

Blackface, White Noise: The Jewish Jazz Singer Finds His Voice

Michael Rogin

1. Movies and the Black Question

Each transformative moment in the history of American film has founded itself on the surplus symbolic value of blacks, the power to make African Americans stand for something besides themselves. There have been four such moments. Edwin S. Porter's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1903), bringing the most performed theatrical spectacle of the late nineteenth century into the movies, marked the transition from popular theater to motion pictures that characterized the prehistory of classic Hollywood cinema. The most lavish and expensive film to date, and the first to use intertitles, *Uncle Tom's Cabin* was the first extended movie narrative with a black character and, therefore, since African Americans were forbidden to play African Americans in serious, dramatic roles, the first substantial blackface film. Porter's one-reeler straddles the border between the most popular form of nineteenth-century entertainment, blackface minstrelsy,

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and the most popular entertainment form of the first half of the twentieth century, motion pictures. Undercutting Stowe's novel, Porter introduced the plantation myth into American movies.¹

D. W. Griffith's *The Birth of a Nation* (1915) originated Hollywood cinema in the ride of the Ku Klux Klan against black political and sexual revolution. Its technique, cost, length, mass audience, critical reception, and influential historical vision all identify *Birth* as the single most important American movie ever made. *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, with Porter at the camera, derived from the artisanal mode of film production; *Birth* confirmed the period of directorial control.²

The Jazz Singer (1927), founding movie of Hollywood sound, introduced the blackface performer, Al Jolson, to feature films. Jolson was the most popular entertainer of his day, and *The Jazz Singer's* souvenir program (unlike critical attention since) devoted far more attention to blackface than to Western Electric's new sound and film projection system, Vitaphone. *The Jazz Singer* was a pure product of the studio producer system; the Warner brothers were in charge. Finally, David O. Selznick's *Gone with the Wind* (1939), an early example of the producer unit system that would come to dominate Hollywood, established the future of the Technicolor spectacular by returning to American film origins in the

1. See William L. Slout, "Uncle Tom's Cabin in American Film History," *Journal of Popular Film* 2 (Spring 1973): 137-52; Donald Bogle, *Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies, and Bucks: An Interpretive History of Blacks in American Films* (New York, 1973), p. 3; Charles Musser, *Before the Nickelodeon: Edwin S. Porter and the Edison Manufacturing Company* (Berkeley, 1991); Thomas Cripps, *Slow Fade to Black: The Negro in American Film, 1900-1912* (New York, 1977), pp. 12-14; Robert C. Toll, *Blacking Up: The Minstrel Show in Nineteenth Century America* (New York, 1974), pp. 1-5; Edward D. C. Campbell, Jr., *The Celluloid South: Hollywood and the Southern Myth* (Knoxville, Tenn., 1981), pp. 12-14, 37-39; David Bordwell, Janet Staiger, and Kristin Thompson, *The Classical Hollywood Cinema: Film Style and Mode of Production to 1960* (New York, 1985), p. 183. Eric Lott, "'The Seeming Counterfeit': Racial Politics and Early Blackface Minstrelsy," *American Quarterly* 43 (June 1991): 223-54, and "Love and Theft: The Racial Unconscious of Blackface," *Representations* (forthcoming) came to my attention after this article was completed. These important essays suggest, for example, that what I call surplus symbolic value derived from surplus labor value under slavery, and from a white attraction to black bodies for which the term symbolic is too ethereal.

2. See Michael Rogin, "'The Sword Became a Flashing Vision': D. W. Griffith's *The Birth of a Nation*," in "Ronald Reagan," *the Movie and Other Episodes in Political Demonology* (Berkeley, 1987), pp. 190-235; and Bordwell, Staiger, and Thompson, *The Classical Hollywood Cinema*, pp. 90-142.

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plantation myth. *Birth* was the most widely seen movie of the silent period, *The Jazz Singer* broke all existing box office records, and Jolson's blackface sequel, *The Singing Fool* (1928), became the leading money-maker of the 1920s. All three were eclipsed by *Gone with the Wind*, classical Hollywood's top box office success.³

American literature, as critics from D. H. Lawrence to Richard Slotkin have argued, established its national identity in the struggle between Indians and whites; American film was born from white depictions of blacks.⁴ The white male hero of our classic literature frees himself from paternal, old-world constraints and establishes his independence against Indians; he rises from black/white conflict in film. These alternative racial roots are not arbitrary, for just as the frontier period in American history generated the classic literature (beginning with captivity narratives), so American film was born from the conjunction between southern defeat in the Civil War, black resubordination, and national reintegration; the rise of the multiethnic, industrial metropolis; and the emergence of mass entertainment, expropriated from its black roots, as the locus of Americanization. If, as Leslie Fiedler suggested, the white male literary hero replaces the white woman with his red brother, then *Birth* and *The Jazz Singer* (the former in the psychological subtext of the film, the latter on screen) use black men for access to forbidden white women. *The Jazz Singer* makes its subject that which is buried in *Birth*, that the interracial double is not the exotic other but the split self, the white in blackface.

Birth and *The Jazz Singer* ostensibly exploit blacks in opposite ways. *Birth* makes war on blacks in the name of the fathers; *The Jazz Singer*'s protagonist adopts a black mask and kills his father. *The Birth of a Nation*, climaxing the worst period of violence against blacks in southern history, lynches the black; the jazz singer, ventriloquizing the black, sings through his mouth. *Birth*, a product of the progressive movement, has national

3. See J. Hoberman, "Is 'The Jazz Singer' Good for the Jews?" *The Village Voice*, 7-13 Jan. 1981, p. 32; Steve Whitfield, "Jazz Singers," *Moment* 6 (Mar.-Apr. 1981): 20; "The Jazz Singer," *Souvenir Programs of Twelve Classic Movies 1927-1941*, ed. Miles Krieger (New York, 1977), pp. 1-20, hereafter abbreviated *SP*; Harry M. Geduld, *The Birth of the Talkies: From Edison to Jolson* (Bloomington, Ind., 1975), pp. 138, 213n; and William K. Everson, *American Silent Film* (New York, 1978), pp. 373-74. I am indebted to Peter Wollen for first adding *Gone with the Wind* to the sequence.

4. See D. H. Lawrence, *Studies in Classic American Literature* (New York, 1923); Leslie A. Fiedler, *Love and Death in the American Novel* (New York, 1960); Henry Nash Smith, *Virgin Land: The American West as Symbol and Myth* (Cambridge, Mass., 1950); Richard Slotkin, *Regeneration through Violence: The Mythology of the American Frontier (1600-1860)* (Middletown, Conn., 1973). The claim about the formative significance of black/white relations to film speaks to transformative moments; African Americans were marginalized or absent from the routine Hollywood product until very recently. In the 1920s westerns were the single most common film genre. See the table in Lary May, *Screening out the Past: The Birth of Mass Culture and the Motion Picture Industry* (New York, 1980), p. 215.

political purpose. *The Jazz Singer*, marking the retreat from public to private life in the jazz age, and the perceived pacification of the (fantasized) southern black threat, celebrates not political regeneration but urban entertainment.

These historical contrasts in the use of blackface arise from an underlying identity. Griffith used blacks not to restore plantation patriarchy but to give birth to a new nation. The immigrants absent from his screen were present in his audience, as *Birth* used black/white conflict to Americanize them. The jazz singer also escapes his immigrant identity through blackface. Moreover, miscegenation as well as assimilation energizes both movies. White identification with (imaginary) black sexual desire, powerfully unconscious in *Birth*, comes to the surface in *The Jazz Singer*. The black desire for white women, enacted in blackface in *Birth*, justifies not only the political and sexual repression of blacks but also the marriage of Civil War enemies, North and South. Blackface promotes interracial marriage in *The Jazz Singer*, by apparent contrast with *Birth*, but it facilitates the union of Gentile and Jew, not white and black.

Celebrating the blackface identification that *Birth of a Nation* denies, *The Jazz Singer* does no favor to blacks. The blackface jazz singer is neither a jazz singer nor black. Blackface marries ancient rivals in both movies; black and white marry in neither. Just as *Birth* offers a regeneration through violence, so the grinning, *Jazz Singer*, minstrelsy mask kills blacks with kindness.

The original reviews of *The Jazz Singer* responded as much to Jolson's blackface as to Vitaphone.⁵ On the film's fiftieth anniversary, with *The Jazz Singer* securely established as the first talking picture and blackface an embarrassment, the four film journal commemorative articles barely mentioned blackface. But each reprinted movie stills that unavoidably made visible what their texts had repressed; all the articles showed Jolson in blackface. Critics in the 1980s, stimulated in part by Neil Diamond's self-consciously Jewish 1981 remake, downplayed sound in favor of the story, generational conflict, and Jewish assimilation.⁶ *The*

5. See Mordaunt Hall, "Al Jolson and the Vitaphone," *New York Times*, 7 Oct. 1927, p. 24, and "The Jazz Singer," *Variety*, 12 Oct. 1927, p. 16.

6. See Jonathan D. Tankel, "The Impact of *The Jazz Singer* on the Conversion to Sound," *Journal of the University Film Association* 30 (Winter 1978): 21–25; Larry Swindell, "The Day the Silents Stopped," *American Film* 3 (Oct. 1977): 24–31; Andrew Sarris, "The Cultural Guilt of Musical Movies," *Film Comment* 13 (Sept.–Oct. 1977): 39–41; Audrey Kupferberg, "The Jazz Singer," *Take One* 6 (Jan. 1978): 28–32; Hoberman, "Is 'The Jazz Singer' Good for the Jews?" pp. 1, 31–33; Neal Gabler, *An Empire of Their Own: How the Jews Invented Hollywood* (New York, 1988), pp. 134–45; "Jews on the Screen," special section of *Film Comment* 17 (July–Aug. 1981): 34–48; Whitfield, "Jazz Singers," pp. 19–25; Lester D. Friedman, *Hollywood's Image of the Jew* (New York, 1982), pp. 48–53; Patricia Erens, *The Jew in American Cinema* (Bloomington, Ind., 1984), pp. 70–110; Mark Slobin, "Some Intersections of Jews, Music, and Theater," in *From Hester Street to Hollywood: The Jewish-American Stage and Screen*, ed. Sarah Blacher Cohen (Bloomington, Ind., 1983), pp. 36–69.

Jazz Singer, however, actually gives equal weight to all three stories: the conversion to sound, the conversion of the Jews, and the conversion by blackface. Far from being separate but equal, so that one story can be rescued from its contamination by others, the film amalgamates all three. Substituting racial masquerade for the mixing of bodily fluids, *The Jazz Singer* speaks from racial desire, not simply racial aversion. As immigration and technological innovations were creating American mass culture, the film announced old-world, patriarchal defeat to obfuscate new world power, and appropriated an imaginary blackness to Americanize the immigrant son. White masks fail to hide black skin, in Frantz Fanon's analysis, and turn African into European. But if the shift from bodily interior to beholder's eye inflicts an epidermal consciousness on the black masked as white, it allows the blackface performer to speak from his own, authentically felt interior.⁷

2. Talking Pictures and the Jewish Question

Although it is always problematic to identify revolutionary innovations with a single achievement, *The Jazz Singer* can legitimately claim the status of the first talking picture. No feature film before *The Jazz Singer* had either lip synchronized musical performance or dialogue. None used sound to cut away from and yet retain the previously visible action, and none incorporated words and music into the story.⁸ These innovations are still electrifying because they are preceded within the film by the earlier forms this movie will destroy—silent, documentary, lower East Side scenes, pantomime gestures, and intertitles. When young Jackie Rabinowitz sings in Muller's café bar, he announces a cinematic revolution.

The second sound interval is even more startling. When the grown Jack Robin (formerly Jackie Rabinowitz) sings "Dirty Hands, Dirty Face" at Coffee Dan's, for the first time in feature films a voice issues forth from a mouth. Jack then breaks free of both the intertitles that have carried the dialogue and the musical accompaniment that has carried the sound, and speaks his own words. "Wait a minute. Wait a minute. You ain't heard nothing yet," says Al Jolson, repeating the lines he'd already made famous in vaudeville.⁹ These first words of feature movie speech, a kind of performative, announce—you ain't heard nothing yet—the birth of sound movies and the death of silent film. The vaudeville performer, Al Jolson, has killed silent movies.

7. See, for example, Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, trans. Charles Lam Markmann (1952; New York, 1967) and Jean Genet, *The Blacks: A Clown Show*, trans. Bernard Frechtman (New York, 1960) for the asymmetrical inversion of whites in blackface.

8. See Tankel, "The Impact of *The Jazz Singer* on the Conversion to Sound," p. 23, and Gabler, *An Empire of Their Own*, p. 143.

9. See Swindell, "The Day the Silents Stopped," p. 28.

Jolson paid for his triumph, however, a sacrifice to what Andrew Sarris has called “the cultural guilt of musical movies.” Although *The Jazz Singer* and *The Singing Fool* were box office hits, Jolson’s career did not prosper in the 1930s. Vaudeville and silent movies complemented each other; talking pictures displaced both. Sarris writes, “Al Jolson became the first scapegoat for the cultural guilt assumed by movie musicals as the slayers of silent cinema.”¹⁰

The jazz singer may have killed silent movies; within the film, however, he kills his father. Sarris’s extraordinary formalism ignores the connection on which the film insists, between the death of silent movies and the death of the Jewish patriarch. Cantor Rabinowitz expects Jackie to become a cantor, like generations of Rabinowitzes before him. Jackie wants to sing jazz. Familially and musically, Cantor Jackie Rabinowitz would lose his own voice. Kol Nidre, the chant on the day of atonement for the forgiveness of sins, takes the place of Jackie’s singing in the movie’s opening scenes. But Jackie does not want to submerge his individual identity in ancient, sacred community; the result is family war. His father beats him for singing “raggy time” songs. He throws the grown Jack Robin out of his house. Jazz was the emblem of generational revolt in the jazz age; critics charged it with destroying the family.¹¹ Jackie’s decision to become a jazz singer kills his father. The cultural guilt of the first talking picture arises from assimilation and parricide.

The Jazz Singer links its twin killings, of silent movies and the Jewish patriarch, since Vitaphone carries the generational conflict in its three, revolutionary scenes—the first, character-embedded, singing voice; the first lip-synchronized singing and first lines of speech; and the first dialogue. Together these scenes form an oedipal triangle—antithesis, thesis, synthesis—with the Jewish mother at the center. Cantor Rabinowitz stops Jackie’s singing in the first scene, returning the film to silence, when he drags his son from the stage. Jack talks for the first time in the second scene, after the heroine admires his song. Jack’s first spoken words introduce the Jewish/gentile romance.

Jewish father stops the voice (antithesis); gentile woman elicits it (thesis). But there is no dialogue at Coffee Dan’s; Jack only speaks from the stage to announce his next number. When he returns home, in the climax at the center of the film, he sings and speaks to his mother. Sara Rabinowitz frantically caresses her son and murmurs an embarrassed few words as she and Jack play a love scene. Jack sings “Blue Skies” to his mother, tells her he’d rather please her than anyone he knows, steals a kiss from her, promises to buy her a new dress, will hug and kiss her in the dark mill at Coney Island, returns to the piano to play a “jazzy” version of “Blue

10. Sarris, “The Cultural Guilt of Musical Movies,” p. 41.

11. See Paula S. Fass, *The Damned and the Beautiful: American Youth in the 1920s* (New York, 1977), p. 22.



FIG. 1

Skies,” and asks her if she liked “that slappin’ business” on the keyboard. *Slapping* was the jazz term for pizzicato playing; the sexual origins of the word *jazz* (in copulation) have never been more spectacularly, inappropriately present. A small door opens in the background, the tiny figure of the patriarch appears, the camera isolates his menacing head and shoulders, and a voice from the mouth shouts, “Stop!”¹² (fig. 1).

In stopping at the same time the music and the romance between son and mother, Cantor Rabinowitz ends speech. For the first and only time in the film there is an extended period of silence, before mournful, east European music, replacing “Blue Skies,” returns. Jolson’s singing will as well, but “Stop!” is the last spoken word in the film. Mother and son try to placate the father, in gestures and intertitles, and fail. Cantor Rabinowitz sends Jack from the house in silence, but the damage to silent pictures and the father has been done. Jack’s father may have the power to stop speech in this film, but it will cost him and silent movies their lives.¹³

In choosing *The Jazz Singer* as the first talking picture, “the itinerant

12. See *The Jazz Singer*, ed. Robert L. Carringer (Madison, Wis., 1979), pp. 144–45; hereafter abbreviated JS. See also Francis Newton [Eric J. Hobsbawm], *The Jazz Scene* (New York, 1960), p. 275. Hobsbawm, putting on blackface, borrowed his nom-de-plume from an African-American jazz trumpeter.

13. Compare R. E. Sherwood, “The Jazz Singer,” *Life*, 27 Oct. 1927, p. 24, and Gabler, *An Empire of Their Own*, p. 150. See also Friedman, *Hollywood’s Image of the Jew*, p. 48.

peddlers, junk-dealers, and sweatshop entrepreneurs who had parlayed their slum-located, storefront peepshows into” one of the country’s major industries were telling their own story.¹⁴ Neal Gabler has recently shown how the Jewish moguls created Hollywood against their paternal inheritance. Doting on their mothers, in rebellion against their failed, *luftmenschen* fathers, the moguls Americanized themselves by interpreting gentile dreams. *The Jazz Singer*, loosely based on Jolson’s own life, suggests the history of the men who made Hollywood.¹⁵

Perhaps because its parricidal implications disturbed them, however, Harry, Al, Jack, and Sam Warner stressed the harmonious generational cooperation that had produced *The Jazz Singer*. As the souvenir program explained, “The faithful portrayal of Jewish home life is largely due to the unobtrusive assistance of Mr. Benjamin Warner, father of the producers, and ardent admirer of ‘The Jazz Singer’” (*SP*, p. 9). Paternal approval, as J. Hoberman writes, was enlisted for paternal overthrow.¹⁶ The Warner brothers’ patriarch, moreover, was being implicated in a Jewish home life of shouting, beating, exile, and death. But the Warner who paid for generational rebellion in *The Jazz Singer* was not Benjamin Warner, but his youngest son, Sam.

Benjamin Warner was poor and devout. Sam was antireligious, however, and after his older brothers married Jewish women uninvolved in show business, Sam chose in 1925 a gentile dancer. As his wife, Lina Basquette, recalls, Sam’s brothers were furious at him for marrying “a little eighteen-year-old shiksa.”¹⁷

Sam Warner had brought his brothers into the motion picture business, was the enthusiast for sound, and was in charge of the Vitaphone project. (His brothers called it “‘Sam’s toy phonograph’” [“GG,” p. 57].) Since the Warner brothers’ investment in sound was part of a coordinated strategy to expand their small studio’s market share and challenge the pre-eminence of Hollywood’s big three (and not, as was once thought, a desperate attempt to stave off bankruptcy), Jack Robin was enacting Sam Warner’s upward mobility through Vitaphone. Sam did not normally make movies, but he came west to supervise *The Jazz Singer*’s production. After Jolson ad-libbed his famous line at Coffee Dan’s, Sam reshot Jack Robin’s homecoming, added dialogue, and thereby created the love scene with the mother.¹⁸

14. Hoberman, “Is ‘The Jazz Singer’ Good for the Jews?” p. 32, is the first to make this point.

15. See Gabler, *An Empire of Their Own*, pp. 3–4, and also May, *Screening out the Past*, pp. 167–79.

16. See Hoberman, “Is ‘The Jazz Singer’ Good for the Jews?” p. 31.

17. Quoted in Barry Paris, “The Godless Girl,” *The New Yorker*, 13 Feb. 1989, p. 57; hereafter abbreviated “GG.” See also Gabler, *An Empire of Their Own*, pp. 3–4, 123–24, 140.

18. See Gabler, *An Empire of Their Own*, pp. 124–37; Herbert G. Goldman, *Jolson: The*

Jack faces the crisis of his life after his father forces him to choose between his mother and jazz. In the film's climax, he is torn between replacing his dying father to sing Kol Nidre on Yom Kippur eve, the holiest night in the Jewish calendar, or going on with the vaudeville show. Kol Nidre is sung on the one night each year when the skies open and Jews can speak directly to God to ask for forgiveness of sins. Jack's sin would be to choose vaudeville stardom ("Blue Skies") over Kol Nidre; the Warner brothers, also flirting with blasphemy, premiered *The Jazz Singer* on the night before Yom Kippur, the night Jack learns that his father is dying and that he must choose between show business and filial piety. Mixing movie with worldly time, the studio wanted Cantor Rabinowitz's death and Jack's Kol Nidre to fall as close as possible to the actual Jewish holiday. But this evocation of the Jewish anarchic "Yom Kippur Ball," a satanic night of feasting during the holy fast, could not be enjoyed by the Warner brothers. The night before Cantor Rabinowitz was to die in New York, Sam Warner died in Los Angeles. He died of a brain abscess at the age of thirty-nine. The "screaming and wailing" mother at his deathbed—I'm quoting Basquette ("GG," p. 58)—appeared again the next night on screen at the deathbed of the Jewish patriarch. Sam's dream of bringing together Jewish mother and gentile wife, fulfilled by the dying Cantor Rabinowitz, happened first over his own deathbed. Sam was buried on Yom Kippur eve, and his three brothers, all in Los Angeles to arrange the funeral, missed the movie premiere.¹⁹

Reflection and perhaps agent of generational war to the death, *The Jazz Singer* can hardly be accused of glossing over family conflict. *The Jazz Singer* exemplifies the hysterical text, in recent readings of film melodrama, exposing the familial conflicts buried in the name of realism. Because *The Jazz Singer* depicts the costs of assimilation to family and immigrant community, Hoberman calls it "the bluntest and most resonant movie Hollywood ever produced on the subject of American Jews."²⁰

But *The Jazz Singer's* ending and its overall, family frame, link this hysterical Jewish melodrama to flight rather than exposure. At the film's

Legend Comes to Life (New York, 1988), pp. 101, 151; Kupferberg, "The Jazz Singer," p. 30; *JS*, pp. 18, 140; and Douglas Gomery, "The Coming of Sound: Technological Change in the American Film Industry," in *The American Film Industry*, ed. Tino Balio, rev. ed. (Madison, Wis., 1985), pp. 236–39.

19. See Ronald Sanders, *The Downtown Jews: Portraits of an Immigrant Generation* (New York, 1987), pp. 99–100; Hasia R. Diner, *In the Almost Promised Land: American Jews and Blacks 1915–1935* (Westport, Conn., 1977), p. 33; and Gabler, *An Empire of Their Own*, pp. 142–43. Thanks to Aliza Bresky for the characterization of Yom Kippur.

20. Hoberman, "Is 'The Jazz Singer' Good for the Jews?" p. 1. See also Christine Gledhill, "The Melodramatic Field: An Investigation," in *Home Is Where the Heart Is: Studies in Melodrama and the Woman's Film*, ed. Gledhill (London, 1987), pp. 9, 30.

most hysterical moment, Jack sings first Kol Nidre at the synagogue over his father's dying body, and then "My Mammy" to his mother and girlfriend at the Winter Garden Theater. The movie was promising that the son could have it all, Jewish past and American future, Jewish mother and gentile wife. That was not what happened in Hollywood. The moguls left their Jewish wives for gentile women in the 1930s and eliminated Jewish life from the screen. They bid farewell to their Jewish pasts with *The Jazz Singer*. Americanized Jews ultimately would retain Jewish identities, but there was no going back to the lower East Side.²¹

The Jazz Singer's happy ending hardly wipes away the conflict that dominates the film. Jack is a "cultural schizophrenic," in Peter Rose's phrase;²² the movie allows no easy, harmonious reconciliation between Jewishness and America. But to weigh the costs displayed within the movie against its happy ending accepts *The Jazz Singer* on its own terms, transforming Jewish history in the United States into family melodrama.

The struggle of sons against fathers was an immigrant social fact, but the documents that chronicle that story join generational conflict within the community to hostile, external pressure upon it, the context wished away by the first talking picture. All Jack's problems are with his father; none are with the Gentiles. Cantor Rabinowitz's hostility to American entertainment is not balanced by any American hostility to Jews. *The Jazz Singer* culminates the tradition of ethnic films that emplotted generational conflict over intermarriage rather than racial prejudice. The Judenfreieing of the Rabinowitz name, so central to the story as we shall see, responds only to the attractions of Americanization, not to the prejudices against Jews.²³

Also excised from *The Jazz Singer* are the social struggles that united Jews, often across generations, in trade unions, radical movements, businesses, and community organizations. Instead of pitting Jews against nativism, *The Jazz Singer* pits father against son. Domesticating the prob-

21. See Gabler, *An Empire of Their Own*, pp. 142–49; Carlos Clarens, "Moguls—That's a Jewish Word," *Film Comment* 17 (July–Aug. 1981): 35; Otto Friedrich, *City of Nets: A Portrait of Hollywood in the 1940s* (New York, 1986), pp. 220–21, 354–56; Erens, "Mentshlekhhkayt Conquers All: The Yiddish Cinema in America," *Film Comment* 12 (Jan.–Feb. 1976): 48; Hoberman, "Yiddish Transit," *Film Comment* 17 (July–Aug. 1981): 36; Erens, *The Jew in American Cinema*, pp. 138, 162. Generational-conflict Jewish films continued to appear occasionally, particularly in the few years after *The Jazz Singer*, but that film marks the apogee of the immigrant film in Hollywood.

22. Peter Rose, *Mainstream and Margins: Jews, Blacks and Other Americans* (New Brunswick, N.J., 1983), p. 67.

23. See Friedman, *Hollywood's Image of the Jew*, pp. 46–47, and Erens, *The Jew in American Cinema*, pp. 54–57, 73. For an academic study in *The Jazz Singer* tradition, compare Werner Sollors, *Beyond Ethnicity: Consent and Descent in American Culture* (New York, 1986), another celebration of the melting pot that frees ethnic history from nativism and makes music its central metaphor. Although Sollors complicates *descent* by showing one can choose one's grandfather, he simplifies *consent* to cover all adaptations to the dominant culture.

lem of the Jewish son, as critics of family melodrama would predict, *The Jazz Singer* lets America off the hook and fragments Jewish community. Shifting from ethnocultural to generational conflict, the film celebrates not the Jew as pariah, united with other outcast groups, but the Jew as parvenu.²⁴

Two historiographies interpret the 1920s, an older approach by way of ethnocultural conflict and a newer one stressing the alliance between youth revolt and the culture of consumption. Provincial, backward-looking nativism triumphs in the former view, which makes the 1920s the last decade of the nineteenth century. Urban, entertainment-centered self-fulfillment triumphs in the latter view, which makes the 1920s the harbinger of the future. *The Jazz Singer*, visible data for the more recent historiography, supports the older by what it hides, for its protagonist rises from the defeat not only of his cantor father but of radical, ethnic-based politics as well.²⁵

F. Scott Fitzgerald, who "claimed credit for naming" "the Jazz Age," understood that it "extended from the suppression of the riots of May Day 1919 to the crash of the stock market in 1929."²⁶ The shift from radical protest to popular culture, enforced by continuing nativism, made possible *The Jazz Singer*. The jazz age introduced modern anti-Semitism into American politics, as traditional rivalry between immigrant and old-stock Americans coalesced with ideological racism. The anti-Semitic, anti-Catholic Ku Klux Klan (legacy of *Birth of a Nation*) flourished in the 1920s. Three years before *The Jazz Singer*, the racist immigration law of 1924 pretty well closed immigration from southern and eastern Europe. ("By far the largest percentage of immigrants [were] peoples of Jewish extraction," the U.S. House of Representatives Committee on Immigration and Naturalization had warned; the Jewish percentage of net migra-

24. Compare Hannah Arendt, "The Jew as Pariah: A Hidden Tradition," *The Jew as Pariah: Jewish Identity and Politics in the Modern Age*, ed. Ron H. Feldman (New York, 1978), pp. 67-90, and Robert A. Burt, *Two Jewish Justices: Outcasts in the Promised Land* (Berkeley, 1988).

25. For the older historiography, see John Higham, *Strangers in the Land: Patterns of American Nativism, 1860-1925* (New Brunswick, N. J., 1955); William Leuchtenberg, *The Perils of Prosperity, 1914-1932* (Chicago, 1958); William Preston, *Aliens and Dissenters: Federal Suppression of Radicals, 1903-1933* (Cambridge, Mass., 1963); Robert K. Murray, *Red Scare: A Study in National Hysteria, 1919-1920* (Minneapolis, 1955). Newer interpretations include Fass, *The Damned and the Beautiful*, and *The Culture of Consumption: Critical Essays in American History, 1880-1980*, ed. Richard Wightman Fox and T. J. Jackson Lears (New York, 1983).

26. Quoted in Arnold Shaw, *The Jazz Age: Popular Music in the 1920's* (New York, 1987), p. 14. See also F. Scott Fitzgerald, "May Day," *Tales of the Jazz Age* (New York, 1922), pp. viii, 61-125. For a comparable shift from radical politics to aesthetics, encapsulated in the changed meaning of the term *the new Negro*, see Henry Louis Gates, Jr., "The Trope of a New Negro and the Reconstruction of the Image of the Black," *Representations*, no. 24 (Fall 1988): 129-55.

tion to the United States, 21.2 per cent in 1920, was reduced by the law to close to zero.) *The Jazz Singer* premiered six weeks after the judicial murder of Sacco and Vanzetti, the final victims of the postwar red scare.²⁷

Nativist pressure created *The Jazz Singer*'s invisible frame. The movie emerged from the moguls' wish to evacuate anti-Semitism from the Jewish question. That wish derived not from Jewish power, Henry Ford's ravings about "Jewish supremacy in the motion picture world" notwithstanding,²⁸ but from just the context of gentile sufferance that the moguls did not

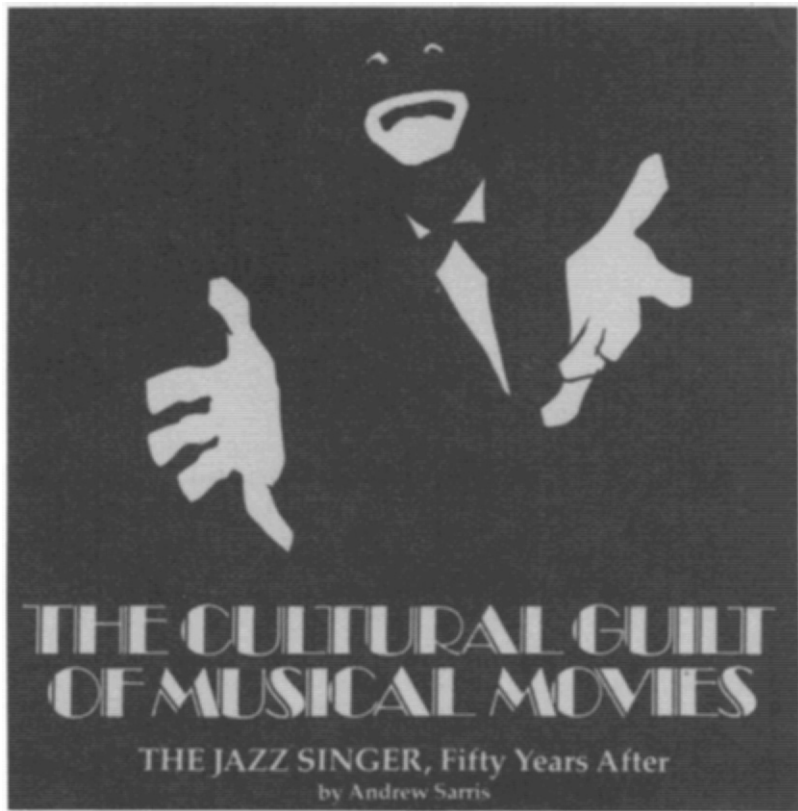


FIG. 2

27. See Lee J. Levinger, *The Causes of Anti-Semitism in the United States* (Philadelphia, 1925), pp. 9–15, 94; David Levering Lewis, *When Harlem Was in Vogue* (New York, 1981), p. 44; "Kike!" *A Documentary History of Anti-Semitism in America*, ed. Michael Selzer (New York, 1972), p. 117; Higham, "American Anti-Semitism Historically Reconsidered," in Charles Herbert Stember et al., *Jews in the Mind of America* (New York, 1966), pp. 240–51.

28. Quoted in David H. Bennett, *The Party of Fear: From Nativist Movements to the New Right in American History* (Chapel Hill, N.C., 1988), p. 205.

want to acknowledge on film. Wishing away anti-Semitism required the disappearance of the Jews. Anti-Semitism is *The Jazz Singer's* structuring absence. The visible cost it leaves behind is borne by Jolson as he plays not a Jew but a black.

A large image of Al Jolson in blackface rises above Sarris's title, "The Cultural Guilt of Musical Movies" (fig. 2). That picture, returning to haunt the text that represses it, insists that one can understand neither the cultural guilt of slaying silents nor the cultural guilt of slaying the father without harkening to yet a deeper layer, the cultural guilt of exploiting blacks. Riveting sympathetic attention on parents and son, united by the movie's affect as they are divided by its plot, *The Jazz Singer* blacks out the non-Jewish group behind the blackface mask. White painted mouth and white gloved hands sing and gesture in blackface performance. Black holes in space fragment, stand in for, and render invisible the broken-up, absent black body. The lips that speak Jack's personal voice are caricatured, racist icons.²⁹ Jack Robin rises through blackface, as vaudeville entertainer, lover, and Jewish son. Jolson's blackface performance dominates the crisis and resolution of the film. Blackface carries *The Jazz Singer* backward to the origins of mass entertainment and forward to American acceptance. The sign of what has been left behind appears not in collective Jewish identity but in the instrument of the jazz singer's individual success, the pasteboard mask that points to another American pariah group, African Americans.

3. *Jews and the Blackface Question*

"This is the turning point represented by Griffith," writes Pascal Bonitzer:

What we have here is a cinematic revolution. With the arrival of montage, the close-up, immobile actors, the look (and its corollary—the banishment of histrionics) an entire facade of the cinema seems to disappear and be lost forever; in a word, all the excrement of vaudeville. The cinema was 'innocent' and 'dirty.' It was to become obsessional and fetishistic. The obscenity did not disappear, it was interiorized, moralized and passed into the register of desire. . . . As the body became more or less immobilized and the look was enthroned,

29. The description of Jolson in blackface is indebted to Lemuel Johnson and Anne Norton. On the black hole as problematic ground for black artists, see Houston A. Baker, Jr., *Blues, Ideology, and Afro-American Literature: A Vernacular Theory* (Chicago, 1984), pp. 3–6, 144–54. For black interpretations of and responses to blackface minstrelsy, see Ralph Ellison, "Change the Joke and Slip the Yoke," *Shadow and Act* (1958; New York, 1972), pp. 45–59; Gates, *Figures in Black: Words, Signs, and the "Racial" Self* (New York, 1987), pp. 50–60; and Henry T. Sampson, *Blacks in Blackface: A Sourcebook on Early Black Musical Shows* (Metuchen, N. J., 1980).

morality, perversion and desire intervened for the first time in the cinema.³⁰

But Griffith did not banish histrionics forever from film. *The Jazz Singer* revived them, innocent and dirty, with blackface. Blackface was the legacy of vaudeville entertainment and the silent screen; *The Jazz Singer's* success would begin to bring it to an end. The first talking picture went backward in order to go forward and enter the era of sound. It revived the roots of movies one more time.

Vaudeville, which succeeded blackface minstrelsy as the most popular American entertainment form, was in turn displaced by movies. Each of these spectacles, however, was linked to its predecessor. Vaudeville absorbed minstrelsy, as Jewish vaudeville entertainers like George Burns, Eddie Cantor, George Jessel, and Jolson himself (Heywood Broun called him "the master minstrel of them all" [quoted in *SP*, p. 15]) gave blackface a new lease on life. One-reelers, in turn, were originally run in vaudeville shows, and live vaudeville coexisted with silent movies in the 1920s motion picture palace. Silent films, however, could not reproduce vaudeville noise (musical numbers, sound effects, jokes, patter). Early sound movie shorts returned to film origins—newsreel documentaries (mainly Fox) and vaudeville performances (mainly Warner Brothers)—to show they could improve on silent pictures. The silent versions of these shorts had exposed the limitations of the stage; the sound versions revealed the shortcomings of the silents.³¹

The Jazz Singer condensed into a single feature film the entire history of American popular entertainment, from minstrelsy through vaudeville to silent films to talking pictures, for the first feature film to bring sound into the diegesis incorporated vaudeville minstrelsy as well. The "desire" that carries forward this "interiorized, moralized" oedipal narrative, to recall Bonitzer's words, is Jack's "innocent and dirty" desire—sung as "Dirty Hands, Dirty Face"—to become a histrionic, vaudeville performer. Classical movies, culminating in sound, may have replaced stock vaudeville caricatures with individuated, interior characters, but Jack develops his character, expresses his interior, finds his own voice by employing blackface caricature. Blackface reinstated the exaggerated pantomime that restrained filmic gestures had supposedly displaced. Characterization, to use David Bordwell's oppositions, employed restless movement

30. Quoted in Thomas Elsaesser, "Film History and Visual Pleasure: Weimar Cinema," in *Cinema Histories, Cinema Practices*, ed. Patricia Mellencamp and Philip Rosen (Frederick, Md., 1984), p. 58.

31. See Toll, *Blacking Up*, p. 274; Robert C. Allen, *Vaudeville and Film, 1895–1915: A Study in Media Interaction* (New York, 1980); Whitfield, "Jazz Singers," p. 20; Hugo Munsterberg, *The Film: A Psychological Study; The Silent Photoplay in 1916* (New York, 1970), p. 7; and Gomery, "The Coming of Sound," pp. 229–51, and "Problems in Film History: How Fox Innovated Sound," *Quarterly Review of Film Studies* 1 (Aug. 1976): 315–30.

rather than replacing it. The closeup, montage, and shot/reverse-shot editing (rudimentary and centered on the jazz singer's performance as the latter is) establish the register of desire between Jack and Mary, but after their initial encounter, Jack plays all their love scenes in blackface.³² Blackface supports its antithesis, the film techniques, character development, and triumph of sound that will destroy it. It does so by splitting the protagonist into forward- and backward-looking halves. The jazz singer rises by putting on the mask of a group that must remain immobile, unassimilable, and fixed at the bottom.

Jack Robin and his black double emerge as split halves of a single self when Jakie Rabinowitz changes his name. "Last time you forgot and addressed me Jakie Rabinowitz," the vaudeville performer writes his mother. "Jack Robin is my name now." Before it was changed in production, the next scene was to show him in blackface for the first time, with the intertitle, "Orchard Street would have had some difficulty recognizing Jakie Rabinowitz of Beth-El choir under the burnt cork of Jack Robin" (*JS*, p. 80). The scene brings Jack and Mary into intimate contact, however, and "playing a romantic scene in blackface" proved too risky "an experiment," as the scriptwriter, Alfred Cohn, feared it might (*JS*, p. 83). Jack in his dressing gown and a black maid in the wings are residues of the original plan, as Jack courts Mary in white face, but blackface's source in split Jewish identity remains. "It talks like Jakie, but it looks like a nigger," says the old Jew, Yudelson, in the shooting script when he first sees Jack in blackface; the intertitle changed "a nigger" to "his shadow" (*JS*, p. 136; for Jack's blackface shadow, see fig. 3).³³ Two Al Jolson heads dominate *The Jazz Singer's* souvenir program, one a grinning black face, the other in white floating slightly above and in front (fig. 4). When blackfaced Jack looks in the mirror, he sees his father before the congregation. *The Jazz Singer* is, and knows that it is, a doubles movie.

Other films that employ the magical doubling device also fail completely to conform to models of the classic narrative film. Compare *The Jazz Singer* with two examples, one, *The Student from Prague* (1913, 1926; the brief analysis here conflates the two versions) from German expressionist cinema, and the other, Charlie Chaplin's *The Idle Class* (1921) from the vaudeville comic legacy.

Blocked mobility, writes Thomas Elsaesser, generates the doubles on the German silent screen. These films typically signal a social obstacle in their openings and then shift to the fantastic. *The Student from Prague*, for

32. See Bordwell, Staiger, and Thompson, *The Classical Hollywood Cinema*, pp. 177, 189–93, and Charles Wolfe, "Vitaphone Shorts and *The Jazz Singer*," *Wide Angle* 12 (July 1990): 58–78. Wolfe's splendid article, which emphasizes frontal performance, denies there is shot/reverse-shot editing in the scene where Jack meets Mary. Repeated viewings support, I believe, my language in the text.

33. I have quoted Jack's letter from the movie intertitle, which differs slightly from the version reprinted in the shooting script.



FIG. 3

example, begins with infantilized student life from which the protagonist is estranged, and then introduces the old (Jewish-looking) Scapinelli. Scapinelli arranges for the student to rescue a young countess, magically produces gold, and then takes payment by splitting the student in two. Scapinelli seizes the student's mirror image; out of ego's control, it comes between the student and his love. The double interrupts one kiss in the countess's bedroom, another at the Jewish cemetery. Interrupting eros, it enacts forbidden aggression, killing the aristocratic rival the student has promised not to harm in a duel. Liberation of his shadow side finally destroys the student; shooting into the mirror (in the 1926 version), he kills himself. Scapinelli, apparent permission-giving alternative to the countess's father, turns out merely to reproduce him.³⁴

Like Jackie Rabinowitz, the student from Prague splits in two to fulfill transgressive desires. But there is no Scapinelli in *The Jazz Singer*. Whereas a black magician controls the student's double, Jack Robin controls his own black double. It does his bidding; it brings him success. Jack is the

34. See Elsaesser, "Social Mobility and the Fantastic: German Silent Cinema," *Wide Angle* 5, no. 2 (1982): 15-17, 24-25; Heide Schlüpmann, "The First German Art Film: Rye's *The Student of Prague*," in *German Film and Literature: Adaptations and Transformations*, ed. Eric Rentschler (New York, 1986), pp. 9-24; and Otto Rank, *The Double: A Psychoanalytic Study*, trans. and ed. Harry Tucker, Jr. (1925; New York, 1979), pp. 4-7.

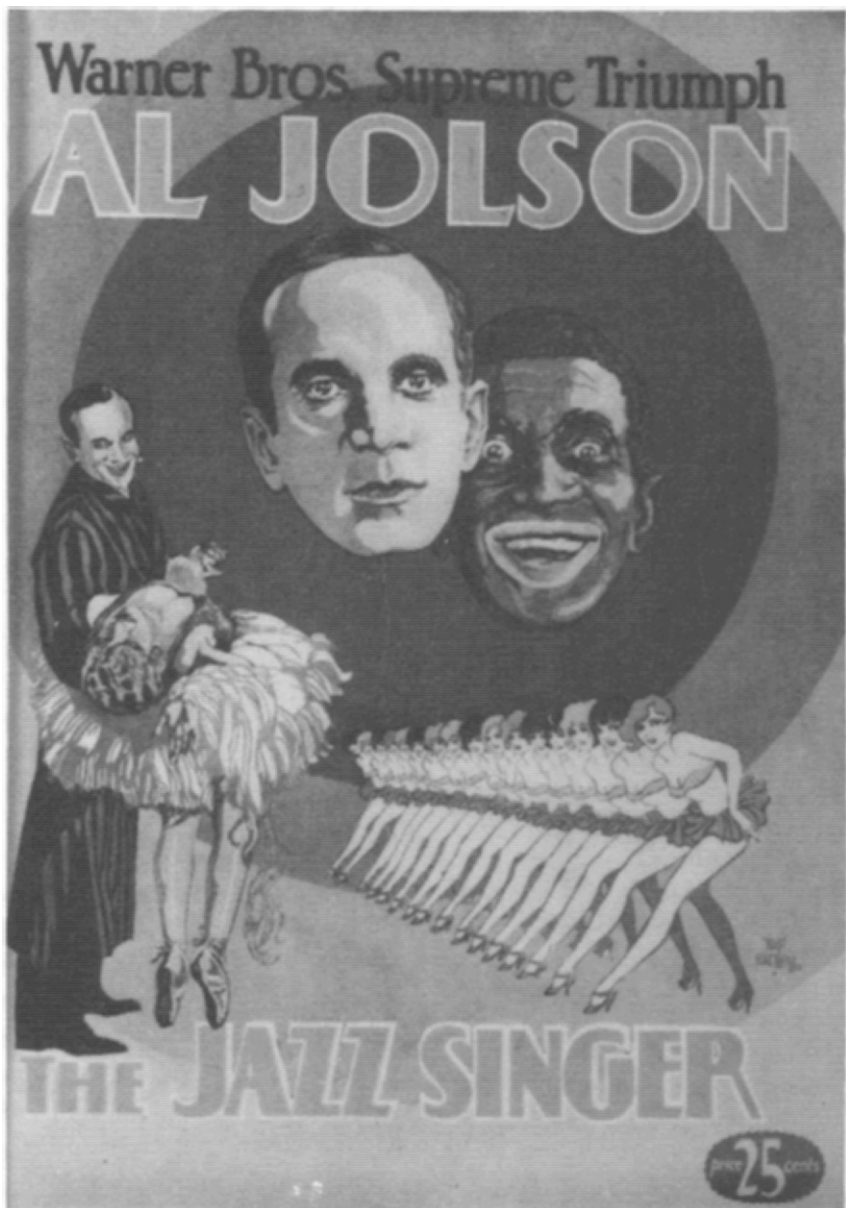


FIG. 4

“master minstrel” in the souvenir program’s words; his blackface double is his slave. Instead of W. E. B. Du Bois’s “two souls . . . warring . . . in one dark body,” two bodies, one blacked and one white, heal Jack’s single, divided soul. Contrast the cooperation between the two Jack Robins with the conflict between the tramp and the man of the leisure class, both played by Chaplin in *The Idle Class*.³⁵

Mistaken identity at a fancy dress ball gives the tramp temporary access to the rich man’s wife and authorizes slapstick violence by the poor Chaplin against his rich double. This anarchic, rebellious, gestural residue of nickelodeon silent shorts makes fun of the rich, to be sure. But it requires that the classes end where they began, that the tramp return to the road and not displace his double in the family. Otherwise there would be no difference between them, and the film would lose its humor and its social point.

Blackface functions in precisely the opposite way in *The Jazz Singer*. Rather than fixing him in the one where he began, it allows the protagonist to exchange selves. Blackface is the instrument that transfers identities from immigrant Jew to American. By taking on blackface the Jewish jazz singer acquires that which is forbidden to the tramp and the student: first his own voice; then assimilation through upward mobility; finally women.

First his voice. Young Jakie Rabinowitz never appears in blackface, to be sure, but he gets the first individual voice in feature films by singing (as the shooting script puts it) “in the most approved darkie manner” (*JS*, p. 62). As Jakie shuffles on stage (fig. 5), Yudelson reports to Cantor Rabinowitz (in an intertitle) that he is singing “raggy time songs”; the original shooting script had called them “nigger songs” (*JS*, p. 61, 136).³⁶

Second, assimilation. Jakie finds his voice through black music; Jack will succeed as a blackface singer. But if the movie insists on the black origins of jazz (I will return to its use of that claim), it also wants the music to have Jewish roots, and so represents jazz as the link between Jews and America. The texts—original short story, play, movie shooting script, and intertitles—transfer Jewish sacred music to American jazz. The images put blacks into the picture.

“In seeking a symbol of the vital chaos of America’s soul, I find no more adequate one than jazz,” wrote Sampson Raphaelson in the preface to his published play, reprinted in the souvenir program of the movie. The intertitle that follows the movie credits, “Jazz is prayer,” appears to a background of mournful, east European music. “Distorted, sick, unconscious of its destination,” Raphaelson explained, jazz linked polyglot, new world

35. W. E. B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk: Essays and Sketches* (Chicago, 1903), p. 2.

36. See also Gabler, *An Empire of Their Own*, p. 136. *SP* has Jakie singing in “his best darkey manner” (p. 4).



FIG. 5

America to the ancient, wandering Jews (*SP*, p. 14). “Carrying on the tradition of plaintive religious melody of his forefathers,” as the narrator puts it in “The Day of Atonement,” the short story from which *The Jazz Singer* derived, “Jackie was simply translating the age-old music of the cantors—that vast loneliness of a race wandering ‘between two worlds, one dead, the other powerless to be born.’”³⁷

“You taught me that music is the voice of God,” Jack tells his father in the movie. “My songs mean as much to my audience as yours to your congregation.” “He sings like his Poppa, with a tear in his voice,” says Sara when she hears him in blackface as the cantor is about to die. “He’s not my boy any more. He belongs to the world.” In blessing Jack’s movement from cantor’s son to jazz singer, Sara sustains his claim that entertainment was the new American religion. When the white-robed and skull-capped Jack replaces his father on Yom Kippur (fig. 6; “a jazz singer singing to his God,” says the intertitle; the shooting script had “stage’s greatest blackface comedian” [*JS*, p. 133]) and then puts on wool cap and burnt cork to sing “My Mammy” (fig. 7), he is exchanging one religious robe of office for another. The island communities of traditional America would be homogenized by idols of consumption. If political progressivism had failed to regenerate America, the jazz age would bring the younger generation

37. Sampson Raphaelson, “The Day of Atonement,” in *JS*, p. 151.



FIGS. 6 and 7

of classes and ethnic groups together around the performer as commodity fetish.³⁸

Insisting on the shift from Hebraic particularism to American universalism, neither Raphaelson nor the intertitles acknowledge blackface as the instrument of that transformation. One would never know from Raphaelson—any more than from Henry Ford's accusation that the "Jewish song trust makes you sing"³⁹—that African Americans and not Jews had created jazz. Blackface gives back to the racial shadow the music taken from its substance.

Much of the early success of Jolson's generation of Jewish entertainers was, as Irving Howe puts it, "gained from acts done in blackface," and Jews had almost entirely taken over blackface entertainment by the early twentieth century. Jewish song writers also turned to black-derived music to create the uniquely American, melting pot sound of the jazz age. Irving Berlin (with whose "Blue Skies" Jack Robin seduces his mother) scored his first big hit in 1911 with the minstrel number, "Alexander's Ragtime Band." (Berlin had written "Yiddle on Your Fiddle Play Some Ragtime" two years earlier.)⁴⁰ "Originating with the Negroes," as John Tasker Howard expressed the consensus of enthusiasts and detractors alike, jazz "has become a Jewish interpretation of the Negro." "There is one vocation, all the known members of which could pass a synagogue door unchallenged," announced *Variety* in 1920, because those who made up "The Syncopated Symphony" were Jews.⁴¹

"We speak of jazz as if it were a product of the Negro alone," wrote Isaac Goldberg the month before *The Jazz Singer* premiere:

True enough, its primary associations, like its rhythms, are black, deriving ultimately from the African Southland. . . . It reaches from the black South to the black North, but in between it has been touched by the commercial wand of the Jew. What we call loosely by the name is thus no longer jet black; musical miscegenation set in

38. My summary comes from the actual movie. On the moving picture cathedral in the 1920s, see May, *Screening out the Past*, pp. 147–66; on island communities, see Robert H. Wiebe, *The Search For Order 1877–1920* (New York, 1967); on the jazz singer as religious figure, see Slobin, "Some Intersections of Jews, Music, and Theater."

39. Quoted in Bennett, *The Party of Fear*, p. 204.

40. Irving Howe, *World of Our Fathers* (New York, 1976), p. 562; hereafter abbreviated *W*. See also Friedman, *Hollywood's Image of the Jew*, p. 19; Goldman, *Jolson*, p. 40; Cripps, *Slow Fade to Black*, pp. 223–24; Gary Giddins, *Riding on a Blue Note: Jazz and American Pop* (New York, 1981), pp. 5–17; Marilyn Berger, "Irving Berlin, Nation's Songwriter, Dies," *New York Times*, 23 Sept. 1989, pp. 1, 7–8; and Shaw, *The Jazz Age*, p. 47.

41. John Tasker Howard, quoted in MacDonald Smith Moore, *Yankee Blues: Musical Culture and American Identity* (Bloomington, Ind., 1985), p. 160; see also pp. 1–3, 70–71, 131–60; *Variety*, quoted in Michael Freedland, *So Let's Hear the Applause* (London, 1984), pp. 22–23.

from the beginning, and today it would be a wise son if it knew its own father.

Jews had made more than a commercial impact on jazz, Goldberg continued; although the “Negro ancestry” of Irving Berlin, Jerome Kern, and George Gershwin was “certainly questionable,” the “musical amalgamation of the American Negro and the American Jew” had given birth to jazz. The *Baltimore Afro-American* excerpted Goldberg’s essay under the headline, “Jazz Indebted to the Jews.”⁴²

“Musical miscegenation” was only part of the uniquely cooperative relationship between Jewish and African Americans in the first decades of the twentieth century. Nativist coalescence of race and ethnic stereotypes into a single, monstrous alien pushed Jews to think of themselves as allied with other minorities. The Yiddish press, protesting against lynchings and other antiblack violence, compared race riots against blacks to pogroms against Jews. Wealthy German Jews made common cause with “talented tenth” Negroes in the struggle for civil rights; Jewish clothing unions organized black workers while American Federation of Labor craft organizations excluded them; and Jewish philanthropy and legal services supported black civic institutions and court fights. In fighting for our rights, Jews also fight for their own, explained the black writer, James Weldon Johnson.⁴³

It is against that background of interracial cooperation that Howe accounts sympathetically for the Jewish attraction to blackface. “Black became a mask for Jewish expressiveness, with one woe speaking through the voice of another,” writes Howe. “Blackening their faces seems to have enabled the Jewish performers to reach a spontaneity and assertiveness in the declaration of their Jewish selves” (*W*, p. 563).⁴⁴ This fileopietty to the blackface Jewish fathers makes Howe, himself, an easy target for a Jew from the next generation, who risks imitating by reversing *The Jazz Singer*. For to attack blackface (who would now defend it?) may simply be another way of putting it on, as this (graybearded) Jewish son, like Jolson before him, uses blacks to declare his independence from the patriarch, Irving Howe—and thereby, like the blackface singer, pretends to speak for blacks as well.⁴⁵ Still, even at the risk of contaminating the questioner, it is

42. Isaac Goldberg, “Aaron Copland and His Jazz,” *American Mercury* 12 (Sept. 1927): 634; *Baltimore Afro-American*, 10 Sept. 1927, p. 9. Compare Diner, *In the Almost Promised Land*, pp. 112–15.

43. See Higham, “American Anti-Semitism Historically Reconsidered,” pp. 250–51; Diner, *In the Almost Promised Land*; Lewis, *When Harlem Was in Vogue*, pp. 100–102, 148.

44. Ralph Ellison accused Howe of “appearing . . . in blackface,” as the good son reminding Ellison and James Baldwin of their debt to their social protest father, Richard Wright (Ralph Ellison, “The World and the Jug,” *Shadow and Act* [New York, 1964], p. 111).

45. Sollors, dismissing sensitivity to distinctive cultural perspectives as the status-

necessary to ask, after Howe, what Jewish “woe” and which “Jewish selves” the jazz singer’s blackface ventriloquizes?

Blackface may seem not to express Jewishness at all but to hide it, so that even your own mother wouldn’t know you. “Jakie, this ain’t you,” says Sara when she first sees her son in blackface.⁴⁶ But why should the member of one pariah group hide his identity under the mask of another? Where Howe sees only solidarity, I see transfer as well. Switching identities, the jazz singer acquires exchange value at the expense of blacks. Miscegenation was regression, in racist theory, because the dark drove out the light. Blackface mimed that process in order to reverse it. Stereotypes located within both pariah groups were exteriorized as black, embraced as regenerative, and left (along with actual blacks) behind. Put Yiddish and black together, wrote Goldberg, “and they spell Al Jolson” (quoted in *W*, p. 563).⁴⁷ Take them apart and their doubling supports the flight of Jack Robin above them both.

Like the Jewish struggle for racial justice, the black-inspired music of urban Jews was a declaration of war against the racial hierarchy of Protestant, genteel culture. Urban entertainment created an alternative, polyglot world, in which the children of Jewish immigrants found new, cosmopolitan identities among Jews, other immigrants, children of old-stock Americans—Randolph Bourne, Hutchins Hapgood, Carl Van Vechten—and African Americans as well. The jazz singer’s parricide spreads, from that perspective, out to the paternal cultural guardians of the dominant society. But *The Jazz Singer* refuses that self-interpretation. Screening out the polyglot metropolis of the second generation, it confines rebellion within the Jewish family. Substituting blackface doubling for ethnic and racial variety, the movie points in spite of itself to another truth about the melting pot, not the cooperative creation of something new but assimilation to old inequalities. Blacks may have seemed the most distinctively American people, the furthest from the old-world identities of Americanizing immigrants, but integral to that distinctiveness was their exclusion from the ethnic intermixture that defined the melting pot. For Jews and blacks were not moving in the same direction in the 1920s. When the historian of Jewish support for racial justice calls Jews “mouthpieces” for the more powerless blacks, she inadvertently

seeking of “biological insiders,” unwittingly mimics American nativism; for Sollors attributes biological racism not to nativists but to members of minority groups. Infatuated by the power of the melting pot, he confuses the experience of varying cultures with the claim of different natures. See Sollors, *Beyond Ethnicity*, pp. 11–12.

46. Compare Ruth Perlmutter, “The Melting Pot and the Humoring of America: Hollywood and the Jew,” *Film Reader* 5 (1982): 248.

47. The full discussion is in Goldberg, *George Gershwin: A Study in American Music* (New York, 1931), p. 41.

invokes the cultural form, blackface, that spoke for assimilating Jews and silenced African Americans.⁴⁸

A common set of racial stereotypes, which bore fruit in the 1924 immigration restriction bill, bound together Jews, Asians, and blacks under the Orientalist umbrella. But Orientalism also had a redemptive meaning in the jazz age; it signified racially alien, primitivist qualities, embraced by Jewish and black musicians, that would revivify American life.⁴⁹ The conflation of racial minorities into a single, Orientalist alien, moreover, at the same time that it allied Jews with blacks, also provided the movie jazz singer with his way out. Unlike the hero of the short story, Al Jolson plays a person of color instead of being confused with one. By painting himself black, he washes himself white. "The cry of my race" pulls Jack back to his family, as he sees his father behind his own blackface, mirror reflection. Blackface, by contrast, liberates the performer from the fixed, "racial" identities of African American and Jew. Freeing Jack from his inner blackness, blackface frees him from his father.

Blackface also gives Jack access to allegedly black qualities, intense emotionality and its form of musical expression. In part these were white fantasies, in part black achievements (jazz), and we will be turning to *The Jazz Singer's* relation to both. The blackface singer makes those qualities his own. His "musical miscegenation" produces the excitement of racial contact without its sexual dangers, for Jack's child is his music and his own reborn self. As disguise blackface capitalizes on identity as sameness; as expression it creates identity as difference. Interiority generated and repressed by the culture of origin finds public form through the blackface mask. Evoking an imagined alternative communal identity, blackface frees the performer from the pull of his inherited, Jewish, communal identicalness. The depersonalizing mask reaches a substrate of emotional expression out of which a new selfhood is born. *Variety* explained, "As soon as [Jolson] gets under the cork, the lens picks up that spark of individual personality solely identified with him." Supplying his spontaneity and freeing him to be himself, blackface made Jolson a unique and therefore representative American.⁵⁰

Freeing the son from the Jewish father on the one hand, the black

48. Diner, *In the Almost Promised Land*, p. 239.

49. See Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (New York, 1978); Michael Rogin, "The Great Mother Domesticated: Sexual Difference and Sexual Indifference in D. W. Griffith's *Intolerance*," *Critical Inquiry* 15 (Spring 1989): 527–28; Lewis, *When Harlem Was in Vogue*, pp. 29, 187–88; Rudolph Fisher, "The Caucasian Storms Harlem," *American Mercury* 11 (Aug. 1927): 393–94; Goldberg, "Aaron Copland and His Jazz," p. 63; Moore, *Yankee Blues*, pp. 131–36; and Hutchins Hapgood, *The Spirit of the Ghetto: Studies of the Jewish Quarter in New York* (1902; Cambridge, Mass., 1967), p. 155.

50. See Goldman, *Jolson*, pp. 35–36; Gilbert Seldes, "The Daemonic in the American Theatre," *The Seven Lively Arts* (1924; New York, 1957), pp. 175–77; and "The Jazz Singer," *Variety*, p. 16. Compare Giddins, *Blue Note*, p. 17.

pariah on the other, blackface is racial cross-dressing. Just as the white man in classic American literature uses Indians to establish an American identity against the old world, so the jazz singer uses blacks. If regeneration through violence against Indians won the West, then rebirth through mass entertainment (expropriating black music) won the city. Just as Leatherstocking can put on and take off the signs of nature and remain, as he puts it, without "a cross of Indian blood," so the jazz singer acquires transformative black qualities by masquerade instead of miscegenation. Cross-dressing, says Sandra Gilbert, allows the white man to acquire the envied (fantasized) qualities of the other sex (here race) and yet reassure himself of his own identity: I am not really black; underneath the burnt cork is a white skin. Cross-dressing, says Elaine Showalter, allows the white man to speak for women (here blacks) instead of to them, and show the actual members of the stigmatized group how best to play themselves.⁵¹

Blackface does not simply substitute racial for sexual cross-dressing, for the movie's romance unites the two. The blackface shadow points to forbidden women. But whereas the double usually signifies sexual catastrophe, as for the Prague student and the tramp,⁵² Jack's double gives him access both to his mother and to her gentile rival. Blackface takes Jack from his mother to Mary, expresses their conflicting demands on him, and finally acquires them both. Miming the most tabooed romance in American culture, that between black man and white woman, blackface disempowers both threatening participants.

Blackface is not the instrument of aggression, however, which is how doubling functions in its comic (tramp) and gothic (student) forms. The student from Prague is a passive, gender-destabilized, half a man whose double takes charge. The double's aggression blocks access to the higher

51. See Slotkin, *Regeneration through Violence*, pp. 466–516; Sandra M. Gilbert, "Costumes of the Mind: Transvestitism as Metaphor in Modern Literature," in *Writing and Sexual Difference*, ed. Elizabeth Abel (Chicago, 1982), pp. 199–201; and Elaine Showalter, "Critical Cross-Dressing: Male Feminists and the Woman of the Year," *Raritan* 3 (Fall 1983): 130–49. Compare Robert J. Stoller, "A Contribution to the Study of Gender Identity," *International Journal of Psycho-Analysis* 45, no. 2–3 (1964): 220–26, and "The Sense of Maleness," *Psychoanalytic Quarterly* 34, no. 2 (1965): 207–18. See also Fred Schaffer, "Male Political Hysteria," unpublished seminar paper, 1987. To identify the appropriative desire in blackface is not to espouse a racial essentialism in which white should remain white and black, black, but rather to interpret racial cross-dressing as generated and contaminated by the rigid boundary, itself. Nonetheless, in relying on hostile accounts of cross-dressing, I am neglecting an important strand in feminist theory, whose bearing on blackface must be explored elsewhere. Compare Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York, 1990); Carol J. Clover, "Her Body, Himself: Gender in the Slasher Film," *Representations*, no. 20 (Fall 1987): 187–228; and Lott, "'The Seeming Counterfeit.'" On the relation between mixed gender and mixed genre, see W. J. T. Mitchell, *Iconology: Image, Text, Ideology* (Chicago, 1986), pp. 104–15.

52. See Rank, *The Double*, pp. 4–7, 11, 33, 73. The student's rescue of the count's daughter on a runaway horse, which initiates their tragic romance, is replayed as the tramp's comic fantasy.

status woman, whereas the aggressive tramp temporarily gets her; by contrast to both, however, the aggressive, self-confident Jack Robin (at Coffee Dan's and in the love scene with his mother) is feminized in blackface. He plays not the black sexual menace of reconstruction, progressive, and *Birth of a Nation* fantasy, but the child Negro of the restored 1920s plantation myth. In a decade that feared Jewish aggression and kept blacks securely in their place, and when white collegians considered blacks less aggressive than Jews, the black mask of deference enforced on one pariah group covered the ambition attributed to the other.⁵³

Enacting submission made Jolson, as the souvenir program put it, the "master not only of laughter but of pathos" (*SP*, p. 7). Prominent teeth and grinning mouth had established the minstrel as a needy, greedy, oral self. Minstrelsy made African Americans into lazy, boastful creatures of physical need, the underside of hardworking, ambitious, white Protestants. Jolson played blackface trickster on Broadway, but not in his movie hits, *The Jazz Singer* and *The Singing Fool*. Drained of the sexuality and aggression that were permitted only as self-ridicule, *The Jazz Singer* left behind a pure figure of longing (fig. 8).⁵⁴

Jack appears between Sara and Mary in two scenes, the two in which he wears blackface. The first scene, displaying the singer's divided loyalties, flirts with racial as sexual cross-dressing. Neither Jack nor Mary appear in the everyday clothes that signify sexual difference. Jack wears black skin as his costume; in tightfitting pants and shirt, he is blacking his face and putting on a black wool wig. Mary, undressed in scanty dance costume, is all white. Her visible limbs convey a phallic power that, her availability for the male gaze notwithstanding, accentuates the blackface performer's passivity. To complete the disorientation, Mary wears a giant tiara on her head. Standing as Jack sits in the scene's opening, Mary towers above him. (See fig. 9 for the three protagonists; I have no reproduction of Jack beneath Mary.) As one sexual signifier floats from Jack to Mary, another slides from Sara to Jack. When his mother enters, "he starts to kiss her," the published shooting script explains, "then remembers her [*sic*] makeup" (*JS*, p. 120). Jack actually remembers *his* burnt cork; the editorial "*sic*" underlines the fact that the makeup is on the wrong sex; and it is Mary, as a production still from the souvenir program indicates, who first showed Jack how to use it (figs. 10 and 11).

Eddie Cantor played *Salome* in blackface and drag. Ike Levisky, the clothing salesman in *Levisky's Holiday* (1913), disguises himself as a

53. See Patrice Petro, *Joyless Streets: Women and Melodramatic Representation in Weimar Germany* (Princeton, N.J., 1989), pp. 110–21, 155–58; Jim Pines, *Blacks in Films: A Study of Racial Themes and Images in the American Film* (London, 1975), pp. 17, 19; Joel Williamson, *The Crucible of Race: Black/White Relations in the American South since Emancipation* (New York, 1984); and Fass, *The Damned and the Beautiful*, p. 482.

54. See Goldman, *Jolson*, pp. 65, 69, and Nathan Irvin Huggins, *Harlem Renaissance* (New York, 1971), pp. 251–56.



FIG. 8

bearded lady to enter the circus without a ticket. Discovered, he is made the target in a "Hit the Nigger" booth, and his son sells the rotten eggs.⁵⁵ Neither menacing nor comic, neither anti-Semitic nor consciously anti-black, Jack's racial cross-dressing nevertheless has a transvestite component. It masks self-assertiveness in racial *cum* sexual drag. Whether as woman-identified or merely (some viewers may think) as child, blackface allows Jack to leave home and have it, too. Putting on the mask of weak-

55. See Friedman, *Hollywood's Image of the Jew*, pp. 23, 50.

ness, the upwardly mobile immigrant acquires the American girl without losing the Jewish mother.

Whiteface enforced a choice on Jack Robin: either Mary (“Toot, Toot, Tootsie”) or Sara (“Blue Skies”). The two women come together in blackface, when Jack first sings the agony of choosing, then the ecstasy of double possession. As Jack sings “My Mammy” at Jolson’s Winter Garden Theater, the camera cuts from the blackface performer on stage to the two adoring women, one in the audience and the other in the wings. Doubles are traditionally fraternal rivals for a single woman,⁵⁶ as in *The Student from Prague* and *The Idle Class*. The blackface shadow, doubling the mother instead, acquires two women for his white substance.

Emblematic of division in short story, play, and shooting script, blackface performs ecstatic synthesis in the movie’s finale. The fadeout on Jolson with his arms outstretched surely means, in the *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* tradition, to evoke Christ on the cross. Blackface Jack’s sacrifice empowers the man behind the mask, however, as the singer moves from Sara to



FIG. 9

56. See Rank, *The Double*, p. 75.



FIG. 11



FIG. 10

Mary, from the Jewish woman with an earthly husband to the Christian woman without one. At the same time, the plot diminishes Mary from career woman, who gets Jack his break, to suppliant and admirer, and the powerful erotic bond remains that between mother and son. Maternal hysteria in the “Blue Skies” scene, in Martha Fineman’s view, expresses less incestuous desire and more the anxiety of maternal loss; Sara wants to hold her family together. It is hard from the son’s point of view not to feel the intermixture of Oedipus and separation in the maternal home. Jack sings on bended knee at the Winter Garden Theater, but this staged, blackface courtship ritual frees Jack from the sexualized mother at home to give him back at a safe distance—“I’d walk a million miles, for one of your smiles”—the purely nurturing one. The body in motion of “Blue Skies” reduces not to *The Birth of a Nation*’s castrated black phallus but to exaggerated white lips that give and ask for nurture. Blackface expresses the “Jewish . . . woe” of leaving the maternal home.⁵⁷

Blackface allows Jack to play the *fort/da* game, losing his mother and getting her back, by linking the black mammy to the Jewish mother. Sophie Tucker (born to Jewish parents in Poland, though Sartre thought she was black), who’d begun in New York vaudeville doing blackface in the afternoon and whiteface at night, and who learned “Some of These Days” from her black maid, introduced “My Yiddishe Momma” in 1925. With Yiddish on one side and English on the other, Tucker’s record sold a million copies. But if Tucker was also a “Red Hot Mamma,” indebted to such classic blues mamas as Ma Rainey, Ethel Waters, and Ida Cox, the kneeling jazz singer reduces his Jewish mammy to passivity. No response comes from her like that Ethel Waters gave a year later to another man who thinks he can come and go at will: “Stand up when you’re making your pleas, No use wearing out your knees; Get up off your knees, papa, You can’t win me back that way.”⁵⁸

As a song of repentance for sins he knows he will repeat, “My

57. Martha Fineman believes that there is unwarranted sexualization of the homecoming scene in my interpretation. On the safe distance between mother and son, compare Perlmutter, “The Melting Pot and the Humoring of America,” p. 249.

58. Sophie Tucker, *Some of These Days: The Autobiography of Sophie Tucker* (Garden City, N.Y., 1945), pp. 2, 112; Jean-Paul Sartre, *Nausea*, trans. Lloyd Alexander (1938; New York, 1969), pp. 22, 178; Denis Hollier, *Politique de la prose: Jean-Paul Sartre et l’an quarante* (Paris, 1982); *W*, p. 561; Shaw, *The Jazz Age*, pp. 168, 176, 203; Whitfield, “Jazz Singers,” pp. 20, 22; and Ethel Waters, “Get Up Off Your Knees,” *The Blues 1923–1937*, BBC RFB 683. Self-identifications of the blues mama, which demand comparison with the mammy in mainstream popular culture, include Sara Martin, “Mean Tight Mama,” *The Immortal King Oliver*, Milestone MLP 2006; Bessie Smith, “Reckless Blues,” *Bessie Smith, The Collection*, CBS 7461–44441; and Ma Rainey, “Oh Papa Blues,” *Blues: Ma Rainey*, Riverside RLP 12–108. Compare Rosetta Reisz, liner notes to *Mean Mothers and Women’s Railroad Blues*, Rosetta Records RR 1300, 1301; Hazel Carby, “It Just Be’s Dat Way Sometime: The Sexual Politics of Women’s Blues,” *Radical America* 20 (Apr. 1986): 6–13; and Daphne Duval Harrison, *Black Pearls: Blues Queens of the 1920s* (New Brunswick, N.J., 1988).

Mammy" is a blackface Kol Nidre, but it no longer asks forgiveness from the Jewish Father God. The Lithuanian Jew who has lost his mother (Jolson's died when he was eight), and longs in blackface for a mammy, is giving up his Jewish for an American dream. For this blackface inversion of Hortense Spillers's "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe" uses a surrogate black mammy to escape a real white father. In a sinister version of the psychoanalytic phrase, blackface is a regression in the service of the ego.⁵⁹

Blackface exteriorizes Jewishness, embraces the exteriorized identity as regenerative, and leaves it behind. The linguistic ambiguity of that "it" has a cultural referent, for however thoroughly blackface relinquishes the Jewish past, it more thoroughly abandons blacks. Yankee, frontiersman, and black, wrote Constance Rourke, were the three humorous masks for establishing a uniquely American identity; urban Jews, racially stigmatized, chose the black.⁶⁰ But a sinister paradox inheres in this choice. Assimilation is achieved through the mask of the most segregated; the blackface that offers Jews mobility keeps the blacks fixed in place. By wiping out all difference except black and white, blackface turns Rabinowitz into Robin, but it does so by retaining the fundamental binary opposition. That segregation, imposed on blacks, silences their voices and sings in their name. Replacing the Jew, blackface also replaced the black.

The most obvious fact about *The Jazz Singer*, unmentioned in all the critical commentary, is that it contains no jazz. Al Jolson may have saved minstrelsy from extinction by giving it a syncopated beat, as Hoberman claims, but he rescued minstrelsy by blocking out jazz. The "jazz" of the jazz age, to be sure, was not the music of King Oliver, Louis Armstrong, Jelly Roll Morton, and Fletcher Henderson. Paul Whiteman, who led the most popular band of the 1920s and sold millions of records, was the acknowledged "King of Jazz." "Mr. Jazz Himself" is a 1917 Irving Berlin song, and Jolson gave Boston's first jazz recital in 1919. "Jazz is Irving Berlin, Al Jolson, George Gershwin, Sophie Tucker," proclaimed Raphaelson (*SP*, p. 14); Tucker's billing changed in the course of her career from "World Renowned Coon Shouter" to "Queen of Jazz."⁶¹ As

59. See Hortense J. Spillers, "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book" *Diacritics* 17 (Summer 1987): 79–80; see also Ernst Kris, *Psychoanalytic Explorations in Art* (New York, 1952), and Goldman, *Jolson*, pp. 4, 74. For the link between Kol Nidre and "My Mammy," as for so much in my approach here, I am indebted to Norman Jacobson; however, he would (I am pretty sure) like to be held no more responsible for the analysis than Cantor Rabinowitz for Jack's music.

60. See Constance Rourke, *American Humor: A Study of the National Character* (New York, 1931), pp. 95–104.

61. See Hoberman, "Is 'The Jazz Singer' Good for the Jews?" p. 31; Shaw, *The Jazz Age*, pp. 41–44; Goldman, *Jolson*, p. 102; Slobin, "Some Intersections of Jews, Music, and Theater," p. 35; and Tucker, *Some of These Days*, pp. 62, 139.

Amiri Baraka puts it, "Jazz had rushed into the mainstream without so much as one black face."⁶²

Blackface did the work of black faces, standing not for what is now called jazz but for the melting pot music of the jazz age. Almost without exception, popular culture writing in the 1920s treated Negro primitivism as the raw material out of which whites fashioned jazz. Savage not polyphonic rhythm was heard in black music. Jazz was identified with freedom as emotional release rather than as technical prowess. Improvisational skill, instead of being recognized in African-American musicians, was overlooked as central to jazz, and attributed to such performers as Jolson instead. It took a decade before a critic linked jazz improvisation to the act of speech, and that delayed insight suggests both why the first talking picture wanted to lay claim to jazz (sensing the link between jazz, speech, and individual freedom), and why (in a racially hierarchical society) *The Jazz Singer* assigned freedom to a blackface ventriloquist rather than to an African-American jazz musician.⁶³

An "industrialized folk music," jazz allegedly combined the sounds of the jungle and the metropolis. But Jolson's success, contemporaneous with Ulrich B. Phillip's celebratory *Life and Labor in the Old South*, points to the importance of slavery for the new music as well.⁶⁴ Blackface began under slavery, when blacks were forbidden access to the stage. *The Jazz Singer* returned them to the plantation. Jakie sings "Waiting for the Robert E. Lee" to begin the sound revolution in talking pictures; Jack sings "My Mammy" to end the movie. African-American jazz was the music of the urban, New Negro, from New Orleans to Chicago to Kansas City, Harlem, and San Francisco. Blackface minstrelsy in the jazz age, by contrast, ventriloquized blacks as rural nostalgia. Domesticating the primitive, in the renderings of Jolson and other songwriters and performers, the plantation supplied the lost-and-longed-for, innocent origins of jazz. Joining a lost southern to a lost Jewish to a lost maternal past, blackface "jazz" restored them all.⁶⁵

62. Leroi Jones [Amiri Baraka], *Blues People: Negro Music in White America* (New York, 1963), p. 99.

63. See, among many other examples, Seldes, *The Seven Lively Arts*, pp. 67–109; "King Jazz and the Jazz Kings," *Literary Digest*, 30 Jan. 1926, pp. 37–42; Don Knowlton, "The Anatomy of Jazz," *Harper's* 152 (Apr. 1926): 578–85; Henry O. Osgood, *So This Is Jazz* (1926; New York, 1978); and, most egregiously, the lavish 1930 Paul Whiteman film, *King of Jazz*. Compare also Moore, *Yankee Blues*. For the jazz/speech analogy, see Reed Dickerson, "Hot Music: Rediscovering Jazz," *Harper's* 172 (Apr. 1936): 567–74. James Lincoln Collier's revisionist interpretation of the reception of jazz, valuable as it is, ignores the racial question in the 1920s. See James Lincoln Collier, *The Reception of Jazz in America: A New View* (Brooklyn, N.Y., 1988).

64. See William J. Shultz, "Jazz," *The Nation*, 25 Oct. 1922, p. 438, and Ulrich B. Phillips, *Life and Labor in the Old South* (New York, 1929).

65. See Gunther Schuller, *The History of Jazz* (New York, 1968), and Lewis, *When Harlem Was in Vogue*, pp. xv, 171.

The Jazz Singer's blackface facilitated upward mobility in the competitive, urban present by symbolizing the peaceful, rural past. As Raymond Williams has argued for England and T. J. Clark for France, urban parvenus required the myth of the stable countryside.⁶⁶ The plantation played that function in the postbellum, industrializing United States, an American agrarian myth that imprisoned blacks. *The Birth of a Nation* invented black, reconstruction aggression to unite North and South against it. *The Jazz Singer* emasculated revolutionary, black modern music in the name of paying it homage. Like the other doubles movies, *The Jazz Singer* is also about blocked mobility. But whereas the tramp and the student from Prague are defeated by their doubles, blackface blocks mobility for the black double (and the woman) so that his white alter ego can rise.

Jazz may have been the jazz age's name for any up-tempo music, but that no more excuses *The Jazz Singer's* missing sound than blackface compensates for its absence of blacks. Signifying the omitted referent claims possession of it, as urban mass entertainment let it be known it was capitalizing on its origins. Just as African-American performers introduced the cabaret songs that first underlay modern urban night life, and then were replaced by whites, so they invented jazz. And just as the first sound picture returned to and domesticated the "slum" origins of movies, so it expropriated jazz.⁶⁷ In the thematized, generational, Jewish story, the white noise of my title is the sacred chant that silences the jazz singer's voice. In the silenced, racial, black story, Jolson's white noise obliterates jazz.

4. *Blackface and the Talking Pictures Question*

The Jazz Singer retains its magic because, like no picture before or since, it is a liminal movie. It goes back and forth not only between sound and silence, music and intertitles, blackface and white, but also between Kol Nidre and "The Robert E. Lee," Jew and Gentile, street and stage, male and female. Jack's putting on and taking off blackface is synecdochical for the movie's reversibility, its promise that nothing is fixed or lost forever.⁶⁸ Going back to the innocent, dirty origins of movies in order to go forward into sound, blackface was talking pictures' transi-

66. See Raymond Williams, *The Country and the City* (London, 1973), and T. J. Clark, *Image of the People: Gustave Courbet and the Second French Republic, 1848–1851* (Greenwich, Conn., 1973), pp. 140–54.

67. See Lewis Erenberg, *Steppin' Out: New York Nightlife and the Transformation of American Culture, 1890–1930* (Chicago, 1981). Adolph Zukor's desire "to kill the slum tradition in the movies" is quoted in Miriam Hansen, "Early Silent Cinema: Whose Public Sphere?" *New German Critique*, no. 27 (Spring-Summer 1983): 151.

68. Thanks to Michael Fried and Ruth Leys for this perception.

tional object. It gathered together the shift from gesture to look, pleasure to desire, vaudeville to Hollywood, immigrant community to mobile individual, silence to sound, and only then became dispensable.

Blackface emancipated the jazz singer from Jews and blacks, I have been suggesting, by linking him to the groups he was leaving behind. It bears the same paradoxical relation to speech. The more primitive, histrionic technique displaces the more advanced, interiorized one during the course of the movie. Jack never appears in blackface before his father's prohibition stops speech. Blackface, in silent scenes and song, dominates the rest of the film. Jack sings in whiteface before the paternal "Stop!"—in blackface thereafter. But speech drove out blackface in the movies that followed *The Jazz Singer*. Blackface was the victim of the technological revolution for which it had fronted. Sarris's cultural guilt of musical movies thus returns, pointing not only to the slaying of silent pictures in general but to the specific destruction of blackface. In what sense did the talkies kill blackface, and how can cultural guilt attach to the destruction of that vicious practice?

The dominant form of nineteenth-century entertainment, blackface withdrew from center stage and finally disappeared from the twentieth-century motion picture. The first talking picture, making blackface its subject and not merely its method, is central to that trajectory. Blackface condensed two meanings, I have argued: heightened authenticity and American acceptance for the (Jewish) individual, subordination for the anonymous (black) mass. *The Jazz Singer's* self-awareness about the former called attention to the role of performance in creating individuality. The first movie musical, *The Jazz Singer* was also the first movie to work musical numbers into its plot.⁶⁹ This conjunction of narrative and spectacle did not simply serve realism, however, and the "My Mammy" climax abandoned verisimilitude entirely for a utopian plenitude of feeling.

"My Mammy"'s pleasure principle set the precedent for production numbers in talking pictures Hollywood, which occasionally also featured blackface. Without encompassing *The Jazz Singer's* social and technological spread, minstrels under cork (like Fred Astaire in *Swingtime*) sang and danced with the emotional intensity enabled by blackface performance. World War II Hollywood featured blackface, in *Babes in Arms*, *Dixie*, and *Holiday Inn*, patriotically to celebrate its own origins in the minstrel show, and the USO called minstrelsy "the one form of American entertainment which is purely our own." *The Jolson Story* and *Jolson Sings Again* revived Jolson's popularity after the war; the latter was the top grossing picture of 1949. But in the wake of the post-World War II embarrassment about racial subordination and stereotyping, and with the beginnings of the

69. Compare Jane Feuer, "The Self-Reflective Musical and the Myth of Entertainment," in *Genre: The Musical*, ed. Rick Altman (London, 1981), p. 160.

movement for civil rights, these backward looks finally brought movie blackface to an end.⁷⁰

Musicals were an important talking pictures genre; for the most part, however, sound intensified the aspiration to verisimilitude that had defined movies since Griffith. White actors might perform under cork in musicals, but to play blackface dramatic roles violated cinematic conventions of realism. Calling attention to the figure behind the mask, blackface would then expose the illusion that the individual was in charge of his or her voice, that it issued forth from an authentic interior. Better to bequeath blackface to the African Americans who played the parts minstrelsy had prepared.⁷¹

But blackface was not only left behind, for production numbers, nostalgia, and African Americans; it was universalized as well. During the period when it was perfecting Vitaphone, Western Electric was also conducting an experiment at the site of production. The "Hawthorne experiment" is as germinal in industrial sociology as *The Jazz Singer* is in the history of film, and the two have speaking in common. Getting workers to talk and feel listened to, the company discovered, increased productivity more than did the effort to create silent, efficient human machines. Talk, encouraged as inner self-expression, functioned as social control. In production as in consumption, in work as at play, the company stood behind the workers' words, Jolson to their blackface.⁷² "Master Minstrel" Al Jolson models the dreams of his fans, dreams produced socially for private consumption and ventriloquized as one's own. Freed from traditional cultural and communal restraints, the jazz singer becomes a component part of standardized organizations and standardized dreams. To cover up that mode of production, blackface had to go. For it exposed the illusion that the individual was speaking and not being spoken for—whether by lan-

70. For the emphasis on performance in *The Jazz Singer*, see Wolfe, "Vitaphone Shorts and *The Jazz Singer*," p. 12. See also *Genre: The Musical*; Joseph Boskin, *Sambo: The Rise and Demise of an American Jester* (New York, 1986), p. 88 (for the USO quote); and Gomery, "Al Jolson," in *Actors and Actresses*, ed. James Vinson (Chicago, 1986), pp. 335–36. Movies no longer employ traditional blackface, of course, but one can hardly overstate the importance of blackface more broadly understood in contemporary American culture, from Elvis Presley to Vanilla Ice.

71. See Bogle, *Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies, and Bucks*, pp. 20–90; Evan William Cameron, introduction, *Sound and the Cinema: The Coming of Sound to American Film*, ed. Cameron (Pleasantville, N.Y., 1980), pp. xii–xiii; Bordwell, Staiger, and Thompson, *The Classical Hollywood Cinema*, pp. 245–48, 257–58, 302; Gledhill, "The Melodramatic Field," p. 39; Sarris, "Cultural Guilt of Musical Movies," p. 41; Noël Burch, "Narrative/Diegesis—Thresholds, Limits," *Screen* 23 (July–Aug. 1982): 19–20; André Bazin, "The Myth of Total Cinema," *What Is Cinema?* trans. Hugh Gray, 2 vols. (Berkeley, 1967), 1:17–40; and Gomery, "Hollywood Converts to Sound: Chaos or Order?" in *Sound and the Cinema*, pp. 26–33.

72. See Gomery, "The Coming of Sound," pp. 234–35; Geduld, *The Birth of Talkies*, pp. 100–101; and Elton Mayo, *The Social Problems of an Industrial Civilization* (Boston, 1945).

guage, capital, the mass consumption industries, or the locus of all three for thirty years after *The Jazz Singer* (returning to haunt us in the 1980s), talking pictures Hollywood.

That, at least, is the conclusion suggested by an extraordinary picture published as part of the fiftieth anniversary celebration of *The Jazz Singer*.⁷³ The picture is captioned with the first words of speech in a feature movie, Jolson's "wait a minute, I tell ya. You ain't heard nothing. You want'a hear 'Toot, Toot, Tootsie?'" The photo (fig. 12) shows a white man sitting on a throne-like chair, with rows of identical-looking, blackface drummers seated around and behind him. One figure in blackface stands front and center, his arms outstretched in song. A blow-up reveals that the singer is Jolson himself.⁷⁴ But Jolson sang "Toot, Toot, Tootsie" alone in whiteface in *The Jazz Singer*; the photograph reabsorbs him into a minstrel troupe. He represents the rows of blackface automatons, themselves synecdochical for the reproduction of identical identities in film technology and mass society. The image thus undercuts the caption that misidentifies its picture. Unmentioned, like blackface itself, in the article that prints it, the photograph makes visible the link between blackface



FIG. 12

73. See Kupferberg, "The Jazz Singer," p. 29.

74. Credit Adrienne MacLean for discovering Jolson under the blackface.

and sound repressed in the text. For this silent picture assigns control over speech not to democratic, individual, or collective voices, but to the unidentified king of blackface, his authority sustained by the interchangeable identities of those who sing his song.