat* tackles many of the same racial themes raised by the *The Little Colonel* and the *The Littlest Rebel*, but unlike the coy subliminal coding of the Shirley Temple films, *Show Boat* attempts to address issues like miscegenation and racial appropriation in a direct and

socially conscious manner. At times the film offers an astute commentary on America's racial relationships.

Beneath this progressive veneer of liberal politics, however, *Show Boat* carries on a simultaneous dialogue which explores the same issues through vague semiotic gestures, which operate on a more subconsciously threatening level by exploiting America's dark archetypal visions of race. As a result, *Show Boat*, like so many successful products of popular culture is a jumble of overlapping and, in many ways, contradictory discourses.

Like the Shirley Temple films, *Show Boat* insists that racial interchange must be an essential component of American society, but unlike Shirley's plantation narratives, the later film is self-consciously aware of the tragic hypocrisy inherent in the hierarchical framework that the film itself is seeking to uphold. By tracing its protagonists' passage into urban modernity and away from the rural simplicity of the old South, the film argues for a progressive new outlook on American life; however, by celebrating the tropes of racial distinction, it simultaneously refuses to relinquish its nostalgic claim to the past. Thus, by contradicting itself, the film actually stages white America's confused and ideologically conflicted outlook on race.

*Show Boat* tells the story of Magnolia (Irene Dunne), the daughter of a show boat captain on the Mississippi. Magnolia meets and falls in love with Gaylord Ravenel (Allan Jones), a kind but unreliable river gambler who passes himself off as a respectable citizen. We are also introduced to Joe (Paul Robeson) and Queenie (Hattie McDaniel), a bickering pair of black servants. The leading romantic duo of the show, Julie Laverne and Steve Baker, are kicked off the boat when their racial identity is revealed and they are discovered to have "negro blood." The captain decides to replace the leading lady with his daughter Magnolia and the leading man with Gaylord Ravenel.

The new combination is a big hit, and eventually Magnolia and Gaylord decide to get married. After she gives birth to her first child they leave the show boat and move north to Chicago, where Gaylord finds he is unable to meet his family's financial needs and eventually abandons his wife and young daughter Kim. In order to support her child and herself, Magnolia is forced to return to her stage career. She gets a job with a big theater, once again taking the place of the mulatto Julie Laverne as leading lady. She becomes a huge sensation in the North, and is even asked to perform in London. Finally her daughter Kim follows in her mother's footsteps, as she too becomes a famous singer. The film ends, with the mother and daughter's reunion with Gaylord, who is working as a doorman at the theater, in a dramatic musical performance in front of an adoring audience.

*Show Boat* sketches the blueprint for its keen, and discerningly skeptical, social philosophy in the opening sequences of the first reel. When the show boat arrives in a sleepy river town, it is met by a delighted crowd of black and white spectators. The captain becomes the master of ceremonies, as the actors put up a smiling facade in order to make the best possible impression on their prospective patrons. But right away, the film audience senses a brooding tension concealed beneath the show business masquerade. The joyful entrance parade is the central image of the opening sequence, but slowly the ceremony is inter-cut with angry exchanges, laced with racial hostility and sexual anxiety, between various members of the show. First a white man confronts the black servant Queenie. Calling her "eightball," he asks where she got the brooch she is wearing, which he had given to Steve's wife Julie. Then Steve confronts his wife, accusing her of being unfaithful to him with another man. All of this remains suppressed beneath the pomp and splendor of the formal parade, which thus far the captain has kept

miraculously on schedule. Until finally the buried tensions flood over, and the entire proceedings are interrupted when Steve attacks his wife's lover. Chaos intrudes. The captain frantically tries to convince the audience that the fight is all part of the show, and the scene ends with his optimistic refrain: "Just one big happy family, folks!"

The captain's ridiculous effort to conceal the hostility between members of his show boat crew (ostensibly a microcosmic segment of the larger society) makes an ironic statement about the inability of popular entertainment to deal with the pressing issues facing the American people. The scene works as a self-conscious critique of Hollywood itself, by showing the glossy show business facade to be an inherently dishonest treatment of social realities. In this case, however, the commentary is not biting, because the audience is not riled by the captain's hypocrisy. In fact, we are meant to recognize his dilemma and identify with his efforts to gloss over the hidden truths of his performing troupe. To a certain extent, the film sanctions this denial of reality; *Magnolia* wants to be an actor "because (she) can make believe so many things that never happen in real life." The audience is hoping for a smooth parade.

*Show Boat* extends this tentative formula of social criticism to many of the racial issues that have been raised in my study of American cinema. The film subtly points out the moral contradictions of white supremacy, while it refuses to take a clear ideological stand in favor of social change.

A perfect example of *Show Boat*'s ambiguous racial outlook is its treatment of the issue of white appropriation of black culture. Julie Laverne is a true mentor to *Magnolia*. The performance qualities that *Magnolia* learns from Julie are defined as racially specific, presumably the product of Julie's black side of the family. When the servant Queenie over hears Julie teaching

Magnolia the song "Can't Help Loving That Man of Mine," she becomes suspicious: "How come you know that song? I thought only black folks knew that song." For a moment Julie looks worried, but it is not until later that we understand the cause for her concern. By concealing her true racial identity, Julie is able to reap the benefits of her black heritage (her mercurial performance style), without suffering the stigma of blackness.

Later in the film Magnolia actually performs the same song ("Can't Help Loving That Man of Mine") in her audition for the position in the Chicago theater, which causes Julie to quit her job, allowing herself to be replaced. Thus the film consciously enacts the process that Snead refers to as "exclusionary emulation."<sup>19</sup> Unlike the Shirley Temple films, *Show Boat* is very aware of the hypocrisy involved here. This is actually the second time that Magnolia has taken Julie's job, in effect using Julie's lessons against her. Therefore when Julie disappears into the shadows of the theater, we are meant to see her as a tragic character, robbed by the same white society that has benefited from her presence.

Magnolia's audition is strong visual portrayal of this "exclusionary emulation." The director agrees to hear her perform only when she tells him that she sings "negro songs." While the director and the piano player struggle to syncopate her performance ("Oh you mean raggedy!"), the black doorman slinks up in back of the director to hear the music. In a fit of frustration over his inability to get her to blacken her singing style, he turns around and sees in the doorman a visual embodiment of what he is looking for. He suddenly shoves the black man away, literally ejecting him from the movie frame, never to be seen again. The director is unwilling to share what he has pillaged.

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<sup>19</sup>Ibid, 60.



During the scene in which Julie teaches Magnolia the song, the two women are joined by Queenie and Joe. As the song intensifies, Magnolia begins to shuffle across the room, performing a awkward hip rolling dance known as the Cake Walk. This visual image amounts to a labyrinthine cultural equation. The Cake Walk was a dance step that was invented by African Americans to mimic the way whites dance when they are trying to dance like blacks. Magnolia's appropriation of the Cake Walk adds a final, and tragically ironic, layer to the dance's already multitudinous cultural dialogue. Even a piece of cultural material as subversively paradoxical as the Cake Walk, is reduced to commodity in the all consuming world of white culture.

Whether or not the makers of *Show Boat* were aware of the complex ramifications of this image, it is clear that they understood, at least to some extent, the involved injustice of America's racial relationships. On the surface, the film addresses the issue of miscegenation with the same discerning eye it applies to the issue of cultural appropriation. *Show Boat* brings the subject out into the open, in way that no film had ever done before, and by doing so it elucidates the inherent hypocrisy and injustice of the white mythologies concerning inter-racial sex. This is the surface conviction. Later we will discuss the film's subconscious take on miscegenation, which (sadly) is less progressive.

The film raises the issue of inter-racial sex in an unusual way. At first Julie and Steve are themselves accused of miscegenation when evidence is produced showing that Julie has "negro blood," but later, in order to avoid prosecution, Steve admits that he too has a mixed racial background. As a result, they are not participants in miscegenation but merely the products of it. It is interesting that inter-racial sex is addressed in the context of a white

man and a black woman; it is Julie who is believed to be black, while her husband is, at first, believed to be white. Similarly, we are told that Julie's mother was black and her father was white. Now this racial scenario was by far the most common form of miscegenation in the United States, but it did not fit well with the white mythologies of inter-racial sex, which centered on the black male aggressor.<sup>20</sup> Thus, by inverting the miscegenation image, *Show Boat* stakes out a bold position on a controversial issue.

Julie and Steve are presented as tragic characters, but they are very different from the tragic mulatto stereotypes (generally self-destructive souls, tortured by their own conflicted identity). In the case of Julie and Steve, the tragedy stems from the irrational stubbornness of the white society's customs. They are at peace with themselves until the law intrudes. For the most part, they are a happy and stable couple, and the work they are doing for the show boat is excellent.

From beginning of the film we have thought of Julie as "the little sweetheart of the South" and Steve as "the handsomest leading man on the river." Therefore, when they lose their jobs due to their racial heritage, the audience, who like *Magnolia* has developed a positive relationship with Julie and Steve, can not help but feel the injustice and hypocrisy of the white system. The protagonist *Magnolia* expresses the audience reaction, when she says: "Julie's my friend! It's not fair to send her away for something she can't help." The wiry little man who brings the accusations against Julie and Steve is probably the biggest villain in the film, as later he tries to sabotage *Magnolia's* wedding.

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<sup>20</sup>Jacquelyn Hall, *Revolt Against Chivalry: Jessie Daniel Ames and the Women's Campaign Against Lynching* (NY: Columbia University Press, 1974), 206.

The film's progressive message regarding miscegenation is undercut, at least to some degree, by the powerful atmosphere of subliminal desire that the servant Joe seems to feel for Magnolia. This subtly encoded sentiment rekindles the white society's racial myths concerning the uncontrolled lust of black men for white women. Joe is an appealing character, and in many ways he fills the Beecheresque stereotype of the friendly shiftless Negro. But at the same time, we sense in him a barely suppressed anger and passion, which is revealed in the image of him straining, shirtless against the bars of a prison when he sings the line: "Get a little drunk and you land in jail." This passion is also expressed by his voyeuristic curiosity towards Magnolia.

In the scene in which Julie sings "Can't Help Loving That Man of Mine," Joe appears at the top of stairs and slowly emerges into the room, flirtatiously telling the woman: "That's my favorite song!" As the only man in a room full of women (Queenie, Julie, Magnolia) he makes himself the only logical subject of the song. When Magnolia begins her provocative Cake Walk, Joe moves in closer, staring at her, and clapping his hands to the rhythm. As the camera cuts to his wide eyed expression, he says quietly to himself: "Look at that girl shuffle."

As Magnolia's dance continues the entire black world seems to converge around her. Wriggling black children peer through the windows, and full bellied black men dance along the river bank. Everyone is staring at the white girl shuffling seductively around the room, and the whole sequences builds to a sensual climax, at very moment Magnolia's oppressive mother arrives on the scene. The string of passion snaps, as the old woman abruptly calls a halt to the proceedings: "MAGNOLIA!" The music stops, and the camera flash cuts between the horrified and embarrassed expressions of Magnolia, Julie, Queenie, and Joe. The little children flee in all directions, the

black men run back along the river. Like the moment in *The Little Colonel* when the Old Colonel catches Shirley and Walker, this sudden cessation feels like a shocking disclosure of an illicit sexual act.

Joe's implied desire for Magnolia continues to reappear in the film through cloaked innuendo. When Magnolia goes into labor on a stormy night and is desperately in need of a doctor, Joe leaps out of his chair, contradicting his self-acknowledged shiftlessness, he says: "I'll get the doctor!" As Joe runs out into the storm to fetch a doctor for Magnolia, Queenie watches him with a bewildered, perhaps jealous, expression: "I've never seen that man move so fast in all my life!"

At the beginning of the film, when Magnolia meets Gaylord Ravenel, she is completely enthralled by him. The first person she sees after her encounter is Joe, and she asks him if he saw Gaylord. Joe replies bitterly: "Yeah, I seen him! I seen lots of his kind along the river." Magnolia replies: "Ah, but Joe he was such a gentleman!" She disappears into the boat, and Joe mumbles to himself, then sits down on the dock and starts to sing "Old Man River," which, coming at this moment, is almost like an unrequited love song.

Joe's rendition of "Old Man River" is a study in contradictions, which taken as a whole, is a perfect encapsulation of the conflicting impulses which informed Hollywood's effort during the 1930s to create films about inter-racial contact and exchange. The Kern and Hammerstein song uses the Mississippi river as an abstract locus, around which all the racial emotions of Southern history evolve. The very abstruseness of the river metaphor creates a general feeling of resignation, similar to Bob Dylan's "Blowing in the Wind." The songs insist that there are no real solutions, because the questions are cosmic and eternal.

Hollywood's films of inter-racial contact are constantly doubling back on themselves, offering some progressive insights, and then tempering those insights with conservative material. "Old Man River" is a perfect example. On the one hand, the song allows Joe (Robeson) to define himself in a sympathetic and believable manner; he is more than the happy plantation Negro, who usually comes to us from a distance (often across a cotton field) with smiling antics and redundant gestures. "Old Man River" humanizes Joe. During the song, the camera sustains a close up on Robeson's face, inviting the audience to join in his feelings of sadness and relate to his quiet defiance.

The images of Joe lifting huge bundles of cotton, contradict his reputation as a lazy good for nothing. The lyrics of the song point to the disproportionate work system of Southern society: "Darkies all work on the Mississippi/ Darkies all work while the white folks play." The words also express genuine despair in the face of racial tyranny: "Don't look up, an' don't look down,/ You don't dast make de white boss frown,/ Bend your knees, an' bow your head/ An' pull dat rope until you're dead."

But these progressive sentiments are rendered meaningless by the essentially inactive message of the song. Robeson himself was frustrated by the passive quality of the lyrics; when he performed the song in concerts he changed lines like "I'm tired of livin' an' scared of dyin'" to "I must keep fightin' until I'm dyin'."<sup>21</sup>

In the film version of the song, Robeson's controlled and solipsistic singing robs the music of the collective spontaneity of genuine black spirituals. The song is confined to simple Western tonalities, and all the

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<sup>21</sup>Richard Dyer, *Heavenly Bodies: Film Stars and Society* (NY: St. Martin's Press, 1986), 107.

improvisational blue notes of black music have disappeared. Even when the black chorus joins Robeson, there is little of the feeling of solidarity, which was inherent in the polyphonic call and response of real Negro spirituals.<sup>22</sup> During this period, Zora Neale Hurston published an essay condemning songs like "Old Man River" for pandering to the white concert audience by emasculating the black spiritual form.<sup>23</sup>

The song ends with the placidity of a restored tonic, drawn out to closure and capped by the resigned gesture of Robeson's pacific smile: "Old Man River he just keeps rolling along!" The film returns to this isolated refrain just before the credits role at the end of the film, as if the narrative unity could not be complete until the racial dialectic is resolved. "Old Man River" encompasses the fundamental design of Hollywood's inter-racial films. The song points to the hypocrisies of southern society, while at the same time it tempers those insights with sentiments of political apathy. The questions are raised, but before we begin to look for the real answers, we are floating off into the glistening waters. Rolling along the soft current.

The American film industry recognized the explosive potential of race in Depression Era society. By bringing blacks and whites together in a controlled cinematic framework, films like *The Little Colonel*, *The Littlest Rebel*, and *Show Boat* found a way to safely speak to many of the racial anxieties of the American people. It was a method of social engineering. The cultural formula that Hollywood developed was so secure, that the films even found room for ideological counterpoints and exotic fantasies.

By relying on vague metaphoric devices like the rolling river or the ritual of baptism, which were compelling but politically inert, the films were

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<sup>22</sup>Portia Maultsby, *Africanisms in American Culture* (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1990), 193.

<sup>23</sup>Douglas, 335.

able to figuratively maintain the civil balance of American society. With studio productions representing a safe and hierarchically secure interchange between blacks and whites, Hollywood had finally discovered a stable formula of racial dialogue. Unfortunately, this carefully balanced equation could not last. As the country struggled through the Great Depression and later faced the uncertain prospect of a world at war, the old methods of racial representation became increasingly untenable. The fears and desires of the white nation would need a new regimen of discourse.

## IV

### Coded Blackness

The image of racial blackness in Hollywood films served as more of a conceptual notion, a method of addressing certain psychological anxieties, than an attempt at representing social reality. The influx of African Americans into northern cities provided Hollywood with an occasion in the modern world to represent primitivism, with all its conflicted ramifications. At its root, this desire for a primitive other was not really about race; it was a psychological condition of modern civilization, a visceral reaction against the stifling power of the ego and the super-ego, but in America the vehicle for this desire was race, and specifically blackness. As we have seen, racial difference became the focal point for the white society's introspective search for personal identity; the construction of the racial other mirrored the general interest in the internal other, the id.

As a result, the existence of the black race in America rearticulated for the white nation a personal conflict (the benefits of civilization vs. the benefits of primitive existence), which Freud insists is an irremediable condition of modernity.<sup>1</sup> The social anxieties inherent in America's racial makeup meshed with these psychological anxieties. Economic competition, job security, living standards, and all the other social concerns the white society foresaw in the Great Migration, always existed alongside these parallel, and perhaps deeper rooted, ideas concerning race.

With the onset of the Great Depression, Hollywood became very aware of the ideology it propagated. The severity of the economic crisis forced the

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<sup>1</sup>Sigmund Freud, *Civilization and its Discontents* (NY: W.W. Norton & Co., 1961), 6.



American film industry to follow the lead of Franklin Roosevelt's New Deal in adopting any means necessary to safely usher the country out of the Depression. Hollywood realized that racial harmony was essential for the preservation of the nation's civil equilibrium. The direct use of African Americans as a tool to plumb the depths of white America's psyche was no longer a politically viable method of representation. The success of Roosevelt's work projects was contingent on inter-racial cooperation. Racial violence, as seen in the Harlem riots of 1935, was a constant concern.<sup>2</sup> Consequently, the cinematic image of black Americans was consigned a less volatile role in Hollywood films, while the psycho-sexual function that black characters had once held was slowly reduced. In many cases, African American characters disappeared entirely.

None the less, Hollywood was entirely unwilling to surrender the archetypal influence that blackness held over the white imagination. The method that many films adopted involved the abstraction of the black image, or the removal of blackness from its human derivation, accompanied by its surrogated reapplication through vague semiotic codes. In other words, blackness took on a life of its own. By freeing it from the confines of its symbolic source (the African American), Hollywood was able cast blackness in any cinematic shape or dimension.

This is not to say that coded blackness did not correspond in the viewer's imagination to African Americans, because subconsciously it did. Coding was simply a politically viable method of speaking to the same issues that we have examined in other films, which used blackness in a more direct and less abstracted manner. But by removing blackness from its immediate

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<sup>2</sup>Cheryl Greenberg, *"Or Does it Explode": Black Harlem in The Great Depression* (NY: Oxford University Press, 1991), 136-137.

racial context, Hollywood could situate white Americans apart from an engaging other, without alienating the races on a conscious level.

Two of Hollywood's most enduring creations, *King Kong* (1933) and *Gone With the Wind* (1939), employ this new method of coded blackness. It is no accident that both of these films have formed a lasting impression on the American public. According to Claude Levi-Strauss, a myth is a narrative with implicit social ramifications that is able to endure over time. The myth symbolically resolves societal conflicts, by first giving voice to distressing, and largely unaddressed, social contradictions and then offering a practical narrative solution.<sup>3</sup> *King Kong* and *Gone With the Wind* are modern films that have achieved the status of mythologies, in part, by thoroughly expressing white America's conflicted attitude of attraction and repulsion towards blackness, while not threatening to divide the social fabric of the nation by directly implicating African Americans.

*King Kong* was the culminating film of Ernest Schoedsacks' and Merian Cooper's directorial career. It followed a series of documentaries the two men collaborated on in Thailand and Iran. Like these films, *King Kong* began as an effort to retrieve exotic images of a very foreign land for the American viewing public.<sup>4</sup> With the new film, however, the Directors let their imaginations run wild. Previously they had offered sensitive portraits of mysterious lands. But the objective camera was not enough, it did little to express their true feelings about the alien subjects they were filming. Schoedsack and Cooper were no longer content to record what they saw. With *King Kong* they decided to record what they wanted to see.

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<sup>3</sup>Claude Levi-Strauss, "The Structural Study of Myth," in *Structural Anthropology* (NY: Anchor, 1967), 202-228.

<sup>4</sup>James Snead, *White Screen, Black Images: Hollywood From The Dark Side* (NY: Routledge, 1994), 16.

*King Kong* tells the story of Carl Denham, who, like Schoedsack and Cooper, is a film-maker with a "reputation for recklessness" who travels to exotic lands to bring back dramatic footage for the curious American public. His new film project is very mysterious. Before the ship he has chartered leaves, Denham reluctantly insists on finding a female star, in order to satisfy the popular taste: "The public, bless 'em, must have a pretty face to look at." He finds such a girl on the impoverished streets of New York. Ann Darrow, who is homeless and starving, agrees to join the expedition, after Denham rescues her from a shop lifting charge. Once the journey gets underway, Ann becomes acquainted with the misogynistic first mate Jack Driscoll.

Finally, Denham tells his bewildered crew about their destination "Skull Island" and its native legend of "Kong." Denham is convinced that something spectacular awaits their civilized eyes: "something neither beast nor man... monstrous, all-powerful, still living, still holding that island in a grip of deadly fear... I tell you there's something on that island that no white man has ever seen... if it's there, you bet I'll photograph it."

When they reach the island, the black natives are preparing to offer a native girl in sacrifice to Kong, but when they see Ann they insist on having her for their ceremony. The whites refuse and retreat to their ship. Later that night, after Jack Driscoll declares his love for her, Ann is captured off the ship by the natives, taken back to the island, and tied to a sacrificial altar for Kong. We see the giant ape King Kong for the first time, when he ferociously emerges from the jungle and carries Ann off in his arms.

The whites launch a desperate rescue party into the jungle, where they encounter a whole assortment of giant prehistoric beasts. Everyone on the mission is killed except for Driscoll and Denham. Eventually Driscoll is able to rescue Ann and carry her back to the remaining sailors, who are waiting

behind the natives' giant wall. The infuriated Kong storms out of the jungle, and crashes through the wall, laying waste to the native village. Finally the whites are able to capture Kong, with the use of gas grenades. Denham is determined to transport Kong back to civilization: "He's always been king of his world, but we'll teach him fear!"

Back in New York, Denham stages a dramatic Broadway presentation of Kong. Unfortunately the system of chains he has devised is not strong enough, as Kong breaks loose and proceeds to run amok throughout the city, smashing elevated subways and biting people. Kong searches for Ann, and finally recaptures her by reaching through the window of an apartment building he has scaled. Then Kong carries her to the top of the highest building in New York, the Empire State Building, where he is attacked by a swarm of U.S. military planes. Kong gently puts Ann down on a ledge, and tries to fend off the aerial assault. Slowly the machine gun fire wears the giant ape down, and eventually he looks down at Ann, then falls off the building to his death. Ann is reunited with Driscoll, while Denham stands by the fallen Kong, telling the gathered crowd: "It wasn't the airplanes, it was beauty killed the beast."

The giant ape Kong may not be intended as direct analogy to African American men, but he certainly is meant as a masculine embodiment of blackness. *King Kong* uses this conceptual idea of blackness, which has been abstracted and partially removed from its racial origins, as an effectual method of speaking indirectly to the white society's conflicted fascination with African Americans.

The black natives of Skull Island function as a crucial semiotic bridge linking the monster to racial blackness.. Kong is their god, but he is also their "king," which suggests a kind of kinship. When the natives capture Ann

from the ship they are narratively anticipating Kong's later act of abduction. During their ceremonies some of the natives are actually wearing furry suits, which visually mimic the appearance of Kong. The giant ape shares the natives' preference for white women. Instead of killing Ann, as he does with the black women and the dark haired woman he mistakes for Ann in New York, he spares the life of the blonde American girl and carries her around as a kind of portable fetish. Similarly, when the natives see Ann they become very excited, offering six black women in exchange; Denham says: "Yeah, blondes are pretty scarce around here."

Significantly the abstract blackness which the film constructs is constantly at war with itself, thus vicariously staging the internal conflicts, both social and sexual, of the white observers. As in *Hallelujah*, when Zeke boxes with the invisible devil, the coded representatives of blackness are struggling for inner sovereignty, which is actually the transposed conflict of whites. When Kong battles the prehistoric beast, the writhing creatures are united in a single terrifying spectacle of blackness. The screeches of pain, the thrashing black bodies, the extreme violence, and the intense music all blend into a concerted vision of chaos. Who does the white viewer pull for in these black on black confrontations? It doesn't matter really, because it is hard to take sides in a battle within yourself.

More than anything, these monster fights are about white sexual anxiety. The fact that the white rescue party are also facing the prehistoric creatures emphasizes the symbolic importance of these monster fights for the white audience. Every one of these beasts has some distinctively phallic quality. The long neck of the water monster emerges from the misty lake like a giant black penis. After the whites mortally wound the stegosaurus, they

think it is dead until its long tail begins to rise slowly off the ground: "One swipe of that thing could..."

Of course, the most obvious example of the sexual contention inherent in these monster fights can be seen when Kong battles the giant black snake. At one point the serpent seems to have the upper hand, as it wraps itself around Kong's throat, in sense, choking the ape with his own phallic energy. Finally Kong kills the snake by beating it against a rock. Kong is quiet for a moment as he holds the now limp snake in his hands, slowly swinging it back and forth, before dropping it on ground. For a moment he almost seems emasculated himself, until finally he releases the snake and roars victoriously, pounding his chest to assert his masculine power.

On the one hand, this triumph of Kong's manhood is appealing to the white men in the audience, who by this point have subconsciously situated themselves within the internal black conflict. While on the other hand, the relatively drawn out image of the lifeless phallus can not help but be disturbing for a white audience who has been led to view this conflict as a singular struggle; two sides of blackness, or vicarious whiteness, doing battle with themselves. This vision of impotence (the limp snake) rearticulates the white castration anxiety, which, as we have already seen, was central to white racial attitudes towards African Americans.

Here again the island natives serve as a visual linkage between the coded role of the monsters and their black human counterparts. When Kong breaks through the towering gate leading to the native village (a climactic breach akin to hymenal penetration), he attacks the black villagers with the same ferocity he demonstrated against the black monsters. On two occasions Kong places black men under his feet and squishes them into the deep black mud, thus entombing them in the primordial gook, which, as we have

already seen, had become a redundant signifier of blackness in Hollywood films.

This black on black violence now moves away from its function as a surrogate white struggle, and becomes a pure expression of racial hostility against blacks. What becomes of the native islanders? Their people are dead, their village is destroyed, and their god is captured, but the minute Jack Denham declares: "We're millionaires, boys!" the camera abandons Skull Island entirely. The native blacks are cinematically exterminated.

One of *King Kong's* most enduring qualities is its filmic capacity for multiple identification. White audiences could subconsciously identify with Kong, while consciously rooting for his white adversaries. The filmmakers use several techniques to achieve this effect. First of all, Kong's facial expressions are highly evolved, which allows the audience to recognize the full range of human emotions: anger, fear, pain, and sadness. His mouth is especially effective in conveying this humanizing effect; at moments we are alienated by his ferocious roar, while other times his quivering mouth transmits a sense of tenderness.

As James Snead points out in his essay "Spectatorship and Capture in *King Kong*" the camera encourages this multiple identification, by adopting a highly fluid point of view.<sup>5</sup> On several occasions, we are shown the camera perspective of Kong as he examines his helpless captive Ann. In fact, when Kong first emerges from the woods to capture Ann, we see her writhing and screaming from Kong's high angle, which mirrors almost identically the earlier scene in which Denham, who is running a screen test, asks Ann to look up and scream at an imaginary horror. On this earlier occasion, Kong's high angle is occupied by Driscoll and Captain Englehorn, who are watching

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<sup>5</sup>Ibid, 23.

from the parapet. By placing the white romantic lead in the same cinematic perspective as Kong, the film allows the white audience to experience vicariously the black sexual advance.

Ernest Hemingway uses a similar appropriation of the beast's perspective, as a method of asserting white masculinity, in his story "The Short and Happy Life of Francis Macomber" (1936). The story takes place in Africa. In the midst of a safari, Hemingway suddenly switches to the point of view of a charging lion, who is stopped in his tracks by the raffles of a white hunter.<sup>6</sup> This inverted perspective produces mixed audience emotions at the animal's death, which is similar to the audience's conflicted reaction to Kong's death.

One of the most striking scenes of the film is when Ann passes out in Kong's arms, leading to an extended sequence of perverse voyeurism as the giant ape slowly peels off the unconscious girl's garments, exposing her nearly nude body. The audience is transfixed by the horrifying spectacle. The Max Steiner score works to suspend time, as the violent Wagnerian motifs disappear and are replaced by ethereal atmospheric tension.<sup>7</sup> The black beast is on the sexual threshold. The audience surrenders itself to the sado-masochistic fantasy of a delicate white woman being ravaged by an impossibly large phallic power. As Kong flicks away Ann's clothing, the music mirrors his actions with playful tickling sounds. When Ann awakes she begins to squirm orgasmically, lifting her knees to protect her vagina from Kong's huge black fingers. It is a moment of extreme fear and extreme delight, similar to Elsie Stoneman's abduction in *The Birth of a Nation*. The calming music permits the audience fantasy, which would otherwise be impossible if the

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<sup>6</sup>Ernest Hemingway, "The Short and Happy Life of Francis Macomber," *The Snows of Kilimanjaro, and Other Stories* (NY: Collier Books, 1961), 137.

<sup>7</sup>Snead, 19.



movements were frantic and uncontrolled. As Freud writes, "Terror is a passion which always produces delight when it does not press too close."<sup>8</sup>

The power of the image is generated from the erotic juxtaposition of two tremendously different beings: the delicate blonde girl and hulking black beast. At the same time, the visual combination draws its strength from more than the clashing opposition between the two, because the film also asks us to view Kong and Ann as constituent parts of a single conceptual image: a unified symbol of social transgression. Denham recognizes the importance of this thematic combination from the very beginning of the film. He mentions "beauty and the beast" as a "theme" even before they reach the island. Kong and Ann must be brought together in order for his voyeuristic scheme to work; as he tells her in the screen test: "It's horrible, Ann, but you can't look away!"

In a sense, Kong and Ann are both monstrous creations of the white male imagination.<sup>9</sup> The film draws unmistakable parallels between the girl and the ape. At one point on the way to the island, Ann is playing with a little monkey, while talking to Jack Driscoll. Denham arrives on the scene and says: "Beauty and the beast, eh?" Driscoll looks at Ann and then jokes to Denham: "Well now, I never thought I was good looking." Does he mean to suggest that Ann is the beast? After all, her last name is Darrow, as in Clarence Darrow, the pro-evolution lawyer in the 1925 Scopes "Monkey Trial."<sup>10</sup> Later when Denham is staging the screen test, Driscoll becomes mortified by Ann when she screams. Although he is located high above her on a parapet, the sound of her outcry causes him to recoil away from her and

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<sup>8</sup>Camille Paglia, *Sexual Personae* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1991), 269.

<sup>9</sup>Herther Derby, "Beauty and the Beast: Darwinian Gender Roles in King Kong," 4.

<sup>10</sup>Snead, 9.

fearfully grab hold of the captain who is standing next to him. Later Driscoll admits to Ann: "I'm scared for you. I'm sort of scared of you too."

Kong, the encoded black male, and Ann, the displaced white female, are two sides of the same fear. In *Light in August* (1932) William Faulkner's Joe Christmas employs a similar unification of threatening others, in his conjunction of the word "womenshenegro."<sup>11</sup> But nowhere is this dynamic more clear than in the 1932 Joseph von Sternberg film *Blonde Venus*, which anticipates King Kong's merging of racial and gender transgression. Helen Faraday (Marlene Dietrich) is a white housewife who becomes a nightclub performer in order to support her ill husband. In one of her routines, entitled "Hot Voodoo," she takes the stage disguised in a black gorilla suit, surrounded by "African" natives. The audience has no idea that Helen is the chained gorilla, until she slowly starts to reveal her white skin, beginning with her hands and working her way to her head. When she finally emerges, wearing a giant blonde afro, we are meant to feel the threatening connection between the ferocious jungle ape and the transgressive femme fatale.<sup>12</sup>

King Kong presents the white male gaze as an antithesis to the unified other of the black ape and the white girl, but the film also seems to recognize the rapacious violence and potential for corruption inherent in Denham's visual appetite. As the American Naturalist Carl Akeley demonstrated in his wildlife expeditions in Africa, the desire for visual possession easily transfers to the desire for material possession, which can only be achieved through violence. In his memoirs Akeley describes how he would photograph gorillas for hours until "feeling that I had about all I could expect," he acted

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<sup>11</sup>Michael Rogin, Michael, "The Sword Became a Flashing Vision," in *Ronald Reagan, The Movie* (Berkeley, The University of California Press, 1987), 207.

<sup>12</sup>Snead, 72.

on his need to actually retain the animals, by replacing his camera with his rifle and shooting them. Inevitably this was followed by a "feeling of regret."<sup>13</sup> Denham undergoes a similar transformation, when he decides to capture Kong instead of merely photographing him: "We came here to get a moving picture and we've found something worth more than all the movies in the world!"

This corruption of the white male gaze, actually points to the dangers of Hollywood's use of blackness as "a show to gratify your curiosity." The white civilization (New York City) is nearly destroyed because of Denham's greedy desire to objectify Kong and Ann. Kong's escape seems to suggest the tragic folly of the white male desire to contain blackness, while simultaneously experiencing it. You can't have it both ways. Significantly, Kong breaks free of his chains at the very moment that the photographers' flash bulbs begin to pop, symbolically escaping from the visual oppression of the white society. Denham tries to stop the photographers, yelling: "He thinks you're attacking Ann!" Which, in a sense, they are.

If, as we have seen, Ann is a part of the same enigmatic creation as Kong, then the camera's gaze is just as threatening to her as it is to the giant ape. During Denham's screen test of Ann, he talks about his camera like a gun. She asks him if he personally takes the pictures, and Denham replies: "Ever since the trip I made to Africa. I would of had a swell picture of a charging rhino but the cameraman got scared. That darn fool, I was right there with the rifle. I'm through with cameramen, since. I do it myself." Denham then applies the camera's violent masculinity to Ann, when he films her cowering from an invisible menace; he supplies the language and

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<sup>13</sup>Donna Haraway, "Teddy Bear Patriarchy: Taxidermy in the Garden of Eden, New York City, 1908-1936," in *Primate Visions: Gender, Race, and Nature in the World of Modern Science* (NY: Routledge, 1989), 33.

imagery of her abduction. More than the giant ape, the real threat to the girl becomes the camera itself, as Denham yells: "There's no chance for you Ann! There's no escape! You're helpless, Ann! Helpless!"

When Kong escapes in New York, the white society pays for its hegemonic tyranny. During the Depression years African Americans suffered worst of all. Kong's destructive rampage through the city of New York is a subconscious embodiment the white nation's guilty nightmare of the Great Migration gone bad. Before Kong's Broadway debut one white spectator says to his wife: "I hear it's some kind of gorilla." To which she replies, "Ain't we got enough of them in New York?"

The newly arrived beast smashes windows, subways, and automobiles, while the white authorities are powerless to stop him. How similar is Ralph Ellison's description of the 1935 black Harlem uprising to Kong's spree of urban chaos:

I could see a crowd rushing a store..., moving in,... as now out of the dark of the intersecting street two mounted policemen came at a gallop... charging straight into the swarming mass. And I could see the great forward lunge of the horses and the crowd breaking and rolling back like a wave, back, and screaming and cursing, and some laughing as the horses went over... And my heart tightened as the first crowd swung imperturbably back to their looting with derisive cries...<sup>14</sup>

The film gives voice to this terrible vision of social chaos, but like all successful myths, the frightening uncertainty is resolved. When Kong climbs the Empire State Building, his black phallic power is literally dwarfed by the tremendous phallic potential of the building. The primitive beast is overwhelmed by the modern feat of technical engineering. In his description of the riot, Ellison writes: "If only it could stop right here, here; here before the (authorities) came with their guns."<sup>15</sup> Kong's demise on the elevated

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<sup>14</sup>Greenberg, 4.

<sup>15</sup>Ibid, 4.

structure is really a giant lynching, an ad hoc punishment for his transgressive sexuality. Kong is able to dominate the city for a time, until the whites are able to apply their cerebral intelligence and make use of their technical superiority. In the end, we are told that the primitive black world is no match for the civilized white world.

But despite the narrative resolution (Driscoll and Ann are reunited, peace is restored to the city, and the antagonist monster is dead), the audience is still left with mixed emotions. When Denham looks at the fallen black beast he shrugs ambivalently, before delivering his triumphant final line. Like Carl Akeley, Denham and white audience are stuck with "a feeling of regret," because by killing Kong they have been forced to vanquish their own anti-social instincts in favor of the controlled procedures of modern society.<sup>16</sup> Ann's denouement in the arms of Jack Driscoll, feels more than a little disappointing after her delirious captivity in the hands of blackness.

*King Kong* insists that white society can not have it both ways. It can not appropriate blackness, without dealing with its full ramifications. In the end, the white society is forced to relinquish its primitive longings in favor of rational authority. This entire dialogue, which covers the full scope of America's racial dynamics, is carried on in a very abstracted manner. Hollywood had discovered the benefits of cinematic codes, which allowed it to disguise, on a subliminal level, what was essentially inflammatory material, while still maintaining the social order on the surface.

Nowhere was this new method more effectively applied than in the monumentally successful film *Gone With the Wind*. By 1939 the crises years of the Great Depression had passed. The government work projects and social assistance programs had been effective in moving the country away the

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<sup>16</sup>Haraway, 33.

brink of chaotic upheaval, which was a reality in 1933, the year of *King Kong*. Nonetheless, the nation's working class population was still languishing in poverty, both rural and urban, despite the social welfare policies of Roosevelt Administration. This was particularly true of the nation's black population. Racial tension was still linked very closely to the economic well being of the nation, and in 1939 Hollywood remained particularly wary of depicting blacks in a provokingly negative or unstable light, at least in their surface representations. *Gone With the Wind*'s producer David O. Selznick wrote in a memorandum, "I, for one, have no desire to produce an anti-Negro film... In our picture I think we have to be awfully careful that the Negroes come out decidedly on the right side of the ledger."<sup>17</sup> This unofficial policy became even more of an imperative with the growing likelihood that the United States would soon be involved in the war against Germany and Japan. When the war did come, racial harmony would be absolutely essential, both on the home front as well in ranks of the military.

Despite these political considerations, Hollywood still turned to blackness as its most tried and effective method of exploring the central mysteries of white identity. For the purposes of this study, we will concentrate less on the real African American characters of *Gone With the Wind*, whose submissive presence is essentially benign, while instead we will examine the ways in which the film removes the most impassioned aspects of blackness from its logical progenitors and locates it within the white struggles at heart of the narrative. *Gone With the Wind* is a long and narratively complex film, and any effort to cover the full scope of its social outlook would certainly require more space this study can afford.

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<sup>17</sup>Thomas Cripps, "The Winds of Change: *Gone With the Wind* and Racism as a National Issue," in *Recasting: Gone With the Wind and American Culture* (Miami: University Presses of Florida, 1983), 140.

The film is remarkably similar to *The Birth of a Nation* both in its format and subject matter. Like the earlier film, *Gone With the Wind* divides the narrative with an intermission, splitting the story between the ante-bellum and post-bellum periods. While both films involve the trials and struggles of the white plantation society of the South, *The Birth of a Nation* concentrates on the public struggle around which the private struggle evolves, while *Gone With the Wind* gives more emphasis to the inner personal struggles which are then situated against the public backdrop of the war and Reconstruction. Both films are undeniable landmarks in the history of American cinema, and as we will see *Gone With the Wind*, like *The Birth of a Nation*, employs race as its central point of social discourse, as well as its principal motivation. But unlike the earlier film, *Gone With the Wind* uses race in such an obfuscated framework that its full meaning most likely evaded even the conscious imagination of its creators. For as we will see, the film effectively reduces blackness to an subconscious idea, the meaning of which is very real but entirely abstract.

The story follows most closely the life of Scarlett O'Hara, the strong willed daughter of Gerald and Ellen O'Hara, the owners of a large plantation in Georgia named Tara. At the beginning of the film we learn of Scarlett's love for Ashley Wilkes, a refined gentleman who has recently become engaged to his cousin Melanie Hamilton. As the men prepare to leave for the Civil War, Scarlett decides to marry an immature young man named Charles Hamilton in an act of jealous spite directed at Ashley. Charles Hamilton dies from sickness very shortly thereafter.

The young widow Scarlett decides to move to Atlanta to live with Melanie, in order to keep abreast of Ashley's activities. Scarlett renews her flirtatious but ostensibly unfriendly acquaintance with Rhett Butler of

Charleston, a shady businessman turned heroic blockade runner. As the war turns against the South, Scarlett is forced to stay in Atlanta and care for Melanie, who is pregnant with Ashley's child, despite the approach of Sherman's invading army. After the child is born, Rhett Butler is summoned from a party at Belle Watley's brothel to help Scarlett, Melanie and child, and a listless black servant named Prissy escape from Atlanta.

After a dramatic flight out of the city, Rhett abandons the women on the road to Tara, in order to join the "lost cause" of the Confederate Army. The women travel through the battle scarred landscape, until they reach Melanie's home Twelve Oaks, which has been burned to the ground. When they finally reach Tara, which is still standing, despite having been pillaged by the Union Army, Scarlett discovers her mother has died and her father has lost his rational mind. The only other people left in the house are Scarlett's sisters Suellen and Carreen, and the loyal black house servants Mammy and Pork. The first half of the film ends with Scarlett looking out on the barren plantation and vowing to raise her family from defeat, even if she has to "lie, steal, cheat, or kill."

Which is exactly what she does, beginning immediately after the intermission. Scarlett shoots a Union soldier who is stealing jewelry from the house. Scarlett and Melanie then empty the dead man's pockets, finding a "good deal of money." Shortly thereafter, Gerald O'Hara dies in a riding accident, while chasing away the carpet bagger who has threatened to buy out Tara unless they can raise five hundred dollars to pay their taxes. Dressed in gown made from her mother's green curtains, Scarlett goes to see Rhett Butler, who is in a jail run by Union soldiers, to try to cajole him into giving her the tax money. When Rhett discovers her hidden motive for visiting him, he angrily sends her away. She then runs into an old family friend



Frank Kennedy, who is engaged to marry her sister Suellen. When Scarlett learns of his financial success, she seduces Frank into marrying her in Suellen's place.

After the war, Scarlett becomes a prosperous business woman, and carves out an independent lifestyle in Atlanta, running the store and lumber business with her husband and Ashley. One day Scarlett is accosted by thugs, while driving her buggy through "Shantytown." She is rescued by Big Sam, the former black slave foreman from Tara. The white men then launch a raid to "clear out those woods" where Scarlett was attacked. Frank Kennedy is killed during the raid, and once again Scarlett is a widow. Rhett Butler then proposes marriage to her, and Scarlett agrees, although she insists that she does not love him.

Rhett and Scarlett go on an extravagant honeymoon and buy a huge mansion in Atlanta. After Scarlett gives birth to a girl named Bonny Blue Butler, she tells Rhett she never wants to have any more children. Rhett begins to suspect that Scarlett still loves Ashley, and eventually he takes Bonny away with him to London. When Bonny gets homesick they return, and Scarlett informs Rhett that she is once again pregnant, a condition which is soon terminated when Scarlett falls down the steps. After Scarlett recovers, their little girl Bonny is killed in a riding accident like her grandfather Gerald O'Hara. Rhett then goes "mad" with grief, and refuses to abandon the body of his dead child. Finally Melanie convinces him to let her go, after which Melanie herself collapses on the floor, becoming mortally ill.

When Melanie dies, Rhett decides to leave for his native Charleston, believing that Scarlett will surely pursue Ashley now that his wife is dead. But Scarlett suddenly realizes that she "never really loved Ashley," and she desperately tries to stop Rhett from leaving, telling him that she truly loves

him. Rhett refuses to listen, and walks out of her life with the immortal words: "Frankly my dear I don't give a damn!" Scarlett finally recalls her father's fateful advice that "land is the only thing that matters," and she decides to start her life anew at her old home Tara.

On the surface, the convoluted plot structure of *Gone With the Wind* has very little to do with issues of race, aside from the stereotypical characterizations of black servants. As we will see, however, the film weaves race into the very fabric of its structure, by using disassociated codes of blackness to portray many of the central events of the white narrative. This process is most evident on the two occasions when Scarlett's safety is threatened by intrusive strangers, who on the surface are white.

The renegade Union soldier who comes into the O'Hara home is constructed in much the same way as Gus, the black renegade soldier from *The Birth of a Nation*. Indeed, the two scenes seem to be in cinematic dialogue with each other. Both men show immediate sexual interest in the unprotected white woman, and both approach the objects of their desire in a similar spatial framework. Gus slowly advances on the Cameron girl from below, until he finally reaches her pinnacle position on the mountain, at which point she throws herself off the cliff. The sequence in *Gone With the Wind* reverses the equation, by having the sexual aggressor reach Scarlett's exalted position on the staircase, at which point *he* is shot in the face and falls down to *his* death.

After Scarlett shoots the man, Melanie immediately appears from her sick chamber at the top of the stairs, meekly dragging Charles Hamilton's ceremonial sword. This image again points the racial groundwork of the scene, because it directly mirrors an event from the author Margaret Mitchell's childhood. During the summer of 1906, the young girl suggested

the use of her family's ancestral sword in order to ward off the "negro mobs" that were rioting in the city of Atlanta. Her father wrote, "I had no gun and could only get the axe and waterkey. When Margaret suggested that Mr. Daley's sword would be a good thing, I adopted the suggestion."<sup>18</sup>

After Scarlett kills the man, the scene becomes strangely sexual as Melenie is forced to remove her white nightgown to soak up the blood. Melanie is embarrassed at having to expose her naked body. Scarlett says: "Oh don't be silly, I won't look at you. If I wore a petticoat or pantalets I'd use them. Thank goodness I'm not that modest." The camera voyeuristically follows the white nightgown as it slides down Melanie's body to the floor. Then we see her peering around the corner, hiding her naked body, as Scarlett wraps the garment around the Yankee soldier's bloody head.

This combination of the Southern woman's symbolic purity (the white gown) with the spilled blood of her Yankee assailant, is reminiscent of the ritualistic scene in *The Birth of a Nation* when the Cameron girl's blood is nearly mixed with that of Gus, the black Union soldier who tried to rape her. Both scenes function as titillating visions of debased white purity.

The substitution of a white character in a connotatively black situation is even more evident, when Scarlett is assaulted while driving her buggy over a bridge near "Shantytown." On her way into the area, she passes by makeshift houses and ragtag inhabitants. Most of the people milling around appear to be black. However, when the two men approach her buggy to assault her only one of them is black, and he is content to remain in the background, holding the bridle of her horse. The white man, on the other

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<sup>18</sup>Joel Williamson, "How Black Was Rhett Butler," *The Evolution of Southern Culture* (Athens: University of Georgia, 1988), 92.

hand, grabs hold of Scarlett and leans in towards her face. As Scarlett faints, the man's smiling sweaty face slowly moves into an expanding close-up.

Again the film has taken the visual language of a black sexual assault and transcribed it vicariously onto a white man. In Mitchell's novel the assailants are reversed. The white man remains in the background, holding the horse, while the black man moves in on Scarlett: "...the negro came running to the buggy, his black face twisted in a leering grin... The negro was beside her, so close that she could smell the rank odor of him as he tried to drag her over the buggy side."<sup>19</sup>

Scarlett is rescued by her former slave Big Sam, who punches out the white man and pulls her buggy back away from the edge. While Big Sam is checking on Scarlett's condition, the other black man jumps on his back. The two men wrestle on the bridge, until finally Big Sam victoriously casts the assailant over the side; we see him falling down towards the water from an extreme high angle, until his bloodcurdling scream is cut off by the splash. The image of the two black men tangling on the bridge, while the white woman's buggy balances precariously on the edge, represents the essential dichotomy of the black image in the white mind (chaos vs. order, with white female purity hanging in the balance).

Finally the controlled side of blackness wins out, as Big Sam throws the scalawag off the bridge. The white audience witnesses this event from a camera angle so high that a small crane must have been employed, which points to the director's desire to look down at the struggle in a symbolic context, removing it from the superior realm of whiteness. After Big Sam brings Scarlett home, the unruly side of blackness is officially contained,

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<sup>19</sup>Margaret Mitchell, *Gone With the Wind* (NY: The Macmillan Co, 1936), 788.

when Frank Kennedy tells Big Sam to go back to his old home at Tara and "stay there." The heroic black man replies: "I sure will, I've had enough of them carpetbaggers!" The ideology is clear: the black man has had a taste of freedom and has voluntarily chosen to return his old ante-bellum existence. In 1939, the message likely would have been received, at least on some level, as a statement about the folly of the Great Migration. Big Sam's home/away/home transition, though less central, is similar to Zeke's narrative progression in *Hallelujah*.

The most significant example of *Gone With the Wind*'s use of encoded blackness can actually be seen in the film's characterization of Rhett Butler, the white male protagonist. In his essay entitled "How Black Was Rhett Butler?" Joel Williamson argues that Margaret Mitchell's novel constructs Rhett's character with the distinctive qualities of a black man, in terms of linguistic color imagery, as well as "his behavior and attitude towards work and sex."<sup>20</sup> Although it lacks the book's vernacular flourishes, the film preserves and, at times, even extends Mitchell's racialized characterization of Rhett.

Throughout the film Rhett demonstrates an unusual ability to cross over social boundaries. We are told he is from Charleston, and yet he seems to have a friendly rapport with Yankees. During the war, he is able to move easily between military and civilian life. After Scarlett gives birth to Bonny, Rhett transcends his role as father and seems to adopt a maternal attitude towards his daughter. At one point, while he is riding around town with Bonny on the front of his horse, he enters into a child care discussion with some old ladies: "My Bonny sucks her thumb, I can't make her stop it... I tried putting soap on her nails." He is a character who defies classification; he

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<sup>20</sup>Williamson, 97.

refuses to identify himself with any side, because as he tells Scarlett: "I believe in Rhett Butler, he's the only cause I know. The rest doesn't mean much to me."

Nowhere is his indistinct nature more evident than in his appropriation of blackness. When ever Rhett talks with Mammy he affects an undeniably black accent. While Rhett is waiting to see his new born child, he and Mammy start drinking whiskey together straight out of the bottle. He begins to genuinely flirt with her in his Negro dialect:

*Rhett:* What's that rustlin' noise I hear?

*Mammy:* Why that ain't nothing but my red silk petty coat you done give me.

*Rhett:* Nothing but yo' petty coat? I don't believe you. Let me see. Pull up yo' shirt!

*Mammy:* Mr. Rhett you is bad!

(She backs away from him and pulls up her shirt to reveal the red undergarment)

*Rhett:* You sho' took a long enough time wearing it!

Rhett's sexual attitude towards Mammy in this scene is impossible to overlook. Their interchange has a socially deviant quality, which is emphasized when Melanie interrupts their conversation to tell Rhett his child has been born. When Melanie enters the room, both Rhett and Mammy appear startled, and Mammy tries to conceal the whiskey bottle. Faced with the reality of his whiteness (the birth of his own daughter), Rhett rushes out of the room, abandoning his flirtation with Mammy. In this manner, Rhett shifts between racial identities with the same fluidity that he displays in his shifts between gender and social identities.

The film directly contrasts Rhett's virile masculinity with Ashley's weakness and passivity. If Ashley is the embodiment of whiteness (Mitchell describes him as "sunny haired"), then Rhett is his polar opposite.<sup>21</sup> In the

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<sup>21</sup>Ibid, 98.

film, he always wears dark clothing, except ironically on the day when the casualty lists appear from Gettysburg, on which occasion he wears white. In the book, Mitchell constantly describes him as "dark" or "swarthy."<sup>22</sup> At one point, Scarlett wants to "hold the whip over his insolent black head."<sup>23</sup>

The racialized quality of Rhett and Scarlett's relationship is patently clear in the scene in which they dance together at the Confederate ball. Rhett bids for Scarlett in the benefit "slave auction." Dr. Meade tells Rhett that she will "not consider it" because she is in mourning for her husband Charles Hamilton. Nonetheless, Rhett and Scarlett dance together to spite convention, shocking the crowd and causing Aunt Pittypat to swoon. "It's a little like blockade running isn't it?," says Scarlett. Their dance has the distinctive aura of miscegenation, as if by dancing together they are breaking some inviolable Southern taboo. As Rhett says, "We've sort of shocked the Confederacy, Scarlett."

Rhett and Scarlett are the only figures dressed entirely in black, which dramatically juxtaposes them against the other dancers. In a film that uses Technicolor as consciously as *Gone With the Wind*, this image must have some significance, although perhaps its true meaning was not the conscious intent of the filmmakers. James Snead describes how the color black can have a racial meaning in Hollywood films, even when the color is removed from a observable racial context: "...we seem to find the color black overdetermined, marked redundantly, almost as if to force the viewer to register the image's difference from white images. Marking makes it visually clear that black skin is a 'natural' condition turned into a 'man made' sign."<sup>24</sup> A perfect example

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<sup>22</sup>Ibid, 97.

<sup>23</sup>Mitchell, 941.

<sup>24</sup>Snead, 5.

is the evil Darth Vader's black suit in *Star Wars* (1977), which "marks" James Earl Jones' abstracted black voice.

Rhett Butler's unstable temperament is another way in which he is used to encode qualities that are socially constructed as black. Throughout the film we see flashes of Rhett's violent anger, as when he kicks down the door to Scarlett's room and throws his drinking glass at her portrait. After Bonny dies, Rhett goes temporarily insane, and his rational mind is not restored until Melanie, the ultimate figure of white decorum, comes to visit him. We learn of his condition from Mammy, as she and Melanie slowly walk up the stairs towards the room where he is guarding Bonny's corpse. Mammy says: "He done lost his mind these last couple days. I ain't seen any man, black or white, set such a sto' by any chile." Mammy reports that when Scarlett told Rhett about the funeral plans, he replied, "You try that and I'll kill you! You think I'm going to put my child in the dark where she's scared of it." This monstrous image is allowed to build in the viewer's mind as Mammy and Melanie slowly approach his room. When Melanie knocks on the door, Rhett yells, "Get away from that door! Leave us alone!" When he finally opens the door, we see him hunched by the door in a black silhouette. Once again, Rhett's dark appearance is overdetermined, in this case, through lighting techniques.

Perhaps the most important factor that links Rhett Butler to blackness is his sexually aggressive attitude towards Scarlett. When he kisses her roughly on the lips, he says, "I want you to faint! This is what you were meant for. None of the fools you've known have ever kissed you like this, not Charles, or Frank, or your stupid Ashley!" Indeed, Rhett's kiss is dramatically contrasted with Ashley's reluctant and passive kiss. This juxtaposition, once again, points to the psychological anxiety of white



America, as the sexual power of the encoded black figure threatens to dwarf the relative sexual impotence of the white figure.

After Scarlett returns from Ashley's birthday party, she finds Rhett crouching in the dark dining room, highly intoxicated. Again he is framed in the doorway in a black silhouette, Mitchell describes his appearance as "a terrifying faceless black bulk."<sup>25</sup> When he puts his "large brown hands" around Scarlett's head, he seems to be on the verge of violent eruption, like Zeke in *Hallelujah*.<sup>26</sup> Rhett says:

Observe my hands my dear. I could tear you to pieces with them, and I'd do it if it would take Ashley out of your mind forever, but it wouldn't. So I'll remove him from your mind this way, I'll put my hands so, one on either side of your head, and I'll smash your skull between them like a walnut.

Scarlett tries to walk away, telling him: "You'll never corner me Rhett Butler, or frighten me. You've lived in dirt so long you can't understand anything else." Finally Rhett loses control. Like King Kong breaking out of his chains, Rhett's forceful sexual advance on Scarlett is a highly charged moment of racial imagery, which speaks to the white audience's vacillating and conflicted view of black sexual aggression. He sweeps her off her feet and carries her into the pitch black space at the top of the stairs, disappearing from sight. It is both frightening and exhilarating. Mitchell's description of the scene expresses the white society's collateral feelings of fear and attraction towards the conceptual black rapist:

He was a mad stranger and this was a black darkness she did not know, darker than death... She was darkness and he was darkness and there had never been anything before this time, only darkness and his lips upon her... Suddenly she had a wild thrill such as she had never

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<sup>25</sup>Mitchell, 933.

<sup>26</sup>Ibid, 937.

known; joy, fear, madness, excitement, surrender to arms that were too strong, lips too bruising, fate that moved too fast...<sup>27</sup>

Gail Bederman maintains that the white society's obsession with the idea of the black rapist was a way for white men to express an alternative form of masculinity, which was not acceptable in civilized society:

Because 'The Negro rapist' represented the opposite of civilized manliness, he also represented primitive masculinity in its purest, most primal form. The male sex drive itself was widely considered a masculine trait— all men, regardless of race or moral status, had it. By discussing the Negro rapist in such obsessive detail, white men were investigating new visions of what "masculinity" might be, unfettered by civilization.<sup>28</sup>

Certainly, this formulation makes a lot of sense. Rhett's forceful sexual advance affirms his masculine authority in a way that the traditional "civilized" model never could. The next morning, Scarlett is literally beaming after her violent night with Rhett, and the film suggests that her happiness stems from her passivity in the face of Rhett's black masculinity. The song she sings in the morning is telling: "She wept with delight when he gave her a smile and trembled with fear at his frown."

But there is also more to it than this. By confining the phenomenon of the black rapist to the white male imagination, Bederman underestimates the full dimensions of America's racial complex. This was not *only* about alternative masculinity, because after all, *Gone With the Wind* was written by a woman. Blackness was a Bacchanalian philosophy, which called into question every aspect of white life in America: money, art, religion, marriage, and sex. Blackness was a modern day mystery. In world where everything had been explored, mapped, and organized into categories, there was

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<sup>27</sup>Ibid, 939-940.

<sup>28</sup>Gail Bederman, *Manliness & Civilization* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1995) 46.

something endlessly intriguing in the idea of losing control, dropping all inhibitions, and vanishing into the unknown, "a darkness that was soft and swirling and all enveloping."<sup>29</sup> Clearly from Mitchell's language, and its popular reception, this attraction was not limited to men.

As with *King Kong*, the ending of *Gone With the Wind* leaves the audience with mixed emotions. On one hand, there is resolution; Scarlett and Rhett have decided to return to their roots, abandoning the extravagant excesses of their post-bellum life "to see if somewhere there isn't something left of charm and grace." Rhett returns to Charleston, and Scarlett returns to Tara. The chaos of their life together is ended in favor of the old civilized order.

On the other hand, the audience is left with a feeling of regret. The blackness of Rhett Butler is tragically renounced. "It seems we're at cross purposes," he says. The white society can not adopt the emotional and sexual freedom of the black society. As a result, the romantic split at the end of the narrative mirrors the personal disjunction of white identity.

*King Kong* and *Gone With the Wind* were both wildly successful films, which achieved the status of mythologies, in part, by giving voice to the racial fantasies and fears of the dominant society, without employing the visual language of racial conflict. This new method of cinematic coding marked a dramatic change in cultural tactics from the confrontational ideology of D.W. Griffith, although, below the surface, the same conflicted attitudes towards race appear. American cinema had come a long way in twenty-four years, though clearly it still carried a heavy load of cultural violence and depredation.

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<sup>29</sup>Mitchell, 940.

I been wond'rin' all about me  
Ever since I seen you there.  
On the cliffs of your wild cat charms I'm riding,  
I know I'm round you but I don't know where.  
You have slayed me, you have made me,  
I got to laugh halfways off my heels.  
I got to know, babe, will you surround me  
So I can know if I am really real?

- Bob Dylan  
-"Spanish Harlem Incident" (1964)

Conclusion:  
**White Rebels:**  
**Rhett Butler and the Rock and Roll Experience**

Rhett Butler is a seminal figure in American culture. Like so many white American icons of the twentieth century, his fictional persona is that of a rebel. He is a existentialist loner: "I believe in Rhett Butler, he's the only cause I know." He exists on the borders of society. And like the rebels that would follow him (Elvis Presley, James Dean, Norman Mailer, Bob Dylan, and Madonna to name a few), Rhett's rebellion is most thoroughly achieved by his appropriation of blackness. This trend of white Americans adopting the tropes of black culture, in a search for personal freedom, continues unabated to this day.

But Rhett Butler also signals another trend in American society, which is the removal of blackness from its racial context. Whites Americans have slowly developed the capacity during the twentieth-century to act like black Americans without the rhetoric of cultural exchange. Rhett is coded as a black man, but his behavior does not come across as a parody or a statement about blacks. He is not a minstrel performer. Instead, Rhett's emotional behavior is understood as an expression of his essential nature as a person. The instinctual drive no longer is consciously associated with blackness. Rhett Butler is a forerunner of this trend, which by the late twentieth-century has almost become a reality. In 1997, a pulsating room full of white college students, writhing on a dance floor, does not feels like a racial masquerade. Chaotic behavior is no longer considered the soul province of blackness. Norman Mailer's idea of the "White Negro" is no longer connected consciously to racial cross dressing, because by the end of the twentieth-

century the battle between hip and square exists not so much as a societal struggle as it does in the mind of each individual, regardless of race; a fact which Mailer himself seemed to anticipate: "The only Hip morality... is to do what one feels whenever and wherever it is possible, and — this is how the war of the Hip and the Square begins— to be engaged in one primal battle: to open the limits of the possible for oneself, for oneself alone."<sup>1</sup> Is this what we now see on the college weekend? Is the adoption of this existentialist philosophy a sign that white Americans are finally coming to terms with their emotional and sexual selves, without the assistance of racial masks?

More likely this trend points to the fact that black culture has now been so thoroughly integrated into the consciousness of white America that the society in general has lost sight of the original strain. The history of rock and roll music, perhaps the purist distillation of America's Dionysian instincts, is the history of this transmission. As John Szwed observes: "The fact that, say, a Mick Jagger can today perform in the blackface tradition without blackface simply marks the detachment of culture from race and the almost full absorption of a black tradition into white culture."<sup>2</sup>

The films that I have covered in this paper represent the roots of America's racial feelings in the twentieth century. Between the 1915, the year of *The Birth of a Nation*, and 1939, the year of *Gone With the Wind*, many of the conflicted attitudes of the white nation towards African Americans were established. Most of the cultural trends that have defined the country for the rest of the century, were formulated during these years. As I mentioned at the beginning, the one constant that all of these films have is the

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<sup>1</sup>Norman Mailer, "The White Negro," in *The White Negro* (San Francisco: City Lights Books, 1957), 15.

<sup>2</sup>Eric Lott, "White Like Me: Racial Cross-Dressing and the Construction of American Whiteness," in *Cultures of United States Imperialism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1993), 475-476.

fundamental conflict of their nature. They have all latched on to race as the formative mystery of American society, but the attitudes that these films express towards race is pliable and indistinct. In consideration of the racial other, the white imagination is torn between attraction and repulsion, between fear and longing. Hollywood cinema during this era introduces us to the central conflicts of American whiteness, which have troubled the very foundation our national character throughout the century.

In every film we have looked at, there is a parallel desire to both transcend and codify racial definitions, what Eric Lott calls the "simultaneous drawing up and crossing of racial boundaries."<sup>3</sup> These films attempt to essentialize the African American figure, while at the same time, they allow whites to appropriate those qualities which are defined as essentially black. Despite what I have said about the de-racializing of emotional culture, the twentieth century has also been characterized by this tendency to both essentialize the races and to transgress the codes of racial comportment.

When Elvis Presley first found his voice in Sun Studios, his white guitarist Scotty Moore exclaimed: "*Damn Nigger!*"<sup>4</sup> With this remark, Moore insisted that what Elvis was doing was inherently black, by definition, but he also was expressing his confidence in Elvis's protean ability to include himself within that definition. What Elvis was doing was not so much breaking down racial boundaries, but rather, attempting to expand his own cultural expenditure. It was an effort to make room for blackness within the consumptive belly of white America.

The roots of this modern phenomenon can be seen in all of the films we have examined. It is a modern phenomenon, because, as I have argued,

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<sup>3</sup>Eric Lott, *Love and Theft: Blackface Minstrelsy and the American Working Class* (NY: Oxford University Press, 1993), 6.

<sup>4</sup>Ibid, 55.

the impetus for white America's movement away from Victorian sensibilities was directly attached to this exploitative interest in black culture. It is therefore ironic that America's passage into modernity is connected to a set of conservative racial assumptions, which by the late twentieth-century are still crippling us as a nation. But isn't that the tragedy of modern life? All the advances in science, technology, and psychology have, if anything, contributed to the fundamental conflicts of our society.

The Russian filmmaker and theorist Sergei Eisenstein recognized this modern American dilemma in the work of D.W. Griffith, the father of American cinema. In order to understand Griffith, Eisenstein wrote, "one must visualize an America made up of more than visions of speeding automobiles, streamlined trains, racing ticker tape, inexorable conveyor belts. One is obliged to comprehend this second side of America as well— America, the traditional, the patriarchal, the provincial."<sup>5</sup> In the end, that is the story of our country in the twentieth-century. A time and a place where the greatest visions of humanity have brought forth a cauldron of driving pistons and spinning microchips, while tragically the problems of the human heart have been lost in the churning vortex. We fight against the civilization that we have created, because as Freud understood, we are not at peace with ourselves. Unfortunately, we are living in an age when even the process of our own rebellion is destructive.

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<sup>5</sup>Michael Rogin, "The Sword Became a Flashing Vision," in *Ronald Reagan, The Movie* (Berkeley: The University of California Press, 1987), 198.



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### The Films

*The Birth of a Nation* (1915), David Wark Griffith (director), Griffith Feature Films.

*The Jazz Singer* (1927), Alan Crosland (director), Warner Brothers.

*Hallelujah* (1929), King Vidor (director), MGM.

*Blonde Venus* (1932), Josef von Sternberg, Paramount Pictures.

*King Kong* (1933) Merian Cooper and Ernest Schoedsack (directors), RKO.

*Kid Millions* (1934), Roy Del Ruth (director), Howard Productions, Inc.

*The Little Colonel* (1935) David Butler (director), Twentieth Century Fox.

*The Littlest Rebel* (1935) David Butler (director), Twentieth Century Fox.

*Show Boat* (1936) James Whale (director), Universal Pictures.

*Gone With the Wind* (1939) Victor Fleming (director), MGM.