Black Is White/White Is Black: "Passing" as a Strategy of Racial Compatibility in Contemporary Hollywood Comedy

Jokes, even if the thought contained in them is non-tendentious and thus only serves theoretical intellectual interests, are in fact never non-tendentious. They pursue the second aim: to promote the thought by augmenting it and guarding it against criticism.

—Sigmund Freud[1]

How can one chart the effects of the culture on its marginal members? Although we can easily assert that, in an earlier period of American history "the minstrelsy era really took off at the same time as the abolition movement,"[2] the 1980s seemed too complex to make any easy formulations. Under the Reagan administration, blacks and other minorities experienced a gradual erosion of the civil rights gained and consolidated in the fifties and sixties: immigration laws requiring passes, English-only initiatives, increased corruption in the judiciary system in the North as well as in the South, and designer vigilantism. At the same time, the 1960s' ocean of prosperity, in which even blacks were able to swim, began to dry up, leaving minorities gasping at the margins. As a consequence, blacks in the 1980s were, as a group, less educated, poorer, and died in greater numbers than ever before. While even feminists could be proud of certain real and probably permanent, although insufficient, gains in, for example, the academy, blacks continued to drop out of college before graduation at an enormous rate. Cuts in social spending and, more generally, the disappearance in America of the heavy industries in which many urban blacks traditionally made their way into the middle class, were responsible for even more misery than would otherwise be visible.

What has any of this to do with comedy, which, although satirical and biting in other countries, is here evasive and sophomoric? Contemporary American comedy evades realistic treatments of social issues, opting instead for escape from these issues. Compare *Rules of the Game* (1939), with its complex treatment of class decay and class relation, or *Traffic's* (1971) avant garde comedy of industrial society, with such mainstream American entries as *The Golden Child* (1986), *Beverly Hills Cop* (1984), or *48 Hours* (1982). How is the comic-book plot of *The Golden Child* a realistic depiction of race relations in the United States? How can we discuss the screwball comedy plot about lovers of disparate backgrounds imposed on *48 Hours* as a strategy for racial harmony, other than as an ironically conceived solution having more to do with Leslie Fiedler's romance between the white man and his "dusky lover" offered in *Love and Death in the American Novel* than as the laissez-faire realism the film purports to offer?[3]

No easy connection can be made between black life and black screen representation. We cannot, for example, unproblematically assert that traditional black stereotypes are back in fashion. Although it was always a complex phenomenon, doing black stereotypes before World War II was comparatively easy: Uncle Tom, Zip Coon, Mammy, and the Pickaninny were all easily recognizable. Then came civil rights, the social problem films of the 1950s and 1960s—for example, *Pinky* (1949), *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner* (1967), and *Imitation of Life* (1959)—and the gradual, begrudged entry into the Hollywood mainstream via exploitation and a few legitimate roles. However, even in the late 1970s James Monaco could assert that "the roles have multiplied perhaps ten-fold, but the old stereotypes survive to be joined by new ones."[4]

In order to formulate a model that will allow more specific discussion of contemporary black film roles, let us, on the strength of two observations about society, make one assumption about film. The observations are that the integration of blacks as equal participants in society remains an official but elusive goal, and the absence of black representation in film is one manifestation of that problem. The very safe neopsychoanalytic assumption is that any existent representation of blacks will have an enormous amount of social energy cathected onto it. That the bulk of this representation should occur in comedy is an indication of the strength of the attempt to avoid the representation of an enormously difficult subject. It also suggests a canny ability to sublimate some of this social energy and anxiety toward the secondary "desire" to recreate a difficult

problem as easily soluble, in other words to recreate race relations as useful insofar as they militate toward humor.

Of course humorous solutions are *fantasy* resolutions of incongruous oppositions. But, as Freud asserts, those fantasies are no less really desired for being fantasies. The "thought" that contemporary films about race embody is the desire that blackness cease to exist, that it be replaced with at most a white version of who and what blacks are. Blacks should be replaced by humans—as humanity is whitely defined. Or, if erasure is impossible only because, were everything white, the page and screen would be blank—the only threat greater than difference is sameness—then borders should be set up, distance maintained, time stopped at about 1947. The lack of black representation in most American film genres is complemented by a reactionary message in the one genre in which blacks make a significant appearance. The resolutions to issues of race proposed by such films as *The Jerk* (1980) and *Beverly Hills Cop* and *Who Framed Roger Rabbit* (1988) should not be dismissed because they are comic. Their plots offer strategies that should be examined as seriously as they are intended. And, of course, the strategy of using comedy as the largest forum for the representation of race ought also to be examined. Race relations as comedy is the contrived de-resolution of a problem into a number of discrete moments of pleasure.

Blackground

The dominant contemporary problem has been to accrue a mere sufficiency of representations of blacks in film. This problem is in part corporate: the white-dominated means of production tends to exclude not just positive but all representations of blacks in film: "We're simply missing from the product."[5] In a way, this is the most extreme criticism of the film industry possible. But the longevity of this practical problem offers itself as both caused by and indicative of another, theoretical dilemma. The white film establishment does not know which is more politically correct (and so bankable): to portray blacks as middle class, or to represent the economic poverty of black life in America. The first option—for example, television's "The Cosby Show"—neglects significant representation of the disenfranchised and smacks of tokenism; the second option too often, as in *The Color Purple* (1985), denies the possibility of positive role models in its depiction of black male rage and impotence.

These limits in representation encourage a kind of iconographicization of the black image, which, in critical discussion, leaves its

creators susceptible to the charge of stereotyping. Once the culture as a whole has opted for this reduced version of representation, it becomes possible to see the behavior of even the most complex film characters as stereotypical. The otherwise astute Donald Bogle, for example, characterizes the radicalized, militant blacks of *Putney Swope* (1970) as "supercharged athletes, as high-powered sexual beings, as loud-mouth do-nothings. Instead of picking at any genuine Black follies to prove his point, the director chose to satirize the lies, myths, cliches, exaggerations."[6] Even Spike Lee in *She's Gotta Have It* (1986) can be characterized as Zip Coon, however perfectly aware we may be of the degree to which Lee is an ironized, individuated character.[7]

Especially in mainstream commercial films, one feels the effect of what, in a different arena, Edward Said refers to as *Orientalism*, the tendency of the hegemonic culture to read and represent the ethnic Other as a projection of the kinds of impulses the culture is afraid of acknowledging, but fascinated by, in itself.[8] Black portrayals will be unacceptable as long as they are created by white administration and money because they represent the mainstream's view of the ethnic and, as such, are always crypto-anthropological in nature, always one culture pretending an objective definition of another. In a white hegemony, black depictions will always be readable as stereotypical.[9]

Still, the Reagan years spawned a visible, if token, Republican black middle class that American film has decided is representative and "real." This class is small. Much of it is spurious—blacks *not* voting as Democrats through a disillusionment with the increasing conservativeness of that party. But, in the portrayal of positive black role models, this new black middle class (with some adjustment in party affiliation) figures heavily in films and television shows as different as "The Cosby Show," *Jumpin' Jack Flash* (1986, fig. 7.1), and *She's Gotta Have It*. This class is the most attractive for Hollywood to represent as interesting because it offers the most hope of allowing black roles that evade stereotyping. As *Hollywood Shuffle* (1987) correctly charts, black *ficelles*—street people, muggers, and pimps—still inhabit film as foils to Clint Eastwood and Charles Bronson. The classic versions of stereotypes exist as well, even if, like the black East German Pullman porter in *Top Secret* (1984), the stereotype is parodic. But this "crossover" middle class offers the fewest overt problems in representation because, whatever its ambivalence in relation to black identity, it presents blacks as potential leads for narratives within Hollywood formulas (e.g., the screwball comedy)

7.1. Whoopie Goldberg, an example of Hollywood's portrayal of the new black middle class, in *Jumpin' Jack Flash*.

that traditionally rely on some form of economic independence as a pre-condition for interesting activity.

The representation of blacks as unproblematically successful extends to the actors as well as the roles. There seem to be more successful blacks in films now than at any time since the significant black independent industry of the twenties and thirties. While the reality of blacks in the marketplace and society has worsened in the last ten years, more popular black (comic) leading men are in film— Eddie Murphy, Arsenio Hall, Bill Cosby, Richard Pryor, and, marginally, Robert Townsend and Spike Lee. But this individual success has an at best ambiguous status: American film is guilty of the same tokenism as the culture. *While American society has sanctioned the disappearance of the black in life, it celebrates the success of the black on film. Mainstream black film in American under the Reagan administration became a way to unwrite the history of blacks in America in the eighties.*[10]

Only incidentally a survey on the progress of the ethnic stereotype in the 1980s, this chapter will examine the way in which Hollywood "gets away" with representing disappearance as its reverse. Although the commonsensical perception is probably correct that

racist stereotypes exist in more subtle versions of the Mammy, the Pickaninny, and others, I will instead discuss certain comic techniques used in an ideologically focused manner on a less-discussed character: the light black passing as white.

The old comedy technique of parody, and the new comedy technique of doubling, have as their offshoots a kind of passing as a member of a different race in certain films of the late 1970s and 1980s. Certain mainstream films use a version of passing to present their stars for token inclusion into the essentially white society those films depict. The black actor passes in a white role, the white actor in blackface. This dual displacement allows a safe filmic non-discussion of the place and origin of blacks in America. One sees a reactionary dialogue in these comedies that both echoes and precedes a particular rewriting of American history as including only those blacks who are really white—success, upward mobility, and virility defined as white—and exclusion of blacks who are black.

Of course, the resistance to seeing these fluffy films as serious is explained by the extremity of the message. The reactionary assertion of the films must be acknowledged if the films are to be taken seriously. So they are not taken seriously. Nevertheless, in the case of these comedies, we should probably take the advice of an acute commentator of humor to "assume of all these anecdotes with a logical facade that they really mean what they assert for reasons that are intentionally faulty."[11]

White on Black

It is in itself significant that in the 1980s the overwhelming number of black leads were still comic. And among the most interesting abilities of the black lead is his imitative ability. In the 1970s Richard Pryor starred in a number of films in which he was disguised in one way or another. The Swank distributors' blurb describes Pryor in *Which Way Is Up* (1977) as a "farm worker, his father and a hypocritical preacher." The most poignant moment, though, comes in a film released at the beginning of the 1980s. In *Stir Crazy* (1980), in order to escape from prison, Pryor (the comic of the mournful countenance) has to wear clown makeup: a black man in prison escapes by wearing whiteface. This is oddly metaphorical for the racial thematics of 1980s' films.
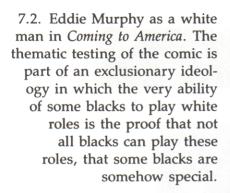
Like Pryor in *Blue Collar* (1978), some comics play various versions of working-class, blue-collar blacks. Or, like Pryor in *Car Wash* (1976), they make forays into parodic versions of wealthy blacks.

But black stand-up comics like Arsenio Hall, Whoopi Goldberg, and Eddie Murphy play multiple roles that have to do with making it as affluent white-collar workers, or even wealthy princes, in such films as *Jumpin' Jack Flash* and *Telephone* (1987) and *Coming to America* (1988).
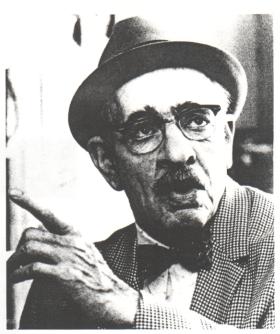
These actors tend to have a wider range of roles that come to define the comic black actor as being about role-playing. Even *Hollywood Shuffle* is in part about the ability of the lead to play a number of roles—the detective, the jive dude, and the movie reviewer (à la Siskel and Ebert). The strategy of the film is a standard catharsis—to act out the roles one fears becoming is to exorcise them from one's personality. Robert Townsend's self-conscious, ironic use of jive roles is supposed to be an exorcism of their power to persuade. Yet we are left with a film in which such roles are still, as always, portrayed as stereotypically comic, if self-consciously so.

The frequency with which actors play multiple roles within a film indicates a tendency to thematize role-playing. Playing a number of roles indicates the actors' understanding of those roles and what they mean. But playing them ironically also means a certain detachment from them, a space that prevents a complete identification of the actor with his or her role. If Goldberg's pretending to be a street person or junkie means that she could not really be one of these characters, what does Eddie Murphy's pretending to be a policeman in *48 Hours* or a customs inspector in *Beverly Hills Cop* mean?

Further, the need to prove that these roles could belong to them, even ironically, means that the roles are not perceived as automatically possible to them. The fact that, as a group, black actors have to prove their fitness for such roles is itself proof that they are not yet accepted as belonging. Northrop Frye's sense of the disguised hero entering the green world for the solution to the conundrum postulated at the beginning of the play as his life has, in the contemporary portrayal of blacks in a white society, a more insidious meaning.[12] The traditional hero enters and leaves the forest, taking something or someone significant with him. But the black lead can never leave the green world; he is defined as already having everything of value he needs, with the exception of freedom and money of course, always available on white corporate America's terms. Orlando enters the Forest of Arden to find Rosalind, whereas Eddie Murphy goes to Beverly Hills to solve a murder. Orlando leaves Arden with Rosalind; Murphy leaves with the hotel bathrobe he has stolen. Murphy and his sidekick—fair, blonde Lisa Eilbacher—are, as Don Lockwood constantly asserts about his relation to Lena La-

7.2. Eddie Murphy as a white man in *Coming to America*. The thematic testing of the comic is part of an exclusionary ideology in which the very ability of some blacks to play white roles is the proof that not all blacks can play these roles, that some blacks are somehow special.

mont, "just good friends." No simulated cunnilingus as in *Romancing the Stone* (1984) for the lead couple here.

Testing is always by its very nature exclusive: not everyone passes, and only a few do well. If one actor is proficient enough to play a variety of middle- and lower-class roles, then he is always so at the expense of a number who are not. The thematic testing of the comic is part of an exclusionary ideology in which the very proof of the ability of some blacks to play more or less white roles is also the proof that not all blacks can play those roles, that these blacks are somehow special (fig. 7.2). Like middle-class black America, these actors are token. They carry the unfair but inevitable burden for both the right and left of accounting for their success when others are left behind. Even in *Hollywood Shuffle* the hero is shown making a choice to leave Hollywood as a choice toward family; the family, and personal connections of the star, are partially responsible for his not making it.

The tendency of black comics to imitate black stereotypes and white mannerisms to the same end can be seen most clearly in certain Eddie Murphy vehicles. Although imitation of whites was always part of stock-in-trade of Zip Coon, the difference is that Eddie Murphy is better than his white counterpart (fig. 7.3). Zip Coon was always a poor imitation of the white dandy. The central scene of *48 Hours* is Murphy's entrance into the bar as a fake police officer in order to procure information from the customers. Murphy gets his

7.3. As in *Beverly Hills Cop,* the primary job of Eddie Murphy in *The Golden Child* is to care for the nonblack.

information, behaving in the best tradition of the kind of white officer who sent him to jail. We admire the uncanny excellence of his ability to identify with the aggressor in this film; technique replaces theme as focus of our attention. Murphy is much better, more deft and competent, than his white accomplice, Nick Nolte.

If anything, Nolte is the hulking, inarticulate, slightly confused and stupefied animal—the negative, more or less self-conscious projection of the kind of character the film chose not to make Murphy. He is the white accomplice who is more stereotypically black than Murphy, further muddying the types while allowing them to persist. The pairing of Murphy and Nolte is a reworking of the screwball formula fantasy in which the antagonists are found to have affinities that take precedence over social and class differences. Only here, the affinities have racist rather than sexist undertones.

In *Trading Places* (1983), we are early given a sense of how Murphy will come to play a black playing a black. Even the plot of the film is about race and the problem of getting the black man into white America as unobtrusively as possible. In order to settle a bet about the comparative influence of heredity and environment, a black beggar is placed in a position of luxury and responsibility by two cretinous bigots. Throwing a party in his new, luxurious digs for his old, lumpenproletariat (largely black) friends, Murphy ultimately ejects them, careful for the furniture they are misusing as he had misused it in a previous scene. The film does not punish him for his abandonment of his friends. In fact, while exorcising the poor black in him, he is made to seem liberal in contrast to the villains of the film, two of whom sport pictures of Reagan and Nixon on their desk, and one of whom is reading a copy of G. Gordon Liddy's *Will*.

At the beginning of the film Murphy pretends to be lame and blind in order to beg; he sways like Ray Charles while sitting on a little cart like Porgy's, doing two imitations at once. At the end of the film he pretends to be a black national, perhaps a U.N. member, with parti-colored caftan and a vaguely British-colonial accent. He is a black man in blackface, pretending to be black, a fair representation of the classic minstrel paradox. It is blackness passing as itself, wearing the face it is forced to take, re-representing itself as its larger audience conceives of it.

In *48 Hours*, Murphy's portrayal of a black con man is equally ambiguous; it is parodic—we know that although he is a black man with a gun he will not really kill anyone important. His gun has no

bullets, his badge is phony. But the parody is an indication that Murphy will, in classic Hollywood style, go from one side of the law to the other. If audiences enjoy him, he will, like Cagney, Bogart, and Gable, go from outlaw to cop in one jump, simultaneously reinforcing two traditional Hollywood assertions: class knows no racial distinctions—police and criminal inhabit different sides but the same milieu—and ethnics are the best policemen themselves. Like the Italian "Little Caesar" who becomes Dr. Ehrlich, or the Irish "Public Enemy" who becomes everyone's favorite G-man, Axel Foley becomes the ethnic who goes straight, leaving behind his old neighborhood in the process.

Beginning with shots of urban street life made fashionable in this comedy cycle by *The Blues Brothers* (1980), *Beverly Hills Cop* announces itself as a film about black urban life. However, the film very quickly moves to its title location. *Beverly Hills Cop* is careful to show that the villains against whom Axel Foley fights are white. Further, the lead heavy—Maitland—has close-cropped blonde hair and steely, blue-grey eyes. Steven Berkoff plays Maitland as more than merely authoritarian: he is epicurean, quietly cold, and sartorially fascist in the best parodic neo-Nazi style.

Again, as in *48 Hours*, much of the comedy depends on imitation and "faking." The imitations multiply like the epiphanies in *Ulysses*: Foley pretends to be a *Rolling Stone* reporter in order to get a room at the Beverly Hilton, an effete homosexual in order to get into a restaurant to confront the villain, a customs agent to explain his presence in a "secured" area. He is constantly explaining his presence as a black man, explaining to the valet at a stylish restaurant that his car looks so damaged because of its treatment the last time he ate there. He also pretends to be a black-marketeer, a truck driver from Buffalo, and a florist delivery person.

This need to explain Murphy/Foley's presence derives from the fact that he is the only significant black man in the film. (As an entry in the detective-thriller genre, the film does of course contain a minor black heavy and cops.) He must not only justify his presence in the haunts of the very white, but also must show that, as a symbolic presence, he contains the whole range of possible black behaviors, ironized and simplified, within his own personae. He has to account for his absence from the black urban milieu in which we first see him by carrying its stereotypes with him.

Murphy/Foley must be serious about the comic parts. He is in an oddly liminal position: the imitations are parodic, but coming as a part of the plot, the diegesis, he is dependent on them in order to

get him into positions and places of power. Unlike, for example, Groucho Marx, who does not care whether or not anyone believes his roles, and who subsequently never tries to be anything other than a lecherous, middle-aged, self-parodic Jew, Murphy/Foley must convince the other players that he is who he pretends to be. His is a modernist stance disguised as a postmodernist stance because it is functional playing, not merely a laughing into the abyss. What ought to be merely comic routines, and were in his "Saturday Night Live" skits, are in fact teleological.

Murphy's characters pretend to positions of power rather than actually inhabit them. His job at Duke and Duke (*Trading Places*) is the result of a momentary whim; it ends as quickly. His gun in *48 Hours* is not, until the end of the film, loaded. Even in *Beverly Hills Cop*, where he is given a status as a member of a police force, that power is negated by taking him out of his area of jurisdiction. The negation becomes in fact a part of the film's interest: it is about his individual ability to get what he wants without any socially sanctioned authority. Read as allegory, this becomes an interesting statement about the way in which blacks ought to work—not collectively but individually, not actively opposing the police but on the edges of their authority.

Black on White

> The implication of a uniform process of change is misleading, as is the failure to acknowledge that the receiving group undergoes change in absorbing the other.[13]

If black comics are coming to wear an invisible whiteface in a kind of minstrelsy-nouveau, white comics, like minstrels of old, occasionally indulge in, if not exactly blackface, then black role-playing. In an attempt at equal opportunity, Hollywood portrays passing on a two-way street: white men can also pass as black. This is another attempt at a configuration in which distinctions between black and white collapse without any real injury to representations of a benign, patriarchal capitalism. There will be fewer films in which whites play blacks, not because no anxiety is involved, but because the historical point being made is in some way more difficult to achieve. Examples include Woody Allen in *Zelig* (1983), Gene Wilder in *Silver Streak* (1976), and Peter Sellers in *Being There* (1979). The very fact that one generally finds this phenomenon in moments of films points to a kind of anxiety about treating the theme of downward mobility, even comically. The great exception is of course

Soul Man (1986), which, because of its status as a minor production with minor casting, will not be discussed herein.

As an example of one moment, in *Back to the Future* (1985), Michael J. Fox finds himself jettisoned back to 1955 and playing in a black rock and roll band. He is trying to get his would-be parents to kiss, or they will not marry, and he will not be born. At some point in his performance he breaks into Van Halen-inspired gyrations during his rendition of "Johnny B. Goode." In fact, Fox's yuppie is *composing* the song, impressing the black band leader, a Mr. Berry, so that he calls his cousin Chuck long distance to hear the new sound.

The chords being struck are extremely different from the theme of, for example, the previous decade's *Watermelon Man* about the torments of a white man who wakes up black. The point of *Back to the Future* is that rock and roll originated not in some arguable combination of black jazz and blues and rockabilly music, but with white, Anglo-Saxon, affluent, suburban, teenagers absorbed with finding an identity outside the moribund culture offered them by their parents. While such an argument has the merit of explaining much about American advertising and marketing trends, it is more interesting than accurate as a part of the historical records already sufficiently obscured in other ways. It accurately reflects a desire on the part of white America to have been less beholden to black culture (among others) for the structure of its own culture, of which rhythm and blues, jazz and rock and roll, are now official components.

This comic obfuscation works by reversing a historical trend— pretending that the causation was the other way around. The wish is presented as comic, but the fact that there is a great deal of audience energy cathected to it is probably significant. The rock and roll scene in *Back to the Future* is one of the more popular for audiences to recapitulate.

Versions of this obscurantism traditionally inform black-white relations in American film and theater. Fred Astaire, in a 1930 recording of "Puttin' on the Ritz," astonishes his black audience ("Boys, look at dat man puttin' on the ritz." "You look at him, I can't") with dance steps, many of which originated in black jazz styles. As late as 1953, Astaire similarly impresses blacks at the beginning of *The Bandwagon*. His stardom cast equally good black dancers—the Nicholas Brothers, for example—in the shade. Even as late as *High Society* (1956) Bing Crosby leads a band for whose style Louis Armstrong is really responsible.

More recently, whites take the position, if not exactly the role, traditionally attributed to blacks in a sly satire of blackness as it is defined by white culture. The most significant versions are some personae of Steve Martin and Dan Aykroyd. Aykroyd is the white investment counselor replaced by Eddie Murphy in *Trading Places*. In that film he makes up for awhile in blackface, imitating a Rastafarian. In *Dr. Detroit* (1983), Aykroyd demonstrates that the best pimp is an Anglo-Saxon pimp. He brings a quixotic, inappropriate nobility to a profession he has entered "accidentally." Aykroyd, in the flamboyant colors and styles the middle class associates with pimps (and that a certain class of intellectuals, best exemplified in Paul Fussell, associates with the middle class), appears ridiculous.[14] The satire is ostensibly directed at a kind of insulated pedantry (Aykroyd is a college professor), but it also works the other way, as a satire of the kind of flamboyant dress associated with urban black street life. In a particularly interesting variation on this strategy of ethnic replacement, *The Karate Kid II* (1986) features an ethnic culture teaching the dominant culture the tools with which to defeat the former group. It is a wonderful allegory about tokenism—the Japanese man teaches the young white boy karate so the boy can use this skill to beat the Asians against whom he competes.

Steve Martin, in *The Jerk*, takes this disguised satire of a version of black culture invented by whites to an extreme when he plays Naven Johnson, a white man raised by black sharecroppers. When he discovers as an adult that he is not black he decides to leave home and make his way in the world. But he behaves in an unacculturated manner: dressing inappropriately, believing everything everyone tells him, and being out of control of his own libido (he calls his penis his "special purpose"). Because he is white he does not behave like the version of the street-smart urban black we have come to accept as more or less politically correct in Eddie Murphy and Whoopi Goldberg. Rather, the Martin role goes back to Zip Coon, the black man trying to imitate the white dandy without understanding the social configurations into which he is trying to place himself. Martin is a version of black passing for white, a man who looks white yet who does not fit into white culture. He even makes the traditional choice of *Pinky* and *Imitation of Life* to return to his people as a prodigal son. As the audience knows he is white, he is as safe to laugh at as were the original white minstrels.

The film's version of the black family that Martin joins at the end of the film is the exemplar of the exotic culture that Said discusses in *Orientalism*, the culture, which exists in some authentic version

but which is reinvented by the dominant culture, the spectator culture for psychic purposes of its own. Here it is reinvented as traditionally happy with its lot as a poor Southern farming family. As a film about blacks made by a white industry, Naven's return to his family is a segregationist strategy disguised as a separatist choice, a comic avowal that there is no alternative to passing but a return to the fold.

Black and White in Color

Because of its ambiguous status as allegory, *Who Framed Roger Rabbit?* takes the most fearlessly and extremely racist position on the politics of passing and segregation. Its status as cartoon, and its reliance on our sense of the fluidity of stereotyping, allows for the re-eruption of the most blatant stereotyping.

That *Who Framed Roger Rabbit?* has at its center an anxiety about passing and tokenism is evident in the barest relation of plot: because a new freeway being built will increase the value of Toontown, a ghetto for cartoon characters, a villainous millionaire (Christopher Lloyd) murders one of the more prominent residents in order to gain control of the town. He blames the murders on Roger, a cartoon rabbit. As it turns out, the villain is himself a toon disguised as a human. Further, this passing toon wants to kill all the toons in the ghetto. For attempting this alternative to the ambiguous segregation the film offers as *its* solution to racial tension, this toon is punished with a public unmasking that reveals him as a traitor. He dies at the hands of a white, human detective (Bob Hoskins).

Rabbit director Robert Zemeckis sets most of his work in the past: *I Wanna Hold Your Hand* (1978) and *Back to the Future*. Coming at an extremely late date in the Reagan administration, *Roger Rabbit* takes advantage of the nostalgia that characterized the 1980s; the film is set in the 1940s, a few years after the trauma of war and its attendant racial tensions, a few years before the trauma of the civil rights movement.

The benign nostalgia for a simpler time when toons were toons is a more or less conscious metaphor for a nostalgia over the last moment when coons were coons and ghettos were not front-page news. *Rabbit* is a more or less allegorical treatment of a benevolent relation between two races somewhat tenuously connected by a common need to laugh. The ostensible threats to racial harmony are big business, transportation technology, and a future landscape blighted with shopping centers and overcrowded cities. The vision

of our present is offered to us as an insane future. But, because this vision depends completely on a modern technology without which it could not be conceived, such nostalgia deconstructs itself. Disney, one of the makers of this film bashing the freeway, is the proprietor of two of the world's largest parking lots: Disney Land and Disney World. This film about the cretinous destruction of an integrated culture by corporate capitalism is produced by a company that has opened a theme park near Paris.

The film's anti-big business pretense is also undercut by its own paternalistic portrayal of the relation between humans and toons. The toons themselves, except for Roger's girlfriend Jessica, are happy-go-lucky and rather careless of economic and political concerns. Their economic life is guided by human (read white) agents, club owners, and studio bosses. They like to laugh, sing, dance, and make love more than they like to work. Their ideal work is that in which they get to do these things. They are saved in the end from the breaking down to their ghetto by a white detective who does not like them. Compare the behavior of Roger to the behavior of antebellum minstrels:

> Minstrel caricatures mirrored the prevailing belief that slavery was good for the slave since it drew upon his natural inferiority and willingness to serve. Slaves were content. The proof was offered in the image of the happy Sambo. . . .
>
> The old plantation was offered as a kind of paradise. White Americans were constantly being bombarded with the image of happy slaves, is what it amounted to. So slavery must be a good institution if the slave was happy and the masters were kindly. And so that whole cultural image of a benign beneficent institution was projected constantly in the period immediately before the Civil War.[15]

Minstrels portray the Sambo as feebleminded and happy to serve—a description that fits Roger, who asserts that he exists only to make people laugh.

The allegorical quality of the film unintentionally takes off in other directions. The other cartoon romantic lead is Jessica, a pneumatically enlarged adolescent wet-dream placed squarely in the tradition of the tragic mulatto (fig. 7.4), "the part-Black woman—the light-skinned Negress was given a chance at lead parts and was graced with a modicum of sex appeal. . . . The mulatto came closest to the white ideal."[16]

The relation between the voluptuous chanteuse and the rabbit is meant to be merely titillating, but it contains all the undertones and anxieties of an absorption with miscegenation. Further, this repre-

7.4. The relation between the voluptuous mulatto chanteuse and the rabbit contains all the undertones and anxieties of an absorption with miscegenation. The magazine cover depicts the body as a cartoon with the face of a human being, thus exemplifying the mediation of racist stereotypes through animation technology.

sentation carries with it more than a *frisson* of bestiality that the fear of miscegnation always included. ("A man cannot commit so great an offense against his race, against his country, against his God . . . as to give his daughter, in marriage to a negro—*a beast*.")[17] Jessica also implies that Roger is well endowed, or a terrific lover in some unspecified way, playing off the white anxiety about the potency of black men. It is no accident that the character chosen for Roger is a rabbit.

The decision to re-present traditional stereotypes is contingent on their transformation by animation technology. Audiences no longer feel comfortable with unmediated depictions of racist stereotypes, but rather with the encoded message in which cartoon equals black person. But the thematically more significant decision is to depict blacks as cartoons in a film that depicts whites as "real" people. In an allegory about race relations, the opposition "human/cartoon" ("human/non-human," "human/animal") is telling. The historically unproblematic whites (unproblematic at least in this dichotomy) must be given status as real, in time and in history, whereas the toons are by nature fictional and textual. Roger Rabbit's willingness to be beaten and mauled as a part of his job is the visible proof that history as pain is always only text.[18] This text has a primary status as fiction because that part of history which is about segregation, pain, and disenfranchisement is the very stuff of the most blatant fictions. History is recomposed as myth. As Roland Barthes constantly emphasizes, the culture reconstructs the problematic past as a myth whose formulas contain the solution to problems that are historically resistant to solution. Claude Lévi-Strauss, in another context, observes that "a myth always refers to events alleged to have taken place in time: before the world was created, or during its first stages—anyway, long ago. But what gives the myth an operative value is that the specific pattern described is everlasting; it explains the present and the past as well as the future."[19]

The allegory takes place at a more structurally significant level than we, or the filmmakers, had at first thought. The problem stated by the plot and theme—how to create a better working relation between toons and people—is the problem that the technology of the film has already solved. The film leaves us remarking how wonderful it is that toons/coons are able to act so naturalistically, that they can be made to react so well with *real* people. Strides in animation technology enable people to overcome the barrier between the real and the surreal, presenting the animated world as socially presentable. The allegory assumes first that modes of minority representation are important—are a problem—only insofar
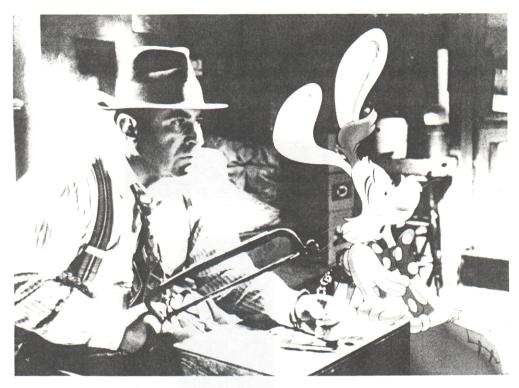
as they conflict with modes of mainstream representation. The second assumption is of course that such a problem is soluble through the sheer power of technology. The degree of integration achieved is possible only through an extremely expensive technology that can only infrequently be brought into use, because it is cost-effective only as long as it remains sufficiently novel to attract large crowds to offset its own cost. The technology itself suggests a tokenist attitude toward problem-making. Social mobility is available only to those groups that have complete access to the most recent technologies.

As the myth perpetuated by *Roger Rabbit* is structured, the segregation postulated in the plot is necessitated by the technologically visible unfeasibility of portraying the toons and the people as inhabiting the same world. They are composed of different stuff, inhabit a different set of audience expectations. The amazement engendered at seeing the toons react to people in a "lifelike" way is always only possible because of the audience's sense of novelty (fig. 7.5). The film promotes a benign separatism between the races that cannot really be brought together both because they are composed of separate technologies and because the purpose in bringing them together—entertainment—would be defeated by overexposure of one to another. One race is invented and more or less controlled by the other race for the purpose of entertainment by watching it hurt itself or act eccentrically in ways that we cannot allow ourselves. Finally, the technology itself obscures the profundity of the racist message. As mythmakers, Stephen Spielberg and Robert Zemeckis may rank with another pioneer in American film myth and technique: D. W. Griffith.

Passing the Buck

Passing as a strategy of racial compatibility in film allows the cultural hegemony simultaneously to perpetuate the notion that by the 1980s America had solved the "race problem" and to deny the depiction of authentic empowerment. Instead, films create a black population of individuals who are merely unique; they are created in order to devalorize cultural Otherness. Make the black man white and render his power charismatic, not political. Make the white man black and perpetuate all the stereotypes about stupidity and failure to understand the dominant social codes so that whoever behaves in this fashion deserves disempowerment. Subordinate the dialogue about race relations in an allegory dependent on technol-

7.5. *Who Framed Roger Rabbit?* offers viewers a vision of benign separatism between the races that cannot really be brought together because of separate technologies: one race is invented and controlled by the other race.

ogy to furnish a racist utopia in which blacks seek their unempowerment and alienation from the dominant culture. The final scene of *Who Framed Roger Rabbit?* shows the toons traipsing back to their newly reconstituted ghetto—all happy music and Technicolor sunset—content to be severed from the problematics of human empowerment. The vision is best summarized by the tune invented by antebellum whites for a black slave persona:

> Oh hand de banjo down to play
> We'll make it ring both night and day
> We care not what de white folk say
> They can't get us to run away.[20]

NOTES

1. Sigmund Freud, *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious* (London: Hogarth Press, 1960).

2. Marlon Riggs, "Ethnic Notions" (television documentary produced in San Francisco, California by Marlon Riggs and KQED Television,

1986). For this and other assertions about the Reagan era and film culture I am deeply indebted to Richard Onorato of Brandeis University.

3. Leslie Fiedler, *Love and Death in the American Novel* (New York: Criterion Books, 1960).

4. James Monaco, *American Film Now* (New American Library, 1979), p. 212.

5. Marilyn Milloy, "A Schematic in Black and White," *Newsday* (June 1982):123.

6. Donald Bogle, *Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies, and Bucks: An Interpretive History of Blacks in American Film* (New York: Viking Press, 1973), p. 229.

7. Nola Darling, who, in *She's Gotta Have It*, is even further individuated, is, in her knowledgability of and freedom with her sexuality, characterizable as a variation on the "tragic mulatto." In stereotypical—if comic—fashion, her sexuality becomes problematic for the men surrounding her. Spike Lee's real innovation is in the multiple points of view the film adopts in order to render Nola complex, as if the film is trying to provide in one text the multiple versions of representations that allow us to consider character as more than a stereotype.

8. Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Random House, 1979), esp. chapters 1 and 2.

9. Never mind that Spike Lee is as much a persona as Whoopie Goldberg; Goldberg seems less authentic in her films, while Spike Lee or Robert Townsend, both of whom write, direct, and finance their films, seem more authentic.

10. For the sake of making the contrast between the myth of black success and the reality of black male culture more striking, it is worth quoting at length some statistics compiled by Robert Staples in "Black Male Genocide: A Final solution to the Race Problem in America," *Black Scholar* 18 (May-June 1987):3:

> 1. While black men account for only 6 percent of the population in the United States, they make up half of its male prisoners in local, state, and federal jails.
>
> 2. The majority of the 20,000 Americans killed in crime-related incidents each year are black men.
>
> 3. Over 35 percent of all black men in American cities are drug and alcohol abusers.
>
> 4. Eighteen percent of black males drop out of high school.
>
> 5. Twenty-five percent of the victims of AIDS are black men.
>
> 6. Over 50 percent of black men under the age of 21 are unemployed.
>
> 7. Forty-six percent of black men between the ages of 16–62 are not in the labor force.
>
> 8. About 32 percent of black men have incomes below the officially defined poverty level.

11. Freud, *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious*, p. 107.

12. Northrop Frye, *The Anatomy of Criticism* (Princeton: University of Princeton Press, 1957), p. 182.

13. Michael Banton, "The Direction and Speed of Ethnic Change," in *Ethnic Change*, ed. Charles F. Keyes (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1981), p. 33.

14. In, for example, Fussell's "Notes on Class," in *The Boy Scout Handbook and Other Observations* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1982), pp. 46–60.

15. Riggs, *Ethnic Notions*.

16. Bogle, *Toms, Coons, Mulattoes*, p. 15.

17. Ariel [Buckner H. Payne], *The Negro: What Is His Ethnological Status?* (Cincinnati, 1867), p. 48.

18. For example, in Paul De Man's assertion that all significant historical representations are "masquerade in the guise of wars or revolutions," quoted in *The Nation*, January 9, 1988, p. 22.

19. Claude Lévi-Strauss, "The Structural Study of Myths," *Journal of American Folklore* 78 (October-December 1955):279.

20. Riggs, *Ethnic Notions*.