THE BIRTH OF BLACK CINEMA

a symposium on the
new black cinema

Film Viewing Guide

PAGE HALL, 135 WESTERN AVENUE
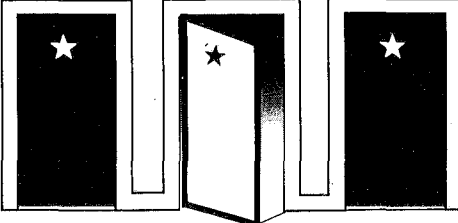UNIVERSITY AT ALBANY, STATE UNIVERSITY OF NEW YORK
NOVEMBER 17, 18 & 19, 1988

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ALL EVENTS ARE HELD AT PAGE HALL, 135 WESTERN AVENUE, UNIVERSITY AT ALBANY, STATE UNIVERSITY OF NEW YORK
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THIS PROGRAM IS BEING FUNDED IN PART BY A GRANT FROM THE NATIONAL ENDOWMENT FOR THE ARTS.
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New York State Writers Institute
of the State University of New York

Film Viewing Guide
PRODUCED BY SUZANNE LANCE

Welcome

The ***Birth of Black Cinema Symposium*** is designed to examine the origin and artistic development of one of the newest, most provocative and often misunderstood segments of the film genre—black cinema. The concept of this project is novel because it concentrates on black cinema in its own context-- forged within black artistic traditions and cultural characteristics.

Because the black presence on screens is surfacing in unexpected and unexplored ways, we have chosen a title *(The Birth of Black Cinema)* that begs several questions that could not legitimately be asked before the 1960's. What is black cinema? When did it begin? What forces compelled, facilitated and informed its origins? How should it be judged? What information is needed to articulate those judgments? What are its critical, cultural and aesthetic premises?

By addressing these questions, this symposium expects to clear away some of the emotional and intellectual debris surrounding the black presence in film. In this way, one can develop the cinematic literacy necessary for deliberating on, understanding, and participating in the future of an art form that, to a large extent, shapes our thinking in a number of areas. This symposium hopes to direct attention to the powerful, risk-ladden alliance of art and society at its most critical moment—when a specific culture begins to shape that alliance.

The ***Birth of Black Cinema Symposium***, therefore, centers on the artistic strategies and choices available to black filmmakers in a highly culture-sensitive medium.

The Schweitzer Chair has devoted all of its resources to a vision of education of which this project is a part: to enhance humanistic studies through the joining of artists, scholars, and the community in a three-way dialogue.

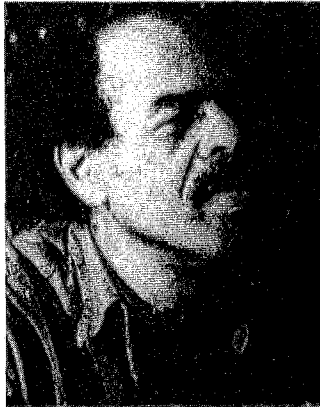The Schweitzer Chair and the New York State Writers Institute are grateful for your participation.

Toni Morrison

Table of Contents

The Birth of Black Cinema: Overview

by Clyde Taylor

The films and discussions in this symposium carry on a distinct burst of African-American image-making, the fuse of which was lit during the black awakening of the 1960s. Before or alongside this new cinema movement lie three major episodes of black imagery in American films.

The first of these is the long pageant of Blacks as servile stereotypes, gunbearers, weirdos, scowling heavies and grinning sidekicks that Hollywood has projected around the world from its earliest years to the present day.

Then, as a kind of competition to this reign of shady caricature came the early black independent films, from roughly 1913 to 1948.

Like a fiery comet, the third definable episode in black characterization, the black exploitation movies, burned and then fizzled—lasting roughly from 1969 to 1975. They died when white producers discovered that black audiences would come to see white male adventure movies, and white filmgoers would not pay to see the black versions.

Were any of these epochs forerunners of the present day black independent film movement? The early black independents were forerunners in form but not really in substance. The contemporary African-American image-makers can look back to Oscar Micheaux and other early directors for the inspiration of their enterprise and ingenuity in surmounting obstacles to bring Blacks to the screen and to create a marginal market of black audiences to see them. Yet when one looks at the content of these movies to learn who African-Americans were, are, or were going to be, the yield is slight. Their tidy achievement was to take black imagery out of the submissive, shadowy margins of subhumanity and recreate it in roles such as cowboys, dentists, socialites, classical composers and chorus girls. They leaped, in other words, over the mainstream of struggling black people into the a-political, bourgeois cover-up of Hollywood commercial escapism.

Who are the new independent filmmakers, where did they come from and how does their work differ from the other chapters in the delineation of black people?

Most broadly, the new movement towards independence in filmmaking can be traced to the world-wide groundswell towards decolonization after World War II, which also set the stage for many national cinema movements. The immediate background of its birth was the black awakening of the 1960s. Television news agencies found themselves at a disadvantage trying to cover stormy events in black communities with all-white crews. And film schools and departments, shocked (or persuaded) into

social responsibility by the murder of Dr. Martin Luther King, finally opened their doors to black candidates.

So, the new independents, unlike the old, are university trained. As students of film art, the new image-makers have participated in a denser, broader film culture than was possible before World War II. They have incubated in the atmosphere of film study courses that set before them the example of Japanese cinema, Italian neo-realism, the French New Wave, Brazilian *cinema novo*, Cuban cinema, the works of Ousmane Sembene, Med Hondo, and other African directors. Their teachers in some cases have been pioneers in the direct cinema style of documentary filmmaking. In short, they became filmmakers in an intellectual climate that nurtured ideas of film far more vast and supple than the formulaic routines of the U.S. movie industry—a climate that makes possible gestures towards the portrayal of national culture on film.

Even during its brief history since the 1960s, the new black cinema has experienced specific clusters of development. The first wave of independents, for instance, arose mainly in and around *Black Journal*. This television magazine, aired by the government-funded Public Broadcasting Service, gathered entrants into the field under the experienced leadership of William Greaves (*Still a Brother*). Among them were Madeline Anderson (*I Am Somebody; Malcolm X*), St. Clair Bourne (*Let the Church Say Amen; Black and Green; In Motion: Amiri Baraka*), Stan Lathan (*Long Day in November*), and Horace Jenkins (*Asundi: Sudan's Pyramids*).

At the *Black Journal* office at Columbus Circle, New York City, these first-footers wrestled with issues of a new black film aesthetic and translated their ideas into weekly documentaries that are still unrivaled in bringing a sharply focused view of their world to black television watchers. Mainly, these *Black Journal* graduates have set the pace in black documentaries, shifting only gradually to dramatic films.

The University of California at Los Angeles in the early 1970s was the fertile ground for another outbreak of black film independence. With Haile Gerima as the most provocative advocate, and most of them collaborating on each other's projects, startling works came from Larry Clark, Charles Burnett, Ben Caldwell, and slightly later, Julie Dash, Bill Woodberry, Alile Sharon Larkin and Bernard Nichols.

The films of Burnett, Dash and Woodbury get their power from controlled reflectiveness, their social implications subtly incorporated. But the UCLA school is more immediately recognizable by a committed social-political energy which at times threatens to overpower the viewer, but always keeps in the foreground a perspective of commitment to an embattled black community.

Then, in the late 1970s New York became the center from which another group of young filmmakers emerged. Attention to this fresh development was first alerted by Warrington Hudlin's *Street Corner Stories*. In all their diversity, the appearance on the scene of Hudlin, Robert Gardner, Roy Campanella II, Ayoka Chenzira, Charles Lane, Alfred Santana, Kathy Collins, Hugh Hill, Monica Freeman, Camille Billops, and others, served notice that the supply of young talented African-American artists determined to make responsible films would not dry up.

Black Journal, UCLA and the New York "school" indicate three focal points where individual talents developed more than easily distinguishable styles. Still, I would suggest that the West Coast work is marked by its expansiveness, its risk-taking, and frequently by a Pan-African community orientation. By contrast, films from the East Coast have so far moved more deliberately within limits, suggesting somewhat the dimensions of the Broadway theatrical stage.

But these three pulses of the movement are not the only ones. Carol Munday Lawrence, for instance, formed a sustaining film production company in San Francisco, the first black woman to do so. Michelle Parkerson makes her films from a base in Washington, D.C., as does Alonzo Crawford. Still others like Jimmy Mannas and Robert Van Leirop have sharpened their skills in faraway places like Guiana and Mozambique.

Nor is even an historical sketch of this new film movement complete without the efforts of its supporting cast of cultural workers like Pearl Bowser, who gained national notice for the new cinema with an historic festival in New York in 1969, followed by dozens of her exhibitions, in places such as Denmark, France and India. One should recall also the Black Film Institute led by Anthony Gittens in Washington, the African Film Society in San Francisco, the Blacklight International Film Festival in Chicago, the Atlanta Third World Film Festival, and several other efforts to develop local community audiences. The movement now has its own journal in *Black Film Review*, published in Washington, D.C.

To individual filmmakers, in conversation, the future is an even rockier road in search of funds than before, faced as they are with deep cutbacks in government and foundation support. And despite their efforts, the breakthrough to the audience they need and deserve has not appeared on the horizon.

But to the historian, their efforts continue to look like an irresistible bid for a representative portrayal of African-Americans before the world. They have already produced a fuller, more rounded portrait of their people on the screen than all the efforts mesmerized by Hollywood's glitter put together.

Each year new names enter the lists—Spike Lee, Carl Clay, Floyd Webb, to name a few. Even more encouraging, many contenders are managing to make their second, third, fourth films, each often a jump ahead

of the last in maturity and assurance. They continue to search for new markets and funding sources, including European television. They take their talents and their films everywhere.

The world is being educated, provoked, and entertained by screen portrayals of black people that reflect their reality. For these young filmmakers, and those to follow, just won't be denied.

The prospects for the new black cinema are mixed. Hopeful signs continue to appear. Charles Burnett has just received a MacArthur Fellowship. The Spike Lee train of remarkable successes rolls on. But we should also notice that during the same years of his hits, the supply of black independent films has been running low, particularly in terms of feature films. Nevertheless, we know a new day in black representation is on the way, part of the emergent challenge from repressed cultures and peoples that is throwing Eurocentric knowledge into its present crisis.

Whatever the combination of talents, marketing strategies and technologies that eventually make black self-representation unremarkable, one, particularly, should concern the participants in this event; the midwives of the black cinema yet to be born. And that is the wider understanding of the mechanics of power-knowledge and the essentiality of cultural democracy as a right, not just a charitable idea.

From: Bright Moments

by St. Clair Bourne
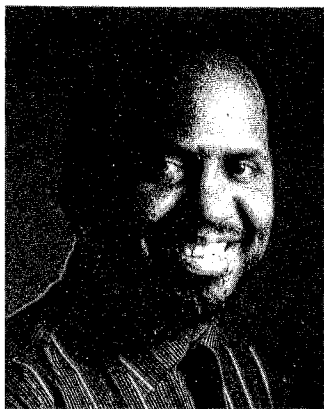
My own beginning in filmmaking in 1968 as a staff producer for *Black Journal,* the first national public affairs television series, was also due as much to social conditions as my own energy. In those days, Black people protested through action about our conditions. Among our complaints was the lack of media acknowledgement regarding black participation in and contributions to American society. At the same time, the Civil Rights movement was beginning to slow down as the activists were more and more thwarted by violent public resistance and government conspiracy. Planned and spontaneous rebellions erupted in the cities where there were large black populations, causing the temporary disruption of ongoing business as well as White discomfort and fear in those cities. Therefore, programs, funds and positions in the television industry were made available to provide black media access and participation to quiet the raging storm. In the tax-supported public television sector, the *Black Journal* series was created. I won't go into a detailed account here but basically, because of our pro-black advocacy point of view film style, the *Black Journal* series documented the black activity of the times and, in the process, influenced the editorial tone and the images in other mainstream television documentaries about black issues.

For most of the filmmakers of my generation, the documentary format became the primary means of expression because most of the independent films were issue-oriented and the primary source of black images came from the television news shows produced in New York City, the center of television documentary filmmaking in the country. Also, *Black Journal* and other black public affairs programs became the main source of employment as well as the spiritual rallying point for many black filmmakers during those times and documentary film production values became the standard that we adopted.

I have continued to make documentary films, although I have abandoned the journalistic format in favor of telling a narrative story using real-life characters in a real-life setting. Also, I've tried, where possible, to choose subjects and situations that are interpreted within an African world view. For example, in *The Black and the Green,* I followed five black American activists as they traveled to Belfast, Northern Ireland to meet with their Irish nationalist counterparts. Their experiences and perceptions about the use of violence for social change in Northern Ireland form the core of the film's content. In another of my films, *Langston Hughes: The Dream Keeper,* I showed the life and times of the famous poet-writer and followed Hughes' wanderings of 60 years ago to France, Spain, Russia and Senegal as he witnessed the major world events of his day.

As the American government has drifted continuously to the right since the early 1970s, the flow of news and information, money for production and broadcast time for documentaries have been cut back. At the same time, the impact of entertainment elements in the daily television news has taken its toll on the attention span of the viewer. The documentary as we know it—once a source of information and inspiration—is an

endangered species, not only because there are fewer sources for financial backing but, more importantly, with fewer places for exposure, the documentary audience is shrinking.

The current crop of black filmmakers are concentrating more on the production of dramatic feature films and seek broad audiences through mainstream outlets. Although they do insist upon artistic control, they have no hesitation with dealing with and, in fact, courting mainstream distribution companies. How, in two decades, did the emphasis within the black independent film community change from documentaries to features, from the pursuit of alternative distribution systems to the push for access into the mainstream?

Of course, black feature film activity did not begin in the 1960s. It had its start during the turn of the century and most of you are aware of Oscar Micheaux, the Lincoln Film Company, Spencer Williams and others who paved the way. But the current state of black film activity has its immediate roots in the black activist 1960s and it is there that we may find some answers.

In addition to the black activism of that time, there was another factor in the film industry that helped increase the black presence in the movies. Skyrocketing production costs and dwindling attendance figures were creating a crisis for several of the major Hollywood studios. It was independent filmmaker Melvin Van Peebles and his ground-breaking film *Sweet, Sweetback's Baadasssss Song*, followed by several other low-budget black directed films that made Hollywood take notice of the existence of a previously undefined black audience. Hollywood's reaction was to absorb certain creative elements from that independent black film and produce imitative films for their own purposes, known as "blaxploitation films." Ultimately, the black audience tired of the formula stories, stopped going and this genre died.

Still, the question remains—why did so many Black people pack the theatre where these films played? From a political and even technical point of view, these films were terrible. First, the black leads in these films were shown fighting the system in some form and winning, even though "winning" often consisted of exploiting women and beating up only the criminal elements of the white community. But to Black people who had seen only "coon" roles in a steady diet of Hollywood films, these new films were a step forward.

Currently, most of the black images emanating from Hollywood are essentially those which have as their primary function entertainment that endorses the current political order and advocates no change. And it is, once again, the black independents that are producing, against incredible odds, the significant work but, this time, with a difference...and the difference is the audience—an audience that is still hungry for

"In the American cinema, political conditions directly influence screen images and thus, the images of African-Americans have served specific cultural and political purposes throughout the history of the film industry."
St. Clair Bourne

images and stories that speak to them but one that has grown sophisti-cated about the media.

Again, one of the spinoffs of the black film activity of the 1960s was the creation of campus and community-based film societies like the San Francisco African Film Society and Chicago's Blacklight Film Festival that would sponsor periodic film series and invite black filmmakers to ap-pear with their work. Conclusions from the often heated discussions after the screenings about film language, values and technique would be fil-tered through the on-going intellectual black community grapevine. As the publisher and editor for over a decade of *Chamba Notes*, an international quarterly film newsletter, I printed much of the information and essays from this period and observed as this exchange of ideas influenced the black film-going audience.

At the same time, films by African filmmakers like Ousmane Sem-bene, Med Hondo and Ola Balagun began to be shown here and, even though they were not seen by a large mass black audience, they influ-enced black critical taste by providing a point of comparison with black Hollywood films.

So where are we now? How do Spike Lee, Niamah Barnett, Robert Townsend, Julie Dash, Louis Massiah and others from this newest generation fit in to the ongoing independent black film movement of which William Greaves, Madeline Anderson, Melvin Van Peebles, Jimmy Man-nas, the late Kathy Collins and myself are all apart?

Although the current generation of black filmmakers are, as Spike Lee states in an interview in my documentary about his newest feature film, "the children of the nationalist 60s," they differ in ideology. For ex-ample, unlike their predecessors, they have no hesitation in dealing with mainstream production and distribution sources, primarily because of their desire for distribution to wide audiences. By looking at the impact of the work of Spike Lee, the most publicized and most prolific of the new wave, as an example, certain conclusions can be drawn.

First, the treatment of both old and new themes by Lee's films has expanded the boundaries into controversial subject matter beyond the black nationalistic cultural affirmation that has been a characteristic of in-dependent black films. **Second**, the use of current state-of-the-art film production technology has set a new standard in terms of production val-ues, thereby raising the ante in attracting black audiences who will no longer settle for a film with a good message but badly made. **Third**, the use of mainstream outlets for films decreases the emphasis on develop-ing alternative black community-based distribution outlets. Whether the use of mainstream distribution has affected the political content of his films has yet to be determined, but the trend is worth watching. **Fourth**, continued black control and financial success of new black films, if ac-quired, will assure an improved black presence in the American film land-

scape and will probably change not only the black cultural image in American film but the cultural style and technique of American film in general. **Fifth**, politically, as black filmmakers begin to establish a limited economic foundation based on the support of a predominantly black audience with a small crossover fringe, the growth and mergers of multi-national corporations presents an extreme political and economic danger to the development of a Pan-African cinema that is aligned with the cultural and political nurturing of dispersed African people.

Everyone should have the right and opportunity to see themselves reflected in the cultural expressions of the land in which they live. Self-determination and artistic explorations are acts of liberation and, in the end, a healthy process. Hollywood has proven that, up to now at least, it is incapable or unwilling to do that. So it is up to us, the independents, to fill that vacuum.

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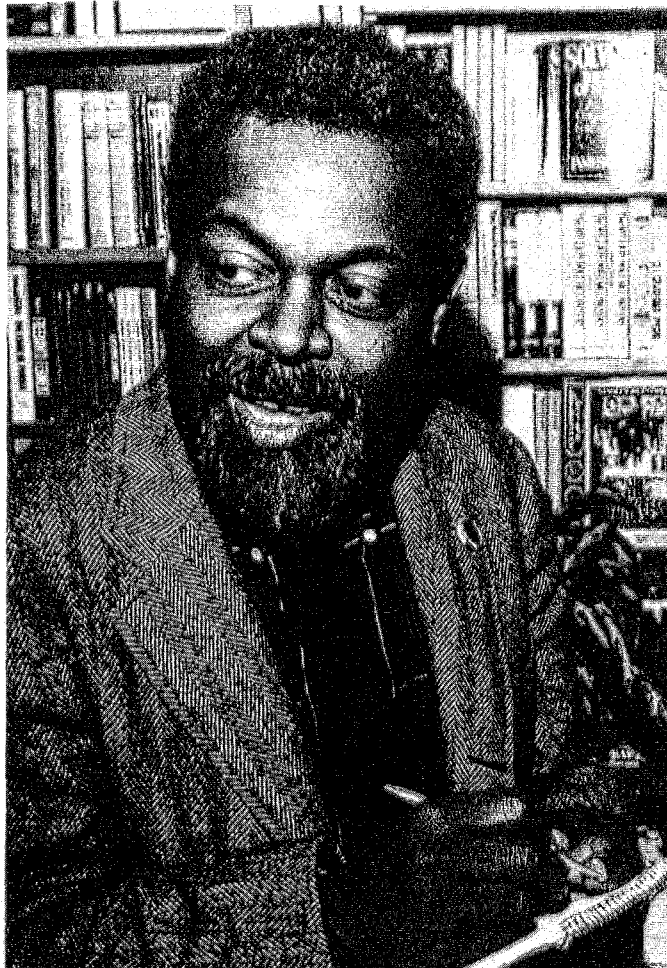
Writer/activist Amiri Baraka is explored in St. Clair Bourne's documentary, *In Motion: Amiri Baraka*

From: Playing the Changes:
St. Clair Bourne's *In Motion: Amiri Baraka*

by James Snead

"Few artists, black or white, alive today, have engaged their times and their art as aggressively as Baraka. In the course of his various 'changes,' he has witnessed, participated in, and influenced the major figures and movements of American poetry, drama, and politics in the 60s, 70s, and 80s."
James Snead

At forty years old, then, I was acknowledging another tremendous change in my life. In my life of changes. (And how can you play the tune, if you don't know the changes?) -- Amiri Baraka, from *The Autobiography of Leroi Jones*

St. Clair Bourne's engrossing documentary, *In Motion: Amiri Baraka* (1981), sets itself the difficult challenge of fixing a subject "in motion," freezing it just long enough in the camera lens so we can see and understand it—yet Amiri Baraka is not just any subject, and his is not just any motion. Baraka is Baraka, and thus the film must in fact have two subjects: the amazingly mercurial writer called Imamu Amiri Baraka (who "changes" names in 1967 from Leroi Jones); and the background subject of the times and personalities which over the last 30 years have shaped Baraka's life and work. Connecting these two massive subjects in a one-hour film is the aim, and the challenge of *In Motion: Amiri Baraka.*

At the outset of his film, St. Clair Bourne makes clear that he is trying to capture Baraka during a tiny two-week cross-section taken out of this amazing 40-year history: "The following documentary covers the final two weeks before (Baraka's) sentencing on charges of 'resisting arrest'." Yet he also intersperses the story about two weeks in 1981, with news footage, photographs, and interviews covering three decades of Baraka's various "changes." St. Clair Bourne uses interviews and archival materials again and more extensively in his later documentary, *Langston Hughes: The Dream Keeper* (1986). The Baraka film, is both a wide-ranging overview of Baraka's past, and a minute examination of a critical moment in his recent career.

In Motion: Amiri Baraka has a virtuoso opening, surrounding us with the central signs and values of Baraka's life in compressed form, anticipating the main themes of the film through a seemingly casual glimpse of Baraka working at home. First, there is the sound of someone practicing jazz drums in the basement of a modest house. Next, we see that the youthful drummer seems to resemble Baraka, and is in fact his son, Obalaji, practicing Max Roach drum patterns. But the allusion here is also to the past: the revolution in black arts in the 50s and 60s to which Roach, as well as Baraka, were major contributors. Finally, if we look carefully over Obalaji's shoulder, in the upper portion of the frame (astute camera positioning here), one can make out a poster of none other than Lenin. In this way, the viewer can connect in a single sequence Baraka's younger days in the 50s and 60s with his ideological and familial situation in the 80s.

"...it is perhaps a minor miracle that so much of Baraka's 40 years could be squeezed into this powerful 60-minute film."
James Snead

The "family" theme continues as the soundtrack cleverly mixes Obalaji Baraka's drumming downstairs with the sound of his father Amiri Baraka typing upstairs, establishing in the staccato clickings both the

unity of generational purpose, and the connection, always present in Baraka, between music and writing. Seeing the writer surrounded by his wife and daughter in his study while he is working, at once reverses the romantic European and American paradigm of the "isolated artist" who must remain undisturbed in a lonely study, shutting out family and friends as he works, angered at the slightest interruption (as in the first scene of Goethe's *Faust,* for example). For Baraka, inspiration is immediate, communal, and non-exclusive. While he is writing, his wife presses him to buy a puppy-dog for their daughter.

Unknown to us, the filmmaker is showing us the family tiff for another reason: it establishes early on how Baraka family disagreements may arise, and allows us to imagine how a similar spat may have initiated the bizarre chain of events that resulted finally in the 'resisting arrest' charge against Baraka. As Baraka exclaims in the film: "you can't get sentenced to 90 days in jail for arguing in your own car...with your wife about the price of your child's shoes—I mean, it hasn't come to that yet!" Yet, on the pretext of "protecting" Amini Baraka from her husband, a New York City policeman actually did reach inside his car and grab Amiri, resulting—once his identity was known—in the incredible charge and the inflated sentence which we see Baraka fighting throughout the film.

St. Clair Bourne's film has an interesting visual design, but often its sound track is more innovative, with several overlap and echo effects that, literally, add resonance to the story the pictures are telling. The film's structure is also unusual, being divided into six segments, all of them titled after a quote from Baraka's works. We follow Baraka "in motion" throughout these segments: driving a car; reading poems; giving a speech at a "Baraka Defense Rally"; announcing a future poetry reading on his WBAI radio program; picketing the offices of South African Airways; discussing a new play after a preview; finally, standing in front of a court building after another stay of his sentence. At the film's end, we read the news, conveyed in small print, that "on December 17, 1981, Amiri Baraka was convicted of 'resisting arrest' and consequently served a 90-day sentence." The soundtrack conveys Baraka's final words: "We will put them on trial one day and we will see what the people's justice is..."

The film, then, tells two stories: 1) the retrospective story of a generation told in often nostalgic tones by famous and not-so-famous witnesses such as Ginsberg, Spellman, Joel Oppenheimer, Baraka's friends, and even his parents; 2) the story of Baraka now, an activist getting older but not softer...

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"And certainly Bourne and his collaborators are trying, through the film's unresolved stylistic tensions, to remind us that it is the very struggle and contradiction between past and present, form and content, tradition and revolution that motivate change."
James Snead

From: The Making of *Ashes and Embers*

by Haile Gerima

The making of film cannot be approached without a thorough consideration of the history of stereotyping in literature, art, theatre, and motion pictures. Whenever we have the opportunity to access this powerful, exorbitantly expensive medium, we cannot afford to merely make a movie without a concrete and critical understanding of the history of stereotyping of the African race in motion pictures. This historic consciousness should remain in the backdrop of our creative process all the way from concept to the creation of characters and on to the further development of the characters' relationships to each other on the vast canvas of the screen plot.

In my own case, during the script writing process I spend a great deal of time on what is known as **Environment** and **Character Development**. Within the process of creating characters, their development is achieved by consistently analyzing, redefining, chiseling, molding and fashioning their individual characteristics and the circumstantial environment in which they are to interact with others. As a result, the environment is believable and the characters are multi-dimensional, deeply reflective and act in order to accomplish their human objectives, whatever their class status or occupation. The script, from the evolutionary process that started as an idea or a seed all the way to a completed motion picture, is the critical floor plan from which the moving picture derives its direction. Therefore it is at this stage that the vigilance against stereotypes and conventional but false cinematic representations must begin.

I made *Ashes and Embers* in 1982. I wish to comment on the creative process of the screenplay stage as it relates to the invention and development of environment and the constant application of safeguards against the phenomenon of stereotypes.

Environment: Locations or environments where a given film narrative will be staged have their own personality. All environments have three important aspects: 1) physical; 2) psychological; 3) sociological. These three aspects of all environments play a large role in any given motion picture narrative. We cannot create comprehendible characters without clearly creating and understanding the environment in its fullest texture. Every environment has a physical dynamic appropriate to a given plot. Even the story of Genesis in the Bible is obedient to the law that puts environment first in the process of creating believable characters and plot line. From the story of Adam and Eve all the way to Solomonic legend, successful stories could not have been told without first creating an environment.

The sociological aspects of an environment play a major role in the anchoring of physical human relationships. Infrastructures and social institutions are erected for the interplay of social dynamics. Countries, villages, cities, houses, churches, clubs, schools, publications, etc. emerge for purposes of social/cultural interaction.

The third aspect of an environment is the psychological aspect. The psychological effect of an environment is a direct result of both the physical and sociological aspects of the environment. An example is the learned value of things. Good houses, bad houses. Good hair, bad hair. Good nose, bad nose. Good skin, bad skin. Good and evil are both physical and sociological aspects of a given society. As a result of these learned values, certain psychological effects are generated and are measurable in physical and in sociological terms, as well as in terms of their subsequent impact on the individual psychology. The environments or location sites for *Ashes and Embers* were carefully chosen with this in mind.

In addition to the primary narrative, the location sites enable me to exploit a deeper text, either in terms of symbolisms, metaphors or analogies. I attempted from the outset to challenge the audience with multi-layered meanings of these location sites through careful manipulation of structure and transitions.

In *Ashes and Embers*, Los Angeles, Washington, D.C., Viet Nam and a countryside were the sites chosen in order to fulfill the objective.

1. **Los Angeles.** In *Ashes and Embers*, Los Angeles is a community made up of a series of racially segregated hamlets surrounded by smoke-covered hills, dark tunnels decorated with manufactured cultural goods of all kinds advertised on the crowded billboards; false and unrealistic colors; and large buildings covered by brown smog, as though a city is burning under invisible fires.

On the sociological level, the message is "go west my son, go west my daughter—enter the industry and come out as manufactured cultural gods, professional buyers and sellers of cultural images—enter the tunnel of horror where social mobility is based on sexual coupons, drug orgies, or at best the destruction of the souls of men and women." Hollywood: where looks are more important than virtues. Where women are bought and sold like lamb chops to advertise and sell anything from soap to condoms. Where there is a clearly distinct class stratification on the basis of color. White upper class people are presented as number one human beings, as leaders, as stars, and models for the rest of the world to emulate. Blacks, Indians and Chicanos compete for the number two human spot, taking turns being servants, butlers, the never-ending Tontos; the insignificant, the human subordinates.

On the psychological level, metropolis Los Angeles unleashes a horrendous repercussion for the entire world. It's a place where movie stars, by the very nature of their status, are suspended in a cloud of cocaine; where blue-eyed and blonde-haired demigods are falsely made to believe they are gods and the non-blond, non-blued-eyed ones are made to feel less so. To appease those who anguish over not meeting these physical standards, modern voodoo industrialists can manufacture these human models

"We should make films in our images in the fullest of our essence. It is in this way we assert our human-ity."
Haile Gerima

> *"We cannot allow nor remain a passive spectator to human life being presented by white human models only."*
> Haile Gerima

through the modern miracles of hair bleach, contact lenses, plastic surgery—all to fit the human specifications imposed by this environment. For non-whites it is quadrupally more oppressive.

In the case of African-Americans, doomed for eternity as comedians, exotica, and servants, the choices available in Hollywood are clearly delineated. The oppressive aspect of the European-dominated cultural imagery has its psychological side effects for those cohabituating with this industry, such as an inferiority complex, loss of original confidence, spastic temperament, jitteriness, nervousness, lack of sleep, subservience to answering services, and obsessive unnatural reflex conditioning toward telephone rings.

In order to underscore these aspects of Los Angeles, *Ashes and Embers* was shot through the use of a fog lens to reveal a hazy dreamland. The first shot begins from the hillside sign of "Hollywood" and travels into Hollywood Boulevard. Through camera placements and lighting effects I wanted to display the dark tunnel that Hollywood Boulevard is.

A synopsis of the beginning scene illustrates the collusion of environment and the life of the characters. In the storyline, Randolph, a friend of Nay Charles, the principal character, is scheduled to audition the next day for an acting part. Because of his anxiety, Randolph forces Nay Charles to take him the night before to locate the place of the audition. Nay Charles, very apprehensive, agrees while complaining about the wrong time and wrong neighborhood for two black men in the middle of the night. Reality strikes when police intercept them. On their knees at gun point, hands on head, they are spread and dehumanized while shiny automobiles quickly dash by in the background and passersby romantically hold hands; two worlds pretending to be one.

One of the most brutal and violent accomplishments of Eurocentric literature and mass media is the historic representation of black men and women outside of the context of the human experience. While contextually connected white people reenact the good and the evil with all the universal human emotions, black people remain unconnected to any human tribe. We have seen fragmented images where black men and women are stepped on and no one will care or miss them when they expire on the screen for no intellectual or emotional connection with them has been displayed.

Since they are not the primary agents of the narrative in screentime, they are ushered in and out quickly without being fully developed as characters. It's very rare that we get a glimpse of a victimized person's parents and the painful turbulence the family is left with. Consequently, we see daily throughout contemporary cities and neighborhoods society's mishandling of black men and women as the general population is desensitized.

In the midst of this, my critical responsibility within the narrative of *Ashes*

and Embers was to introduce a film structure which violates this traditional representation of African people. As both Nay Charles and Randolph are on their knees, in order to anchor Nay Charles to his human origin, I have utilized a flashback technique to take him to the countryside to immediately connect him to his grandmother. At this juncture there are more functions to this cinematic technique that will be elaborated later. However, the most important effect is to link them to a grandmother who is firmly grounded in the history of struggle. She is the pendulum sitting on the swing on the porch that actually paces the life of Nay Charles. She is the heartbeat of his restlessness. She is the umbilical chord. The flashback puts him in context.

2. **Viet Nam.** Viet Nam, another location site, is brought into *Ashes and Embers* although in a very limited fashion. Historically, whenever America goes to war a period of negotiation occurs in all areas of racial oppression. It is a time of loyalty and betrayal. A time of hope and of despair. Most specifically, it is a period when the world of African-Americans is enlarged as it relates to their condition and their aspiration. *Ashes and Embers* underscores this phenomenon in order to advance the thesis of dislocation. I wanted to show a character imbued with the most painful and complicated experience since it is my belief that a major and fundamental contradiction in all societies is the ownership of pain. Through society's struggle to collectivize pain it becomes enabled to rectify individuals with collective crisis. Nay Charles, however, is unable to share his pain; he holds on to it as though it is his alone.

He has two choices. One, to be so passive that he has to self-destruct, or two, allow his grandmother with her churches, her congregation; allow Jim, the television repair man or Liza Jane with her political tribe, to share and appropriate and make his pain a collective experience.

The other aspect of Viet Nam in *Ashes and Embers* is based on a grading system, marking an evolutionary process of Nay Charles' character. Throughout the narrative he comes to grips with certain aspects of the war. The first grade is Nay Charles as an instrument of conquering power expressing his double loyalty. This image is presented as he conducts himself as a G.I., a G. I. conducting a symphony orchestra as he tells the Vietnamese people to "sit down", to "get up" , to put their hands on their heads, contributing his bit as an army of occupation, making others non-existent, projecting his own non-existence to them.

In the second grade of the Viet Nam experience he slowly starts to see a glimpse of Vietnamese as women, men, old and young with all the human emotional facets. This consciousness of their humanity turns the victims into his haunters. As he roams and wanders in his flashbacks and pre-flashbacks he allows their images to be sharper, more in-focus in his head within these different stages.

The third grade of this Viet Nam location, i.e. experience, is when the

sight of Nay Charles' grandmother squatting at a graveside triggers a mental image in his mind. He connects her to a Vietnamese woman who is in the same physical squatting posture as well as the same social condition as his grandmother. This association is torturous for Nay Charles and a signal that he is humanizing himself.

The fourth grade of this evolutionary process is the final consummation of himself as a Vietnamese. He roams the streets alienated by any and everything, flashing back to the physical beating of a Vietnamese man. Nay Charles usurps the excruciating pain upon himself. Feeling the blow of the actual G.I. boot, he collapses in the middle of the capital city of the United States. He is picked up from the street as though he were actually a stabbing victim, declaring as much to his rescuers as they place him on a bench overlooked by a great monument of war. Looming in the distant background is the infamous U.S. Archive. However, at this point, the connection made by Nay Charles with that of the Vietnamese people is the most significant evolutionary process into which Nay Charles has entered.

In my long life as a filmmaker, however imperfect and small my contribution is, I have always held my head high, never being ashamed to present any one of my films in public. Each film, from *Hourglass* to *After Winter* represents the stages of my own growth. In my travels across the U.S. and some other parts of the world I have been encouraged to pursue my search for truth. Again and again after screenings of my films I have seen people emotionally and intellectually stimulated. I was subsequently sent back to the empty film editing room, recharged into my life as a filmmaker which is otherwise depressing. I have received from people numerous letters, poems, and phone calls inspired by my film work. My intentions have never been doubted. My films, however imperfect in their presentation, in their posture, have never apologized or asked for forgiveness. In a society that is extremely tribalized and ghettoized, my films are always propelled and shot across the auditorium on to the screen with the fullest confidence under which they were charged. They assert themselves to be taken as normal films. Nothing more, nothing less.
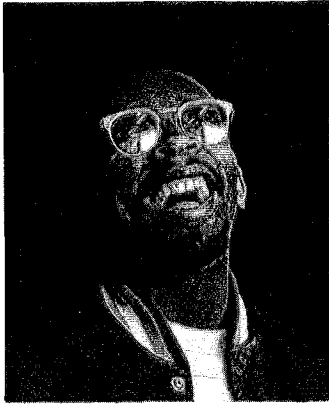
John Anderson plays a Viet Nam veteran in Haile Gerima's film *Ashes and Embers* (1982).

Notes on *School Daze*

by Spike Lee

from **Uplift the Race: The Construction of School Daze** by Spike Lee with Lisa Jones
used with permission from the author

This script takes place at a fictitious, predominantly Black college in the South. The student body is divided into two factions: the Haves and the Have-Nots. This division is based upon class and color. The Haves, the affluent students at Mission, are all with light skin, "good hair," blue or green eyes, and so forth, while across the tracks are the Have-Nots. They are dark, have kinky nappy hair, and many of them are the first members of their families to ever get a college education; in other words, the black underclass. Each faction has a name for the other. It's the WANNABEES VS. THE JIGS!!! Wanna Be White and Jigaboos. Remember, it's about class and color.

Almost halfway through the shoot, with footage already in the can, the colleges of the Atlanta University Center decided to bar the School Daze Picture Company from filming on their campuses. The reason for the boot? They feared that *School Daze* would portray a negative (shit, that word again) image of Black colleges, and more importantly of Black people as a whole. You have to understand that historically Black colleges have been very conservative. They consider themselves the guardians of the integrity of the race. We tried to reason with them, in fact, negotiations with the schools had been going on since the previous November. But the alarm went off even before that, back in October 1986.

Before *She's Gotta Have It* opened in Atlanta that October, I came up with the idea of making the premiere screening a benefit for my alma mater, Morehouse College. I wanted to shoot *School Daze* at the Atlanta University Center the following spring and thought the benefit would get things off to a good start. Forty Acres [Lee's production company] would provide the print of the film, pay for the theatre, the advertising, and the cost of printing the tickets. Morehouse would kick back and count the money. We planned to charge $15 a ticket, and the college would collect $6,000. We were sure that Morehouse would welcome the offer; we went ahead and printed the tickets. Morehouse turned us down.

The old, tired, conservative administration and faculty had heard that *She's Gotta Have It* was a pornographic film (a rumor that would haunt us throughout the shooting of *School Daze*). They didn't want Morehouse's good name to be associated with such a film. Even if the filmmaker was their alumnus. That hurt me alot.

We began shooting on the campuses in March without a contract, apart from an agreement signed early on with AU. After three weeks we still didn't have one. Heading towards our fourth week, we received a letter from the AUC's lawyer demanding that we stop shooting until the script was made available. We again refused and were barred from the campuses. Not only that, but the footage we shot previously could not, or so they told us, be used in the movie. At the time of this writing, Morehouse had still not agreed to let us use the footage shot on its campus. Morris Brown, however, gave us a definite no.

16

> *"We were determined to make a film which would allow Black folks to see themselves up on the screen and really feel proud; proud about who they are and how they look."*
> Ernest Dickerson, Director of Photography for *School Daze*

There were so many rumors circulating around the AUC about the movie. Women at Spelman thought that Kelly Wollfolk—who played Vicky, football player Grady's love interest—had the role of a prostitute. The students were influenced by the propaganda being pushed out by the administration. When I was at Morehouse the atmosphere was different. The student body was more vocal and certainly more political. We didn't take what the administration told us at face value. I think we would have been really upset if a young Black filmmaker came to our campus to shoot a film and got kicked off by the school. But there wasn't a whimper from any of the students at Morehouse, Spelman, Clark, or Morris Brown. In fact, we never had a chance to shoot anything on Spelman's campus. The acting president was quite adamant about us not being there.

I'm all for Black colleges. I'm a third-generation Morehouse man, and I hope my sons choose Morehouse. But there are certain things wrong at Black colleges and I address some of them in *School Daze*. To me, this doesn't mean that I'm putting forth a negative portrayal of these institutions. The AUC presidents were after squeaky clean images of Black colleges. I refuse to be caught in the "negative image" trap that's set for Black artists. Yes, Black people have been dogged in the media from day one. We're extrasensitive and we have every right to be. But we overreact when we think that every image of us has to be 100 percent angelic—Christ-like even.

The Look of the Film

I think Ernest Dickerson (Director of Photography) and I accomplished the visual look we wanted for this film. We wanted the camera to always be moving, whether on a dolly or a crane. The camera moves in this film are really good. The camera's like a character itself, dancing around people.

There ought to be a study done on how many questions a film director is asked during a shoot. With a film of this size and scale, a director gets faced with thousands of questions a day. It's said that if the brain were receptive to all the stimuli that is out there, a person would have a nervous breakdown. When I'm directing I try to operate with this in mind. I tell people only what they need to know to do the jobs they were hired to do. Otherwise I'd be spending the entire shoot answering questions.

I got into a lot of static with my script supervisor this time around. It's her job to ask for a shot list every day and I didn't have one every day. We wanted to be open. For some scenes you want to see what the blocking is going to be like, you want to see the actors go through it on location, and then you want to look things over with your director of photography. I would have a shot list for big scenes with lots of extras,

though. But the little stuff, things that are not going to involve many shots, I rehearse them, then I look at them. I don't want to come on the set all the time with a predetermined idea of what we're gonna shoot. There's no spontaneity to that.

In the final scene of the film, we call it "Wake Up," I wanted to show that the people at Mission College had come to some kind of realization, some kind of meaning, some kind of truth. (I had the Gamma Rays take out their weaves and their blue contact lenses for this scene.) And when "Dap" calls everyone out of bed, they come because they've realized something, not just because they're being summoned. That's the way I wrote it. And I hope it comes off that way. It is a metaphor for the sleeping that we as a race have done.

Wynn Thomas was the production designer on *She's Gotta Have It.* He did that work with practically no money. On *School Daze* he had a decent budget—not a ton of money—but we gave Wynn the ball and he ran with it. The sets he built for the film are great—"Straight and Nappy," the Gamma house, "Dap's" room, and the coronation. He had this sequence of interconnected backdrops worked out for each number of the coronation. We ended up cutting one of the dance numbers, "Sun is Rising," from the film.

The Music

My mother took me to Broadway plays and I went to see my father in jazz clubs in the Village when I was five or six years old. I was brought up around music, and whether I do musicals or not, music will always play an integral role in my films.

I didn't begin with the idea of making *School Daze* a musical. I wanted to make a film which took place on a Black college campus during homecoming weekend, and from that material, the music arose. There is always so much music happening during a homecoming. The subject matter of *School Daze* really dictated that it be a musical.

Neither Island nor Columbia objected to the idea of a musical, though Russell Schwartz, the president of Island, wanted to cut some of the numbers to trim costs. When I was still with the company, one of the major issues to resolve was the money for the music. Even before I wrote the first draft of *School Daze*, I knew I wanted a separate budget for the music. Island Records gave us only a $7,500 advance to distribute the sound track of *She's Gotta Have It*, and we had to fight to get that. I didn't want to be tied to Island Records or Columbia for the *School Daze* sound track, so I made a deal with Manhattan Records, a division of Capitol EMI. I think the idea of a musical really struck a positive note with Columbia. I guess they know singing and dancing Negroes sell. But *School Daze* was not

18

going to be another *Wiz*. It's an original work for film, whereas *The Wiz* began as a play with an all-Black cast adapted from the film *The Wizard of Oz*. The film translation didn't work for me. Critical mistakes were made in casting and it was over-produced. They went for box-office names, like Diana Ross, instead of actors who could do a believable job. Ms. Ross was too old.

School Daze is not a traditional musical; actors don't just break out of nowhere into song and dance. In many musicals you can always tell when a song is coming because the dialogue gets corny. I wanted to integrate the music into the movie. One traditional musical piece in the film is "Straight and Nappy," which is meant as a prototype MGM musical number. People sing in the other numbers because they are performing in a show or are accompanied by a band—where the setting is realistic.

My father wrote the score, acted as musical director, and contributed two featured songs. My aunt Consuela Lee Morehead, an accomplished pianist and composer in her own right, assisted him. Unlike my previous films, we had input from other songwriters.

Since the success of *She's Gotta Have It*, people constantly ask, "Are you happy, are you sure?" My answer is still yes. I'm doing what makes me happy. And I say my prayers every night that I'm able to do the thing that makes me happiest and make a comfortable living too. And people ask, "Why film?" Well, I think because it encompasses all the arts, photography, music, acting, dance, you can put all that stuff in a film.

I probably could have followed in my father's footsteps, but I rebelled against it. He never pushed me into it, not any of his children. Whatever we wanted to do with our lives was fine with him. He and my mom just stood back and gave us encouragement. Moms dragged me to Broadway plays, and had to take me home in the middle of *The King and I*, because I cried. All that singing, music, and dancing scared me to death. But that's where I started to like musicals. On becoming a filmmaker, I knew that I'd want to try to do a musical. One of my first Super-8 films was a four-minute dance piece, the dancer was Melody Ruffin, and the song was Patti Austin's "At the End of the Rainbow." Melody had done it for the Morehouse coronation I directed. So we came back a month later to shoot it. By the way, Jasmine Guy, who plays "Dina," a Gamma Ray, danced in that coronation. She was a freshman in high school at the time.

In *She's Gotta Have It*, I tried to incorporate a musical number, the duet in color. Of all the reviews I read, this one scene received the most mixed response. I liked it then and still do. Island Pictures made several hints that it should be cut. One reviewer said, "Vince Minnelli is turning in his grave." That hurt. We tried it again in *School Daze* with the "Sun Is Rising" number and during the editing it got cut. It's a good dance number, but the film was too long. Barry and I spent a lot of time in editing trying to make the piece work. But alas, it still had to go.

"Reading the script was like stepping into a culture that you realize has been around you but you've never ever known it. Also it was not totally specific to the culture of Black people. It commented in a wider sense."
Matia Karrell, production manager for *School Daze*

19

When I think about it, *School Daze* really isn't a musical piece. But it's not a comedy or a drama either. *School Daze* is a complex hybrid of all the above. It's a hard film to describe in a sentence. But I strive not to make films that can be boxed in and categorized—unlike these "high concept" Hollywood movies. What is *School Daze* then? Maybe it's just a Spike Lee Joint, better than *She's Gotta Have It.*

Coach Odom, played by Ossie Davis leads the Mission College football team in a pre-game pep talk.

The Jigaboos, from the production number, "Straight and Nappy."
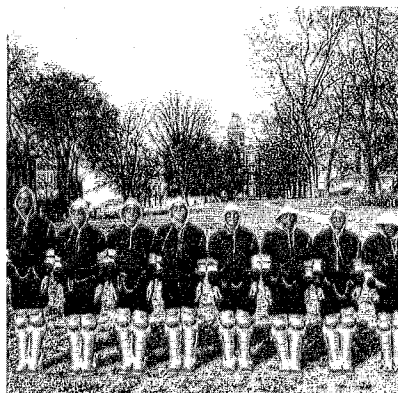
The Gammites, eight pledges of the Gamma Phi Gamma fraternity.

Critics' Notes

Toni Cade Bambara

There is an idea afoot in the world, thanks to our more conscious filmmakers, theoreticians, critics, reviewers, and exhibitors: The Cinema of Liberation. That is to say, a growing number of òur cineastes throughout the African Diaspora have opted for maroonage.1 Rather than going Hollywood, they've escaped to the hills. They've joined the guerrilla army committed to the decolonization of the global mind. The task of the filmmakers—to liberate the global screen. The campaign to free the African screen was begun in earnest with the launching of FESPACO, the Pan-African Film Festival at Ouagadougou. Like a magnet, it has brought together a number of independent-minded folks from the U.S., the U.K., the Continent, the Caribbean, Europe, South America, Cuba, and soon I hope, Oceania.

There is no one film that exemplifies the cinema of liberation. Groupings, though, come to mind. Three films I usually play back-to-back for the purpose of laying a foundation for further explorations of the transformation imperative are: *Bush Mama*, a black-and-white feature by Haile Gerima (Ethiopia/U.S.), that portrays the coming to consciousness of a woman too long a welfare victim; *Burning An Illusion,* a color feature by Menelik Shabazz (Caribbean/U.K.), that dramatizes the dual awakening of a would-be Buppie sister and a would-be Rasta Jah brother; and *Hairpiece: A Film for Nappy-Headed People*, an animated short by Ayoka Chenzira (Brooklyn/U.S.), which confronts us with the issue of alien vs. authentic standards. More importantly to an understanding of the idea is what happens during festivals; what happens between an audience and a group of films, an audience and a group of panelists, and the audience with each other after days of rubbing elbows together. A change of mind, a shift of allegiance from eccentric or Eurocentric to Afrocentric, the development of a wary eye when viewing products of the conventional cinema, and a growing desire to know more about Blacks and Cinema.

Frequently one begins a discussion/exhibit/paper/retrospective on Blacks & Cinema with either our 1920 attempt to launch *Birth of a Race*, or with our 1915 and thereafter protests against *Birth of a Nation.* Usually we begin with the career of Oscar Micheaux or with the founding of Lincoln Pictures. It makes more sense to begin with the 1890s when we were both on the screen and in the auditorium too, and thinking. Operators for Lumiere, Melies, and Edison were presenting, in various countries, programs of flickers shot all over the world. In 1897, for example, Feliz Mesguiche, an Algerian operator for the Lumiere company, exhibited films in New York City at Proctor's Pleasure Palace, a five minute

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1. *Maroonage refers to maroons, fugitive Negro slaves of the West Indies and Guiana in the 17th and 18th centuries who rebelled and lived apart in their own defended societies.*

walk from Black turf. *Minstrels Dancing on the Streets of London* was part of the program....

But let's not begin in the 1890s. Let's begin in the beginning of our experiments with cinema. That would be the Nile, Year 400....

"Present-day students of (black) film are necessarily the leading edge of an eventually more sophisticated criticism."
Thomas Cripps, from
Black Film as Genre

Hortense Spillers

There is at the moment no coherent or sustained body of film/image criticism that would assist Black Americans in their understanding, enjoyment, and consumption of popular cinema. Growing up in Memphis, we used to call it "the show"—Saturday afternoon fare for less than four bits—hot salted popcorn, Baby Ruth candy bars, segregated movie houses with sumptuous red trimmings and shrouded mysterious organs wrapped in them, which darkness no one apparently penetrated. But that innocence, never entirely forgotten in synthesis with the discourses of self-reflection, remains, in my view, the primary eye through which the community both witnesses and imagines its v*isual potential* -- how "I" look? To whom? Any systematic critical position must begin with these basic questions.

It would seem, then, not charitable in the least to rob a body and soul of its first groping questions in the dark of old southern movie houses, but here we are now, decades later, at a crossroads not so much between movies and the culture (since that always was the point, really), but rather, an advanced art of talk about movies and the relationship between such language and a larger agenda of social and political purpose. Trusting the child in me sometimes and obligated to respect the adult I think I'm becoming, I would offer for consideration that same old query, radically transformed by the urgencies of a quite different world from that of the U.S.A. in the fifties—not simply how "I" look, but how to turn inward? Or, greedily, how to come into possession of "the look," which philosophers tell us is already constituted in, by, and for the gaze of a powerful other. These, then, are notes for amateurs—the johnny-come-lately lay crowd to the serious business of filmic criticism.

Not wanting to concede more to the sociology of black film than it already commands, I want to begin with an anecdote which, in turn, generates its own problematic. As an undergraduate in the mid-sixties, I was given my first hint that a film means more than meets the eye, when the International Relations Club at Memphis State University sponsored a forum on D.W. Griffith's *Birth of a Nation.* For black people, usually, who

> *"Perhaps ultimately American movies will wake and be invigorated by black cinema the way poetry was by black poets and the way sports were by black athletes and the way music was by black composers, musicians, and performers."*
> Donald Bogle, from *Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies and Bucks*

always seem to make up half the nation (rather than Langston Hughes' "dark tenth" of it), this classic film is on the one hand, racially virulent and, quite probably, politically dangerous. It is believed by some to have reinforced the racist sentiments and assumptions that spread like wildfire at the turn of the century and, in time, it came to characterize the contemporary period of race relations in the United States. On the other hand, students of film tout *Birth of a Nation* as a significant development in the career of modern cinema. But I dislike it because the film is not only silent, but executed in a choreography of movement only slightly advanced over that of the nervous disjointedness of the animated cartoon. In short, I have no eyes for old movies, silent movies, or for film that does not occupy my whole vision as if in a plenum of movement through a material scene.

Beyond the comparatively "underdeveloped" technology of Griffith's film, I understand that the contrast between "black" and "white" not only enables the technology of today's films in sound and color, but that such contrast represents virtually frightful comparisons. It seems that the black person's critique of film, then, embraces the politics of the "gaze" and the "look." But this critique must also work out thoroughly the figurative and semantic implications of "black" itself: If "black" is to "white," making the production of the image possible in the first place, what the negative is to the sentence, then "black" and "white" mutually coexist in the production of meaning, not its negation. Because audiences of film actually appear to confuse the tortuous political symbolisms of "black" with its richly various aesthetic functions, we live in the midst of what could be called an "image crisis." We have seen the evidence of such a crisis in the protests generated by Alice Walker's novel-become-film, *The Color Purple*, for example, during its premier showings three years ago. So far as I am concerned, then, the real object and subject of filmic criticism sits in the spectator's seat, and it is the black spectator, above all, who must learn to see the image without fear and anxiety, or, in short, to unlearn the "perceptual cramp" into which the eye has been forced by the violence of specular suggestion. As spectators, we have yet to learn our own eyes, or to exploit the DuBoisian "double consciousness" in an experimental way.

In "forgetting" that somebody is watching you, you/we dare to look inward. As far as I can tell, this intramural project is not only long overdue, but it is the only interesting one in this period of artistic realism. African-Americans have been called upon to learn many "foreign" languages in their long historical apprenticeship in the New World. We have yet another to consider and that is, the grammar of an appropriate image, beyond crisis. I really do not think that, this late in the century, any of us, at least in the United States, have seen "it."

copyright Hortense Spillers, 1988

Biographical Sketches

Clyde Taylor is Associate Professor of English at Tufts University where he teaches Film and Society and Archaeology of American Cinema. He has contributed numerous articles and reviews on black film to magazines, journals, and books. He also has organized several film festivals and conferences and has served as guest curator of a film series on St. Clair Bourne at the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York City.

Spike Lee, filmmaker from Brooklyn, took the film world by storm with his release, *She's Gotta Have It*. Filmed in black and white, in 12 days with a budget under $200,000, it won the Cannes International Film Festival prize in the new filmmaker category in 1985. It was also the first independent, all-black cast American film in over a decade to be distributed worldwide. Lee received a M.F.A. from New York University Graduate School of Film. His thesis film *Joe's Bed-Stuy Barbershop: We Cut Heads* was the first student film ever selected for the prestigious New Directors/New Films series at the Museum of Modern Art in 1983. It also won the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences Student Academy Award.

Haile Gerima is Associate Professor of Film at Howard University, having received a M.F.A. in Film from University of California/Los Angeles. His film credits include two documentaries, *After Winter: Sterling Brown* (1985), and *Wilmington 10 - U.S.A. 10,000* (1978), and four dramatic films, *Ashes and Embers* (1982), *Harvest: 3,000 Years* (1976), *Bush Mama* (1976), and *Child of Resistance* (1972). *Ashes and Embers* received numerous awards including Outstanding Production at the London Film Festival, 1983, Grand Prix Award at the Lisbon International Film Festival, 1982, and the International Critics Award at the Festival of Three Continents, 1983. Gerima also received the Best Feature Film - Oscar Micheaux Award in 1976 from the Black Filmmakers Hall of Fame for *Harvest: 3,000 Years*.

St. Clair Bourne has challenged the normative roles and images of blacks in American cinema through his innovative documentary and fiction films. He began his career in 1968 as a staff producer for the first national Black public affairs series *Black Journal*. That year the program won an EMMY award and Bourne himself received the John Russworm Citation for "excellence in broadcasting." As an independent filmmaker, Bourne's 31 productions have included *Let the Church Say Amen!* (1973), *The Black and the Green* (1982), *In Motion: Amiri Baraka* (1982), and *Langston Hughes: The Dream Keeper*. Bourne has taught film at Cornell University and UCLA and has had solo screenings of his work at The Museum of Modern Art (1973), the Whitney Museum of American Art (1974), and the High Museum, Atlanta (1986).

Toni Cade Bambara is one of America's leading black woman writers, having achieved success as a short story writer, novelist, and television scriptwriter. Her novel, *The Salt Eaters*, won the 1981 American Book Award from the Before Columbus Foundation, as well as the Langston Hughes Society Award and Medallion. She wrote the script for, and narrated, the television documentary, *The Bombing of Osage* which won the Best Documentary Award in 1986 from the Pennsylvania Association of Broadcasters and the 1986 Award from the National Black Programming Consortium. Bambara is a graduate of Queens College in theatre, with a Master's degree in American Literature from the City College of New York. Her other works include *The Seabirds are Still Alive, Gorilla, My Love, Tales and Short Stories for Black Folk,* and *The Black Women.*

James Snead is Associate Professor of English and German Literature at the University of Pittsburgh. He received his Ph.D. from St. John's College, Cambridge University, and was Associate Professor of English at Yale University for five years. He has presented numerous lectures on black cinema on topics such as "History of Black Independent Cinema in the U.S.," "The Black Image in American Film and Television," and "Technology and Content in Media Images of Blacks." His book reviews and film criticisms have appeared in *Black Film Review, The New York Times Book Review, Los Angeles Times Book Review,* and *Black American Literature Forum.* Snead is currently working on a book entitled, *The Coded Black: Film Stereotypes in Transition.*

Hortense Spillers is Professor of English and Creative Writing at Cornell University. She holds a Ph.D. in English and American Literature from Brandeis University and has taught literature and writing at Haverford College, University of Nebraska, Wellesley College and Brandeis. Her numerous essays, literary criticisms and short stories have appeared widely in journals including *The Black Scholar, The Harvard Advocate, Black American Literature Forum,* the *American Book Review,* and *The Women's Review of Books.* For one of her short stories she received the National Book Award for Excellence in Fiction and Belles Lettre in 1976. She is the co-editor of *Conjuring: Black Women, Fiction, and Literary Tradition* (1985).

Glossary of Film Terms

A

Abstract Film: A film that shows only the essential elements (shapes, patterns, etc.) of the original subjects; a nonrepresentational film.

Accelerated Motion: Action filmed while the camera rate is progressively reduced, used to represent action as taking place at a greater than normal speed.

Action: The rehearsed movements, speech and behavior of performers within a shot.

Action!: The order of the Director indicating that actors are to begin performance, once cameras are up to speed, all is ready, and the number board and/or clappers have been photographed for a take.

Action Field: The area that is actually being filmed by the camera; frequently referred to as frame or shot.

Added Scenes: Material, shots, or sequences written into a script during its filming or after its completion.

Ambient Light: Lighting of a set or scene which does not fall directly on the subject of a shot.

Angle: The relationship between the camera and the subject; the camera's view of a shot: "high", "low", etc.

Antihero: The protagonist, male or female, in a film, who has pronounced personality or character defects or eccentricities not usually associated with heroes.

Approach: The director's instruction to bring the camera closer to the object of the shot.

B

Backdrop: An artificial background usually painted on a cyclorama, curtain, or flats, used to achieve the effect of a natural setting such as forest, beach, or other landscape in a shot or sequence.

Background (picture): The most distant part of a shot, usually well behind the subject being photographed in the foreground.

Back Lighting: Illumination deliberately aimed more or less towards the camera, giving silhouette or highlight effect; lighting the subjects of a shot from the rear.

Back Projection: A system by which action may be shot with moving background taken separately; projection of film on a translucent screen from a rear projector to provide what appears to be a moving background for actors being filmed on a set.

Background (sound): Music or sound played to underline action being filmed.

Block: To determine the position of the camera, crew, and cast, and cast movements before shooting a particular scene.

Boom: Cantilevered mounts of various sizes and lengths on which film cameras are mounted.

Boom Shot: A shot made from a camera mounted on a boom for high angles or wide angles; a versatile shot that can be used to pan, tilt, or travel in all directions.

Bridging Scene: Shot inserted for smooth transition between two shots to clarify an otherwise difficult transition.

Build Up: To promote tension in a film by arranging shots that will build to a crisis.

C

Camera Speed: The rate at which film runs through a camera, measured by frames per second or in feet or meters per minute.

Cheat Shot: A shot in which the action is not as it appears to be.

Close Up: A film shot in which an object or actor is photographed so that it or he/she fills most of the frame.

Combined Print: The final stage in film making. A print consisting of images with sound track to one side.

Composite Photography: A special-effects technique in which two images seem to appear together in the same shot despite the fact that they are photographed separately.

Conflict: The struggle between opponents that is a necessary component of any dramatic plot.

Continuity: Appropriate succession of content in scenes that follow one another; even transition from shot to shot.

Contrast: The overall light/dark ratio of a shot.

Crop: To reduce or define the area in a shot, usually by tightening the frame.

Cross Cut: To edit back and forth with a pair of scenes in different places in which the action is occurring simultaneously.

Cut: Sharp transition from one scene to another.

Cut Away: Shot which temporarily draws attention from the main action.

Cut Back: To return, in editing, to the main scene after a cut away.

Cutting In the Camera: Shooting scenes of shots so that the desired content and continuity are obtained with little need for editing.

D

Definition: The clarity of sound or an image on film. Sharpness of focus or accuracy of registration.

Defocus: To deliberately take the action out of focus by focusing the lens to a close point in order to reduce the depth of that action area.

Degradation: A loss of image fidelity through duplication.

Denouement: The action in a film which follows the climax and ties up all loose ends that may remain after the main conflict is resolved.

Detail Shot: A close shot used to reveal details of an object or part of an object, or of part of an actor's body.

Dialogue: Conversation between two or more actors.

Director: The individual immediately in charge of translating a shooting script on to film.

Discovery Shot: A shot that reveals something to the audience during the course of action or camera movement.

Dissolve: The linking of two shots as the first fades out and the second fades in, usually signifying a lapse of time and a change of pace.

Distributor: The middle man of the film world who buys rights to films from the producers and leases prints to exhibitors.

Documentary: A film depicting nonfictional events or occurrences and meant to be informative or make a specific comment on a subject or issue.

Double Frame: To expose or to print two successive frames of each image, usually in order to retard action.

Dub: 1. To blend speech, music and effects into one sound track. 2. To substitute foreign language dialogue or commentary for the original.

E

Edit: To correlate, arrange, synchronize, trim, or cut film, and to annex leaders to it and/or sound track strips in order to achieve the properties and proportions necessary for a cohesive and credible film production.

Effects: 1. Electronically produced visuals. 2. Any elements of sight or sound used for specific effects.

Elevation Shot: A shot in which the camera moves in a vertical position only.

Establishing Shot: A long shot that establishes the primary locale of the film; used for atmospheric purposes and generally shown in the opening scene of a film.

F

Fade In/Out: Gradual picture transition from or to a blank screen; the corresponding effect in sound.

First Answer Print: The print that is first viewed in its entirety by the producer, who will judge its acceptability.

Flash: Very short scene.

Flash Back: Sequence out of temporal order in a finished film.

Follow Focus: Change of focus during a shot as it tracks, or as the actors move.

Foreground: The action area that is nearest the camera in a shot or scene.

Framing: The manipulation of camera positions in order to achieve the best composition for a shot or scene to be filmed.

Freeze Frame: To continuously print a single frame of film so that its still image can be held on screen to produce the effect of stopped action.

Full Shot: To include all of a subject so that the image entirely fills the frame.

G

Genre: A motion picture catagory such as Western, mystery, gangster or science-fiction.

H

Head-On Shot: An action shot in which the actors, vehicles, horses, etc., are moving directly toward the camera.

Headroom: The area between the top of an actor's head (or the top of an object) and the upper edge of the frame.

I

Independent Filmmaking: The filming of productions that are conceived by a person or group not under contract to a major studio; usually done in rented or leased facilities. The film may be produced without union personnel or may be subcontracted to union personnel.

Insert: Close, explanatory scene such as of a letter, clock face or calendar, that can be made out of sequence and inserted into the principal action during the editing process.

Intercut: To edit two or more scenes alternately to show what is happening simultaneously in different locations.

J

Jump Cut: A sharp advance in an action shot or between two shots when a portion of film is removed, usually to advance the action quickly.

K

Key Light: The main illumination of the center of interest in a shot.

L

Location: Any site for filming away from the studio.

Long Shot: A camera shot in which the subject is seen at a distance.

Low Key: 1. Pictures in which shadowy areas or lower gray scale tones are emphasized. 2. Dim illumination of the subject.

M

Mask/Matte: 1. To hide part of the view, e.g. to shoot through a keyhole. 2. To shield the camera from a lamp, or from the sun shining directly at the lens.

Master Scene: Usually an establishing shot: the basic scene from which a sequence is edited by intercutting or adding closer shots.

Match Dissolve: Gradually and precisely to replace a shot by another of similar outline and content.

Memomotion: A photographic technique used to represent an extremely slow process at normal projection speed (time lapse cinematography).

***Mis-en-Scene*:** The act of combining all of a scene's elements (setting, costumes, lighting, action, etc.) in order to achieve the ultimate desired effect.

Mixer: The member of the sound crew who is responsible for controlling and bringing together sound, from various recordings.

Montage: The visual juxtaposition of a series of short shots, often superimposed, made to convey an impression.

N

Narrator: One who speaks a commentary for a film, usually off screen.

Night Filter: Filter used to alter the color of a daytime shot in order to present the illusion that it was shot at night.

O

Objective Camera: A camera angle in which the shot is seen by members of the audience as if they were actually observing the action from their theatre seats, such as a straight-on shot of a scene as it might appear on a stage.

Obligatory Scene: A scene that is necessary in order to resolve the plotted problems and conflicts that have preceded it; particularly important in climatic scenes and those of the denouement.

Off-Mike: Directed away from the microphone, to simulate sound from a distance.

Out-Takes: A shot deleted from a film during the editing process.

Overlay: To dub one sound on top of another.

P

Pan: To move the camera around in the horizontal plane.

Parallel Action: A series of shots of two or more events shown alternately, to convey to the audience that

they are taking place simultaneously.

Participation Shot: One in which the camera seems to take the viewpoint of some character in the film.

Persistence of Vision: The phenomenon of image retention caused by the time-lag effect between visual stimulation and the loss of response to that stimulation. All film illusion is based on this persistence that occurs when static images, each slightly changed from the preceding one, are displayed faster than the brain or the optic nerve can comprehend or react to them.

Polaroid Filter: The trade name for a large filter that polarizes light in order to eliminate glare or unwanted reflections from objects during shooting.

Process Shot: A scene which combines live action with some form of existing background.

Producer: The individual around whom the making of a film revolves - responsible for casting, selection of writer, director, editor, etc., and supervises all facets of the production.

Q

Quick Cutting: Instantaneous transition shots made without dissolves, so that shots follow each other in rapid succession.

R

Ratio: The shooting ratio is the relationship of exposed film stock to the corresponding length of the finished picture. In films 5:1 is very economical, 15:1 is extravagant.

Raw Stock: Unexposed negative film.

Reaction Shot: Close up of a performer's face, used as a cut away from the main action to register an emotional response to something that has just taken place.

Reflector: An easel-shaped stand with a highly reflective board used to throw natural light where required.

Relief: A shot or sequence inserted into a film to reduce audience tension following scenes of horror, fear, or trouble.

Re-take: A second photographing or recording to take the place of material found to be no good, though thought to be okay at the time of shooting.

Reverse Angle: A shot taken from the opposite or approximately opposite angle from the one in the preceeding scene.

R/L (Right/Left): The general direction of movement of action is most important from the point of view of continuity. If an actor walks in one shot towards the right and the next scene picks up the apparently continued movement, he must be seen still moving from left to right.

Rough Cut: A stage in the editing of a film between assembly and the final form of the cutting copy.

Runaway Production: 1. A production made on an American location away from Hollywood or in a foreign country for the purpose of reducing production expenses.   2. A production designed to bypass the use of union performers and crew members.

S

Selective Focus: Shooting in sharp focus only a section of the action area.

Sequence: Film equivalent of a chapter, or numbered section in a book; ordinarily limited by unity of time, place and action.

Set-up: The position of camera, mike, lights, artists, etc. at any given moment: generally applied to the positions at the start of a shot.

Shooting Script: Written content of an entire film in precise detail and separated into serially numbered scenes. Often written in two columns, pictures, and sound, with simultaneous items opposite each other.

Short: A film under 3,000 feet in length, i.e. thirty minutes, playing time.

Skip Frame: A method of negative cutting by which pace of action may be speeded up by eliminating alternate frames.

Slow Motion: A method of shooting with camera running at a rapid speed so that, in projection at standard speed, the action will appear much slower than normal.

Soft Focus: An intentional reduction of an image's sharpness by use of an optical device such as a diffusion disk or netting or gauze placed over the lens.

Spare Takes: Takes which, while good, were left unselected for cutting copy use. They remain available in case of second thoughts.

Special Effects: Generally, any device or technique used to create an appearance of reality in a scene where it would be impossible, impractical, or unsafe to use an actual action or effect.

Spot Lighting: Light sources which project a beam, the angle of which is variable, enabling the lighting to be focused.

Straight Cut: Scenes succeeding each other without intervention of any optical effect.

Subjective Camera: Referring to scenes shown from the point of view of the camera so that audience reaction is immediate and intensified.

Superimposed: Two or more shots photographed or printed on to one piece of film.

T

Take: One complete photographing of a single piece of action.

Tempo: 1. Actual pace of performer's action in a shot. 2. Apparent pace, in the film sense, of a sequence achieved by appropriate juxtaposition of shots of particular length.

Tilt Shot: A shot made with a camera as it is pivoted in a vertical line from a fixed position.

Time Lapse: Story gap, with break of immediate continuity between successive sequences.

Tracking Shot: A shot in which the performer's movements are followed by moving the camera along its axis or on tracks laid for a particular scene.

24 Frames: The normal speed for photographing, recording, and projecting film per second.

Two Shot: A medium close shot covering two characters in a frame.

V

Visuals: 1. Shots to illustrate essential commentary. 2. Any action or object that is seen on film.

W

Whip: An abrupt camera movement.

Wipe: An optical effect used as a transition between two shots in which the first shot appears to be pushed off the screen by the gradual appearance of the second shot.

Wrap: The successful completion of a shot.

Z

Zoom: To alter the size of the action area from wide-angle to close shot without moving the camera, by means of a zoom lens.

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Schedule of Activities

November 17th, 7:30 p.m.
"The New Black Cinema"
keynote address by
Dr. Clyde Taylor

November 18th
Film Screenings, 12 noon
In Motion: Amiri Baraka
directed by St. Clair Bourne

6:00 p.m.
Ashes & Embers
directed by Haile Gerima

8:30 p.m.
School Daze
by Spike Lee

November 19th
Filmmaker and Critic Discussions
moderated by Toni Morrison and
Clyde Taylor

10:00 - 11:30 a.m.
Haile Gerima and Toni Cade Bambara
discuss *Ashes and Embers*

1:00 - 2:30 p.m.
St. Clair Bourne and James Snead
discuss *In Motion: Amiri Baraka*

3:00 - 4:30 p.m.
Spike Lee and Hortense Spillers
discuss School Daze

4:30 - 5:30 p.m.
Summary and conclusions

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