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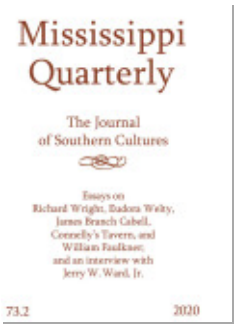

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THE PURPOSE OF THIS NOTE IS TO IDENTIFY AND COMMENT ON A MOTION-picture-related joke in the second chapter of William Faulkner's *Light in August*. The joke, an allusion to the film comedian Joe E. Brown, occurs midway through the conversation between Byron Bunch and Lena Grove in which Byron, already in love with Lena, "though he does not yet know it" (Faulkner 55), inadvertently reveals that her runaway betrayer, Lucas Burch, has taken on the assumed name of Joe Brown. When Lena asks whether Joe Christmas's "partner [is] named Joe too," Byron responds with sidelong but telling skepticism:

> Yes, ma'am. Joe Brown. But I reckon that may be his right name. Because when you think of a fellow named Joe Brown, you think of a bigmouthed fellow that's always laughing and talking loud. And so I reckon that is his right name, even if Joe Brown does seem a little kind of too quick and too easy for a natural name, somehow. But I reckon it is his, all right. Because if he drew time on his mouth, he would be owning this here mill right this minute. (54)

There are several reasons for believing that there is an allusion to Joe E. Brown here, and for seeing in the allusion somewhat more significance than it might at first appear to possess. For most current-day movie goers, Brown is familiar, if at all, for his role as Osgood Fielding III, the character enamored of Daphne, the character played by Jack Lemmon, in Billy Wilder's *Some Like It Hot* (1959). But in the early 1930s, at a time overlapping with the writing of *Light in August*, Brown was emerging as one of the most popular film comedians. Beginning at the age of ten as a member of a team of traveling acrobats, then progressing through work in circuses, burlesque, vaudeville, and Broadway and touring company stage shows, Brown arrived in Hollywood in the late 1920s already an accomplished and successful comedian. In 1929, after a few minor roles and a couple of films in which he was miscast as a tragedian, Brown signed a contract with Warner Brothers, a studio

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fending off bankruptcy by pioneering the emerging technologies of color and sound. With Warner Brothers, Brown transferred to his film work a previously developed comic persona that emphasized the extraordinary width of his mouth and a variety of vocal mannerisms suitable to roles as a "smart-aleck athlete," a "fast-talking young playboy[]," and "someone mistaken for a champion athlete" (Gehring 64, 55, 46). Between 1929 and 1932, Brown was extraordinarily active, appearing in three or more films each year.[1]

Whether Faulkner ever saw a movie featuring Joe E. Brown is, so far as I can determine, not known. But he would have had several opportunities to do so, and he could have become aware of what an early critic called Brown's "crater mouth" even without attending one of his films. For the entirety of 1929, 1930, and most of 1931, Faulkner resided in Oxford, writing and attempting to publish *Sanctuary* and numerous short stories. On August 17, 1931, he began writing *Light in August*, completing the manuscript on February 19, 1932 (Gresset 28–32). A review of ads in the *Oxford Eagle* for the Lyric, Oxford's sole movie theater at that time, shows that at least five of Brown's movies played there during this period, with ads appearing for *On with the Show!* (April 12, 1930), *Song of the West* (April 26, 1930), *The Lottery Bride* (January 4, 1931), *Going Wild* (January 6, 1931 and January 10, 1931), and *Local Boy Makes Good* (February 16, 1932). The ads for all but the first of these movies feature Brown, at times above the title, and the one for *Going Wild* on January 10, 1931 identifies him as "Big Mouth Brown." Also, had Faulkner happened to walk by the theater, the posters outside could have made him aware of Brown's unusual physiognomy, for they almost invariably featured caricatures exaggerating the width of his mouth.[2]

Speculations about whether Faulkner saw or was aware of Joe E. Brown's movies could be extended to wondering whether he ever actually met Brown—his first stint as a film writer, for Metro-Goldwyn-

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[1] For biographical and career-related information regarding Brown, see Brown; Gehring. The quoted phrases appear in the Gehring volume, with the second attributed to historian Henry Jenkins.

[2] There is a thriving market in vintage movie posters. Searching the internet for "Joe E. Brown movie posters," I came across posters prominently featuring caricatures of Brown for *Song of the West* and *Local Boy Makes Good*. Posters for the other three movies appearing at the Lyric during the relevant time period may also exist.

Mayer, ran from early May to mid-June 1932, a time when Brown was prominent in Hollywood social, civic, and athletic circles (Brown 200). But of larger importance, and not only a matter of speculation, is the place film, and visual and aural media in general, had begun to occupy in Faulkner's imaginative life in the late 1920s and early 1930s.

In chapter five of *Light in August*, in the account of Joe Christmas's peregrinations during the evening before his murderous encounter with Joanna Burden, we are told that "[t]he street . . . was deserted at this hour. . . . At seven oclock he would have passed people, white and black, going toward the square and the picture show; at half past nine they would have been going back home" (114). The specificity of these time notations is one of numerous instances of alertness to contemporary forms of visual media in the novel—most strikingly, the moment when Joe watches his naked body, in the glare of headlights from an approaching car, "grow white out of the darkness like a kodak print emerging from the liquid" (108), but also the sign outside Hightower's house advertising "Photographs Developed" (58); the newspaper photograph of Hightower himself, his face looking "like the face of Satan in the old prints" as he leaves his empty church after his wife's apparent suicide (69); and the magazine Christmas reads "of that type whose covers bear either pictures of young women in underclothes or pictures of men in the act of shooting one another with pistols" (110).

As Sascha Morrell observes, in the technology available in the 1930s, prior to the digitalization of the photographic process, when a photograph was developed in a darkroom, colors were reversed, with black areas in the negative becoming white in the finished print and vice versa. Hence, Morrell says, "[t]he inner contradictions of the negative-positive development process provide Faulkner with the perfect metaphor for the indeterminacy of Christmas's racial identity" (174). This indeterminacy is eloquently expressed in the scene with the Kodak image itself. Joe's "grow[ing] white out of the darkness" in the headlights of the oncoming car is immediately countered by Joe himself, when "he adds a caption to the white image of himself that insists on his blackness" by shouting "[w]hite bastards. . . . That's not the first of your bitches that ever saw . . . ." The closing ellipsis intimates a reference to his exposed genitalia (Morrell 173).

The roster of works of scholarship on the relation between developments in visual and aural media—photography, motion pictures, radio,

phonographs—and Faulkner's fiction is large and varied. It includes Bruce Kawin's seminal *Faulkner and Film*, with its study of the relations between the screenplays on which Faulkner worked and the novels he was writing at the same time; John T. Matthews's "Faulkner and the Culture Industry," in the Philip Weinstein-edited (and since superseded) *Cambridge Companion to William Faulkner*; Peter Lurie's *Vision's Immanence: Faulkner, Film, and the Popular Imagination*; the Peter Lurie and Ann J. Abadie-edited proceedings of the 2010 Faulkner and Yoknapatawpha conference, *Faulkner and Film*; James D. Bloom's "The Hollywood Challenge" and Sarah Gleeson-White's "Faulkner Goes to Hollywood," both in the John T. Matthews-edited *William Faulkner in Context*; and Stefan Solomon's *Faulkner in Hollywood: Screenwriting for the Studios.*

Foremost among recent work of this sort (in my opinion) are Julian Murphet's *Faulkner's Media Romance* and the essays in *William Faulkner in the Media Ecology*, the collection edited by Murphet and Stefan Solomon in which Morrell's essay appears, and which also includes interesting essays on Faulkner and aural media by Sarah Gleeson-White, Jay Watson, and Michael Zeitlin. In the introduction to that collection, Murphet describes the threat that the "speeds, conveniences, movements, and transactions of modernity" posed to "everything that the novel as a form [had], historically, arrogated to itself as responsibility and property: knowable communities, defined individuals, durable relations, and dense structures of feeling" ("Introduction" 3). But while this threat provoked in Faulkner his "oft-remarked antimodernity" (4), at a deeper level it produced a "technical wrestling" with the new media that created new possibilities for the novel as a form, even a renewal of its "long-term fortunes" (9). And in *Faulkner's Media Romance*, Murphet advances an impressive argument about the relation between Faulkner's affinity for romance motifs, inherited from family history, southern culture, and his preferred reading within the literary tradition, and their "debased" continuation in movies, popular movies, and mass-circulation magazines.

Within this large context, and when compared with the significance of the play with whiteness, blackness, and sexual exposure in the Kodak episode, the novel's allusion to Joe E. Brown may seem merely incidental. But it too carries cultural resonance. Faulkner was approached about working for MGM in December 1931 and began his first six-week

stint as a scriptwriter in May 1932, at a salary of $500 per week, a contract renewed in July, but at the lower amount of $250 per week (Gresset 34–37). When Byron Bunch says that "if [Lucas] drew time on his mouth, he would be owning this here mill right this minute," we may if we wish hear an allusion to what Joe E. Brown's "mouth" was earning, which at the height of his mid-1930s popularity was $300,000 per year. The irony of the contrast between his income and that not only of Brown but of other movie stars must not have escaped Faulkner's attention. That he could both persist in what he once called "a rotten way to make a living" (Gresset 40) and turn it to fictional account, thereby creating an enduring form of aesthetic capital, should not escape ours.

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