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<b>Author</b>	Simone Knewitz
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# **Black Bodies, White Subjects: Modernist Authenticities and Anxieties in the Avant-Garde Film *Borderline***

Simone Knewitz, University of Bonn

In one of the early scenes in the silent movie *Borderline* (1930), we see the barmaid (played by Charlotte Arthur), a supporting character and the one most closely associated with sensual pleasures, dance joyously and narcissistically to the tunes of the pianist. Striking is the way the barmaid's dance is presented: the images are insistently fragmentary. The camera does not linger on the body of the barmaid, refusing to offer it to the voyeuristic gaze of the viewer. Instead, we see only bodily fragments, which are moreover intercut with images of the bar manager speaking on the telephone, the pianist's fingers hitting the keys of the piano almost frantically, and a glass of water balancing dangerously on the edge of a table. The latter is particularly dramatized by the camera's low-angle perspective. Arthur's body appears grotesque, with fast cuts and different camera angles increasing this sense of dislocation. The scene gains much of its drama through its heavy use of close-ups and the rapid intercutting of these different images. One may even perceive this montage itself as a dance of images, as the movie here is continuously in motion, giving the viewer's eyes no rest and no unified focus.

I am pointing to this scene because it seems pivotal both for the concerns of the movie and the modernist movement it is a part of. Staging the barmaid's dance this way, the movie plays with ideas of wholeness and fragmentation, an opposition which is important to early cinema. Susan McCabe recognizes in the films of the era a central paradox,

a desire to include bodily experience and sensation along with an overpowering sense of the unavailability of such experience except as mediated through mechanical reproduction. Cinematic montage and camera work often exposed the body's malleability. Sped up or slowed down, the pacing and piercing of film could recreate the moving 'lived' body, while these methods ruptured fantasies of physical self-presence or wholeness. Broadly speaking, film showed that the temporal present could be endlessly repeated; it was mechanical yet created a *felt* immediacy. (*Cinematic Modernism* 3)

The fragmented dance of the barmaid seems to illustrate precisely the mechanisms McCabe describes, a mechanical, ruptured projection of self-presence and immediacy.

In what follows, I examine the movie *Borderline* in its attempt to create a language of the body. *Borderline* was a collaborative project of the Pool group, which included director

Kenneth Macpherson, the poet H. D., and her partner Bryher. Both H. D. and Bryher star in the film, along with African American singer and actor Paul Robeson. I read *Borderline* as a work which parallels modernist literary experiments, for instance the poetry of William Carlos Williams, Gertrude Stein, H. D. and Amy Lowell.<sup>1</sup> This experimentalism is related to the problem of authenticity, which modernist authors often associate with the materiality of the body. The movie, as I will show in the following discussion, works with two different, intersecting notions of authenticity. On the one hand, it locates authenticity in the material body, especially the black body of its star Paul Robeson. On the other hand, it emphasizes the materiality of the medium itself.

"Authenticity" is a problematic term, particularly if regarded from a perspective informed by poststructuralist arguments which have shattered notions of originality, identity, and authenticity. In her discussion of the concept, Ana María Sánchez-Arce has emphasized that its meaning has varied historically and continues to fluctuate.<sup>2</sup> Our current conventional understanding has its roots in an individualistic definition of authenticity deriving from the Romantic period. In this understanding, authenticity is related to the search for an inner core, the real and truthful self. In recent years, the concept of authenticity has increasingly come under scrutiny, particularly within the field of modernist studies. As Debra Cohen and Kevin Dettmar point out, many scholars now tend to "reject[] the notion of an intrinsic authenticity located either historically or spatially," instead regarding authenticity as "a transactional process" or a "simulacrum." In that sense, they conceive of authenticity as a textual effect which is created performatively. Modernist writers were often interested in achieving a sense of immediacy and presence, using techniques like improvisation or automatic writing in the attempt to circumvent the conventions of language, but paradoxically emphasizing the medium of language at the same time. They thus strove to achieve immediacy by highlighting processes of writing. Cohen and Dettmar therefore characterize modernist authenticity as "bootstrapping authenticity" (478-79).

*Borderline* represents central moments of modernism's engagement with authenticity in the way it employs formal experimentalism and represents race. On the one hand, *Borderline* displays the hopes the avant-garde put into film as a prosthetic device, seeking authenticity and presence in the fetishized black body of Paul Robeson. Robeson, starring in his second movie,<sup>3</sup> was meant to provide the image of a "complete and perfect body" (Armstrong 220). On the other hand, the film is very much concerned both with the senses and the unconscious. It attempts to render the thoughts of its characters material and focuses on expression. By excessively relying on close-up, however, the movie emphasizes surface

rather than depth, projecting the interiority of the self onto the materiality of the body, and, by extension, the two-dimensional materiality of the screen. *Borderline* is thus emblematic for the modernist enactment of the tension between depth and surface, the expression of interiority and the emphasis on materiality.

### **The Body in Avant-Garde Cinema**

Modernity has been described as the age in which "all that is solid melts into air" (Berman). If this is the case, it should not be accidental that materiality and the body occupy a privileged position within modernism. The material body in modernism becomes a trope for that which resists representation. It becomes a locus of authenticity and anxiety because body and text are fundamentally incommensurable. The body stands in for the presence, materiality and immediacy which representations lack. Within literary modernism and modern culture, the material body thus occupies a crucial role, which in itself is related to the emergence of the visual media, particularly film. The new media at the beginning of the twentieth century fueled anxieties about the integrity of the body and the self. At the same time, for many writers, silent film took an important role within modernist experimentalism. The cinema seemed to resolve the language crisis of modernism and to offer the possibility of a direct access to the body (Armstrong 226). Sabine Hake suggests that "the body became the true medium of the cinema, endowing its images with the kind of authenticity that was no longer available through, and in, language" (82-83).

Like many avant-garde artists, the Pool Group was ambivalent about the advent of sound in film, believing that sound obliterates the distinct means of film. Between 1927 and 1933, when the transformation from silent to sound film took place, they published the magazine *Close Up*, whose pages took up the current debates in cinema. In contrast to its silent predecessor, sound film was invested in the creation of reality effects, as film scholar Paula Cohen explains (127). The group worked against precisely this tendency to produce more mimetically realistic movies, focusing instead on the languages of the body and undercutting narrative with opacity and fragmentation. H. D. contributed eleven articles during the first two years of *Close Up*. Though she never explicitly positioned herself in the sound debate—which just began as her articles ceased—"her film aesthetics and her model of vision are predicated on symbol, gesture, 'hieroglyph,' 'the things we can't say or paint,'" Marcus notes (*Close Up* 101). The true medium of the film actor is movement, *Close Up* writer Ernest Betts argued: "If he is able to express himself in words, will he not diminish by so much verbal force all that he might accomplish by mime and gesture?" (*Close Up* 89).

*Borderline*, though until recently unavailable for a larger public, has received significant critical response, especially with respect to its politics and its queering of identities, and the intersections between race and sexuality.<sup>4</sup> It was the first full-length silent film produced by the Pool Group. Previously, they had shot three short films, *Wing Beat* (1927), *Foothills* (1929) and *Monkey's Moon* (1929), none of which have been preserved. *Borderline*, produced in 1930, was the group's most ambitious work. The collaborators understood the movie as an avant-garde project, setting itself apart from both earlier populist movies such as Griffith's *The Birth of a Nation* (1915) as well as contemporary Hollywood cinema. McCabe explains in *Cinematic Modernism* that the movie "reverses Griffith's myth of American identity as the virulent protection of white womanhood from 'primitive' black sexuality; it exposes the ambivalent desire for the black body across gender lines along with the white body's pathological refusal to recognize its 'border' existence, permeable and contiguous with other bodies" (170).

In *Borderline*, director Macpherson attempts to render the characters' inner feelings by employing cross-cutting techniques, but also by relying on symbols, such as a stuffed seagull. He was influenced by Freud's psychoanalysis and in particular by the theories of the Russian filmmaker Sergej Eisenstein, which the magazine *Close Up* published in translation at the time. Moreover, the film was meticulously scripted. In her essay on *Borderline* in *Close Up*, H. D. stresses the detailed craftsmanship with which Macpherson had storyboarded the movie (*Close Up* 221-36).

### **Sensation and Expression in *Borderline***

The title *Borderline* hints at the various ways in which the movie challenges boundaries and dichotomies: black/white, hetero/queer, male/female, conscious/unconscious, body/mind, transcendence/immanence. Important is the movie's narrative opacity: it possesses a plot, but its details remain vague; the actual appeal of the film does not lie in the identification with its characters, but in the dramatization of the events and in the physical expression of emotions. Upon its publication, H. D. wrote a one-page libretto to accompany the film, in order for the audience to understand the narrative development. Despite its opacity, the movie relies on a highly sensational story: Set in a mountain village somewhere in Europe, the film is about a black and a white couple. Astrid (played by H. D. under the stage name of Helga Doorn) sees her marriage to Thorne (Gavin Arthur) endangered by the latter's affair with the mulatto woman Adah (Eslanda Robeson) and thus summons Pete (Paul Robeson), Adah's black boyfriend, to the village to put an end to the affair. Though Adah and Pete reunite, Astrid's and

Thorne's relationship is doomed. When Thorne leaves Astrid, they get into a fight during which Astrid threatens Thorne with a knife. The situation results in Thorne accidentally stabbing Astrid to death. While he is arrested at first, he manages to plead self-defense. In the aftermath, Adah leaves Pete since she believes herself responsible for the situation; Pete is driven out of town as a scapegoat by the racist village people. Most of the scenes are set in a hotel bar, above which the couples have their rooms. The bar itself functions as a borderline between the private sphere of the main protagonists and the village people and is inhabited by three queer characters. The butch bar manager (Bryher) and the barmaid may be read as a lesbian couple; the pianist (Robert Herring) is coded as gay.

*Borderline* is driven by two conflicting and intersecting notions of authenticity. On the one hand, "Macpherson is looking for a way to introduce authenticity aligned with the primitive and with nature" (Brown 698), particularly through the body of Pete; on the other hand, I would argue that the movie persistently emphasizes the materiality of the screen which fragments the body and through this fragmentation attempts to performatively create a sense of immediacy. The central filmic technique to achieve fragmentation is the close-up. Mary Ann Doane notes that the appearance of the close-up in cinema is contemporaneous with the first formulations of a 'cinematic language' ("The Close-Up" 91). She explains that "[o]f all the different types of shots, it is the close-up that is most fully associated with the screen as surface, with the annihilation of a sense of depth and its corresponding rules of perspectival realism" (91).

Judith Brown has stressed the importance of the close-up technique in her discussion of the movie, and in particular of close-up shots of hands in *Borderline*. According to Brown, "[t]he film offered a response to the losses occasioned by modern life, and an attempt to invigorate, even electrify film audiences, not through cognition, [...] but through sensation" (690). The hand, Brown notes, possesses a large symbolic range and can be most generally regarded as an indicator of sensation, "the combined experience of emotion and the body" (697). The hand represents the concrete and tangible, but may also symbolize abstract emotions. One may add to this the association of the hand with the act and thus with agency. In the case of the movie, hands are particularly involved in acts of violence: it is Thorne's hand which stabs Astrid; Pete's fist strikes down a villager. An anonymous hand gloved in white brings the note which demands Pete's departure, thus representing a more abstract form of violence. The hand may also figure contact, as in the handshake between Thorne and Pete exchanged at the end of the movie. Focusing so closely on hands, the movie underlines its commitment to the physical gesture and the movement of the body.

Perhaps most notable, as Brown has pointed out as well, is the contrast between the hands of the white characters and the close-ups of Pete's hands (699). White hands are connoted with anxiety in the movie: they are clenched to fists or clutch to telephone receivers; they reach out in violence or flutter nervously. Pete's black hands are mostly framed in a relaxed position: they are situated close to his body, to his crotch, and are thus associated with sexual prowess and presence. Pete's hands seem to rest in themselves, being at once powerful, animalistic and passive. Pete is frequently portrayed in states of contemplation, his body objectified rather than active. His state of peace is only disrupted once toward the end of the movie, as he reacts to the provocations of one of the villagers by punching the latter's face with his fist.

The movie does not only display close-ups of hands, but also uses the device more traditionally for faces, which was particularly meaningful in the early silent film tradition. Paula Cohen explains that

film could bypass [...] linguistic revelations and show, through a character's facial expression, what characters inside the film could not see. The silence of early film was crucial in establishing this effect, for the medium was forced to take advantage of the close-up in its effort to render cinematically what novels and plays had been able to do through language. (115)

In contrast to this, Doane has argued that the close-up is a presentation rather than a representation ("The Close-Up" 91), a statement I find more helpful for the analysis of *Borderline*. In the movie, close-ups do not serve to give the viewer a privileged gaze at the characters' interior thoughts, but to render abstracted psychological states. The camera often lingers on a face for several seconds and records facial expressions, but they appear as surfaces. Indeed, it seems that the movie frequently emphasizes surfaces rather than depth, portraying characters in front of walls and in closed rooms.

The unconscious is abstracted by the use of montage and by projecting the internal state of characters on material objects, for instance, on a glass of water balancing on the edge of a table or newspaper sheets fluttering in the wind entering a window. When Thorne attempts to leave Astrid, the camera intercuts between her face in close-up and a detail shot of the suitcase Thorne carries. Then, there is a rapid clatter montage of Adah's face with the close up of the suitcase, to the point that the two images almost get blurred into one another. The effect is a nervous flickering, recalling the flickering of Astrid's eyes a little earlier. It thus imitates the quick succession and interrelation of thought, as in a ruptured stream of consciousness.

The movie also employs concrete symbols, especially in the form of animals. It associates Astrid with a stuffed seagull and Pete with a cat. When Pete follows Adah through the streets of the village to reclaim her, the scene is intercut with a cat trying to catch a fish from a small glass of water left on the street by a little boy. As we see Pete going after Adah, the cat circles the glass until finally sticking in its paw, catching and eating the fish, at the very moment—the montage indicates—when Pete encounters Adah. The same cat walks through the hotel bar when Thorne learns about Pete's arrival. In a later scene, it reappears when Thorne is crying, knowing that he has lost Adah. It is sitting on a chair in his room, twitching its tail. He takes it up, caresses, kisses it and holds it tight, trying to hold on to it even as it attempts to get away. In this scene, standing in for Adah as Thorne's object of affection, the cat relates to both black characters, Adah and Pete. The cat, a carnivore, is a symbol of wild, undomesticated nature and also associated with the night; in the film it stands for the intruder who disrupts the social order, but also for the eroticized, exotic Other.

The stuffed seagull appears in the scene before Thorne attempts to leave Astrid. Pinned to wooden board with outstretched wings, the seagull seems congealed at the height of its life. H. D. calls it a "Victorian abstraction": it represents Astrid's paralysis and the suffocating norms of bourgeois society. Astrid appears as dead even while she is alive (and significantly she enacts her own death before she is stabbed). She has also internalized the racist views of society, voicing her contempt at her husband's relationship with a "nigger." Cat and seagull in the movie are analogous to nature and deadened culture, respectively, with nature being privileged. Moreover, as symbols for the language of the unconscious, they operate differently. The cat is not aligned with Pete's unconscious—also underlined by the fact that Pete and the cat never appear in the same frame—, but with the white characters' perception of him. In contrast, the seagull is directly related to Astrid. Thus, both symbols are clearly part of the white unconscious, underlining the filmmakers' disinterest in black subjectivity.

### **The Authenticity of the Black Male Body**

Throughout the movie, the black male body of Pete/Paul Robeson is privileged as a site of natural authenticity and presence. Pete appears for the first time standing at the window and looking outside; we first see him in a half-profile, in a medium close-up. His face is calm and melancholic; his shoulders appear prominent and very muscular. Shiny on the forehead and the nose, Pete's head seems like a sculpture, an impression to which his stillness contributes. The dark face is contrasted by his white shirt and the white curtain in the background. The



camera focuses on Pete for a long time; we see the back of his full body, then again a close-up of his face in a low-angle shot, followed by a detail shot of his hands. The strongly veined hands thus seem primitive, animalistic and erotic at the same time. In more than one instance, the camera most intensely focuses on Pete. Of all characters, it gets closest to him, with extreme close-ups not only of his face, but also of his whole body. The camera runs down his still body in a slow, caressing movement. This is especially remarkable since the movie otherwise works with montage rather than with camera movements. The camera comes so close to the body that the picture is blurred, simulating extremely close vision. The effect is that Robeson's body—the body of the star—seems in reach of the viewer's touch.

Throughout the movie, Pete is consistently portrayed in low-angle shots which give him an air of aloofness. Macpherson works with strong light and dark contrasts, which give his face both a mystical and a very plastic image. In several instances, Pete's head is shot against a clouded sky, directly relating him to heavenly transcendence. His meetings with Adah are frequently outdoor scenes, and he is often shot against natural backgrounds. Both through visual techniques and in terms of narrative, Pete's black body is the center at which sexual desires are projected. Significantly, in her essay on the film, H. D. conflates Robeson and the role he plays (cf. Walton, "White Neurotics" 251). She explains:

Mr Robeson is obviously the ground under all their feet. He is stabilized, stable, the earth. Across Mr Macpherson's characterization of Pete, the half-vagrant young giant negro, the fretting provincialism of small-town slander and small-town menace move like shadows from high clouds. The giant negro is in the high clouds, white cumulous cloud banks in a higher heaven. Conversely, his white fellow-men are the shadows of white, are dark, neurotic; storm brews [...]. (*Close Up* 224)

H. D. associates Robeson/Pete with materiality and nature, granting him a greater authenticity and a closer connection to nature than the neurotic whites. Thus, while she glorifies his body, she also objectifies him. Adah occupies an even more thoroughly passive role within the movie, being portrayed as a victim without agency. This passivity is consistently emphasized as the camera focuses on her in high angle shots. In her first scene, we see her in a fight with Thorne in a shot-reverse shot sequence of medium close-ups. Thorne thrusts his hands forward, and we assume that he has just pushed Adah away from him. Thorne is shot from below, Adah from above, which creates the impression that Thorne towers over Adah. Both are breathing heavily. Light shines on Thorne's face from the right, which puts it into sharp contrasts of shadows and light. Adah sits on the floor, with her back pressed against a curtain. Her eyes are fixed, then she lowers her head, the camera moves closer, framing the bare back

of her neck. Then she raises her head again a bit to look at Thorne and sobs. The camera turns back to a close-up of Thorne's body, as he grasps an object and raises his arm into the air. In the subsequent picture, Adah presses herself more closely to the curtain. The camera then takes a bird-eye's view as Thorne smashes a white clay figurine to the floor. In the final picture, the broken figurine spins on the floor in close-up. The figurine possesses great symbolic value, metonymically representing a shattering of white subjectivity set in motion by the desire for a black body.

As McCabe and Jean Walton have suggested, *Borderline* intertwines racial and sexual Otherness.<sup>5</sup> Significantly, while race is essentialist, sexuality is portrayed as surface effects. The three supporting protagonists—the bar manager, the maid and the pianist—are all presented as queer. Identities here are notably constructed by surfaces, as there are distinct markers in each case. The pianist appears as thin and nervous, which is particularly rendered by his hands which are almost constantly working the piano (and are often shown in close-up). He wears jewelry, particularly a large ring on his right hand, underlining his homosexuality. Most significantly, he keeps a picture of Pete at his piano, at which he gazes longingly. Similarly, the bar manager is coded as butch through her short haircut, her clothes and the cigar she smokes in her very first appearance. The barmaid, in contrast, appears as promiscuous, flirting with almost everybody, whether male or female. We see her throughout the film dancing around the bar in happy frenzy, consuming alcohol. She thus appears as the manager's femme (or bisexual) counterpart. While the movie only portrays them in the public sphere of the hotel, giving their relationship no private side, their status as a couple is suggested in one scene in which the barmaid demonstratively keeps her arm around the manager's shoulder while engaging in a conversation with the patrons of the café.

Race and sexuality thus work on different levels in the movie: While sexuality appears as coded in surface markers, these markers are suggestive of interiority, subjectivity. In contrast, the intense preoccupation of the camera with Robeson's body relate to nothing but his physicality. I would argue that the movie's racial and sexual politics are intricately related to its formal concerns. Significantly, the movie takes a "white" perspective by refusing to grant its black characters subjectivity and reducing them to the primitive, natural, and material. Black bodies, particularly Pete's, appear only as a projective surface denoting essential being. *Borderline* is thus foremost concerned with the modern anxieties of its white subjects. Walton has similarly suggested that *Borderline* "reserves psychological depth and complexity only for its white characters, constructing the black characters as the primitivized others, the prehistorical background against which the white psyche may be laid bare through

its own artistry" ("White Neurotics" 267). Just as the sexual desires in the movie are projected toward the essentialized black body, the film is driven by a desire for wholeness and immediacy, despite the awareness that it can only create a mechanical illusion of such immediacy.

### **Modernist Authenticities and Anxieties**

Many of the modernist writers were interested in experimental techniques, like automatic writing or improvisation, because they were trying to circumvent conscious structures and to inscribe the body itself into their texts. Thus, they were trying to circumvent mediation itself. However, in the same attempt to achieve presence and immediacy, the writers often emphasized the medium itself, the texts' processual aspects and materiality. Modernism therefore often operates in the field of tension between a search for presence and immediacy, and the focus on the medium itself.

I see precisely this tension at work in the movie *Borderline* as well. *Borderline* highlights important issues in avant-garde modernism, both in terms of its formal experimentalism and its engagement with racial Otherness. In particular, it explores and enacts the tension between surface and depth, fragmentation and wholeness. While *Borderline* denounces racial violence and ostensibly crosses racial borderlines, it engages in a "positive" racism which reduces the black characters to bodies without subjectivity. At its core, therefore, the movie is about white middle-class anxieties. Thorne and Astrid are representatives of the bourgeoisie who, fuelled by contemporary theories of race degeneration,<sup>6</sup> feels threatened by the intrusion of colored people. Ultimately, the movie attributes its black characters with an ambivalent vitality its white characters lack, as suggested by the stuffed seagull associated with Astrid: "it is the white woman and the white man who are victims, when there is the final test of man and nature" (*Close Up* 224), H. D. suggests in her essay.

### **Notes**

<sup>1</sup> This essay is part of a larger project on the significance of authenticity within modernist literature and modern culture. I have talked at length about the two conflicting notions of authenticity in my dissertation entitled "A poet is flesh and blood as well as brain": Amy Lowell, William Carlos Williams, and the Modernist Poetics of the Material Body (2010), currently in preparation for publication. On Amy Lowell in this context, see also my essay "Poetry as a Spoken Art."

<sup>2</sup> For an extended discussion of the concept of authenticity, see also Guignon.

<sup>3</sup> His first movie had been Oscar Micheaux's *Body and Soul* (1924), in which Robeson had played a double role. Robeson was also previously known to the public as an athlete, singer, and stage actor.

<sup>4</sup> See Friedberg for a more general introduction to the movie. On issues of race and sexuality in *Borderline*, see McCabe, *Cinematic Modernism* and "Borderline Modernism" as well as Gallagher, Walton, and Debo. Hazel Carby offers an excellent discussion on Paul Robeson as an object of the modernist fascination with black masculinity.

<sup>5</sup> See especially Walton, "White Neurotics."

<sup>6</sup> Theories of racial degeneration combined with a voyeuristic, white middle-class fascination with deviant bodies were especially prominent at the beginning of the twentieth century. Perpetuated in books like Eugene Talbot's *Degeneracy: Its Causes, Signs, and Results* (1898), Thomas Mosby's *Causes and Cures of Crime* (1913), or William Sadler's *Race Decadence* (1922), they bespoke the imminent danger of the decline of the white race. On this issue, see, e.g., Dana Seitler's monograph.

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