
Unspeakable Images
*Ethnicity and
the American Cinema*

EDITED BY

Lester D. Friedman

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Ethnicities-in-Relation: Toward a Multicultural Reading of American Cinema

Debates concerning minoritarian and postcolonial discourse, ranging in full force in prestigious literature departments, have as yet had relatively little resonance in cinema studies. Issues of ethnic and racial representation have been marginalized within the field, perhaps on the assumption that such narrowly "sociological" matters are somehow unworthy of the discipline's newly achieved formal sophistication. The debates over ethnicity and race tend to be regarded, furthermore, as having only limited significance, or as being relevant only to a specific corpus of films. But ethnicity and race inhere in virtually all films, not only in those where ethnic issues appear on the "epidermic" surface of the text. I propose that ethnicity is culturally ubiquitous and textually submerged, thus hoping to challenge the widespread approach to ethnicity as limited to "content" analysis, as well as to reconsider the critical approaches toward the (informal) canon on cinema studies from a multiculturalist theoretical frame.

The disciplinary assumption that some films are "ethnic" whereas others are not is ultimately based on the view that certain groups are ethnic whereas others are not. The marginalization of "ethnicity" reflects the imaginary of the dominant group which envisions itself as the "universal" or the "essential" American nation, and thus somehow "beyond" or "above" ethnicity. The very word *ethnic*, then, reflects a peripheralizing strategy premised on an implicit contrast of "norm" and "other," much as the term *minority* often carries with it an implication of minor, lesser, or subaltern. Restricting the quality of "ethnicity" to particular communities, further-

Every
ethnic.

more, is linked to a ghettoizing discourse which considers ethnic and racial groups in isolation. By projecting "minorities" as if they lived apart from the larger cultural-historical dynamics of the United States, this discourse implicitly suggests their "special," allochronic, quasi-anthropological status. (Anthropological texts, as Johannes Fabian argues, have located the "other" in a temporally distinct space, different from that of the speaking subject.)¹ This essentializing and ahistorical discourse masks the fact that no group exists in a vacuum. In a multiethnic society communities are necessarily implicated—economically, historically, politically, and culturally—in one another, subjected to permeable boundaries of identity.

The word *ethnic* in contemporary parlance often evokes little more than sentimental traces of the customs and cuisine of the old country. In this sense the adjective *ethnic* implies a liberal-pluralistic vision which masks contradictions of class, race, and gender, as well as the interdependency of histories and even identities. The hegemonic national imaginary projects (North) America as constituted by an Anglo-American core, subsequently supplemented by ethnic "accretions." Eurocentric historiography posits quasi-magical beginnings with the "discovery" of America, the pilgrims, the puritans, and the pioneers eliding Native-American and African-American perspectives and voices. The liberal concept of a happy plurality of "hyphenated Americans" posits a pseudo-equality in status, as if that which precedes the hyphen—"African," "Greek," "Dutch" (the categories themselves level the continental with the national)—alluded to more-or-less equivalent historical experiences, ultimately subordinated to the melioristic teleology implied by the post-hyphen "American."

The intersection of ethnicity with race, class, and gender discourses involves a shifting, relational social and discursive positioning, whereby one group can simultaneously constitute "norm" and "periphery." A given community can in a single context exist in a relation of subordination to one group and at the same time in a relation of domination toward another. Flexible contradictory relations, furthermore, can characterize the community itself, suggesting that "ethnicity" is far from being a unitary topos. I use the term *ethnicity*, therefore, to refer to a spectrum of identities and differences, all ultimately involving questions of inequalities of power. Ethnicity does not constitute a fixed entity or category expressing a natural, essential difference, but rather a changing set of historically diverse experiences situated within power relations. Although a poststructuralist formulation of ethnicity carries with it the danger

of undermining legitimate struggles for recuperation of cultures which have undergone brutal ruptures and are in a constant process of forging their communal identity, it also has the advantage of transcending essentialist notions of identity. Without falling into essentialist traps and yet without being politically paralyzed by deconstructionist formulations, we may argue for provisional ethnic and racial identities at particular moments of history, articulated in relation to parallel and opposing collectivities. And without positing a hygienic concept of communities, we may speak of overlapping, de-centered circles of identities.

Focussing on character stereotypes and social mimesis, studies of images of America's ethnicities have tended to pit an isolated minoritarian group against a fixed, white-American power structure. They have not generally attempted to register the structural analogies underlying Hollywood representation of "subaltern" groups as well as the interplay of social and sexual displacements, projections, and dialogisms among the diverse ethnicities—whether marginalized, hegemonic, or situated between. Even the recounting of the influential role of minoritarian groups on the dominant ethnic culture—for example the striking Africanization or Latization of North American music and dance—tends to ignore the interethnic influences among the diverse of "margins." My interest, however, is not simply to consider the relation between a marginalized group and the "center"—for example its exclusion from representation despite its centrality in social production—but also the relationship among the various groups on the "periphery" and their (potentially) dialogical interlocution with regard to the center(s) of power. The "center," for its part, is also considered as an ambivalence-reflecting category,² constantly appropriating the margins, even partially reconstituting itself in terms of its neighboring "others," while yet maintaining what Edward Said has termed its "positional superiority." Positing ethnicities in relational terms can help us envision the possibility of a critical reading which complicates the "center/periphery" dichotomy.

The issue of ethnicities-in-relation is of special importance for the critical and historiographic accounts of American cinema. The United States, as part of the New World, is a society wherein ethnic composition exists at the pulsating heart of its historical and cultural formation. Discussion of ethnicity raises issues, not only of historical-cultural perspective but also of geographical representation. One place to look for a discourse on domestic ethnicity is in films set outside the United States. Since all groups, except for Native Amer-

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But its still separate from (US) (Shohat?)

Center (s)
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icans, descend from some other part of the globe, Hollywood films' geographical constructs have visceral impact for America's communities. And since immigration is at the core of the American ethos, the sympathetic portrayal of certain lands of ethnic origin—for example European lands—and the caricaturing of others—for example African—indirectly legitimates links to Europe while undermining links to Asia and Africa. The question is complicated, furthermore, by the fact that immigrants themselves played a major role in Hollywood, occupying a contradictory position. Thus the study of American cinema is necessarily as well the study of the projected "American Dream" of these immigrants, their manner of perceiving the image that hegemonic America would desire for itself. Their agility in expressing, and more often repressing and sublimating, America's multiethnic dimension offers a barometer for the sociopolitical context within which these images were produced. As late as the 1950s and 1960s, films shot or set in New York, for example, *On the Town* (1949) or *It's Always Fair Weather* (1955), tended to downplay the ethnic and racial diversity of the metropolis. Despite the role of Jewish immigrants in the industry, Jewishness, for example, was often reduced to the presence of closet Jews. The "problem film" *Gentleman's Agreement* (1947) provides a perfect exemplum of this polite embarrassment in the presence of the Jewish "other" (or in this case "self" as "other").³

Ethnographic cultural critique has significant implications for film analysis because film narrative entails not only ethos (character) but also ethnos (peoples). The assumption that only certain films are relevant for the discussion of ethnicity is based on a superficially thematic examination of the filmic text, that is, whether or not the film explicitly foregrounds ethnic conflicts or complementarities. But this formulation of the issue ignores such considerations as the body language of the actors or characters and the intonations or accents which define even dominant groups as ethnic in the sense of displaying specific cultural codes. Lily-white films portraying innocuous suburban romances are also ethnic in that they reproduce an ethnically coded language. Cinematic space, far from being ethnically neutral, is the subliminal site of competing ethnic and racial discourses having specific resonances for spectators, themselves constituted by and who constitute these discourses. The orchestration of speech, looks, make-up, costume, decor, music and dance and locale implies a set of cultural codes whose "white"⁴ ethnic composition often remains invisible to those who have power over representation and can formulate the world in their terms. To

nore the issue of ethnicity in dominant films set in hegemonic and homogeneous environments would be as mistaken as to ignore issues of gender and sexuality in films privileging the male presence, for example in war or Western films, in which women and sexuality per se tend to be absent from the narrative but issues of sexual politics and gender roles "haunt" the film.

Filmic images and sounds come inevitably "saturated" with ethnic and racial resonances. The Hollywood linguistic paradigm, for example, is inscribed within the play of artificial hierarchies of languages, dialects, and accents. That Cecil B. DeMille's biblical epics depict both the ancient Egyptians and the Israelites as speaking English, and that the audiovisual presence of God in *The Ten Commandments* (1956) is conveyed through the voice of male, upper-class North America, has clear racial, national, and theological overtones. The same filmic images or sounds have different reverberations for distinct communities.⁵ An iterative⁶ shot of a familial Sunday visit to church, a character crossing himself or herself, or the sound of church bells to announce a communal rhythm of birth, marriage and death—to take typical examples—all address themselves to a culturally prepared interlocutor presumed to be, if not Christian, at least familiar with the images and sounds of Christian culture.⁷ But while for the implied (white) "Christian" spectator these images and sounds suppose to evoke an extra-cinematic norm, for the non-Christian they might just as easily provoke a sense of exclusion, and in the case of Jewish culture come burdened with overtones of oppression. (In Jewish poetry, for example, church bells often signify danger.)⁸ The shots of Mount Rushmore in *North by Northwest* (1959) similarly evoke for the Euro-American patriotic roots and links to the "forefathers," but for the Dakotan Native American, they presumably might elicit a quite different set of feelings having to do with rupture and dispossession. A dialogical structural shift in ethnic perspective would change the emotional and ideological valence of such images. An intercultural reading, thus, would articulate the diegetic ethnic assumptions, problematizing the text's universal norms as exhibited through its formal paradigms.

The view of ethnicity as culturally ubiquitous and textually submerged can hopefully lead to a reconceptualization of the analysis of ethnicity in the cinema, opening its present boundaries. Rather than submit our analysis to the films' discourse of "ethnic" themes, the seemingly nonethnic or ethnically irrelevant text can be regarded as a field for discovery, excavation, and reconstruction of ethnic and racial contradictions. And instead of the traditional "im-

*Ethnic
Races*

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age" analysis applied to an unproblematized notion of "minorities" ethnic representation can be studied in terms of the undertones and overtones which permeate the text. In *Vertigo* (1958), for example, the male and female (white) protagonists are possessed by a traumatic past—Scottie's vertigo, his obsession with "Madeleine's" fixation in Carlotta, and then with Judy's reincarnation of Madeleine. The archeological layers of the psyche, however, can also be read ethnographically, as that hidden strata of the national American psyche. The suppressed Spanish-Mexican history of San Francisco might be analyzed through such inadvertent verbal and visual allusions, for example, the city's Spanish name and architecture, including sites such as Mission Dolores, and more specifically through the haunting iconographic presence of the Hispanic Carlotta Valdez. Her dispossession from wealth and maternity, and her final despairing suicide, allegorize a series of North American and Mexican relations in which her framed muteness in the museum literally conveys her Hispanic voicelessness. A metaphor for her city, Carlotta can be recognized only via the "white" gaze at her—Madeleine/Judy's and Scottie's—as well as Hitchcock's inscription of her (Hispanic) city on the screen, inadvertently defining the history of women as the haunting unconscious of American history.

The concept of submerged ethnicities, in other words, can be highly productive for Hollywood's ethnically embarrassed texts. Even in narratives that explicitly foreground racial and national issues, we may still uncover latent ethnic perspectives. In the *Indiana Jones* series, the third world becomes not only a space wherein first world interests are played out, but also for submerged ethnic voices even in the *absence* of delegate characters. On one level our analysis can concentrate on the colonial Eurocentric ideology of *Raiders of the Lost Ark* (1981). The full significance of the ancient archeological objects in the film is presumed to be understood only by the Western scientists. The origins of archeology, the search for the "roots of civilization," as a discipline are linked inextricably to imperial expansionism. However, the *Indiana Jones* series reproduces the colonial vision in which Western "knowledge" of ancient civilizations "rescues" the past from oblivion. It is this masculinist rescue in *Raiders of the Lost Ark* that legitimizes denuding the Egyptians of their heritage, confining it within Western metropolitan museums.

On yet another level we might discern a hidden Jewish substratum undergirding the film, despite the absence of such "ethnic" delegates. The American archeologist hero—often cinematically portrayed as a cowboy—implicitly searches for the Eastern roots of

Western civilization. He liberates the ancient Hebrew ark from illegal Egyptian possession while also rescuing it from immoral Nazi control, allegorically reinforcing American and Jewish solidarity with respect to the evil Nazis and their Arab assistants. The geopolitical alignments here are as clear as in the inadvertent allegory of *The Ten Commandments*, in which a WASPish Charlton Heston is made to incarnate Hebrew Moses struggling against the evil Egyptians, thus allegorizing in the context of the 1950s the contemporary struggle of the West, Israel, and the United States against Arab-Egyptians. That at the end of *Raiders of the Lost Ark* it is the American army which is made to be the guardian of the top-secret ark—with the active complicity of the ark—strengthens this evocation of geopolitical alliances. In the ancient past, Egypt dispossessed the Hebrews of their ark, as do the Nazis in the 1930s. In a time tunnel Harrison Ford is sent to fight the Nazis in the name of a Jewish shrine—the word *Jewish* is of course never mentioned—and in the course of events the rescuer is rescued by the rescuee. A fantasy of liberation from a history of victimization is played out by Steven Spielberg, using biblical myths of wonders worked against ancient Egyptians this time redeployed against the Nazis—miracles absent during the Holocaust. The Hebrew ark itself performs miracles and dissolves the Nazis, saving Dr. Jones from the Germans who, unlike the Americans, do not respect the divine law that prohibits looking at the Holy of Holies. The Jewish religious prohibition of looking at God's image and the prohibition of graven images (and from that the cultural deemphasis on visual arts) is triumphant over the Christian predilection for religious visualization. The film here in the typical paradox of cinematic voyeurism punishes the hubris of the "Christian" who looks at divine beauty while also privileging spectatorial visual pleasure.

Formulating identities in relational terms has the advantage of unbinding our reading from the films' presumed lack of ethnic and racial appearances. A multicultural reading of mass-mediated culture, therefore, will explore the repressed ethnic and racial contradictions, transgressing the segregationist discourse on ethnic representation as limited to either third-world films or to narratives depicting peoples of color. In fact, we may reconsider not only specific texts, but also whole genres according to such theoretical parameters. From *The Jazz Singer* (1927) and *Swing Time* (1936) through *The Gang's All Here* (1943) and *Porgy and Bess* (1959), to *Funny Girl* (1968) and *New York, New York* (1977), the musical genre in particular has articulated ethnic heterogeneity, either explicitly in its themes

or, more commonly, implicitly through music and dance. (In the silent era, "exotic" dances, for example in *Fatima's Dance*, already gave indirect expression to white ethnic imaginary.) Carnavalesque parodies of the musical such as *The Producers* (1968) and *The History of the World, Part One* (1981), meanwhile, satirically underline latent ethnic experiences that classical musical comedy usually glosses over. A number of interlinked issues concerning ethnicity and methodology can be discerned in the musical and in carnivalesque parody, emphasizing a relational discourse on ethnicity analyzed through specific cinematic, narrative, generic, and cultural mediations. An analysis of the musical and the parody will serve as a case study from which more general methodological lessons can be extrapolated for ethnicity and representation.

The Dialectics of Presence/Absence

In "Entertainment and Utopia" Richard Dyer analyzes the Hollywood musical as performing an artistic "change of signs" whereby the negatives of social existence are turned into the positives of artistic transmutation.⁹ The musical offers a utopian world characterized by abundance, energy, intensity, transparency, and community instead of the everyday social inadequacies of scarcity, exhaustion, dreariness, manipulation, and fragmentation. The musical's utopia provides the sensation, as Jane Feuer puts it, of what it would "feel like to be free."¹⁰ Fredric Jameson suggests that one must look not only for ideological manipulation but also for the kernel of utopian fantasy whereby entertainment constitutes itself as a projected fulfillment of what is desired and absent within the sociopolitical status quo.¹¹ It is precisely the musical's intrinsic evocation of social harmony, accentuated in music and dance, that makes the genre appropriate for discussing ethnicities-in-relation. And it is precisely the musical's "management" of harmony that makes Dyer's category of community, of collective activity and communal identity, ethnically problematic. The "imagined community"¹² of the classical musical comedy is often limited to the dominant ethnic group, eliding even a possible "management" of interracial collective harmony. This elision can take various forms, most of which point to the purist exclusionary nature of the musical's communality. Communal harmony, whether set in the Midwest in *Meet Me in St. Louis* (1944) or *Oklahoma!* (1955); in New York in *Dames* (1934) or *Shall We Dance* (1937); or in Hollywood in *Show Girl in Hollywood* (1930) or *Singin' in the Rain* (1952), is a monolithically white har-

mony which represses, on the levels of narrative, mise-en-scène, and music and dance, America's multicultural and multiracial formation.

Historically, the musical has had a somewhat special relation to marginalized communities since the advent of sound opened the medium to preexisting African and Latin-American expression in music and dance, and subsequently to all forms of performance.¹³ With the coming of sound, Euro-American producers and owners of the film industry became the arbiters and filters of black music on the screen, exploiting its popularity at the expense of African-American musicians.¹⁴ The exclusion of African and Latin Americans from access to production, scripting, direction, distribution, and exhibition is therefore especially striking in the production of musicals. The musical genre allows us to illuminate the dialectics of presence or absence of marginalized groups, even in exclusively white-cast films. The occasional allusions to marginalized cultures in all-white-cast films usually occur in the fantasy space of the musical numbers, as in *A Star Is Born* (1954) and *It's Always Fair Weather*, in which Asians, Scots, and Latinos are evoked in bricolage-style song and dance numbers. I am interested, then, in exploring what I would term as the inferential ethnic presences, that is, the various ways in which ethnic cultures penetrate the screen without always literally being represented by ethnic and racial themes or even characters.

One of the iconic paradigms of the presence or absence of marginalized ethnic groups is the minstrel figure, constituting a kind of mockery of blackness. The tradition of blackface recital was especially popular in musicals—for example, Al Jolson in *Hi Lo Broadway* (1933), Fred Astaire in *Swing Time*, Micky Rooney and Judy Garland in *Babes in Arms* (1939), and Bing Crosby in *Dixie* (1943), featuring the life of a "pioneer" minstrel Dan Emmett. The presence of "blackness" in the form of a mask, as well as the veiled presence of African-American music and dance in numerous films—"Remember My Forgotten Man" in *Golddiggers of 1933* and "Fascinating Rhythm" in *Girl Crazy* (1943)—only denotes African-American absence from the screen. In fact, historically, minstrel shows evolved largely in the North and were performed on the basis of little significant contact with Southern culture and slavery, or even, for that matter, with African Americans.¹⁵ The African-American intertext is apparent in body movements or gestures appropriated from blacks—for example, "Louisiana Hayride" in *The Band Wagon* (1953) or "Broadway Rhythm" in *Singin' in the Rain*—in which the per-

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formers collectively shake their hands, gospel-like, in the air. In musicals, then, African Americans tended to constitute not only a suppressed historical voice but also a literally suppressed ethnic voice because various black musical idioms became associated on the screen with white stars, authorizing a Euro-American signature on basically African-American cultural products.¹⁶

A similar dialectic of presence or absence operates in relation to other subaltern groups, as in the evocations of Latinas, Africans, and Japanese in the "Les Girls" number in *Les Girls* (1957); of Chinese in "Shanghai Lil" in *Footlight Parade* (1933); or of Native Americans in "Crazy Horse" in *The Girl Most Likely* (1957). The erotic phantasm of the "other" within the musical numbers, seemingly unrelated to the lily-white romances in the films as a whole, manifests tensions between latent interracial desire and monoracial law. The "other" then serves to define diacritically the dominant ethnic self. In *Pal Joey* (1957), as Frank Sinatra sings "Small Hotel," the music suddenly shifts to Latin rhythms, subliminally authorizing Euro-American characters to move their bodies more sensually. The same "sensuality-effect" occurs with the cha-cha in "Too Bad We Can't Go Back to Russia" and in the African-American melody of "Red Blues" in *Silk Stockings* (1957). These brief moments subliminally define essentialist contours of identities as drawn between Euro-America and its "others" while simultaneously functioning as outlets for ephemeral play with ethnic identities.

Within what Rick Altman designates as the musical's "dual-focus narrative,"¹⁷ *Silk Stockings* stages a kind of cold-war romantic imperialism, positing the West as an erotic place of fun and pleasure in contrast to the austerity of the Soviet lifestyle. Latin and African-American rhythms thus come to signify the putative vibrancy of Anglo-American culture through signifiers which, paradoxically, call attention to the absence of the cultural sources of the signifiers, that is, African and Latin American cultures themselves. At the same time, the monological appropriation suggests the North American hegemony representing itself to a competing ideological discourse (Soviet communism) in an ethnically "exotic" spirit. Whereas the Soviets are associated with dull high art—linked to the Old World—North Americans are associated with an exciting popular culture defined, ironically, in Latinized or Africanized terms—precisely that which within the hegemonically imagined American nation is considered as non-(core) American.

Such films as *The King of Jazz* (1930) go even further in their delineation of North American history. By superimposing a series of

musical ensembles representing various European ethnicities, *The King of Jazz* (1930) celebrates the origins of jazz, completely eliding the primordial African musical contribution to it. The blending of images and sounds comes to metaphorize the melting pot, vocalizing Euro-American history while silencing the African dimension even where it is most obvious. *Birth of the Blues* (1941) conforms to a similar Eurocentric discourse in its focus on Bing Crosby leading his Basin Street Hot-Shots as they struggle to be heard in New Orleans, with authentic jazz trombonist Jack Teagarden in tow. (The film was loosely based on the formation of Nick LaRocca's Original Dixieland jazz Band, reportedly the first Euro-American group to play African-American music.) Similarly, in *High Society* (1956), despite the appearance of Louis Armstrong, who plays himself, Crosby enacts a classical musician who turns to jazz, legitimizing the popular music to the East Coast elite. In "Now You Has Jazz" he educates spectators "how Jazz music is made" while introducing the black band and their instruments—the black musicians presumably ignorant of classical music. In such symptomatic instances, the representation of African-American cultural production is mediated through a Euro-American musical authority.

Assuming a quasi-ethnographic role, Hollywood's filmic hegemony undertakes to speak for "marginal" cultures, blocking the possibility of self-representation. Films involving allusions to "subaltern" communities address themselves to a presumably "nonethnic" spectator, claiming to initiate him or her into an "alien" culture. The spectator, along with the textual delegates, comes to master, in a remarkably telescoped period (both in terms of "story" and "discourse" time) the (presumed) codes of a "foreign" culture, shown as simple, stable, unself-conscious, and susceptible to facile apprehension. Such films as *The King of Jazz* and *High Society* thus reproduce colonialist discursive formations by which non-European cultures, rendered as devoid of any active historical or narrative role, become the passive objects of study and spectacle.

In the majority of Hollywood films, Anglo-American protagonists embody what Boris Uspansky terms the "norm of the text."¹⁸ Gérard Genette's notion of "focalization," that is, his reformulation of the classical literary question of point of view in terms of the diegetic level of character perspective as the juncture which links the different narrative roles, can be highly productive here. Genette's recasting has the advantage of pointing to the structuring of information within the story world through the cognitive-perceptual grid of its inhabitants, raising questions of "who sees," "who in-

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is not examining the mask but rather looking at what's beneath it.

forms," and thus "who represents" even when a literal point-of-view shot is not deployed.¹⁹ This concept facilitates the analysis of liberal films such as *Gentlemen's Agreement* and *Soldier Blue* (1970), which foster the "positive" images, granting the "other" literal point-of-view shots and dialogues, yet focalized through Anglo-American protagonists who represent hegemonic cultural norms.²⁰ Reconceptualizing "focalization" in ethnic terms highlights the fact that white characters become radiating "centers of consciousness" or "filters" for information, embodying dominant racial and ethnic discourses. Here it is necessary to expand Genette's term, proposing the notion of "centers of consciousness" as representing less individual characters than a set of specific community discourses mediating the film. Focalization and "norms of the text," however, do not always strictly coincide, and indeed at times cohabit only in tension within the same text. Focalization can be granted to the subaltern, for example to the mulatta in *Pinky* (1947), but the norms of the text are represented by "white" marginal characters, as by the Southern white lady in *Pinky*. In the absence of explicit "white" delegates of such norms, as in the all-black-cast films, for example, *Hallelujah* (1929) and *Cabin in the Sky* (1943), the "white" norms permeate the text through the implicit ethnological examination of the black community as "deviant."

Musicals usually cast minoritarian groups or their presumed representatives only in a few sequences but do not grant them the status even of secondary characters. Generally, the "ethnic" characters lack even the most basic marker of identity—a name. For example, in *The Band Wagon*, Fred Astaire's singing and dancing in "A Shine on Your Shoes" inspires the otherwise nonexistent or dormant dancing talent of the African-American shoeshine (LeRoy Daniels), who is merely used as a kinetic object, a device reminiscent in its objectification of Busby Berkeley's depersonalizing rhetoric of gender (fig. 8.1). Daniels as the shoeshine "boy" (kneeling) literally shines Astaire's shoes and brushes his clothes during the musical number. Just as images of women beautifying themselves in *Dames* yield their quantum of spectacle, the African-American shoeshine servant status in *The Band Wagon* is deployed to form part of the esthetic dynamics of the number. In *High Society*, it is the singing of Bing Crosby that stimulates Louis Armstrong to echo Crosby on the trumpet. *The Bells Are Ringing* (1960) is in this sense an anomaly. Its Hispanic character teaches Judy Holliday the essential steps of the cha-cha, thus connecting the rhythms to a specific ethnos. The Hispanic, furthermore, is conversant with European classical music, in



8.1. Fred Astaire and LeRoy Daniels in *The Band Wagon*: the esthetic dynamics of servitude.

contrast to the ethnic division of prestige in *High Society*, in which the "white" ethnic Crosby remains the center of consciousness who filters "peripheral" culture.

Hollywood's ethnography engendered frequent cultural dislocations. Communitarian representations are often accompanied by the "mark of the plural"—a notion elaborated by Albert Memmi in connection with anti-colonial discourse—the device whereby various ethnic communities and nations are subject to homogenization.²¹ Latin American countries are reduced to a stereotypical cultural emblem, projected as one entity despite their many differences. In *Flying Down to Rio* (1933), Brazilians are made to wear Mexican sombreros, dance the Argentinian tango, and speak with an excessive accent of ambiguous nationality, neither Spanish nor Portuguese (Carmen Miranda, the synecdoche of Latin America in many films, reportedly spoke English fluently and had only a slight accent but was forced by producers into her caricatural speech patterns). In *Kismet* (1955), such diverse nationalities as Arab, Indian, Persian, and Chinese are presented as a single entity; the Orient, as Said puts it, is itself "orientalized."²² The same mechanism of obscuring

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the boundaries among the "others," while manifesting a distinguished difference of white ethnicity, is seen on a smaller scale in *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* (1953). In "When Love Goes Wrong," we see, in long shot, children sporting red fezes, which in the French context evokes an Arab cultural presence. But when the camera moves closer, we see black children tap dancing. A process of condensation, then, superimposes on the distant "other"—the Arab—the more familiar "other"—the African American.

The raised ethnic consciousness of the late 1960s brought a resurgence of ethnicity in the cinema, embracing America's diverse ethnic groups via "Roots"-like recuperation of the past. Thus we find narratives set in the Old Country (as in the European shtetl of *Fiddler on the Roof*, 1971), or foregrounding present-day multiethnic America, as in *Nashville* (1975), *Hair* (1979), *Fame* (1980), and *Dirty Dancing* (1987). *West Side Story's* (1961) critically stylized ethnic conflicts ironically conveyed that "everything's right in America/if you're a white in America." (The satire is largely focussed in the such musical sentiments as "I want to be in America.") In early 1960s' musicals, in the wake of rock and roll and the growing popularity of black culture, such films as *Bye Bye Birdie* (1963) deploy Euro-American performers who incorporate, to a certain extent, African-American-style singing and dancing, in contrast to earlier musicals such as *Cabin in the Sky*, which created a segregated "black" filmic zone for such movements. Yet *Bye Bye Birdie's* allusions to Elvis Presley still suppress the African-American sources of white rock and roll. In the wave of musicals of the 1980s about the 1950s and early 1960s—for example, *Dirty Dancing* and *Hair Spray*—black and Latin influence on white popular culture is made explicit and even thematized. The films project moments of desired ethnic communal utopia, heretofore repressed, in which Euro-American characters are viscerally "possessed" by African-American or Latin cultures. *Dirty Dancing*, and even the independent production *Hair Spray*, however, retain the symptomatic hierarchical focalization in which Euro-American (in these cases the marginalized white working-class or Jewish middle-class) perspective is privileged by the narratives even though the music and dance are African and Latin American.

Ethnic Allegories

Although incorporating or alluding to "subaltern" communities through music and dance, the Hollywood musical brought a "well-behaved," domesticated version of jazz to Euro-American au-

diences within the films' narratives as well as to their counterparts in the movie theaters. In Woody Allen's *Zelig* (1983), the protagonist's transformation into a black trumpeter can be seen, in this sense, as a parody of the musical tradition of Euro-American performers such as Al Jolson, Fred Astaire, and Bing Crosby wearing black masks and capitalizing on African-American culture. Through his physical capacity to enact ethnic and cultural syncretism, *Zelig* indirectly illuminates Hollywood's penchant for ethnic simulacra. *Zelig's* narrative underlines its protagonist's blackness as hybridization in contrast with *The Jazz Singer*, *Swing Time*, and *Dixie*, where blackness is largely a costume worn for show and entertainment.

To fully comprehend the structure of feelings undergirding Al Jolson, Eddie Cantor, or Sophie Tucker's evocation of black America, however, we must take into account not only the racial dimension—their "whiteness"—but also the ethnic one—their Jewishness. In the United States, Jewish entertainers took over the preexisting tradition of blackface, largely from vaudeville, endowing it with their own gesture and intonation. The Jewish minstrel figure is a site of contradictions involving both opportunism and an intuition of deeper affinities.²³ As Jolson's character is told in *The Jazz Singer*: "There are a lot of jazz singers but you have tears in your voice." And as Irving Howe suggests, "Black became a mask for Jewish expressiveness, with one woe speaking through the voice of another."²⁴ (The "ethnic pastiche," as Ronald Sanders points out, is a propensity of people who live in culturally bilingual situations.)²⁵ Jews, therefore, thanks to a black "mask," could perform their heritage of emotional expressiveness indirectly, conveniently displacing it onto a group seen as inferior in status. Blackface thus enabled Jewish performers to reach a spontaneity and assertiveness in the declaration of their ethnic selves. First-generation, American-born Jews, eager to assimilate, tended to repress traditional melodramatic sentimentality of theatrical grand gestures, while adopting the relatively more controlled body language of Anglo-American culture, which had stigmatized expressive gestures or bodily undulations as signs of backward and uncultivated societies. In *The Jazz Singer*, the older immigrant generation is associated with melodramatic gesticulation, while the eager-to-assimilate younger generation incarnated by Al Jolson uses more expressive gestures when in blackface, a device employed not only in musical sequences but also in straightforwardly dramatic sequences. Jackie Rabinowitz/Jack Robin's identity crises is articulated in blackface. His mirror reflects not his literal self, but the image of the Jewish community, echoing as

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8.2. Al Jolson in blackface: the Jewish minstrel figure as the site of contradictions.

the intertitle suggests, the "call of his race." The ambiguous binary between Jewish and black identities in this sequence reintroduces the question of displacements and dialogisms within the minstrel, for example "speaking" through a neighboring other.

The American situation in which diverse communities mingled daily in the streets made cultural syncretism virtually inevitable. Films such as *The Jazz Singer* must be considered in this context. Their Oedipal narrative, symptomatic of the melting-pot discourse, reflects at the same time the mutually imbricated dynamics of American culture. At the end of the film the two conflicting worlds represented by Broadway jazz and Jewish kol nidre music, are reconciled, a reconciliation summed up in Jolson's belting out "mammy" to his weeping mother (fig. 8.2).²⁶ In *The Jazz Singer*, Jolson melds Yiddish schmaltz and black-inflected melody with blackface tradition. The black influence on his Yiddish-inflected singing is shown explicitly in the biographical *The Jolson Story* (1946), recounting his fascination with blues musicians in New Orleans. Jolson operated in the same cultural ambiance that allowed Irving Berlin to mingle Yiddishisms with "coon song" conventions (Isaac

found a musical kinship between Afro-American "blue notes" and the "blue note" of Hasidic chant)²⁷ and George Gershwin and Yiddish folk tunes with African-American melodies in *Porgy and Bess*.

With analyzing the structural analogies in the representation of marginalized communities, for example, the simulacral presence of blacks and Jews in liberal films from the 1940s such as *Pinky* and *A Gentleman's Agreement*, we may also examine intertextual dimensions of subaltern cultures and their analogical "structure of feeling." The concept of situated multivalent ethnic relations is well exemplified by *Zelig*, which ultimately concerns a bizarre chameleon who has an uncanny talent for taking on the accent and ethnicity of his interlocutors. Obviously "white" and Jewish, Zelig chameleonizes at diverse points to become WASP, Native American, Mexican, American, Irish, Chinese, and Mexican, thus "condensing" multiple ethnic and racial plurality.²⁸ Each particular metamorphosis of the multiethnic protagonist bears its particular burden of historical reverberation, illuminating the latent intercultural "structure of feeling" which undergirds them. Zelig's recurrent chameleonizing to blackness, for example, is deeply rooted in the Jewish presence in Europe. Medieval European iconography contrasted the black image of the synagogue with the white of the church, an iconography which transmuted itself in the nineteenth century into the image of the "black Jew" common in end-of-the-century racist discourse. A Polish noble, Adam G. de Gurowski, reporting on his voyage to the United States in 1857 wrote that "Numbers of Jews have the greatest resemblance to the American mulattoes. Sallow carnation complexion, thick lips, crisped black hair. Of all the Jewish population scattered over the globe one-fourth lives in Poland. I am, therefore, well acquainted with their features. On my arrival to this country [the United States] I took every light mulatto for a Jew."²⁹ Herman Wegener called Jews "white negroes," and Julius Streicher, one of the most notorious anti-Semites of both Weimar Republic and Nazi Germany, argued in 1928 for the identity of language between white and black: "The swollen lips remind us again of the close relationship between the Jews and the Blacks. Speech takes place with a racially determined intonations."³⁰ The American heirs of European anti-Semitism and anti-Semitism, the Ku Klux Klan, have carried on the perception of "colored" people as a threat to white racial purity, constituting a kind of menacing heteroglossia. In Woody Allen's film *Zelig* the K.K.K. views Zelig as a triple threat precisely because of his multiple Otherness as black, Jew, and Native American. The fact

ethnic
comparisons

that Zelig, in his moments of metamorphosis, is both the ethnic "Other" and recognizably Woody Allen, white, and Jewish, metaphorizes American ethnic interaction and hybridization, personifying the cultural syncretism characteristic of a multiethnic society.

The partial play of identity already in early films such as *The Jazz Singer* inadvertently touches an intercultural nerve. It implies an affinity—whether past or potential—between African Americans and Jews, between two groups excommunicated by Europe and by WASP-dominated America. In both traditions narratives of slavery and diaspora have played a major role in the collective consciousness. In Jewish religious culture, the yearly Passover recounts the Exodus story, celebrating the liberation of the Israelites from Egyptian enslavement. Bible-based black spirituals, meanwhile, appropriate the Jewish-Hebrew experience, rereading or translating it into their own idiom via such lyrics as "When Israel was in Egypt land. . . . Let my people go." The Jewish conception of exile from the Promised Land and the Nostalgia of Return became significant in the creation of a rebellious black language testifying to the African diaspora experience throughout the Americas. This conception is articulated in the language of the Rastafarian movement and in reggae music with its lyrical leitmotifs of "Babylon," "Jerusalem," and "Lion of Judah," rendered for example in the music of *The Harder They Come* (1973). Much as blacks in America allegorized their collective oppression through the story of the Hebrew-Jewish people, so Jews in America allegorized their historical sorrow via black expressivity; blackface becomes iconic of exclusion.

African-Americans' allegorization, in contrast to the Jewish, however, did not take place in a caricatural show-business context. While searching for multicultural dimensions in American cinema, then, distinct historical situations which determined the access for self-representation in the Hollywood studio system must be taken into account. The marginalization of Jews, Irish, and Italians, as opposed to that of African Americans, was hardly identical, suggesting that ethnicity and race can, at times, form the locus of contradictions on the "periphery." Jews, for example, chose to immigrate to the United States, and their process of assimilation was eased by the facility with which they could pass, their color masking their (ethnic) difference. African Americans, like Asians and Native Americans, meanwhile, could not conveniently mask their features. "White ethnic minorities," furthermore, had much more powerful positions in Hollywood than racially marginalized groups. And although European immigrants, in some ways, had to conform to the

institutionalized, establishment-oriented desires for what Americans should see, they still enjoyed enough power to prevent, for example, most anti-Semitic film imagery. Assimilation, the norm of the melting pot, was therefore experienced differently by ethnic and racial groups. If Jewish characters could more easily achieve assimilated status as in *The Jazz Singer*—and if assimilated Jewish actors such as John Garfield and Kirk Douglas could become stars within Anglo-American-oriented institutions—African Americans, due to their undisguisable racial difference, were obliged to perform within the black actantial slot, or within the segregated space of all-black-cast films.

The possibilities of erotic interaction in films before the 1960s were severely limited by apartheid-style ethnic and racial codes. Hollywood could project mixed love stories between Anglo-Americans and Jews or even Hispanics and Arabs—especially if incarnated by white American actors and actresses such as Valentino in *The Sheik* (1921), Dorothy Lamour in *The Road to Morocco* (1942), or Natalie Wood in *West Side Story* (1961)—but was inhibited in relation to African-American or Native-American sexuality. This latent fear of blood-tainting in such melodramas as *Call Her Savage* (1932) and *Pinky* necessitates narratives where the "half breed" (Native American in *Call Her Savage* and black in *Pinky*) female protagonists are prevented at the closure of the films from participating in mixed marriages, ironically despite the roles being played by "pure white" actresses. It is therefore the generic space of melodrama that preoccupies itself with interracial romantic interaction. The trajectory of constituting the couple in the musical comedy could not allow for a racially subaltern protagonist.

The Production Code of the Motion Picture Producers and Directors of America, Inc. (1930–34) explicitly states that "Miscegenation (sex relation between the white and black races) is forbidden."³¹ The delegitimizing of the romantic union between "white" and "black" "races" is linked to a broader exclusion of African Americans and Native Americans from participation in social institutions. Translating the obsession with "pure blood" into legal language, Southern miscegenation laws, as pointed out by such African-American feminists as Anna Julia Cooper and Ida B. Wells as early as the end of the last century, were designed to maintain white (male) supremacy and to prevent a possible transfer of property to blacks in the post-abolition era. "Race" as a biological category, as Hazel V. Carby formulates it, was subordinated to race as a political category.³² It is within this context of exclusionary ideology that we can rethink crit-

See this

ically the Production Code's universal censorship of sexual violence and brutality in which the assumption is one of purely individual victimization, delegitimizing a collective notion of victimization. This formulation undermines the racially and sexually based violence toward African Americans, wiping out the memory of the rape, castration, and lynching of slaves. The Production Code eliminates a possible counternarrative by third-world people for whom sexual violence has often been at the kernel of historical experience and identity. Keeping in mind this significant structuring absence, it is ironic to encounter the compensatory "liberal" gesture by which the word *nigger*—hygienically mentioned in the alphabetical list of ethnic slurs defined as "offensive" words to the "patrons of motion pictures"—is proscribed.

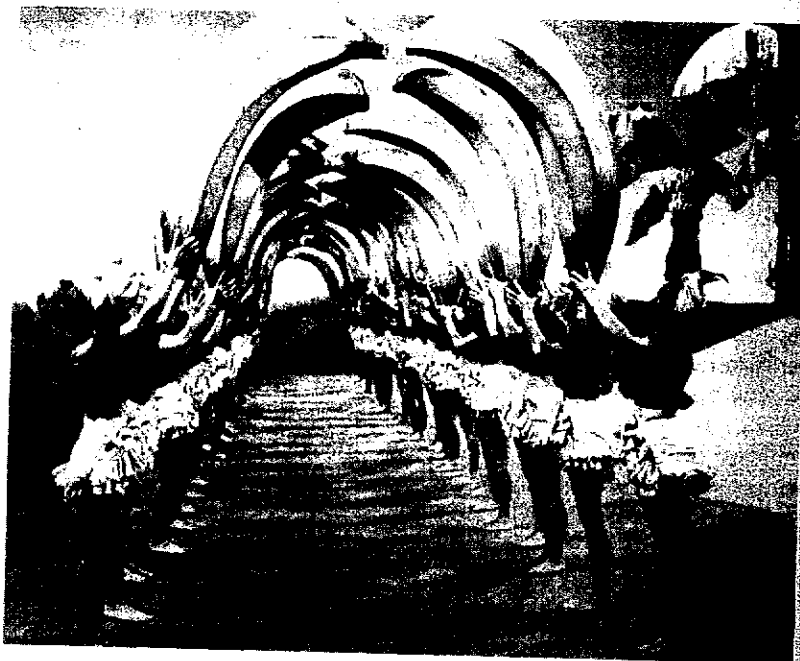
An analysis of the history of American cinema in ethnic terms uncovers a tendency toward ethnic "allegories" in Jameson's sense, of texts which, even when narrating apparently private stories, managed to metaphorize the public sphere, where the micro-individual is doubled by the macro-nation and the personal and the political, the private and the historical, are inextricably linked.³³ The ethnic hierarchies of the cinema allegorize extradiscursive social intercourse. The musical's version of ethnic utopia, embodied by such films as *Follow the Fleet*, *Annie Get Your Gun* (1950) and *Oklahoma!*, is often exclusionary; when representatives of marginalized groups do appear, "social order" and the "purity" of ethnic-sexual interaction are still maintained. The overwhelming majority of love stories in musical comedy avoids all hints of miscegenation by focalizing a glamorous heterosexual white couple, epitomized by Ginger Rogers and Fred Astaire. In *Swing Time*, the narrative role of Rogers's lover, a Latin musician (George Metaxa), is to act as a catalyst for her relationship with Astaire, who wins Rogers from the libidinal Latin—a variation on the romantic plot of *Top Hat* (1935), again with a volatile Latin-lover character (Erik Rhodes). Astaire is foregrounded by the film both as lover and performer. The romantic performance of the Anglo-American entertainers, as the purveyors of the "norms of the text," is narratively and cinematically privileged, while Latin and black entertainers hardly function outside the musical numbers.

Mixed couples are relatively rare in musical comedy, except in times of acute economic lust on the part of North American corporations. In *Flying Down to Rio* (1933), for example, Dolores del Rio discards her Brazilian lover for an American.³⁴ The film's mythical discourse of love, as Brian Henderson points out, masks the crude promotion of the new airline route of New York-Rio de Janeiro, the merged imperialist interests of PanAm and RCA.³⁵ In the period of

the Good Neighbor Policy, Hollywood attempted to enlist Latin America for hemispheric unity against the Axis. When European film markets reduced their film consumption as the war began, Hollywood, hoping for Latin American markets and pan-American political unity, flooded the screens with films using Latin stars, locales,³⁶ historical heroes, and particularly Latin American music and dance. (Swing, in this period, was eclipsed by rumba.) The trope of "good neighbor" very rarely extended to winning family status through interracial or interethnic marriage, however. Latin Americans or African Americans are almost invariably marginalized by the narrative and cinematic codes, and usually limited to roles as entertainers within musical numbers.

The disjunctive structure of the musical, in which a relatively "realistic" mode of narrative representation is foiled by implausible musical numbers which flaunt playfulness and imagination (for example Busby Berkeley's surreal play with abstract esthetic forms), makes possible superficial allusions to the culture of the "Other." The musical often allots its narrative "spaces" in ethnic terms. The presence of marginalized groups is largely felt through music and dance or entertainers, while the "realistic" narrative development becomes largely the space of white action. The disjunctive nature of the musical thus homologizes segregationist attitudes in the larger society. The presumed nonrealistic status of the musical numbers provides a narrative license for displaying "exoticism," while allowing for subliminal eroticism via the safe channel of the "Other." The musical numbers not only provide the spectacle of difference but also function narratively by uniting the North American couple with respect to the "Latins." *Guys and Dolls'* erotic metamorphosis of the Salvation Army worker (Jean Simmons) during her visit in Havana is condensed in the sweeping music and dance, allowing for her romance with Marlon Brando. In this sense, the musical's bifurcated narrative mode enables heightened presence of the subaltern, which otherwise would not merit entering the space of the "real," particularly since "reality" is assumed to be white and Euro-American.

Marginalized within the narrative, the Latin characters in *The Gang's All Here* (1943), *Too Many Girls* (1940), *Pan-Americana* (1945), and *Weekend in Havana* (1941) at the finale tend to be at the exact point from which they began, in contrast with the teleologically evolving status of the North American protagonists. Films such as *The Gang's All Here*, furthermore, demonstrate a generic division of labor, whereby the solid, "serious" or romantic numbers such as "A Journey to a Star" tend to be performed by the North American



8.3. *The Gang's All Here*: sexual metaphors and agricultural reductionism.

protagonists Alice Faye and James Ellison, whereas the Latin American characters perform "unserious," "excessive" numbers involving swaying hips, exaggerated facial expressions, caricaturedly sexy costumes, and "think-big" props embodied by Carmen Miranda. The bananas in Miranda's number "The Lady with the Tutti-Frutti Hat" not only enact the agricultural reductionism of Latin America but also form phallic symbols, here raised by "voluptuous" Latinas over circular, quasi-vaginal forms (fig. 8.3). This construction of Latin American ethnic codes. The Latin characters therefore do not form part of any narrative development, and their presence is tolerable on the folkloric level of music and dance. Character interaction, in this sense, allegorizes the larger relation between the North and South and reflects ambivalent feelings of attraction and repulsion toward the culturally different.

Films which do include a romantic interethnic interaction, such as *The Jazz Singer*, *The Jolson Story*, *La Bamba*, and *Fame*, tend to project allegories (even quasi-didactic allegories) of ethnic tensions

and reconciliation in which youthful mixed couples microcosmically unite, or attempt to unite, conflicting communities. Thus ethnic and class conflicts are "solved" by "acceptance" or reconciliation and implied harmony. In the process of assimilation, Al Jolson in *The Jazz Singer*, rather like Hollywood's stereotypical tragic mulatto, is torn between two worlds—between the role of a cantor—synecdochic of his Jewish heritage—and the role of a Broadway jazz singer—synecdochic of the contemporary America embodied by his Anglo-American girlfriend. The musical's closure—in contrast to the hesitant integrationist ideology toward "non-white" communities—celebrates the New World as an ultimately utopian place, a perspective underlined by the melting-pot trope. A Jewish cantor is transformed into a jazz singer without completely discarding his heritage. Jewish music is melded with black music, and a mixed Jewish-gentile couple is implied. This implication of an ethnically mixed marriage, however, occurs within the classical narrative largely among white ethnicities, and often presumes the assimilation of the "minority" character.

When assimilationist discourse is no longer politically feasible within the civil rights context, the mixed ethnic love of *West Side Story* is presented as tragic. The love-death nexus, foregrounded by the end of the film, is at the same time accompanied by utopian longing for ethnic and social harmony, the idea that "somehow, somewhere, someday, we'll find a new way of living." The film ends with the implied ethnic peace won by the sacrifice of victims on both sides. Nonassimilationist intercommunal romantic closures, meanwhile, were largely produced since the late 1960s when the pluralist ideology replaced the earlier melting-pot trope. Recent films such as *Breakin'*, *La Bamba*, *Dirty Dancing*, and *Salsa* thematize the subject of "ethnic" music and dance, celebrating its pluralistic integration into mainstream American culture.

If in the past a latent white desire to incorporate the "Other" was reflected in the attempt to absorb jazz, samba, and rumba rhythms, contemporary Hollywood films center around pronouncedly "ethnic" characters. In *La Bamba*, for example, the class ascendancy of the Hispanic character allegorizes the American Dream. In *Dirty Dancing*, the Jewish characters constitute a kind of simulacrum of mainstream Anglo culture, whereas the white working-class male protagonist is associated with Latin and African-American rhythms and dancers. The film ends with integration through Eros. The excluded, even forbidden "dirty" music and dance played only in ghettoized surroundings—and its "ethnic" and lower-class per-

Integration
America

formers—are accepted, and communal harmony is celebrated. Swaying the hips—or “going native”—becomes a collectively desired fantasy of the upper-middle class. The final image of the dancing couple surrounded by a mainstream community that emulates their movements encapsulates a liberal integrationist vision.

Many recent films, in the same vein, give “mythic” expression to the common attitude that cultural differences and class distinctions will be eliminated by the American-born younger generation, especially through love, as in the implied couple of the upper-middle-class Jewish woman and working-class man in *Dirty Dancing*. The differences are “contained” by the over-arching ideology of integration, presumed to solve conflicts, as if mixed marriage were sufficient to eradicate or modify deeply rooted structures of domination. Even when the films are seemingly focalized through “ethnic” protagonists, it is the liberal hegemonic discourse that they represent.

The Carnavalesque Critique

While the canonical musical mythically transcends the oppressive structures of everyday life through stylization and choreography, the carnivalesque parody of the musical at least partially subverts ethnic-racial hierarchies. Parody, which tends to be a marginalized artistic practice, is especially important for the discussion of how marginalized ethnic and racial groups can critique not only explicit racist enunciations, but also what the political theorist Stuart Hall calls “inferential racism,” that is, those apparently naturalized representations whose ethnocentric and racist propositions are inscribed in them as a set of unquestioned assumptions.³⁷ (This approach would question, for example, the invisible racist discourse in films such as *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes*, with its respectful attitude toward white-dominated South Africa and its diamond mines.)

While the musical represents the “management” of an orderly, harmonious, transparent utopia, parody exposes the silences of the American master narrative, and thus can critique inferentially racist discourses. The term *parody* is used here in its contemporary—largely Bakhtinian—sense of a self-reflexive, self-critical, and, frequently satirical mode of discourse which renders explicit the processes of intertextuality through distortion, exaggeration, inversion, or elaboration of a preexisting text.³⁸ Parody is especially appropriate for the discussion of “center” and “margins” since—due to its historical critical marginalization, as well as its capacity for

appropriating and critically transforming existing discourses—parody becomes a means of renewal and demystification, a way of laughing away outmoded forms of thinking. Parody, by exposing the mechanisms of mimesis and the processes of intertextuality, becomes an apt locus for rendering explicit the ethnic “mimesis” of much of American cinema, its representation of the “natural,” “American way.”

Many of the parodies I discuss are important for their incorporation of the carnivalesque, which Mikhail Bakhtin traces back to Rabelais and to Menippean satire. The carnivalesque, for Bakhtin, represents the transposition into art of the spirit of carnival—popular festivities offering a brief entry into a sphere of utopian freedom in which the conventional world is symbolically turned “upside down.”³⁹ Because both evoke utopias, the carnivalesque parody is a particularly interesting genre to compare with the traditional musical’s ethnic discourse. Whereas musicals, even those with “minority” characters, tended historically to offer communal utopia as a cultural monolith, the carnivalesque parodies, even when produced in Hollywood, have to some extent offered a multivoiced ethnic utopia wherein syncretism is privileged. Parody’s capacity to appropriate different genres—most associated with hegemonic ethnic discourses—allows for a broad interweaving of different texts, defamiliarized from their original cultural context, especially through associating them with “ethnic” discourses, in order to forge a satiric palimpsest of syncretic identities.

Such films as *Hair Spray* foreground the collectivity of various marginalized groups: the obese, working-class Euro-American female protagonist and her “mother” Divine, as well as the community of African-Americans defeat the racists, allegorizing the utopia of a nonracist, communal America. At the film’s end, the protagonist dances the black-style “bug” and wins over the “all-American girl!” and her racist supporters. In one scene, white paranoid attitudes toward African-Americans are satirized by showing blacks playing with the racist expectations of a white matron “stranded” in a ghetto. By focalizing the scene through the traditionally marginalized perspective of the African-American neighborhood, John Waters sutures the spectator into an antiracist viewpoint, much as John Sayles, using a similar strategy, represents two terrified mid-western Euro-Americans from the perspective of the patrons of a Harlem bar in *Brother from Another Planet* (1984). In the last scene of *Hair Spray* the triumph of the various “margins” is celebrated, cul-

→ good (ex)

S. G. ...

minating in the police's participation in the collective dance—much as the baton-twirling officer in Lionel Richie's "All Night Long" music video.

If in most films African Americans have been merely the "guests" in the narrative, or the entertainers featured in the musical numbers, and if all-black-cast films partially aimed at the African American audience consumption reproduced the dominant ideology, in Spike Lee's *School Daze* (1987) issues of race constitute the central focus. Whereas traditionally all-black-cast films were symptomatic of the exclusion and segregation of African Americans from hegemonic culture, *School Daze* subverts this connotation of an all-black space. It represents a conscious choice to foster a provisionally isolated space in which to delve into class and even racial tensions within the African-American community. Exploring ideological conflicts between light- and dark-skinned African Americans, as well as between middle-class and lumpenproletarian blacks, the film subtextually defines black positioning in relation to white centers of power.

One satirical musical number in particular stages the tension between colonized and politically conscious black women. "Straight and Nappy" (fig. 8.4) satirizes not simply the feminine beautification process in general, but also in relation to white (European) versus black (African) models of beauty, a question that also bears obvious relevance to black males—consider Michael Jackson. Set in a stylized decor of a black beauty salon, the jazzy number foregrounds the role within African-American culture of hair in both metonymic and metaphoric terms as an object of praise or blame depending on political outlook.⁴⁰ The colonized Wannabees censure the African look—"Don't you wish you had hair like this/then the boys would give you a kiss . . . cain't cha, don't cha hair stand on high/cain't cha comb it and don't you try." Their view is counteracted by the politically conscious Jigaboos—"Don't you know my hair is so strong/it can break the teeth out the comb. . . . I don't mind being BLACK/go on with your mixed-up head/I ain't gonna never be 'fraid."⁴¹ The dancers carry Vivien Leigh and Hattie McDaniel fans, reflexively alluding to the representation of race relations in Hollywood and implicitly to their impact on the African-American self-image. "Straight and Nappy"'s focus on looks and identity must be understood against the backdrop of Malcolm X's suggestion that the white man's worst crime was to make blacks hate themselves. Offering an alternative to the usual tourist status of African Americans within mainstream cinema, a status which



8.4. Spike Lee's *School Daze*: re-invoicing black space.

burdens every black character with the role of representing their community as a whole, *School Daze* literally liberates the narrative space for African-American use to play out the contradictions, complexities, and multiplicities of the African-American community.

Yet another filmmaker who employs ethnic conventions of the classical musical against ethnocentrism is Mel Brooks. His deployment of parody, specifically musical parody as in *The History of the World, Part One* and *The Producers*, allows further exploration of the musical's dissonances concerning ethnicities-in-relation. *The History of the World, Part One* is structured as a series of episodes representing selected moments from history from the Stone Age, through ancient Rome and the Spanish Inquisition, to the French Revolution. Narrated by Orson Welles, the film, much like *Zelig*, plays imaginatively with generic conventions, while also subverting anachronistically time and place as well as the official Western perspective on history. Brooks's parody of historical epic films implicitly conveying the dominant historiography must be appreciated within carnivalesque tradition, with its logic of the turnabout and perpetual de-canonicalizations. *The History of the World, Part One* is told from a marginalized perspective; the periphery moves to the center. The

Rome episode, for example, is focalized not through the emperors and their triumphs and defeats, but rather through the marginalized—the Jewish “fool,” schlemiel, and “stand-up philosopher” (Brooks) and the black slave. Brooks’s presentation of history recalls that of the *Annales* school of historiography, which shifts the emphasis to peripheralized communities, in contrast to dominant historiographical accounts that focus only on the powerful.

The shift of historical perspective has crucial implications for the issue of ethnic representation, a shift which goes beyond the binary discourse of negative versus positive images. We tend to associate the musical’s esthetic forms with an innocuous, harmonious world while in the Inquisition episode, much as in “Springtime for Hitler and Germany” from *The Producers*, Brooks employs Busby Berkeley style forms, particularly the forms of Esther Williams’s musicals, to recount horrifying moments of history. In this sense, it is a film self-declaredly in “bad taste.” It neglects the elevated and implicitly offers a critique of the “refined” and rigid conception that serious matters deserve only “serious” genres—and seriousness is artificially contrasted with humor. This separation of styles, as Pierre Bourdieu documents, has tended historically to be tied to class—and ethnic—hierarchies.⁴² Rather than classical Hollywoodian sublimation, we are given a strategy of reduction and degradation which uses obscenity and caricature. Rather than the musical’s idealized, sanitized fetishization of the white female body as a source of pleasure for spectatorial gaze, here we find the crude and satirically cruel fetishization of the “ethnic” male body. The film parodically celebrates sexuality as transcending ethnic and religious differences. Where torture has failed, sex succeeds, that is, in converting Jews. The musical’s ethnic purity is also subverted by showing ethnic religious conflicts transcended through a syncretic ending. The lure of sex is presented reflexively, equated with the lure of Hollywood’s entertainment and glamour. The final image associates the Jewish symbol (the menorah) with stereotypically Anglo-American blondes who carry it—all within a mainstream artistic form: the Hollywood musical.

The History of the World, Part One’s parody of the musical also incorporates specific languages, dialects, accents, and paralinguistic sounds associated with specific ethnic groups (“Oy!,” “Nay, Nay, Nay,” “Hey man!”) as well as ethnically specific gestures, for example, black-style speech, for purposes of ironic inversion. In the musical show “Springtime for Hitler and Germany,” Hitler and Goebbels talk and move in a black-inflected street manner. Brooks thus super-



8.5. Mel Brooks as Torquemada in *History of the World, Part One*: the carnivalesque incarnation of the haunting oppressor.

imposes signs associated with a presumably inferior race precisely on the Nazi ideologues who theorized and tried to enforce that inferiority. By associating traditional musical forms with recognizable marginalized communities, *The History of the World, Part One* and *The Producers* call attention to their traditional exclusion from the musical’s communal harmony. The Inquisition musical number, furthermore, imagistically associates the medieval Catholic hierarchy with Busby Berkeley’s esthetic order, just as “Springtime for Hitler and Germany” subliminally links fascist esthetics with the Hollywood spectacle.⁴³ The Inquisition episode satirizes the so-called civilized world celebrated by Hollywood. The episode initially visualizes a Catholic mass as if drawn from a horror film (fig. 8.5). Sounds that the dominant liturgic sensibility associates with purification, spirituality, and holiness are superimposed on the cries of tortured people. In one of the following sequences a tortured Jew asks in Yiddish-accented English: “Is it polite? Is it considerate? To make my privates a public game?”⁴⁴ Jews, like other third-world people, were accused of barbarism, savagery, vulgarity; therefore, the projection of bourgeois codes of etiquette of privacy, politeness, and

good manners onto an Inquisition context reduces these codes to their hypocritical core. It was in the very name of its civilizing missions that Europe committed its acts of barbarisms against diverse "Others": Jews, Africans, Native Americans, and Asians.

Brooks's *Blazing Saddles* (1974), in which he collaborated on the script with, among others, Richard Pryor, also fosters ethnic syncretisms at once critical of dominant ethnic discourse and pointing to a carnivalesque utopia. The Western, the generic locus of Anglo-American male heroism and the filmic historiographical authority of the American experience, becomes in *Blazing Saddles* the subject of revisionist historical discourse. If the Western embodies the hegemonic ethnic discourse in which the few ethnicities present, except for Anglo-Americans, are "Indians" or Mexicans cast as evil within a Manichean outlook, the parody of the Western brings in these elided subaltern histories and suppressed ethnic and racial voices. The film opens with what is absent from Hollywood historiography, showing forced black and Chinese labor on the railroad, mistreated by the racist and greedy cowboys who also confiscated Native American lands. Slim Pickens is hijacked from the classical Western to play a satirically revised version of his traditional role. Furthermore, Gene Wilder (the schlemiel rabbi in the West in another ethnic revisionist film *The Frisco Kid*, 1979)⁴⁵ is here a gunslinger who joins the black sheriff (Cleavon Little) to rescue the town from an evil judge and cowboys' vandalism. Wilder and Little manage to win over the racist town and give the oppressed blacks, Chinese, and Irish their share of land and equality.⁴⁶

The provocative articulation of previous discursive silence concerning American historiographical representation is also seen in the carnivalesque inversion of an exploited black laborer who is transformed into a sheriff, as well as in the criss-crossing of identifications and displacements among the marginalized. For example, in one scene, the Indians attack a segregated wagon train of which the blacks occupy, as it were, the back seats. The Indians—Brooks plays the chief in dark-face—are not demonic, but sympathetic and release the blacks. Here Brooks merges Native Americans and Jews as well as African Americans, all marginalized groups excluded from the Anglo-American master narrative. The "Indian" chief speaks Yiddish, addressing the blacks as "shvartzes" (blacks in Yiddish) and preventing his Indian companion from killing them. When the black family continues to travel, the Indian Mel Brooks says in a Yiddish accent "they are darker than us." On the one hand, his remark is a self-mocking allusion to Jewish racist attitudes toward blacks, while at the same time the remark acknowledges the

different colors as nuances on a spectrum, as well as the affinities among all three groups objectified and oppressed on a pseudo-biological basis.

A similar Native American-Jewish affinity is suggested by Zelig in his transformation into a Native-American "Indian." Zelig in this sense follows the tradition of such Jewish entertainers as Fanny Brice, who used to sing "I'm an Indian." A whole body of poetry was in fact written by Jewish immigrants alluding to Native Americans, displacing their own sense of marginality onto America's quintessential "other."⁴⁷ Jews, as Tzevan Todorov points out in *The Conquest of America*, formed Europe's internal "Other" long before the peoples of Africa, Latin America, and Asia became its external "Other."⁴⁸

The Jewish merging with the Native American, then, forges a link between Europe's external and internal "Other." A Lenny Bruce monologue voiced the bitter irony of Native Americans by having one complain: "Oh Christ! The white people are moving in—you let one white family, and the whole neighborhood will be white."⁴⁹ Bruce here calls attention to urban ethnic phobias directed toward marginalized groups, but by placing the sentiment in the mouth of a Native American he also calls attention to white expropriation of the Native-American national land. The concept of the "Indian" is employed as a mode of indirect enunciation, as a political metaphor constructing one's own ethnic subjectivity in terms of another "Other."

Parodies of dominant modes of representation are the products of specific ethnic cultures as well. The Inquisition episode in *The History of the World, Part One*, for example, must also be seen within a specifically Jewish carnivalesque tradition, that of the Purim carnival. The *Purimspiel* tradition celebrates the prevention of genocide through Esther's outwitting of the oppressor. It is the biblical Esther's sexuality—here transformed into the erotic kitsch of Esther Williams—that redeems the Jews. The satirical popular costume in the Jewish carnival, that of Haman, the biblical figure who ordered the genocide of the Jews, marks the rejoicing at the success of Jewish survival. The oppressed who survived, then, wear the self of the oppressor in order to celebrate the continuation of collective history.

Applying the Purim tradition to relatively recent history, in *The History of the World, Part One*, Brooks literally dresses up like the Grand Inquisitor, Torquemada, while in *To Be or Not to Be* (1983) he masquerades as Hitler, and as a Nazi in *The Producers*, much as Woody Allen in *Zelig* transforms himself into a Vatican official and a

Nazi. In *The Producers*, moreover, dozens of saluting Hitlers are revealed to be actors auditioning—a mechanical reproduction which demystifies the haunting figure of the Fuhrer, as does the ending of *The History of the World, Part One*, in which Brooks promises a sequel which includes “Hitler on Ice” and “Jews in Space.”⁵⁰ Brooks’ wearing the persona of Torquemada or Hitler can be seen as a form of metaphorical cannibalism, a symbolic appropriation of the power of the historical enemy through playfully masquerading as that enemy.⁵¹ The carnivalesque laughter at power and death through music and dance also exorcises the community’s latent collective fears. Carnavalesque parody is in some ways the site of a return of the ethnic repressed. If the musical represented a single American history and a unified ethnic ideal ego, the carnivalesque parody presents the multiplicity of histories and conflicting utopian visions.

A discourse of ethnic representation rather than ethnic images involves issues of textual structuring of historical perspective and power relations. *The History of the World, Part One* implicitly illustrates this point in the ordering of the episodes themselves. The Inquisition number follows the Rome episode whose final sequence focuses on persecuted Jesus and the Last Supper. The episode of Christians persecuted by Rome is thus juxtaposed with Christians as persecutors. Similarly, within the episode itself, the Christian black is not persecuted by the Romans because of his color but because of his religious persuasion. He even tries to save his life by insisting that he is not a Christian but a Jew, proving it by tap dancing to “Hava Nagila.” The following Inquisition episode, in which Christianity has now become the persecuting norm, fully illuminates ethnic positioning as tied up with the variabilities of power. Flexible contradictory positionings characterize ethnic and racial relations. A critical analysis of ethnicity in films, then, also involves historicizing the question of the specific and evolving articulations of cultural and political power. An awareness of texts as palimpsests of competing ethnic and racial collective discourses is thus critical for a multicultural reading which goes beyond any number of invisible ethnocentricisms.

NOTES

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1. Johannes Fabian, *Time and the Other: How Anthropology Makes Its Object* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1983); for a major critique of Western anthropological representation, see James Clifford, *The Predicament of Culture: Twentieth-Century Ethnography, Literature, and Art* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1988).

2. Richard Dyer has proposed a critical discussion of “whiteness” in cinema, “White,” *Screen* 29 (Autumn 1988): 44–64.

3. The reasons for Jewish producers’ suppression of Jewish presence on the screen, despite their relative power in the industry, are discussed by Patricia Erens, *The Jew in American Cinema* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984) and Lester Friedman, *The Image of the Jew in Hollywood* (New York: Frederick Ungar Publishing, 1982).

4. In most cases I prefer to use the term *African American* to *black* in order to emphasize not only the racial, but also the historical dimension in the forcing of an African-American critical discourse. For the same reason, I avoid, whenever possible, the problematic term *white*, shifting the focus to Euro-American, or Anglo-American, hegemonic culture as inseparable from the broader history of colonialism and the encounter between the first world and the third world in the United States.

5. For an illuminating discussion of the question of black spectatorship, for example, see Manthia Diawara, “Black Spectatorship—Problems of Identification and Resistance,” *Screen* 29 (Autumn 1988): 66–72.

6. On iterative scenes, see Gérard Genette, *Narrative Discourse: An Essay in Method*, trans. Alan Sheridan (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1980).

7. Since spectators are ethnically constituted, a marginalized community might be especially alert to certain references on the margins of filmic text. In *Singin’ in the Rain*, Gene Kelly and Donald O’Connor, as they sing “Moses,” briefly wrap themselves with lined curtains reminiscent of Jewish prayer shawls (*taliith*), a visual allusion that Jewish spectators are more likely to catch and appreciate. In *Footlight Parade*, which features a character of a (closet) Jewish producer, a presumably Jewish soldier sings of “Shanghai Lil”: “She won’t be mine for all of Palestine. . . . Oy!” beating his head with his hand in a Jewish style.

8. See, for example, Shaul Tchernechovsky and Chaim Nachman Bialik’s poetic work.

9. Richard Dyer, “Entertainment and Utopia,” in *Movies and Methods*, vol. 2, ed. Bill Nichols (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985).

10. Jane Feuer, *The Hollywood Musical* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1982), p. 84.

11. Fredric Jameson, “Reification and Utopia in Mass Culture,” *Social Text* 1 (Winter 1979): 130–48.

12. The phrase is borrowed from Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflexions on the Origins and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 1983).