

# Post-Soul Black Cinema

*Discontinuities, Innovations, and  
Breakpoints, 1970 – 1995*



William R. Grant, IV

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To the memory of my Mom and Dad, you gave me the courage and strength to keep knocking no matter how big the door.

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Gina and Madison, for giving me the love, the clarity and the motivation to continue to reach higher and to dig deeper.

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# Foreword

UNTIL I WENT OFF TO THE UNIVERSITY OF WISCONSIN IN 1972, MASS media was my one and only avenue for encountering African-American culture. Living halfway between Milwaukee and Madison, family trips to Milwaukee would mean occasionally seeing African-Americans out the car window if we drove in on Capitol Drive, but that was about as close as I came to direct encounters. With both parents as teachers who were also good moderate liberals, I do of course remember news reporting and family discussions of major Civil Rights events in the early 1960s, both heroic and tragic—more the latter, too many assassinations and riots, too much poverty. From grade school I have vague memories of watching *Louisiana Story*—too vague now to even remember anything at all about African-American representations. And I remember the household vocabulary subtly changing in the early 1960s, with the eventual substitution of “Black” for “Colored” or “Negro.” Of course, thanks to TV and radio, I did know a few of the hit songs by musicians like Little Stevie, Diana and the Supremes, the Tops, and the Temps. I knew who Sidney Poitier was. Bill Cosby was not only a comedian, he was a cool TV spy. In the world of mainstream media, Elvis Presley even came back from the dead in 1969 (from when he was musically dead, not really dead) with his monster hit “In the Ghetto.” But my understanding of African-American culture was not through personal experience, but instead mediated by news headlines, TV shows, Hollywood, and hit songs.

For reasons that still puzzle me more than 30 years later, in 1971 when I was a senior in high school the movie theater in my small Wisconsin all-white home town brought in, for a few days, *Sweet Sweetback’s Baadasssss Song*. In retrospect and thinking back on movie-going in my younger days, I now realize that the local theater owner had more expansive and eclectic taste than we gave credit for (or perhaps he would just take anything the distributors had for a good deal) because the Sergio Leone spaghetti westerns would always show up for a few days too. Knowing nothing about *Sweet Sweetback* and, as always, fighting off boredom, my friends and I checked it out.

Seeing *Sweet Sweetback* in a small-town Wisconsin movie theater in 1971 remains a memorable experience in two ways. For one, my friends and I saw a representation and a narrative that, needless to say, we were not encountering in

the headlines of the Wisconsin newspapers, on AM radio, or on *Ed Sullivan* or *Bandstand*. Beyond that, there are also memories of the audience—the 400-seat theater (now like all surviving others of its vintage subdivided into smaller theaters with poor sight lines) was about 1/3 full. The movie absolutely riveted the entire audience. But the conversations among the masses as they ambled out into the night were not the usual small-town suspicions about the racial other. With continual use of the “n-word” in the air, we heard snippets of conversation, over and over again, about how that “n-word” was an angry man, that “n-word” was right to be angry, that “n-word” did what he had to do, and they would do exactly the same thing as that “n-word” did if they were in his shoes.

Overhearing all this proved to be a bit too much for my friends and me, so we quickly retreated to the safety of someone’s car, shoved in an 8-track from a collection of Jimi, Zep, ELP, or whoever, and drove around doing what high schoolers often did back then when they drove around small towns until the time was right for a burger or something. But *Sweetback* struck a responsive chord for us; later that school year when *Shaft* came out, our high school orchestra teacher, in either a moment of kindness or what counted then as subversiveness, agreed to let the orchestra do a cover of “Theme from Shaft” at the last high school concert before we graduated. I can still remember watching one of my best friends standing in the middle of fifty-plus string players with his Fender Stratocaster and his wah-wah pedal.

When I got to Madison in Fall 1972, my dorm roommate was a great guy named J.C.Grimes, who ended up being not only the first African-American with whom I had ever had a conversation, but also a very good friend. He dropped the needle on Marvin Gaye that first night of college, and *What’s Going On* blew my mind. I returned the favor and got *Talking Book* the first day it showed up in the local record stores. The big sound that year, however, was the soundtrack to *SuperFly*. Our dorm was a concrete tower with architectural similarities to Chicago housing projects, and *SuperFly* bounced off the cinderblocks of virtually every room, black or white, for months on end. In fact I never saw the movie. I didn’t have to—after three months as the daily dorm soundtrack, I knew exactly what it was all about. There was something in the air at that moment, something about African-American culture that crossed racial divides and allowed everyone who wanted to become a discriminating consumer. Even I could dig it.

And then before I knew it, the thrill was gone—or more accurately, the authenticity. Movie after movie, and album after album, disappointed more often than not. My personal low point came in 1973 at a drive-in, where I took my girl to (supposedly) see *Scream, Blacula, Scream*. The romance collapsed on both fronts: the movie was terrible, and she dumped me for thinking I could get away with a date like that. I apologized to her to no avail, and apologized to myself for not being a discriminating consumer of African-American culture. From then on, for many years, I stuck mainly with the music and left the movies alone. Then, over a decade later and living in Chicago, in 1986 I went again on a date to an African-American movie: *She’s Gotta Have It*. Given that my date was my new

wife and she is among other things a film scholar, I figured I could chance it. This time, romance grew on both fronts and continues to this day.

I recount this personal journey of my youth not to claim some sort of deep expertise on African-American cinema or media culture—the author of this book has expertise and wisdom on those topics far beyond my own. Rather, I have recounted this tale in order to talk about ideas of culture, authenticity and the discriminating consumer. Fictional media representations that succeed in connoting a sense of cultural authenticity are important, because that successful connotation of cultural authenticity is not only of value to the core cultural audience, but can cross cultural lines and racial barriers and carry value to those audiences as well. This border-crossing can then go on to create a positive sort of discrimination across racial and cultural lines: a discrimination based on taste, understanding, and appreciation for groups and cultures beyond one's own.

This book explores the turbulent history of African-American media representations in unique and compelling ways. Herein you will find discussions and analyses of past controversies, breakthrough moments, successes and failures, audience responses, industry greed, and incredible artistry and entrepreneurship by African-American filmmakers. While these stories have particular resonance for African-Americans, these events and outcomes are significant for all of us, regardless of our skin colors, aesthetics, or youthful memories. Learning to live together means learning to appreciate difference. When it comes to consuming not just the mainstream but also the differing products of American media cultures, learning to appreciate difference can also create the conditions of discriminating consumption, of learning to recognize and appreciate media texts and artifacts such as film or music that give dazzling and exciting samples of cultures other than one's own. In this sense, developing the ability to be a discriminating consumer of media cultures beyond your own is—quoting that filmmaker I first encountered in 1986—to do the right thing.

I hope you enjoy reading this book as much as I enjoy the lively mind, wisdom and collegiality of its author. I'm very appreciative of the author's kind invitation to write this brief foreword and relive some youthful memories. Beyond those memories, I'm even more appreciative of our mutual and continuing friendship.

James Schwoch  
Evanston, Illinois

# Preface

FILM IS NOT AND NEVER HAS BEEN THE PASSIVE MEDIUM THAT MANY ARGUE it is. No. Film taught immigrants how to be American, it taught the world what it meant to be American, and unfortunately it made the masses believe that African-Americans were the repulsive and vile caricatures frequently found at a theater near you. This book examines and analyzes how the cinematic image of the African-American became a fixed image with strict rules of depiction both written and unwritten. And, how those very limited and under-informed images would not and could not be challenged or transformed until the power relations in the American film industry began to change, and afforded Blacks the opportunity to tell stories from an informed position able to provide the cultural authenticity frequently missing.

Chapter 1 outlines the scope, purpose and intent of this book. It includes a fairly comprehensive literature review of writings on Black cinema from race movies through the present. Chapter 2, "Race and Representation in the Classical Style," is a parallel chronological history of the formative years of the American feature film industry examining Anglo and Black participation inside of the studio system. Paying special attention to the early construction of Black images in the cinema and how early filmmakers employ earlier narrative forms and strategies to develop a fundamental film language. Chapter 3 focuses on a critical juncture in Black cinema: the birth and subsequent death of the *blaxploitation* cycle by analyzing the convergence of factors that enable the cycle to happen. Films such as Melvin Van Peebles' *Sweet Sweetback's Badasssss Song* (Cinematation Industries, 1971) and the Gordon Parks Jr. ode to the "drug game" *Superfly* (Warner Brothers 1972), films that in recent years have come to symbolize and define the era also offer critical sites of investigation.

Chapter 4 offers an in-depth examination of Spike Lee's *Do the Right Thing* (Universal, 1989), a film that I argue is the doorway to the main-stream. In Chapter 5, I summarize the conclusions drawn from earlier chapters. The re-emergence of Black film during the years 1986–1989 explains how, following the release of *She's Gotta Have It* (Island Pictures, 1986), and *Hollywood Shuffle* (Samuel Goldwyn, 1987), Black cinema not only becomes commercially viable,

but additionally, Black film begins to move toward liberation from the dominant Hollywood construction of Blackness.

# Acknowledgments

MY FASCINATION WITH THE LIGHT AND SHADOWS THAT FLICKER ON the screen began during the 1970s *blaxploitation* cycle, and came of age in the 1980s with the emergence of Spike Lee, and his *Forty Acres and a Mule Filmworks*. The fascination gave way to passion, and in 1991 I found myself fully immersed in the study of film, in the graduate film program at Northwestern University.

I began my formal study of film thanks to a graduate fellowship, granted by the Illinois Consortium for Education Opportunity Program (ICEOP). In 1997, a dissertation year fellowship from the Graduate school at Northwestern University gave me the funds to begin my research. I am extremely grateful to the Consortium for a Strong Minority Presence at Liberal Arts Colleges and The Colorado College for 2 years of support, as a dissertation fellow, through the Riley Minority Scholars in Residence program. Without the generous financial, spiritual, scholarly and emotional support of Colorado College, I would have never completed a draft, let alone the entire process. I will be forever thankful and indebted to Dean Victor Nelson Cisneros for his guidance and compassion, Dean Richard Storey, Dean Mike Edmonds, Barry Sarchett, Adrienne Lanier Seward and the wonderfully provocative students I taught and encountered during my tenure at The Colorado College.

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shape my intellectual pursuits were more than I ever asked for and I am forever grateful.

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Last but not least, the village that helped raised a child from a boy to a man: My Godparents Ralph and Dolores Elliott, Dr. Dereck J.Rovaris, Mrs. Patricia Smith, The Blairs, Dr. and Mrs. Norman C.Francis, Dr. Shamsul Huda, The Thomas Family, The McKinneys, The Hawkins, The Jacksons, and The Andersons. If I forgot you, believe me you are not forgotten.

And...Action!



# Introduction

The most negative Black films of the past were not made by Blacks. We must remember that. Putting the image of Black Americans into the hands of other Americans is like asking management to paint a flattering portrait of workers on strike.<sup>1</sup>

ARGUABLY EVERY MOVEMENT HAS POPULAR SIGNIFIERS THAT SERVE AS turning points and markers able to identify the road towards change. The modern civil rights movement took a considerable leap forward when Rosa Parks refused to give up her seat on a bus in Montgomery, Alabama; Rock and Roll was forever changed following the British music invasion that landed in 1964 with the Beatles; and the Black film renaissance began to show life on August 6, 1986, in New York, New York, when *She's Gotta Have It* premiered at the Studio Cinema movie theater. Certainly there were other filmmakers producing quality work at this juncture. Yet, if one is going to write a study on Post-Soul Black cinema, *She's Gotta Have It* holds this position of a traceable signifier marking the emergence of the third significant period of Black feature film production.

The emergence of a new group of Black filmmakers engaged in feature film production between 1986 and 1991 making fundamental changes in practice and representation responded to the typical Hollywood depiction of African-Americans in mainstream cinema that had previously relied heavily on stereotypes in Black-oriented film production. The purpose of this study is to examine and to analyze how the cinematic image of African-Americans became a fixed image with strict rules of depiction both written and unwritten. And, how those very images would not and could not be challenged until the power relations in the American film industry changed, and afforded Blacks the opportunity at the very least to tell stories from an informed position. Race movies were the earliest films by and for Blacks made outside of the dominant cinema, by race movie producers during the 20s, 30s, and 40s, and not until the late 60s would African-Americans find consistent employment as screenwriters, directors and producers. In the late 1960s and early 1970s the *Blaxploitation* films showed real signs of promise and hope for challenging the stereotypes as well

introducing new types of characters and storylines. The success was short lived as the early efforts presented in *Sweetback* and *Shaft* (MGM, 1971) were quickly coopted and the films fell back into the old standard stereotypes with some variation, but not enough to keep the audience attracted. In the late 1980s a select group of Black films written, directed, and/or produced by Black filmmakers during a five-year period set the stage for what many have come to regard as a renaissance in Black cinema. The films were created both within the confines of Hollywood and totally outside of the traditional industry mechanisms. For this book special attention will be paid to Spike Lee's third film *Do The Right Thing*, one of a handful of films able to present a significant challenge to the use of stereotypes, and the traditional power relationships experienced by Black filmmakers working within the system. This book is not an attempt to offer a complete history, critique or analysis of the period. Instead this book is an examination of Hollywood's historical tendency to marginalize non-Whites in general and African-Americans in particular in the filmmaking practices of the commercial film industry; therefore issues of visual representation must be examined in order to understand any movement beyond the margins of the silver screen. Particular consideration is given to the Classical Hollywood Cinema<sup>2</sup> and the *Blaxploitation* period and the respective influence each period played in forming the cinematic image of African-Americans.

By analyzing the innovations, discontinuities, and breakpoints in filmmaking practices and the issues of representation, a central question will be answered. Has Black cinema moved from the margins to the mainstream? This primary question gives rise to secondary questions: How did filmmaking practices and representations change between the Classical Hollywood Cinema and *Blaxploitation* period? How have those shifts influenced the practice of filmmaking during the *post-soul* period? What effect have the earlier periods had in shaping the framework and or parameters for a Black film aesthetic? Has *post-soul Black cinema* been able to recuperate the cinematic representation of African-American life and culture?

One must remember that film, similar to other art forms, has a continually changing creative landscape. The period of inquiry for this study is no different. This is validated by the continual shifts in the types of films dealing with the Black experience that find their way to the silver screen. *Post-Soul Black Cinema* begins with *She's Gotta Have It* and *Hollywood Shuffle*, both urban comedies, and gradually shifts into more dramatic territory confronting America's fascination with race—*Do The Right Thing* (Universal Pictures, 1989). Less than five years later, films would become preoccupied with the wanton violence plaguing urban Black America in films such as *Boyz N the Hood* (Columbia Pictures, 1991), *New Jack City* (Warner Brothers, 1991) and *Straight Outta Brooklyn* (Samuel Goldwyn Company, 1991). By the end of the period, a tenuous balance emerges with commercially popular films such as *Waiting to Exhale* (20<sup>th</sup> Century Fox, 1995), *Friday* (New Line Cinema, 1995), and *Set It Off* (New Line Cinema, 1996). All these films enjoyed widespread theatrical

release, favorable reviews and, most important to Hollywood, positive numbers at the box office.

## REBIRTH

With the release of *She's Gotta Have It* and *Hollywood Shuffle* Black cinema re-emerges with refreshing points of view when compared to the plethora of formulaic social problem films and buddy films targeted for the Black movie going audience in late 70s through the early 80s. With *She's Gotta Have It* and *Hollywood Shuffle*, Black characters were at the center of their own struggles for self-determination rather than the victims of it for the first time since the early days of the *blaxploitation*.

In the years that followed their phenomenal debuts, *She's Gotta Have It* and *Hollywood Shuffle* have come to represent the foundation for *postsoul cinema* in some very particular ways. Both films explored alternative means and new film financing strategies that would serve as an alternative blueprint for film financing utilized by other filmmakers (both Black and Anglo) in the 1980s and 1990s. The fact that both films were financed outside of the traditional Hollywood money channels would have an impact on product content as well as the mode of production. The ability of Lee and Robert Townsend to employ “guerrilla-style filmmaking” tactics in order to bring their visions to the screen would heavily influence the period. If there were going to be any alternatives to the way Blackness was constructed by the commercial film industry in earlier periods such as classical Hollywood cinema and the *Blaxploitation* period, they would have to come from outside of Hollywood.

Looking back, these two films are forever linked together. *She's Gotta Have It* and, the film's companion volume, *Spike Lee's Gotta Have It: Inside Guerilla Filmmaking*<sup>3</sup> almost immediately became the blueprint for how to make a “Black film.” *Hollywood Shuffle* occupies a more peculiar position, as the film critiques industry hiring and production practices while simultaneously entertaining the audience. Thus, with the release of these two films, new production approaches emerge that have Black independent sensibilities and the ability to negotiate entry into the system. The films should also be considered important artifacts in the ongoing movement toward reconstructing the notion of Blackness in American cinema.

Another important aspect of the new films is that they both have a certain hip-hop sensibility: like rap-music, both films strive for a more authentic voice able to connect and communicate to the Black community. Issues of representation and style become central, especially as they affect the failure or success of films in reaching or finding an audience. The ability of Black films to engage a certain style easily equated with “avant garde films/art style” and position themselves as alternatives in harmony with Hip Hop and opposition to Hollywood in the years that follow will become crucial.

Finally, the inner-city Black underclass—a segment of the African-American population noticeably absent from the silver-screen—which in the middle of the 1980s was the dominant Black image found in rap and rhythm and blues videos was moving to the center in a non-caricatured form. Prior to *post-soul Black cinema* Black actors were mainly relegated to the buddy role, or even worse, were stuck in one of the many ill-conceived, under-informed “hood” settings popular in the middle of the decade. *Breakin’* (Cannon, 1984), *Rappin’* (Cannon, 1985) and other films with a supposed urban sensibility typically failed miserably in their attempts to portray the “hood” in accurate or culturally authentic terms, because they were nothing more than exploitative attempts by Hollywood to make a quick dollar.

It is important to note that, at the same time a *post-soul cinema* begins to emerge, another distinctly African-American art form is beginning to capture the ears, dollars and psyche of young urban Black America—rap music. The films produced captured some of the same raw energy found in rap music. The music video was swiftly moving from the simplistic camera following a rapper walking around the block and through rubble-filled vacant lots, dropping verse after verse, to the four-minute short film. By 1988, rap videos were evolving into short films, often with poignant and timely story lines. The Public Enemy video for *Night of the Living Base-heads* offered an inside look at the explosion of crack-cocaine as the innercity drug of choice in the 1980s, and the destruction that came with the addictions associated with a highly profitable and often violent drug trade. Of course, music video formats and emerging networks such as MTV, BET and The BOX networks added to this synergistic relationship.

There are few people who would argue against Black film and rap music being two of the more influential African-American art forms in the post civil rights era. By the end of the 1980s there was really no telling what kind of relationship would develop between the film and the music if any. In 1989 an answer emerged when Spike Lee released his third film, *Do The Right Thing*. One could certainly notice the cultural and financial signs pointing towards an intersection between the film and the music. And it is possible to consider Black music videos between 1987 and 1994 as a sort of “virtual trailer of coming attractions” for *post-soul Black cinema*.

### THE STEREOTYPE

Films are produced to engage the audience, and in this sense must be acceptable representations of what can be understood by people of the era in which the film is produced. Since films’ earliest days the stereotype has been used to facilitate an understanding of character or to define character. It is the latter use that is of importance in this study.

The type is any character constructed through the use of a few immediately recognizable and defining traits, which do not change or ‘develop’ through

the course of the narrative and which point to general, recurrent features of the human world.<sup>4</sup>

The use of stereotypes described by Richard Dyer in his essay “The Role of Stereotypes” is exactly the type of use that has been detrimental/harmful to the representation of *Blackness* in the cinema. The influence and power of media images on society cannot be ignored.

The stereotype is taken to express a general agreement about a social group, as if the agreement arose before, and independently of, the stereotype. Yet for the most part it is *from* the stereotype that we get our ideas about social groups. The consensus invoked by stereotypes is more apparent than real; rather, stereotypes express particular definitions of reality, with concomitant evaluations, which in turn relate to the disposition of power in society.<sup>5</sup>

In America, Black has historically been equated with the most negative values present in the society representative of a direct opposite of the puritan ethic that is the foundation of all that is “American.”

Film stereotypes have evolved in Western civilization from archetypal portrayals of Africans and Afro-Americans in which Black has been equated with bad, inhuman or subhuman and soulless, and White has been equated with good, mature, pure and civilized. Commonplace phrases reflect these connotations: *he has been Black balled, buy it on the Black market, his being Black mailed, and he believes in Black magic.*<sup>6</sup>

Thus the fundamental problem with the American film industry is that “Blackness” as a film construct has a long history of being confined to stereotyped caricatures typically used to establish supporting characters. *Birth of a Nation* (David W. Griffith Corporation, 1915) was based on two novels written by the Reverend Thomas Dixon, *The Clansmen* and *The Leopard’s Spots*. Originally the film was titled the *Clansmen*. Following a screening in New York City, Dixon was so moved by the audience reaction he suggested that the title be changed to *Birth of A Nation*.<sup>7</sup>

Often Griffith is singled out as the racist filmmaker effectively responsible for shaping the Hollywood image of African-Americans. That would be less than accurate, for by no means was Griffith alone; William Fox produced *The Nigger* (Fox Film Corporation, 1915) the same year as *Birth*, which argued that “the negro problem” was “bad whiskey”. Donald Bogle argues that:

With *Birth of a Nation* in 1915, all of the major black screen types had been introduced. Literal and unimaginative as some types might now appear, offensive and cinematically untutored audiences of the early part

of the century responded to the character types as if they were the the real thing.<sup>8</sup>

While each of the types was presented in pre-classical films prior to *Birth of A Nation*, the inclusion of the five major types in Griffith's epic cannot be ignored. Part of the classic style usually meant relegating the Black image to a mere shadow on the silver screen. Rarely does the Black image exist outside of the boundaries prescribed and adhered to by the Classical Hollywood Cinema.

Spatial narration in classical cinema makes sense through a hierarchical disposition of objects on the screen. Thus space is related to power and powerlessness, in so far as those who occupy the center of the screen are usually more powerful than those situated in the background or completely absent from the screen. I have described here Black people's relation to spatially situated images in Hollywood cinema.<sup>9</sup>

Historically the Black image in the commercial cinema has been relegated to the margins of the frame in films such as *Showboat* (Universal Pictures, 1929), *Imitation of Life* (Universal Pictures, 1934), and *The Littlest Rebel* (20<sup>th</sup> Century Fox, 1935), or more often than not completely absent from the frame in films such as *Big Parade* (MGM, 1925), *Cleopatra* (Paramount Pictures, 1934) and in the case of *Casablanca* (Warner Brothers, 1942) a lone Black character isolated in a totally White world. The position of cinematic inferiority occupied by Blacks was not limited solely to on screen portrayals. Creative opportunities for Blacks were severely limited as well. Prior to Gordon Parks' directorial breakthrough *The Learning Tree* (Warner Brothers, 1969), the only creative opportunities available to Blacks aside from acting and performing was the occasional writing assignment. Notable Black writers such as Langston Hughes, James Weldon Johnson, and Richard Wright faced limited possibilities during the classical period.

With the emergence of a new group of Black film writers, directors and producers in the 1980s and 1990s, many hoped to get beyond the narrow typecasting and themes so prevalent since film's earliest days. The current crop of writers, directors and producers have attempted to make films that audiences find entertaining while simultaneously engaging in a cinema of image recuperation by introducing new practices and illuminating issues central to African-Americans, focusing on the daily experiences of race, class, culture, economics, representation and reception. Important to developing a new Black aesthetic in the practice of Black films has been a re-centering of the frame and the use of other Black cultural expressive traditions such as Jazz, Blues, folk tales and Black novels. In order to re-center the frame, Black filmmakers have begun to tell the stories that Hollywood has historically ignored, while addressing and navigating the racism that still permeates the American film industry. John Singleton's *Boyz N The Hood*, Spike Lee's *Do The Right Thing*

and Charles Burnett's *To Sleep With Anger* (Samuel Goldwyn, 1990) are excellent examples of films from the period attempting to go outside the boundaries typically reserved for Black stories and filmmakers.

As American society advances, the film industry does not always change at the same rate. To date there have been more than a handful of Black Chief Executive Officer's of Fortune 500 companies, and still the positions of power in Hollywood are predominantly occupied by White males. The most notable exception to the rule is Sherry Lansing, CEO of Paramount Studios. To date, not a single Black person has been named CEO of a major studio or had the power to green-light a film from the inside.

It is no accident that many of the Black filmmakers who have taken advantage of the inherent power of the moving image to resist and reposition the cinematic notion of Blackness have come from outside of the studio system. The Black feature filmmaker has rarely been able to approach one of the majors, get a green-light for his project, make the film, release the film, then move to the next project. By contrast the Anglo feature filmmaker has seemingly had the luxury of making films without much economic hardship. Clearly between 1915 and 1969 the opportunity for employment in Hollywood for a Black feature film director or producer was non-existent and by default access to the largest possible audience was as well. Additionally, the opportunity of studio work was readily available to Anglo filmmakers, implying a relationship between race and working conditions. The Black filmmaker from the beginning has had to create under an entirely different set of rules. Prior to 1969 and Gordon Parks' emergence as the first Black director in Hollywood, no Black person had ever directed a feature film released by one of the majors: MGM, Warner Bros., Paramount, Twentieth Century-Fox, RKO, Universal, Columbia or United Artist. This means that between 1915 and 1969 not a single film out of more than ten thousand motion pictures produced by the majors as a collective was under the creative control of a Black person.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

Over the past 30 years there have been volumes written in popular and scholarly circles about Black film. The discourse deals with issues that are integral to this study of *post-soul Black cinema*. Prior to the release of *The Learning Tree* in 1969, Black people were not an integral part of the creative process in mainstream Hollywood. Thus the representation of Blacks in American cinema since the early days has been problematic. There is almost no way in which early American commercial film can be viewed as an honest or accurate reflection of Black people because the representations are uninformed by Black participants.

Yet, there have been significant strides toward a cogent film theory and a recovery of Black film history from a Black perspective has developed over the past 30 years, in the work of Manthia Diawara, Mark Reid, bell hooks and Clyde Taylor. The apparent goals of the recent work have not been to understand the

work of Black filmmakers from the position of the dominant histories; instead, the aim has been to make sense of the work of Black writers, directors and producers from a more informed center.

In the case of African-Americans, the influence of the movies is clearly discernible in one overwhelming historical process I mention earlier: stereotyping. From the *cinema of attractions*<sup>10</sup> through the modern era, Blacks have been stigmatized on the screen as clowns and buffoons, humbled but loyal servants, and jovially overweight “mammies.” Volumes have been written on the historical development of the American commercial cinema, but only a handful of the efforts have attempted to trace the history of Black involvement. Even fewer have offered any type of structural analysis examining the exclusion of Blacks in the commercial film industry. The archival and archeological work of Phyllis Klotman, Pearl Bowser, Gloria Gibson Hudson and Louise Spence<sup>11</sup> over the past 30 years has uncovered and unearthed important cinematic treasures once believed to be gone forever and in some cases unknown prior to being unearthed.

The popular appeal of American movies has produced an enormous body of works treating early and modern American film history. A few selected examples include Tom Gunning’s *D.W.Griffith and the Origins of American Narrative Film: the early years at Biograph* (1991), the Bordwell, Staiger and Thompson study *The Classical Hollywood Cinema* (1985) and Thomas Schatz’ *Hollywood Genres: Formulas, Film Making, and the Studio System* (1981). Recently published studies pointedly address, and go beyond, early motion picture history, such as the Jon Lewis edited, Duke University anthology *The New American Cinema* (1998), James Monaco’s detailed analysis of contemporary Hollywood *American Film Now: the people, the power, the money, the movies* (1979). In addition, more narrowly focused studies of particular periods including Robert Lang’s treatment of film melodrama *American Film Melodrama: Griffith, Vidor, Minnelli* (1968), John Pierson’s *Spike, Mike, Slackers & Dykes: a guided tour across a decade of American independent cinema* (1995) provide sufficiently detailed accounts of specific areas of interest to this study. All of these works contribute useful interpretations of the rise and dominance of the motion picture as a dominant part of the *culture industry* and the reality that film is as much business as it is art.<sup>12</sup>

None of these sources, however, either singly or collectively can be used to discover the full range of the participation of African-Americans in early American film history. Early film history had no “reason” to consider or question the meaning of race or the differences inherent to race. Their mention of Blacks in association with film history prior to World War II is cursory, at best, and generally only in relationship to social problem films or landmark productions such as *The Birth of a Nation* (1915), *The Jazz Singer* (Warner Brothers, 1929) and *Gone with the Wind* (MGM, 1939). As Mark Reid points out early film histories have limitations:



Film histories that fail to distinguish Black commercial films from Black independent films tend to focus entirely on the commercial films. Consequently, they bury Black film history by analyzing it according to “relevant” theoretical criteria that are not applicable to Black independent film. They also do not consider the particular cultural experiences of African-Americans.<sup>13</sup>

Additionally they fail entirely to acknowledge or recognize the work of Blacks operating outside of the system. Thus, the work of many Black film pioneers such as Bill Foster, Spencer Williams, The Johnson Brothers and Oscar Micheaux, for many years, went largely unnoticed, un-documented, and rarely screened, except for a small number of film scholars and cinephiles just beginning to recognize the value of the “race movies.”

In light of this scholarly neglect, many of the early studies focused on the historical reconstruction of Black participation in Hollywood. Peter Noble’s *The Negro in Films* (1948) represents the earliest full-length treatment of Blacks in cinema. In addition to a historical survey of Black representation, Noble’s work is a vitriolic indictment of Hollywood racism. In this regard, *The Negro in Films* developed a pattern that later film studies of Blacks tended to follow: the reconstruction of Black involvement in the movie-making process, in conjunction with the identification and condemnation of the perpetuation of stereotypes by the film industry. Many of the studies fail to make sense of the how and why for the racist treatment of non-Blacks in the classical Hollywood cinema.

There was a surge in film scholarship focusing on issues important to the role of Black in the cinema beginning in the 1970s, starting with Donald Bogle’s interpretative history, *Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies and Bucks* (1973). His work can be viewed as the foundation for the critical study and reconstruction of Black cinema history. Other useful studies of Black cinema include Thomas Cripps’ *Slow Fade to Black* (1977). Cripps’ study was by far the most detailed of the early studies—James P. Murray’s *To Find an Image: Black Films from Uncle Tom to Super Fly* (1973); Daniel J. Leab’s *From Sambo to Superspade* (1975); James Nestey’s *Black Images in American Films, 1896–1954* (1982); Ed Guerrero’s *Framing Blackness* (1993); Mark Reid’s *Redefining Black Film* (1993); and Jesse Rhines’ *Black Film/White Money* (1996).

In addition to the works mentioned above there have been several anthologies and sourcebooks. Notable examples are *Black Films and Film-makers*, edited by Lindsay Patterson (1975); *Black Cinema Aesthetics*, edited by Gladstone Yearwood (1982); and *Black American Cinema*, edited by Manthia Diawara (1993). All three volumes do an adequate job of addressing issues specific to Black film by including essays from film historians, cultural critics, actors and filmmakers. As sourcebooks, Henry T. Sampson’s *Blacks in Black and White* (1977) and Phyllis Klotman’s *Frame by Frame*, vol. I (1979) and II (1997) offer

invaluable information by providing relevant data devoted to race movies, Black independent and commercial films produced between 1910 and 1994.<sup>14</sup>

Other works in varying degrees of relatedness to this dissertation should be mentioned as having influenced my thinking in regard to general historical and cultural phenomena for the periods covered here. These include Robert Jackson's *The Darkside: chronicling the young Black experience* (1997); Nelson George's *Buppies, B-Boys, Baps & Bohos: notes on post-soul Black Culture* (1992), an anecdotal treatment of Black urban culture during the 80s and 90s; and Tricia Rose's *Black Noise: rap music and Black culture in contemporary America* (1994), by far the most thorough study to that date of Hip Hop culture and the production of Rap music.

Because of the apparent limitations of the available mainstream film histories, I have employed other ways of knowing and understanding Black film history. Because the movement was taking place in front of my eyes, I have had the opportunity to study and interpret many of the films during the times they were released. I would argue that Black film images created from a Black point of view by Black people are finally becoming a part of the American film landscape due in large part to the commercial and critical successes of films produced during the late eighties and early nineties. This is not to imply a dominant position but instead a relevant position, and not one based on political correctness but instead an earned position.

By the middle of the 1980s, Black audiences were no longer willing to readily accept stories told from the position of Hollywood's master narrative where *Blackness* has historically been positioned as inferior. Evidence can be found in the commercial failures, of a slew of ill-conceived films in the early 80s, which attempt to cash in on the early popularity of rap music. While most of the earlier studies do an adequate job of making sense of the history of Blacks in American film, few have concentrated solely on the 80s Black film renaissance that began with *She's Gotta Have It* and hit full stride with *Do The Right Thing*. Still missing from the literature is a specific discussion on the necessity of *blaxploitation* film as a flawed but progressive step for Black film. By focusing on the structural issues that influenced the transition from the margins of the commercial cinema to the Hollywood mainstream in the 1990s, this study will add to the growing body of Black film scholarship.

## CHAPTER DESCRIPTIONS

Chapter 1 outlines the scope, purpose and intent of this book. It also includes a literature review of writings on contemporary Black cinema as well as race movies. Chapter 2, "[Black Representation in the Classical Style](#)," is a parallel chronological history of the formative years of the American feature film industry examining Anglo and Black participation inside of the studio system. I pay special attention to the early construction of Black images in the cinema and how early filmmakers utilize earlier narrative forms to develop a fundamental

film language. Examining the development of Hollywood from both the creative and business perspectives is valuable in that such an approach enables one to do the following: better understand why Black characters were excluded from principal roles in mainstream cinema, if present in a film the types of characters played by Blacks were typically one-dimensional roles based largely on the standard African-American stereotypes, and more often than not isolated from anything Black.

Chapter 3, “[The Political Economy of Blaxploitation](#),” focuses on explaining a critical juncture in Black cinema: the birth and subsequent death of the *blaxploitation* cycle. In the early 70s everything seemed possible for African-Americans coming out of the tumultuous 1960s, and the motion picture business appeared full of the same possibilities. The cycle seemed to offer diverse representation but with few exceptions such as *Sweetback* were stymied by the political economics of Hollywood and thus failed in the mission to transform the Classical Hollywood Cinema legacy of stereotypes. By analyzing the convergence of factors that enable the cycle to happen, key films such as *Sweetback* (Cinematation Industries, 1971) and *Superfly* (Warner Brothers 1972) that shaped the era and in recent years have come to symbolize and define the era will be sites of investigation. Finally I examine how Hollywood’s backlash following the phenomenally commercial success of *blaxploitation* sets the stage for the growth of a *post-soul Black cinema*. While in many aspects the movies as a group failed to fulfill the very real potential for change, they do lay a solid foundation for a transformative moment that is represented by *Do The Right Thing*.

Chapter 4, “[Reflecting the Times: Do The Right Thing Revisited](#),” is an in-depth look at Spike Lee’s *Do the Right Thing*, a film I would argue is the doorway to the mainstream.

In Chapter 5, the conclusion looks at the re-emergence of Black film during the years 1986–1989 and explains how, following the release of *She’s Gotta Have It* and *Hollywood Shuffle*, Black cinema not only becomes commercially viable, but also begins to exhibit the potential to become liberated from the dominant Hollywood construction of Blackness.

Again, this book is not intended to be an all encompassing study of the late 1980s Black film renaissance, a period that began with Spike Lee’s *She’s Gotta Have It* and arguably ended with Julie Dash’s *Daughters of The Dust* (Kino International, 1991). Looking back, there has been a rather large body of Black films produced over the past decade both independently and by Hollywood. The films produced during the period were not produced in isolation nor were they produced in studio exile, and most importantly, the production process was not overwhelmingly controlled, creatively or financially, by White writers, directors and producers. Of course outside factors, such as economics, politics, the sexual politics of the day, as well as the social conditions of African-Americans, directly influence the changes in the landscape as well as changes in the mode of production of films that are written, produced and directed by Black filmmakers.

To exhaustively cover all of the films produced and do them justice is beyond the scope of this project. Instead the approach here will be to make sense of the collective body of work by taking the period and dividing it into manageable parts. The goal is that by analyzing the filmmaking practices that emerged out of the Classical Hollywood Cinema and the inclusion of Blacks in key creative positions, beginning with the *blaxploitation* cycle, an understanding of the movement from the margins of American commercial cinema to the mainstream in the late 1980s and early 1990s will gain greater clarity.

# Race and Representation in the Classical Style

How we are seen determines in part how we are treated; how we treat others is based on how we see them; such seeing comes from representation.<sup>1</sup>

MOVIES BEGAN AS A CINEMA OF ATTRACTIONS FOR WORKING AND middle-class audiences. In general, the movies developed into a leisure time activity full of possibilities; it was affordable entertainment, as well as informative.

And with the influx of a new class of spectators unable to afford most of the other amusements offered during the period, the nickelodeon became a form of entertainment whose audiences were the masses themselves, the “theater of the working man.”<sup>2</sup>

By 1910 the middle class largely ignored movie novelties, and the nickelodeon assumed the status of “theater of the working man.” However with improved editing technologies, more sophisticated story lines and the advent of movie palaces—elaborately designed for elite tastes —middle-class audiences returned to enjoy the visual pleasures of the new medium. The emergence of advanced editing techniques, which provide the capability of manipulating the hitherto “unformed” image, shapes the beginnings of a narrative cinema. These advancements reach an audience comprised of different social classes.

According to Tom Gunning, the desire for respectability of the young industry “provoked the narrative discourse of film” and by adopting the rhetoric of the “uplift” movement,<sup>3</sup> the industry was able to attract its desired audience. The influence and popularity of narrative cinema in the United States grew steadily and rapidly; the American film industry quickly dominated the enterprises of other countries and took over the international market. By the end of the First World War, Americans were producing 85 percent of the films shown throughout the world and 98 percent of those shown in the United States.<sup>4</sup> Another interesting development occurred among those who produced them. By 1915, the film nickelodeon vanishes with the emergence of the movie palace

owned and operated primarily by first and second generation European immigrants who recognized great opportunity for success in what earlier had come to be considered as the “theater of the working man.” The term “mogul” came into use around 1915 to describe these pioneers in the business of movies as “part splendid emperors, part barbarian invaders.”<sup>5</sup>

Men such as Goldwyn, Fox, Mayer, Selznick and Loew came to exert an enormous amount of power over the image factory that would become Hollywood and their names would become synonymous with the movies. Like other immigrants, as first and second generation Americans, they were regarded with suspicion and distrust but responded in ways that demonstrated a strong assimilationist compulsion to create a respectable place for themselves (and their business) in American society.<sup>6</sup> The mood for Americanization characterizes an aspect of thinking during and after World War I, which found the moguls in a position to make a difference in American attitudes toward ethnic groups. The moguls systematically purged the Jewish image from the screen and in effect the new medium “became an instrument of self-perpetuating Americanism” by reinforcing basic values that could be translated into terms that crossed class and ethnic boundaries.<sup>7</sup> The reality may have altered very little for most Americans. But the American dream was given, through the movies, more vitality to more people than ever before.

By manipulating time, space, and point of view, early innovations in film editing such as parallel editing made it possible to introduce films with unified, complex and cogent narratives able to satisfy maturing audience taste. Short anecdotes and variety entertainment were expanded to include full-length stories with limitless possibilities for visual engagement. The transition beyond the one- and two-reel films demanded that filmmakers keep up with the growing sophistication of audience taste. Popular plots from novels, short stories and dramas were revised. Early films drew heavily from the entertainment models provided by minstrels, vaudeville, and popular variety shows. As a result early narrative films in which Black characters are featured represent the many hackneyed characterizations, themes, and plots from those sources.

### THE CLASSICAL HOLLYWOOD CINEMA

From the beginning, classical Hollywood cinema devised a fairly consistent approach to character and the purpose that character would play in narrative film structure. The classical Hollywood cinema became dependent on its ability to distinguish the difference between movement and action and cinematic importance of conflict and resolution. Thus, the Hollywood product is dependent on characters and their ability to move the narrative to its pre-determined destination. In their book *The Classical Hollywood Cinema*, Bordwell, Staiger and Thompson argue that fictional film narrative utilizes three systems that form the Hollywood narrative—a system of narrative logic, a system of cinematic time (temporal), and a system of cinematic space (spatial). Narrative logic controls

how events will be defined, causal relations, and parallelisms between events; cinematic time will control the manner in which time is ordered, the duration of events, and repetition; and cinematic space will control orientation, and composition.

Rarely has narrative film treated the elements that comprise the system—narrative logic, narrative space and narrative time—as equal parts of a whole. Instead, historically the relationship has been more akin to a pyramid made up of different layers. If one were to examine the structure of the pyramid, they would find that time and space serve as the foundation and narrative logic at the apex. Temporal and spatial issues are frequently subservient to narrative logic. Historically the Hollywood film progressed in a linear fashion moving from “point a” to “point b” often with a specific causal explanation of the action, whether large or small.

Because of the desire for financial gain, a film that could be easily understood by audiences was more of an asset than it was a liability. Certainly the need to present films able to reach varied audiences was a factor in why the classical style ended up being character-centered and driven. Narrative films are constructed from a relational standpoint of the following: causality, consequence, and obstacles directly influenced by spatial and temporal concerns become dependent upon character agency to advance the story from one point to the next. As the commercial film industry was taking shape with the mergers of production companies such as Metro Pictures, Mayer Pictures and Goldwyn under the auspices of MGM, the moguls put substantial economic resources behind stars, character-driven stories and recognizable forms. While causality remains central to story development and characters defined by the needs of the narrative, the classical style rarely uses coincidence as motivation for character agency.

Bordwell illustrates that on occasion Hollywood films have had impersonal causes but even they are the subjects of psychological causality. The frequent use of historical events as source material in motion pictures, which attempt to use impersonal causes for the films’ narrative logic is still subject to human agency. Early on, Classical film took a non-committal approach to war and catastrophe, which either happen without explanation or because a single individual is responsible for the events that transpire and start a war. Bordwell offers *Birth of a Nation* as an example of the latter as the Klan rises to save the South. In *Birth*, Griffith links the widespread abuses by former slaves during the Reconstruction period to the views of a proper social hierarchy held by Austin Stoneman (Ralph Lewis). Consequently the film that becomes an important and influential model for the classical style makes history reliant upon the actions of a single individual to illustrate its effects.

In *Birth*, coincidence is dangerous, a danger Hollywood quickly realized needed a defined purpose. After observing a group of Black children scared by a group of White children in White sheets, Stoneman later explores the possibility that men in White sheets with pointy-heads might scare all Black people. The

initial encounter could be by chance but the following encounters need a purpose. And Stoneman's purpose is clearly to intimidate Blacks back into a pre-Civil War position of subservience. If the character must act as the prime causal agent, he or she must be defined as a bundle of qualities, traits and clearly defined goals. Today most screen-play manuals commonly demand that a character's traits must be clearly identified and consistent with one another.

Pre-classical film borrows from the conventions established by earlier theatrical and literary forms. From the beginning, earlier narrative forms such as live theater, particularly vaudeville and minstrel forms, influenced early narrative style. It didn't take long for writers to realize that the visual elements of a given story had to carry a lot of weight, that what could not be said must be shown, and the traits that a character is given will be revealed by the action. Some melodramatic stage types, however, such as the old maid, the villainous lawyer, and the lazy servant all made the transition to the screen and were immediately recycled in the Hollywood cinema. As Bordwell, Staiger and Thompson point out, characters will be determined and recognizable by types, often based solely on occupation; for example, cops will be burly. But equally if not more important, these types will have individual traits that are given based upon narrative function. The information needed to keep up with the characters will be given during the exposition. Early on in *Birth*, the audience learns through carefully and deliberately constructed shots exactly how Stoneman feels about the Black characters he will encounter through the course of the film.

The Bordwell, Staiger and Thompson study highlights the obvious: Hollywood characters are goal-oriented and that they exist for one purpose, to attain their goal. It is important to note that in narrative film it is the primary responsibility of the protagonist to carry the central line of action and resolve the succession of conflicts and resolutions that provide the dramatic foundation in Classical Hollywood Cinema, running back to Aristotle. If the protagonist strays, he does so only to return to a path clearly defined by narrative logic that allows the narrative to advance to the predetermined conclusion. Quite often, the hero either seeks something new or is out to restore an original state of affairs. The Western genre has relied on the hero as pioneer model, while *Birth* presents a story about returning Blacks to a pre-reconstruction state of affairs.

Hollywood film historically has at least two lines of action, both causally linking the same group of characters. Almost invariably, one of these lines of action involves heterosexual romantic love. Of the one hundred films used in the study done for *The Classical Hollywood Cinema*, ninety-five of the films used romance in at least one line of action; while in eighty five, romance was the principal line of action.<sup>8</sup> For many of the films produced during the classical period, gaining the love of the opposite sex has often been a central theme. I offer *Gone with the Wind* (Metro Gold-wyn Mayer, 1939), a film set in the Civil War that revolves around the love Rhett Butler (Clark Gable) has for Scarlett O'Hara (Vivien Leigh). A love story occupies the primary line of action, while the second line is occupied with the war, but causally related to the primary. The



Civil War will interrupt Rhett's pursuit of Scarlett, and the sooner the war ends, the sooner Rhett can continue his pursuit.

Thus the characteristic progression of the Hollywood film is determined by the ability of characters to achieve a set of clearly defined goals and overcome the obstacles presented in a given film. Hollywood's use of story conflict and story resolution, which relies on a formula that creates obstacles for characters to overcome, along with goals to achieve, show the characters overcoming the obstacles and resolving the multiple conflicts, and finally provides resolution to the stated objectives. This is why continuity editing is so important. For Hollywood film, if events do not fit together seamlessly, the action will almost invariably disturb the spectator.

Characters are subservient to climax. We have no use for any manifestations of their character outside the needs of properly developing the big moment of the story.<sup>9</sup>

Because the image or presence of African-Americans was not central to developing the big moment, the existence of the African-American in film became a secondary thought and the image was consistently treated as such. Again in *Gone with the Wind*, the only purpose the Black characters have is to fill the usual subservient stereotypical roles galvanized in *Birth*, a film Jack C. Ellis argues "established the technique and style of film making that has come to be called classic Hollywood cinema."<sup>10</sup> Film historian Lewis Jacobs' assessment succinctly places *Birth* as integral to the American film tradition. He offers:

*Birth of a Nation* propelled the film into a new artistic level. A high point in the American movie tradition, it brought to maturity the editing principle begun with Melies and furthered by Porter. So rich and so profound in organization was this picture that for years thereafter it directly and indirectly influenced filmmakers everywhere and much of the subsequent filming progress owes its inspiration to this master achievement.<sup>11</sup>

While there are film historians on both sides of *Birth* as master text, I am much more interested in *Birth* as the film that clearly helped to define and galvanize how Blacks would be portrayed in Hollywood and by default the Classical cinema. On a dark note, the use of African-American stereotypes presented in Griffith's master achievement made it clear that Black characters would not be active participants in the "big moment."

### **EARLY IMAGES OF BLACKS IN AMERICAN CINEMA**

The Black image appeared in films almost as quickly as the medium began to capture the attention and popular imagination of its first audiences with the

nickelodeon at the turn of the century. As with other popular and elite art forms, the Black images responded to the constraints of the medium and those imposed by the existing social, political and economic hierarchies. By the late 1890s, a new Negro begins to emerge, able to overcome economic, political and social restrictions: Jim Crow laws, separate but equal schools, lynching and other forms of institutional oppression. With new educational and economic opportunities large numbers of Black people were changing their lives. The multi-dimensional facets of this personality were inescapably visible. People like Ida B. Wells, Booker T. Washington, W.E.B. DuBois, Mary McLeod Bethune and organizations like the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) and the National Negro Business League would make it difficult for many Whites, as well as Blacks, not to notice. The responses varied in several ways; some of them were oppressive and violent, such as the 1896 Supreme Court decision rendered in *Plessy v. Ferguson*, which sanctioned separate but equal schools and the twenty years of race riots in major urban centers before and after the first World War. Hollywood became an active and enthusiastic participant in defining the roles available to Blacks in American society.

The earliest images of Blacks in American film were shot in accordance with the technical capabilities and narrative maturity of the medium. Prior to Georges Méliès' *Trip to the Moon* (Star Film, 1902) and Edwin Porter's *The Great Train Robbery* (Edison Manufacturing Company, 1903), film editing was not a major consideration. Essentially the camera rolled and recorded the action in front of it, as in the early Louis Lumière film *Arrivée d'un train à la Ciotat, L'* (1895), which depicts a train pulling into a train station. Certainly events were staged and reconstructed for the camera, and camera placement does have a certain influence on what is seen and not seen, but little was done to manipulate the sequence or juxta-position of the shots, especially in comparison to later advances in film editing. Thomas Cripps considers early images of African-Americans as unformed and the portrayals available surprisingly varied especially when compared to the opportunities available in real life.<sup>12</sup>

Many of the films that featured Blacks were either documentary in nature or comedies. Early documentaries include films such as *A Morning Bath* (Edison Manufacturing Company, 1896) and *A Hard Wash* (American Mutoscope Company, 1896). Both show a Black woman giving a Black child a bath. *Colored Troops Disembarking* (Edison Manufacturing Company, 1898) and *The Ninth U.S. Cavalry Watering Horses* (Edison Manufacturing Company, 1898) at the end of the Spanish American War document actual events. Comedies such as *The Watermelon Contest* (Edison Manufacturing Company, 1900) and *Laughing Ben* (1902) are representative of early filmed comedies and also provide a look at the future of Blacks in commercial cinema in the United States. These two films ludicrously show Blacks in stereotypical situations, borrowed directly from the minstrel show. The Edison Company, a forerunner of the modern studio, readily borrowed from America's immediate past utilizing characterizations

overwhelmingly popular on the minstrel stage and the vaudeville show. The title of *The Watermelon Contest* explains the film's content and the film is catalogued as a documentary rather than as a comedy. *The Edison Minstrels*, *The Battling Minstrels*, and *Sambo and Jemima*, comedies produced between 1897–1900 by the Edison Company, used the traditional Blackface White actor in lieu of Black performers.<sup>13</sup>

Early on, there was no qualitative distinction in the content of many of the films that featured Black performers and characters. The style or genre was of little consequence. “Documentaries” exploited the same stereotypes as the “comedies,” thus maintaining the discrepancy between reality and popular perceptions of it. *Laughing Ben* is represented as a comedy: “Quaint old negro over eighty years of age who laughs continual-ly.”<sup>14</sup> Surprisingly, *The Washing of a Pickaninny by His Mother* is listed as a comedy and described in the American Mutoscope Biograph Catalogue as a film, “funny and especially to children,” of a “colored woman washing a little pickaninny.”<sup>15</sup> Certainly the earliest representations of “Black”<sup>16</sup> in American cinema had little if any chance of being “unformed” as long as the image and production process were clearly informed by racist attitudes and material.

The types of roles available for Blacks in American cinema certainly stand apart as narrow conventions lacking any purpose other than jerking a tear or snaring a laugh. Jackie Stewart, however, points out that the conventions had purpose beyond the obvious:

Black Images in preclassical cinema were staged primarily for the benefit of a White public invested in the racial distinctions required to maintain a White-dominated society. This viewing public included a large proportion of recent immigrants who, in their efforts to enter the American cultural mainstream, had to construct themselves as “white” over and against non-White others, particularly Blacks.<sup>17</sup>

Between 1903 and 1915 the expectations, possibilities, and practices for representing African-American life in pre-classical cinema and later the classical Hollywood cinema were fixed in the movie-goers' imagination. Early films were based on the 18<sup>th</sup> century novels by Harriet Beecher Stowe and Reverend Thomas Dixon. *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (Edison Manufacturing Company, 1903), a film that “depicted Blacks as docile victims, totally subservient to whites,”<sup>18</sup> and the Thomas Dixon novels *The Clansmen* and *The Leopard Spots*, which provided the source for *Birth of a Nation*, certainly influenced the acceptable and believable spaces available for African-Americans in American cinema. While the commercial cinema certainly denigrated other ethnic groups, none was repeatedly placed in the position of cinematic inferiority occupied by Blacks or simply absent or erased from the frame altogether.

*The Fights of Nations* (Biograph, 1908) presents a melting-pot allegory: “Our latest production, under six titles, represents various types and nationalities, with

tragedy and comedy intermingled. Every scene is beautifully staged, and each nationality well represented.”<sup>19</sup> The film consists of 6 vignettes: “Mexico vs. Spain,” a fight over a *senorita* between her suitors; “Our Hebrew Friends,” described as “a characteristic battle” over money between Jews; “A Scottish Combat,” a swordfight displaying “how quick and accurate these weapons can be handled;” “Sunny Africa,” a dancehall frequented by “the colored element,” a woman’s honor is broached and her man steps forward to defend her and a razor fight breaks out; “Sons of Ould Sod,” a battle over wet sheets is resolved through the wonder of draft beer. While each vignette has its own set of problems, the film finale is most troubling. In “America” all of the groups are able to cross the threshold, welcomed by an Uncle Sam type of character with arms open into the American melting pot, into “harmony, peace and goodwill the characters of the different appear nationalities, making it an allegorical representation of Peace.” The painful irony of the allegory of *Fights of Nations* is an America without Blacks, who are not included in the “appropriate finale.”<sup>20</sup>

Not surprisingly, two of the more popular stereotypes were recycled from literary sources: the loyal servant, also known as the Mammy, and the Uncle Tom. The faithful Tom and the protective, nurturing Mammy characters find plenty of work with the Edison Company and Griffith companies in *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* and *Birth of a Nation* respectively. James Nesteby argues:

The Afro-American image, though not always a reflection of cultural context, is frequently a reflection and illumination of cultural myths and fantasies. This is true of nearly all film images, but it is particularly true for African-Americans who have been equated with negative values in American culture.<sup>21</sup>

The projection of heroic actions, for example the Mammy in *Birth* who protects her master from the Union soldiers, is transparent and reflects the early cinematic construction of Black characters lacking any accurate social or culturally authentic context.

Ultimately, the tensions between authentic and artificial Blackness in preclassical cinema reveal White anxieties about a lack of knowledge about Black people. These anxieties were exacerbated by Black’s (sic) attempts to move into new social and political positions via urban migration, to which Northern Whites frequently responded by enforcing greater spatial (residential) separation between the races than in the South. Thus, these films’ efforts to define, recognize and reproduce Blackness is always informed by White desires to claim privileged knowledge about Black people, but to keep their distance from the real thing.<sup>22</sup>

They not only lack identities but these characters are merely extensions of their White masters, superiors and Hollywood's imagination. This stereotype cannot exist in isolation from Whites or without a reference to an oppressive system.

Appearing relatively infrequently in early films are the *tragic mulatto* and *brutal Black buck*. Donald Bogle argues that the *tragic mulatto*, a classic literary figure,

...the mulatto is made likeable—even sympathetic (because of her White blood, no doubt)—and the audience believes that the girl's life could have been productive and happy had she not been the victim of a divided racial inheritance.<sup>23</sup>

One thinks of the Lydia character in *Birth*, who cannot overcome her fate. With the exception of a few jungle “savages,” the Buck image on film does not appear in its most definitive form until we see Flora Cameron jump off a cliff, after being chased by Gus, in the “rape” scene in *Birth*.

As popular as the *buck*, *mammy*, *Uncle Tom*, and *tragic mulatto* may have been in early American cinema, the *Coon* provides the mold from which the most popular and indelible representations for Blackness in the cinema were cast. The very first screenings of motion pictures utilized the Black character as a source of humor. Historically, most characterizations either fall into or have traits easily traceable to the *Coon*.

According to Bogle, there were two types, the pickaninny and the Uncle Remus. The pickaninny was most often represented by women or children, from Prissy in *Gone with the Wind*, to Topsey in *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1903, Porter Version). Coon characters are invariably bumbling, inept, lazy, superstitious clowns and chicken thieves. The Uncle Remus coon is found in the Rastus serial. Between 1910 and 1911, several films featuring a character named Rastus were produced by the independent filmmaker Sigmund Lubin. Lubin's pictures frequently exploited the most ridiculous, offensive and demeaning of Black stereotypes, and the Rastus cycle seems no exception. Among the extant titles are *How Rastus Got His Turkey*, *How Rastus Got His Pork Chop*, *Rastus and Chicken*, *Chicken Thief*, *Pickaninnies and Watermelon*, *Rastus' Riotous Ride*, and *Rastus in Zululand*. In *Rastus in Zululand* the title character is transported, through a dream, to Africa where he finds being boiled in water as a dish for local cannibals more attractive than marrying the chief's daughter, who is depicted as being as fat and ugly as Rastus is stupid and lazy.<sup>24</sup> Unlike the other film stereotypes that largely owe their mass recognition or appeal to literary antecedents, the Coon and specifically Rastus have a broader popular base as characters in the African-American folk tradition.

Very little changed in Black stereotypes during the early years—the first two decades—of the cinema in the United States. The post World War I period showed promise for changes in Black iconography and social status. Mass migration of Blacks from South to North, beginning after World War I,

culminated by the early 1920's in a new Black cultural visibility. Change was especially visible in the urban centers of Chicago, Washington D.C., and most notably New York City's Harlem section. The Black audience's growing disinterest and disenchantment with the silent cinema's fascination with plantation life held the promise for new representations of Black life and culture in film. Though the release of *Birth* stunned Blacks, there was at least one positive effect: it helped mobilize community support against the under-informed images of Blacks and Black life constantly finding their way to the screen. In addition, the influence of Griffith's success at promoting racist ideologies suggested an alternative use of the motion picture as a tool against racism. Booker T. Washington's *The Birth of a Race* (State Rights, 1918), though a costly and hopeless commercial failure, would encourage other Black entrepreneurs and filmmakers to consider the possibility of a Black cinema in response to a White one.

A later technological advancement in film, however, would severely undercut Black efforts, and the image-making process would continue unabated with the introduction of sound. By 1929, Hollywood released two Black-cast sound features: *Hallelujah* (Metro Goldwyn Mayer, 1929) and *Hearts in Dixie* (Fox Film Corporation, 1929). Both films accurately reflect the Southern minstrel tradition out of which its White screenwriter, Walter Weems, had come.<sup>25</sup> *Hearts* provides well-executed samples of dance traditions popular on minstrel stages (e.g., the cakewalk and the buck and wing); in two important musical sequences a variation of the "walk around" is performed to highlight solo performers. It is the latter association with minstrelsy that most members the 1929 audiences are likely to have made during the music/dance routines presented in *Hearts*. The minstrel stage itself was not far from memory, and the related vaudeville tradition was finally beginning to wane.

The introduction of sound to motion picture technology forecast great possibilities for Black performers. Robert Benchley, realizing the early disappointments associated with the first attempts to reproduce the human voice, notes in 1929 that

...the future of the talking-movie has taken in a rosier hue. Voices *can* be found which will register perfectly. Personalities can be found which are ideal for this medium. It may be that the talking-movies must be participated in exclusively by Negroes, but, if so, then so be it. In the Negro the sound picture has found its ideal protagonist.<sup>26</sup>

Similar praise for the possibilities of sound and a fresher depiction of Black life come from Alain Locke and Sterling Brown. Also addressing the newly released *Hearts*, they are in agreement with Benchley that the film represents a step forward for screen images of Black people.

The usual types are there—the Daddy, Uncle, the Mammy and the inevitable pickaninnies, but in this group are real flesh and blood Negroes evoking a spontaneous and genuine human interest.<sup>27</sup>

But Brown and Locke also welcomed variation in conventional stereotypes, which they did not find in *Hallelujah*, a film they criticized in the same article as being quite inferior to *Hearts*. In their view the leads in *Hearts* reveal an individuality seldom seen on the screen.

The newly added dimensions in representation are certainly present in these films, but not as emphatically realized as Brown and Locke seem to suggest. The Gummy character (Stepin Fetchit) is still closely related to the *Coon*; he's still more lazy than crafty. And of course the *Uncle Tom* is present. In Nappus (Clarence Muse), ambition and discernment are dramatized as qualities that meet with the approval of the film's only White character. Chinquapin's (Eugene Jackson) role as a sympathetic symbol for Black progress, by definition, diminishes his characterization as pickaninny in the vein of a Topsy or Sunshine Sammy. The failure of *Hearts* and other films of the period does not lie solely in their representation of Blackness. Instead the failure lies in the preservation of unrealistic relationships, and the failure of Black characters to move beyond the limiting types and show agency for themselves.

Considering *Birth* as an integral force in establishing the classical Hollywood cinema is important beyond the obvious technical and narrative contributions. Griffith's ability to translate already existing stereotypes such as *Uncle Tom* and the *Coon* in addition to the use and mastery of other less developed stereotypes such as the *Brutal Black Buck* clarifies the archetypes Hollywood then utilizes for the portrayal of African-Americans. Griffith introduced the mass movie going audience to the range of stereotypes that lingers in Hollywood for more than 80 years. By defining the acceptable spaces and spatial relationships available for Blacks in motion pictures—the noble manageable toms, the clownish coons, the stoic hefty mammy, the troubled tragic mulatto, and the brutal Black buck. While *Birth* was not the first or the last, it is often considered to be the film that fixed the image of Black people in the commercial cinema. "White people must occupy the center, leaving Black people with only one choice—to exist in relation to Whiteness."<sup>28</sup>

Further testimony to Griffith's singular talent is the indisputable fact that many of the types are still in use today, albeit in watered-down versions. As Bogle points out

Once the mythic types were introduced, a number of things occurred. Specific Black themes emerged. (The old South theme proved to be a great favorite.) And the basic types would come and go in various guises. Guises long confused many movie viewers. They were (and remain) deceptive, and they have traditionally been used by the film industry to camouflage the familiar types. If a Black appeared as a butler, audiences thought of him

as merely a servant. What they failed to note was the variety of servants... What has to be remembered is that the servant's uniform was the guise certain types wore during a given period. That way Hollywood could give its audience the same product (the types themselves) but with new packaging (the guise).<sup>29</sup>

A quick look back and one finds the *mammy*, *mulatto*, *Uncle Tom* and the *coon* still find work even in modern Hollywood. While the studios did tone down the stereotypes over time, their roots in *Birth* are still visible even today. Certainly there have been advancements, but a maid is a maid and a chauffeur is still a chauffeur and the lack of agency in the range of characters played by Morgan Freeman, Eddie Murphy, Whoopi Goldberg, and Chris Rock strongly hints at a larger systemic problem. Traces of these stereotypes can be found in characters such as the *Tommish* chauffeur, Hoke Colburn (Morgan Freeman) in *Driving Miss Daisy* (Warner Brothers, 1989), or the *coonish* detective Axel Foley (Eddie Murphy) in *Beverly Hills Cop* (Paramount Pictures, 1984), or the modern *mammy* Corrina (Whoopi Goldberg) in *Corrina, Corrina* (New Line Cinema, 1994) and Chris Rock in *Down to Earth* (Paramount, 2001). Although the names have changed, the types of characters and the range for the most part have remained the same.

The stereotypes utilized by Griffith, with one exception, would be used continually for more than sixty years. The only one not regularly employed by the later studio features was the *brutal Black buck*; not until 1971 would this type be seen again. But when the *brutal buck* returned it was with a vengeance, a character out to wreak havoc on the White-man, in Melvin Van Peebles' third feature film, *Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song* (1971). For a brief period of time, the Superspade character articulated in *Sweetback* and later featured in many of the *blaxploitation* films would eventually become a victim of his own success and move from character to caricature and into retirement.

Despite efforts of noted Black and White critics to emphasize the optimistic thematic, aesthetic, and representational aspects of *Hearts in Dixie*, *Stormy Weather* (20<sup>th</sup> Century Fox, 1943), *Hallelujah*, and many other all Black-cast films, clearly in the hope of encouraging Hollywood to create more and more vehicles for Black talent, Hollywood's early race experiments failed to capture the interest, dollars, and imagination of the mass audience. Most of this said, the audience was likely to have identified these films at best as entertaining, and at worst, as more of the same—with sound. As quickly as the all Black-cast talky appeared, it was quickly forgotten. These films borrowed heavily from minstrelsy, relying on the same formulas that the earlier film vignettes had used. Films such as *Hearts* were then simply packaged into an experiment, demonstrating the receptivity of audiences to longer motion pictures with all-Black casts and sound. Early Black independent filmmakers used all-Black casts in sound features but attempted to draw from sources identified more closely with Black folk traditions.



It is important to downplay the idea of stereotypes in film because stereotype-based analysis sets up a historical situation where American Blacks of the 1910s-1960s went to the cinema as unwitting dupes, who nevertheless consumed the product. Instead, we must find evidence/imag ine that the American Black film audience of this period constructed their own film experience that was somehow able to negate the stereotypes in favor of an alternative reading that held possibilities for other conclusions. While that is not the main focus of this study, I offer another perspective, that American Black audiences were capable of being turned off by stereotypes while simultaneously constructing alternative spectatorship experiences to build their collective identity through their expression of agency. But strictly within the production practices of Hollywood cinema, this exercise of agency is not as “active” or “successful” due to the incredibly strong and long-lived principles of production-thinking so ably discussed in Bordwell, Staiger, and Thompson’s *Classical Hollywood Cinema*. Film historian and author Clyde Taylor offers another perspective on the audience-spectator question in the documentary for the Spike Lee film *Bamboozled* (2001, New Line Cinema)

I remember when I was watching movies way back in the Black and White days and I’d see Stepin Fetchit and maybe Hattie (McDaniel) and those people. And I would be there to see maybe Bob Hope or Clark Gable or something like that or maybe Humphrey Bogart and then the Stepin Fetchit would come in and then the rest of my friends we would sort of like duck. It would be like you’re on this endemic island and all of the sudden this storm of Black denigration would come across us and then we would just sort of like wait until that storm would be over we would just giggle but we would be giggling out of self-anxiety.<sup>30</sup>

So while I certainly recognize the potential for the Black audience to have both stereotype and agency spectatorship, I want to reaffirm that the production process, rather than the spectatorship of the audience, is the central theme in this chapter.

# The Political Economy of Blaxploitation

THIS CHAPTER EXAMINES THE FUNDAMENTAL NATURE OF THE POLITICAL economy of the 70s *blaxploitation* cycle. Key issues such as alienation, underemployment, exploitation, and institutional racism within the American commercial film industry are critical sites of investigation in order to understand the cycle. Additionally, the resulting effect of powerlessness and the quantitatively heightened exploitation of the Black audience and the further marginalization of Blackness in the motion picture industry is explored with a discussion of the most aesthetically and politically influential and popular films of the cycle. This chapter outlines the key aspects and issues associated with the political economy of the *blaxploitation* period in particular and the argument that *blaxploitation* was a necessary predecessor to the Black film renaissance that begins in the late 1980s; I argue that without *blaxploitation*, there would be no *Do the Right Thing*, *Boyz N the Hood*, or *Daughters of the Dust*.

The *blaxploitation* cycle emerged out of two major conditions of possibility. First and most evident are changes in political and social consciousness of African-Americans in the middle to late 1960s. The political, social and economic issues raised in the messages of civil rights leaders such as Malcolm X, Huey P. Newton, Martin Luther King, Fannie Lou Hammer, and Stokely Carmichael began to influence Black thought in a wide range of arenas in general, and the creative arts in particular. Early efforts by Van Peebles, Parks, and Parks Jr. were attempts to satisfy a large, under-served audience anxious to see accurate filmic representations of their daily lived experiences at local movie houses. In addition to voices representative of the different divisions within the movement, vocal and outspoken Black critics emerge, unapologetic in their disapproval and opposition of Hollywood's historical practice of limiting the types of stories and roles available for Blacks in the commercial cinema. Second, the economic down-turn in Hollywood in the years following the 1948 Paramount consent decree severely weakened Hollywood's virtual monopolies, an impact heightened by the enormous and rapid growth of television's audience share. In the post-World War II years the financial impact of both these developments influences the declining movie box-office. Additionally the early 1970s domestic economic recession caused by the Arab oil crisis coupled with the mergers and acquisitions of motion picture studios increased the cost of

doing business across the board. The shrinking audience forced Hollywood to respond to the increased potential of an important market segment by not only making films oriented toward a Black audience but also including Blacks in the creative process as writers and directors as well. These were all strategies to cultivate Black film audiences.

For a brief period of time in the early 70s, Hollywood targeted the Black audience with an array of inexpensive, Black-cast films influenced by the B-movie strategies, utilized by companies like American International Pictures, to make a significant number of films.<sup>1</sup> Previously profitability was achieved by systematically conforming films into standardized forms (for example, the western) and utilizing pre-determined narrative forms extrapolated from Hollywood's strategy of ideological containment (the hero wears the White hat and always gets the girl). Standardizing the production of films and the division of labor with the central producer system and the system contract players enabled the industry to control cost, while the western and other easily recognizable narrative genres allowed Hollywood to stay current and keep abreast of contemporary social and political issues. Hollywood has played the gatekeeper able to contain the radical political impulses of not only the civil rights movement but other radical movements as well, such as the protest to the war in Vietnam. In some cases genre can operate as a type of cage able to contain because of the expectations inherent in any genre, and is able to contain even the largest stars. John Wayne, for example, was never able to escape his persona as the "Duke" and the audience's expectations associated with his screen image severely limited the possibility of the "Duke" to move beyond audience expectation. In the case of *blaxploitation*, the exploitative marketing strategy was intentionally aimed at an inner-city audience in hopes of revitalizing Hollywood's dwindling coffers.

The essence of the political economy of *blaxploitation* can be summed up succinctly with the following idea: prior to the cycle Blacks had virtually no control over the politics and economics associated with the representation of Black images inside of Hollywood. A cursory examination of the hierarchy of Hollywood before, during, and immediately following the cycle reveals the following: not a single Black studio head, no Black owned or operated first-run distribution companies, nor any national exhibition concerns. The analytic term for this phenomenon, in which the ultimate disposition of the fruits of a person's labor is in the hands of his employer, is alienation. Alienation comes to mind because the White-run industry controls the means of production, distribution and exhibition, which ultimately limits creative possibilities for the Black writers, directors or producers attempting to create within the system.

Of course writers and directors own the creative tools of the trade, so to speak, but ownership of the idea cannot prevent the alienation of the artist from the final product. Because film production remains an inherently dependent process, the antagonistic relationship endures between those who create and those who control the means of production, distribution and, above all, exhibition. In order

to earn a livelihood from the creative product films must be shown to a paying audience, resulting in a relationship that will always favor the system of ownership and control over their creative talents.

An obvious consequence of this situation in which the filmmaker operates primarily to enrich someone other than the creator or author is exploitation. The creative endeavor serves primarily to benefit the studios and/or conglomerates such as Paramount Pictures or Columbia Pictures, owned by Gulf+Western and Coca-Cola, respectively, during the *blaxploitation* cycle. One must also remember that not only do the studios have a strangle-hold on production and distribution but they also wield an overwhelming influence on exhibition, because they control the majority of the supply able to satisfy demand. Even though Black filmmakers themselves did not ordinarily employ the term *blaxploitation*, they were certainly aware of the phenomenon, and the inherent limitations placed on their ability to create films outside of the margins that would come to define the *blaxploitation* cycle. Of course exploitation strategies are not limited to Black writers and directors and their relationship to the industry. The term also refers to the marketing strategies used to make the films profitable in addition to the apparent exploitation of the African-American audience. Certainly the severity and impact become more noticeable and heightened because of the inability to move beyond the margins of the *blaxploitation* formula in terms of the types of films created and marketed for the Black audience. In essence *blaxploitation* was operating in many directions and at multiple levels.

In the global arena dominated by the American film industry, time has proven that ownership and power are synonymous. He who owns in America occupies the dominant position in the marketplace—a position that places those outside of the system at an apparent economic disadvantage. Access to positions of power and authority were non-existent during the *blaxploitation* cycle and even at the present time are still, at best, limited. Thus the possibility to make changes working within the system has, at best, a minimal chance of realization for Blacks. One of the greatest problems, the likelihood of being exploited as a writer, director or actor in the commercial film industry, has little chance of changing.

The second most important factor to consider is that, largely as a consequence of the alienated subordinate position, unemployment, underemployment and non-employment were chronic afflictions before and after the cycle. Many Black writers, directors, and to a certain extent actors, began to recognize a condescending attitude toward Black film and Black talent generally held by studio executives who possess almost omnipotent power and authority over the commercial cinema. Thus the persistent denial of even the opportunity to earn a living becomes an over-determining factor for Blacks attempting to operate within the system. In addition to the limited types of stories and characters able to be presented by the studios; for example, Black nationalism is often presented as a joke in many of the films from *Shaft* to *Foxy Brown*.

It follows then that how the studio executives who dominate the processes of production and distribution in Hollywood regard Black film as a form plays a significant role in not only determining the level of employment, but the level of production as well. As I illustrate extensively in this chapter, the tendency has been for studio executives to view the films produced by Black filmmakers as inferior either artistically or economically. As a consequence even when Hollywood chose to undertake a certain amount of activity in the sphere of Black-oriented film, the level of employment they created was still kept artificially and unnecessarily low by their scorn for Black film as a form or an aesthetic practice.

Historically the possibility for workers to improve the conditions under which they toil is always least during periods of high unemployment or in the case of African-Americans extended periods of high underemployment and exclusion. In the motion picture industry, such periods are the rule for Black talent in general. In particular, Black screenwriters are in a perennial position of having to sell their work in a buyers' market, a state of affairs that drastically reduces their power to bargain for the same kind of economic treatment enjoyed by their White counterparts.

The qualitative and quantitative exploitation by Hollywood of Black writers and directors, and the disregard the industry displays towards Black talent in general, makes such exploitation a virtual certainty. I will offer evidence in this chapter that substantiates this position. In view of the foregoing, it should be no surprise to learn that studio heads maintain a double standard where White and Black films are concerned. This is most notably evident in the drastic financial disparity found in the budget differences for "White" films and "Black" films.

Studio heads also have the power to shape the manufacture and dissemination of ideas pertaining to film: ideas about who creates film, ideas about who benefits, ideas about acceptable political or social commentary, and finally ideas about which issues deserve discussion and which ideas merit a prompt and permanent burial. Hence the ability to determine the production and distribution of ideas directly related to cinema only serves to reinforce the power of those who already control the means of production, distribution and exhibition.

In the preceding paragraphs, I have tried to coherently summarize the essential features of the political economy of blaxploitation. In the following pages, I attempt to clothe the outline with compelling evidence.

### **WE SHALL OVERCOME**

Clearly, social, political and economic pressures inside and outside of the commercial film industry played a pivotal role in creating the possibility for "above the line" opportunities in mainstream commercial cinema for Black Americans. Certainly the growth of television and its "free" product had an economic impact coupled with the social and political impact of the Civil Rights movement and the end of the war in Vietnam. Two major economic factors

directly impacted the change: first the Paramount consent decree and the enormous growth of television in the 50s and 60s followed by conglomeration of Hollywood in the 60s and 70s coupled with the Arab oil crisis in the 70s which drove up the cost of doing all business.

Hollywood, in the late 60s and early 70s as the dominant participant in the global commercial film industry, faced severe economic problems and an uncertain future. In addition to economic pressures, prominent civil rights organizations, most notably the NAACP, were demanding that the industry provide visible evidence that it was sensitive to the issues and demands for more accurate cinematic depictions of the Black people. Early tangible evidence that Hollywood was listening and willing to act came in 1969 when Warner Brothers financed the production of Gordon Parks' semi-autobiographical coming of age film, *The Learning Tree*, which recounts the story of Parks' childhood during the Depression. The film establishes Gordon Parks as the first Black director of a feature film produced, distributed and exhibited by a major Hollywood studio.

One could argue that while Hollywood was at an economic disadvantage, it had to make room for other voices able to effectively reflect the times—an insider's view, if you will, as well as political insurgence related to the war in Vietnam and transformation of the Civil Rights movement:

Internally, what was once a liberal White and Negro upper-class movement became a completely Black-led and almost entirely Black, largely working-class movement. There was a shift in agitation, legislation, and court litigation aimed at securing the Black person's constitutional rights to emphasis on direct-action techniques, and finally to mobilizing the potential power of the masses in the ghettos along political and economic lines.<sup>2</sup>

Easily identifiable markers signifying change begin to surface and point towards ruptures in the civil rights movement—the assassination of Malcolm X, the Watts riot, the assassination of Dr. King, the arrival of armed revolutionaries in the form of the Black Panther Party for Self Defense, and possibly most important Stokely Carmichael's utterance of the phrase "Black Power." Carmichael's statement created a rupture in the freedom movement and marked the shift from peaceful non-violent protest to a more aggressive self-defense/nationalist agenda. The growing frustration with non-violence as a means to move beyond the confines of second-class citizenship was clearly a motivating factor in the riots following the death of Dr. King. The frustration found its initial voice with Black artists and intellectuals whose charged words begin to critique American institutions they believed to be responsible for the degradation, oppression and destruction of Black life in general.

## A STAR IS DYING: SIDNEY POITIER AND THE DEATH OF UNCLE TOM

The classical style not only created and relied on a select group of stereotypes to represent Black images in the commercial cinema, but Hollywood as Donald Bogle illustrates in *Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies and Bucks* has historically been able to handle one Black character type at a time. The 60s could be classified as the decade of the *Uncle Tom*, and the majority of roles played by Sidney Poitier fit neatly into the narrow space Hollywood provided for Poitier to operate. Audiences and critics alike began to see the limiting nature of the “Poitier Persona” as being out of sync with the emerging new reality for Black Americans:

a good boy in a totally White world, with no wife, no sweetheart, no woman to love or kiss, helping the White man solve the White man’s problem.<sup>3</sup>

At the very least the Poitier persona was in direct opposition to the rising calls for a new, liberated Black sense of manhood and self. And more important we begin to see a transition from the harmless types continually employed to more radical images.

The Poitier persona was obviously unable and incapable of addressing the growing desires and expectations for a liberated and empowered Black male able to reflect, articulate and represent the changing times. The responsibility may not have been his alone: James Baldwin argues that roles played by Poitier and his identity as an artist must be considered within the context of Hollywood’s unwritten policy of ideological containment for representing Blackness. Many of the roles played by leading Black actors such as Paul Robeson and Louise Beavers were reflections of the popular imagination dominated by notions of racial subordination and a belief that even if given the opportunity to live out the American dream, Blacks would rather be subservient to Whites Beavers in *Imitation of Life* (Universal Pictures, 1934) or go insane attempting to enjoy a tainted version of the same dream, Robeson in the *Emperor Jones* (United Artist, 1929). While revolutionaries in Watts, Detroit and Chicago were screaming, “burn baby burn”, Hollywood was still in the business of creating stars and in the 1960s, no star was brighter than Sidney Poitier. Poitier’s arrival as a star comes at an interesting historical juncture. Poitier was to become the victim of an old system as the first Black star produced by the “old” star system more or less on equal terms with other such stars produced at that time. This inescapable dilemma situates the “Poitier persona” in uncharted territory. Therein lies the paradox, the first and last Black star of the old order cannot be sustained because the racist system that previously subordinated Poitier and other Black performers was no longer strong enough to sustain its first and only Black star of a dying system. For James Baldwin, the “Poitier persona” must be analyzed in its proper

context. In his 1968 *Look* magazine article “Sidney Poitier,” that meant within the boundaries of American race relations. Hollywood had no choice but to present the American audiences with palatable fantasies that perpetuate the myths as well. To present accurate representations of Black people was antithetical to the American dream. Hollywood was well aware of the inherent power of medium, and to present accurate representations of Black life would destroy the fantasy.<sup>4</sup>

Unfortunately the status afforded to Hollywood’s premier Black-star came at a price; the “Poitier persona” was all about containment. By the mid 1960s, the revolution in Black consciousness ultimately rendered Poitier’s noble roles in *Guess Who’s Coming to Dinner* (Columbia Pictures, 1967) and *Lost Man* (Universal Pictures, 1969), for example, as irrelevant. “Poitier’s screen persona, which for nearly a decade had been the dominant image of the Black on the screen, was no longer considered pertinent.”<sup>5</sup> The insistence of the commercial film industry to only change, as Bogle argues, the guises but not the types, limited the opportunity for Poitier to move beyond the persona. This persona suggests success primarily in economic terms; many equate financial success with power, but the lack of expressive freedom in the roles illustrates that the power was meaningless.

As Poitier fades away an old type, the *buck*, begins to form in a new guise the neo-buck, seen in a number of B-movie action flicks, in parts primarily filled by retired football players such as Jim Brown, Bernie Casey, Woody Strode, and Fred Williamson. In a way these films served as a model for the *blaxploitation* heroes yet to arrive. The standout was Jim Brown. The core of the Brown screen persona was the renegade first-to-fight-first-to-die in virtually every movie role he played. The roles were thin, underdeveloped and unable to move beyond Hollywood’s systematic containment of Black masculinity. The studios merely used variations on old types and guises. The Brown persona is accurately described by Donald Bogle, “Even though he was to be nothing more than the Black buck of old, he answered—because of his unique charisma and astounding physical presence—the need for a viable Black-power sex figure”<sup>6</sup>

With mounting political and social pressure from the civil rights movement, and later the Black Nationalist rhetoric that dominated the end of the decade, demands were made not only for more accurate representations on the screen, but jobs and training in the film trade as well. The economic thrust came from the industry’s own recognition of the economic importance of the ever-increasing Black audience. The boycott, a formidable weapon was used with great success during the Montgomery, Alabama bus boycott and used again by M.L.King as he fought for the desegregation of department stores in Birmingham, AL. Initially used in the segregated south, the boycott becomes increasingly appealing to many civil rights organizations, especially to the Hollywood branch of the NAACP. By 1963 the racism and discrimination so pervasive in the industry is confronted by an organized effort combining the Hollywood branches of the NAACP and ACLU respectively. This effort garners the backing of



Hollywood elite such as Marlon Brando, Paul Newman, Burt Lancaster, and James Whitmore.<sup>7</sup> Other stars could not make sense of the agitation by outside forces. Bette Davis opined “if our primary concern becomes the protection of every race, every creed instead of producing entertainment there won’t be any time to even make pictures.”<sup>8</sup> Fortunately for Black actors there were plenty of people inside and outside the industry who clearly disagreed with Ms. Davis, and continued to apply pressure. While there was more work in front of the camera, the opportunities behind the camera were sluggish.<sup>9</sup> In 1965, the Federal Fair Employment Act became law and soon after the Hollywood branch of the NAACP outlines their dissatisfaction with the studios after watching and monitoring their hiring practices and lack of Black technicians.

By late 1969 Hollywood began to feel the mounting pressure from the threat of economic boycotts by NAACP and discrimination lawsuits ready to be filed by the US Department of Justice for discriminatory hiring practices and policies used against Blacks.<sup>10</sup> While there were increases in employment, access to the craft unions was still not readily available:

Last week’s activity in the National Assn. for the Advancement of Colored People vs. Hollywood craft unions saw four shops turning thumbs-down on organizations’s demands for a Negro to be added to each feature and telefilm crew and NAACP countering with threat to file decertification proceedings with the National Labor Relations Board against discriminatory unions.<sup>11</sup>

IATSE: “No Negro Need Apply: Locals Stick to Exclusion,”<sup>12</sup> and in 1969 the Justice Department announced plans to sue Columbia, Paramount, 20<sup>th</sup> Century-Fox, MGM, Warner Brothers and Disney as well as ABC and CBS.<sup>13</sup> By the end of the 60s, the pressure had reached a boiling point yet Hollywood was still able to maintain the status quo both on and off the screen through the use of the “double refusal:”

The Union tells them it cannot refer on the waiting list, and the applicant cannot join the union because he does not have a studio job.<sup>14</sup>

History reveals that the industry has always been most vulnerable in periods of economic instability. Without question the pressure from the growth of television was beginning to have a measurable impact on the bottom line in Hollywood. For a number of years the industry was aware of the Black audience but still failed to offer more than smoke, mirrors and changing guises. Only when the economic, social and political pressures began to intersect and overwhelm the standard practice of Black exclusion, were the calls for change heard. And when the industry responds, it is on terms beneficial for its own political and economic interests.

As the decade came to a close, Black audiences were hungry for new types of Black films and Black film heroes—able to touch on the new national mood of Black militancy and cultural nationalism. Curiously, perhaps even perversely, the only images able to capture the mood were the wooden, rough and tough, action roles occupied by ex-football players. But the one-dimensional action figures were ultimately unable to satisfy audience demands. By the end of the 60s one could be Black and proud, politically assertive, economically independent, and as the Black Arts Movement demonstrated, creative without restraint or apologies. A new attitude toward the expression of Blackness was prominently on display, heard in the music of James Brown and read in the words of Leroi Jones, rebellious to some and honest to others. Directly or indirectly proponents of the Black Arts Movement insisted that art be employed for freedom and justice, and that art which failed that aim was deemed irrelevant. For better or worse they influenced many of the Black screenwriters and directors emerging in the late 60s and early 70s.<sup>15</sup>

By 1969 Hollywood no longer had a choice in whether or not it would respond to the building pressures of the Black cultural and political revolution, and to its own fiscal crisis. I would argue that although the *neo buck*, Black action heroes failed to satisfy audience demand, the films did offer irrefutable economic evidence to Hollywood that the Black audience was a significant economic presence. As a direct consequence Blacks begin to participate in all levels of the creative process, most notably as writers and directors.

As stated earlier, *Life* magazine photographer Gordon Parks' directorial debut *The Learning Tree* was the initial attempt by the majors to appeal directly to a Black audience. The film makes an honest and admirable effort to present an accurate filmic representation of Blacks in opposition to the Hollywood master text. The film was a commercial success and thus able to speak in a language Hollywood clearly understood and embraced, the language of money, the commercial and critical success realized by Parks and Hollywood. In broad terms productions such as *The Learning Tree*, *The Graduate* (Embassy Pictures, 1967), *Midnight Cowboy* (United Artist, 1969) and *Easy Rider* (Columbia Pictures, 1969) were in line with Hollywood's late 1960s shift toward films from voices previously in the margin. These were all significant productions that, in their own ways, represent Hollywood's response to the social, political, and economic messages of the protest generation and simultaneously allowed the industry to stay attuned with the emerging college generation.<sup>16</sup>

I would argue that the most significant development with the early films is that the American commercial film industry, after years of neglect, finally produces Black oriented films that not only speak to a Black audience but also begin to effectively address the interests of that audience. With a developing Black aesthetic, films are made for a brief period of time, that communicate with the Black audience. Black writers screenwriters and directors are able to produce films from a more informed Black cultural perspective.

## THE BIG BREAK AND A HERO NAMED SWEETBACK

In 1971, Melvin Van Peebles maximized the opportunities created by Hollywood's rupture, as did other maverick filmmakers at that time. In many ways Van Peebles could be aligned with Francis Ford Coppola, Peter Fonda, and Mike Nichols. Before 1971 Melvin Van Peebles was a relatively unknown writer and director with two films to his credit: *The Story of a Three Day Pass* (Sigma III, 1968), a moderate commercial and critical success, and *Watermelon Man* (Columbia Pictures, 1970), a studio financed feature that also enjoyed moderate commercial success. Van Peebles walked away from a three-picture deal with Columbia Pictures to make *Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song* for Cinemation Industries. *Sweetback* would become a box-office hit and emerged as the film that would serve as the model for the blaxploitation strategy employed by the studios ad nauseum between 1972 and 1977.

With *Sweetback* Van Peebles had total creative control; in addition to his responsibilities as writer and director for *Sweetback*, he was also producer, lead actor and he wrote the score. His ability to multi-task places Van Peebles in the Black film continuum that begins with Oscar Micheaux, the Johnson Brothers and Spencer Williams in the 1920s and 1930s and continues with contemporary filmmakers Julie Dash, Spike Lee, and John Singleton. By going outside of the traditional industry money channels, Van Peebles was able to finance the film by utilizing "guerilla tactics" that one could argue have come to represent Black feature film production. The financing of *Sweetback* would serve as a model for all independent film-makers who followed Van Peebles. After investing \$70,000 of his own money and getting Bill Cosby to commit \$50,000, he was still short of his 500K budget. But by convincing a film lab to defer the processing cost, he essentially financed much of the film with paper transactions. By hyping the film as a "smut flick" Van Peebles was able to remain under the radar of the studios and the unions. Finally and of great importance he was able to hire Black technicians because of the lack of union involvement. By far the most astute arrangement was the favorable distribution deal struck with the Cinemation Industries, a relatively small independent distributor, primarily engaged in exploitation films.

I had offers from majors but they just wanted to give me the prestige of THEIR taking a chance with me. Fuck that in, I wanted bread and control. In the end I LEASED the film to a smaller company called Cinemation Industries because I liked the style of Gross, the boss, and especially his second, Marenstein. They had balls and brains, enough brains in fact to know they didn't know Black folks and that's pretty smart for White men.<sup>17</sup>

The final result was a ground-breaking feature-length film shot in less than three weeks with a negative cost of \$500,000. The film entered the market with a

limited release schedule opening at the Coronet Theater in Atlanta, GA and the Grand Circus Theatre in Detroit, MI, smashing box office records at both venues.<sup>18</sup> The film would go on to earn upwards of \$10 million at the box-office.

Van Peebles also found time to attack the rating system employed by the Motion Picture Association of America. His argument was simple: he questioned the right of the Motion Picture Association of America (MPAA) to impose its value system on what Van Peebles deemed to be Black art. In a letter sent to Jack Valenti, President of the MPAA, Van Peebles outlined his case, informing Mr. Valenti that *Sweetback* would not be subjected to the rating system of the MPAA nor would he “self apply” an “X” rating on the film. The thrust of his argument was that any rating from an outside group would be both “prior censorship” and “unconstitutional.”<sup>19</sup>

A decisively shrewd marketing campaign grew from the protest as the tagline on the posters read, “rated X by an all white jury.” In the end the controversy only helped draw attention to the film. Van Peebles, stated:

I made the picture because I was tired of taking the Man’s crap and of having him define who we were to us. Sick and tired of watching the parade of jigaboos, valets and tap-dancing cooks on the big screen, I felt we had the right to define who we were to ourselves. I am most proud of the fact that I decided to do something about it.<sup>20</sup>

Because the film operated as a response to the containment strategies utilized by Hollywood in its construction of Black stories and Black characters represented in films such as *The Emperor Jones*, *The Defiant Ones* (United Artist, 1958), *Imitation of Life* and too many more to name—its contribution and influence on Blacks in the cinema can never be overstated. Van Peebles himself has never been one to understate the importance of the film

*Sweetback* is the first Black movie that doesn’t cop out. It tells you about Black life like it is—not like the man wants to hear it is. It’s also the first revolutionary Black movie. It shows a *nigger* that busts a White man’s head *and gets away with it!* Now, bourgeoisie critics don’t like that, but Black folks do. They scream and cry and laugh and yell at the brother on the screen. For the Black man, *Sweetback* is a new kind of hero. For the White man, my picture is a new kind of foreign film.<sup>21</sup>

Critical reception of *Sweetback* was understandably mixed. A cursory examination of the films reviews, “He Won’t Bleed Me: A Revolutionary Analysis of ‘Sweet Sweetback’s Baadasssss Song’” written by Black Panther Party chairman Huey P. Newton, and “The Emancipation Orgasm: *Sweetback* In Wonderland” written by *Ebony Magazine* editor Lerone Bennett offers insight into the world of *Sweetback*. One can equate the political and social ideologies of the Newton’s Panther party and Bennett’s *Ebony Magazine* as being

representative of the opposite ends of the social and political spectrum that made up Black America during the post King era. In one corner Bennett, a voice for the Black middle-class was not particularly interested in rocking the boat; in the other corner you have Newton, a strident Black nationalist trying to figure out how to blow the boat up. The amount of printed space occupied by *Sweetback* commentary tells a story. Newton dedicates the entire, June 1971, issue of *The Black Panther Party* to the revolutionary *Sweetback* while the Bennett article, judging the film neither revolutionary nor Black,<sup>22</sup> finds itself buried on page 110 in the September 1971 issue of *Ebony*.

Newton offers praise; critique would be inappropriate since he appreciates, embraces and supports all elements of the film and chooses not to confront the seedier elements in a film he believes is revolutionary. Newton rationalizes the films' most vile and shocking scenes. From his perspective, the rape scene that opens the film in its proper light is a rite of passage "in the scene where the woman makes love to the young boy but in fact baptizes him into his true manhood."<sup>23</sup> The use of the Negro spiritual, "Wade in the Water," signifies to the audience that the scene "is a very sacred rite for the boy, who was nourished to health, and is now being baptized into manhood."<sup>24</sup> Bennett's critique of sexual and gender politics resonates as he puts the sexual initiation of "Sweetback" in a much different light. Bennett views Sweetback's sexual initiation at 10 years old, not as an "act of love"<sup>25</sup> "between a Black man and woman as Newton argues, but rather as the "rape of a child by a 40-year-old prostitute."<sup>26</sup> While the community is clearly engaged in a revolution of sorts against the outside forces (the police and City Hall) that occupy the community, rape is rape and there is nothing whatsoever revolutionary about an old prostitute having sex with a young boy.

If anything is revolutionary, it is the construction of the "Sweetback" character and the possibility of a character operating in opposition to the "Poitier Persona" and other Black characters striving for assimilation, embodied in the Delilah and John characters in *Imitation of Life* and *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner* respectively. For Bennett, *Sweetback* was essentially a case of Van Peebles constructing Black characters in reaction to the Black bourgeois ideal epitomized by the "Poitier Persona." "Sweetback" was supposed to be a revolutionary response to the years of stereotypes inflicted on Blacks, on the commercial screen, "counter-counter-contrast conceptions, as the opposite, in short, of what Negroes said Negroes were."<sup>27</sup> Yet, the Bennett article raises a crucial question: "At what cost?" With one question, Bennett moves the discourse on Black film into new territory, and the desire for a clearly defined "Black aesthetic" changes the study of Black film.

The disenfranchised and oppressed revolutionaries presented in *Sweetback* had little if anything in common with the "noble Negro" characters dominant in Hollywood. *Sweetback's* ability to present in an accurate manner, issues and concerns important to the Black urban audience signifies an important change in the relationship between filmmaker and audience. Certainly, Van Peebles

ultimately romanticizes the ghetto, in a manner akin to the dominant paradigm found in the “Gangsta Rap” genre of Hip-Hop. In these contexts the ghetto is a great place to live that the residents absolutely love. Van Peebles’ presentation of a neo-Black cinematic experience does shift the representation with the introduction of authentic images of inner-city life. *Sweetback* forever expanded the possibilities for the types of usable Black images in the commercial cinema by going beyond the usual images and re-introducing the brutal Black buck. Bennett refers to this as Black “image confusion,” arguing “some men foolishly identify the Black aesthetic with empty bellies and big bottomed prostitutes.”<sup>28</sup> For Bennett, *Sweetback* was “neither revolutionary nor Black”<sup>29</sup> and ultimately fails because the protagonist is a selfish anti-superhero operating without any semblance of a revolutionary program, unable to respond to the audience needs for images able to go beyond the one or two dimensions typically represented by Poitier, Brown, and Williamson. While Newton is clearly off the mark with his assessment, Bennett fails to acknowledge the alternative reality presented and the revolutionary argument articulated by Van Peebles with the films’ group protagonist highlighted in the opening credits “Starring the Black Community.”

### THE GREAT FLOOD

Many “Sons of *Sweetback*” followed in the early 70s, where the devaluation and degradation of Black women in *blaxploitation* were definitely aided, with few exceptions, by the figure of the Superspade who was equal parts pimp, player hustler, and sex-machine hero of the emergent genre. *Blaxploitation*, as a standardized form, became an important money making strategy embraced by the studios, primarily because of their relatively low risk and potential for high return. The majority of films produced that attempted to break out of the confines of the *blaxploitation* mold did poorly at the box office by comparison. Family-oriented films such as *Souder* (20<sup>th</sup> Century-Fox, 1972) or *Claudine* (20<sup>th</sup> Century-Fox, 1974) are just two of the many examples of marginal box-office failures used by the studios to promote and support the monolithic audience myth and the adherence to the *blaxploitation* strategies. The belief in a monolithic audience excused the intent of the studios, because clearly the majority of the films produced were never conceptualized to be anything but imitations of *Shaft* (MGM, 1971), *Superfly* (Warner Brothers, 1972), and *Sweetback*.

Following the phenomenal success of *Sweetback*, *Shaft*, and *Superfly*, *blaxploitation* becomes a recognizable form. It called for a strong Black male who continually beat the Anglo protagonists in unrealistic situations, and end up waltzing off into the sunset. Somewhat similar to the *western* genre, the hero always got the girl, the money, and *blaxploitation*’s major innovation, he always beat the Man, albeit in the most unrealistic of situations.

*Sweetback* so effectively presented a new formula that responded to audience interest that Hollywood rushed to make more Black-oriented films. One of the earliest examples was Gordon Parks second effort, *Shaft*, which was rewritten to

appeal to the same inner-city Black-male youth audience that responded to *Sweetback* with their dollars.

Originally, the script of *Shaft* was written for a White actor, but they changed to a Black. They threw in a couple ‘motherfuckers’ and that became a Black film.<sup>30</sup>

Interestingly it was *Superfly*, the third film and one of the most popular, controversial, and purest formulaic expressions of the *blaxploitation* cycle, that would perfect the visual and audio style that defines *the* genre.

Commercial attempts to deal with Black subject matter produced a succession of movies that did little but play on the desires of African-American audiences for heroic figures, but failed miserably in answering the need with accurate representations in a realistic manner. A spate of films followed often produced by smaller production companies such as Samuel Arkoff’s and James Nicholson’s American International Pictures, and distributed by the majors. The films had a simple goal: to repeat Van Peebles’ earlier commercial success. The term *blaxploitation* rankled many in the Black community, including those who worked on the original films. First coined by the trade publication *Variety*, it was used to describe a sub-genre of film in the early ‘70s that featured Black heroes and heroines, trying to gain money, justice, glamour and power, stuck in a White-dominated culture. It must be noted that not all of the films released during the period fit comfortably under the *blaxploitation* umbrella, but the majority possessed some, if not all, of the markers that define the style. The number of films produced between 1970 and 1975 varies widely, from 50 films to 200 are considered *blaxploitation*. One of the earliest accountings was by Marshall Hyatt, he considers 57 films produced between 1970 and 1975 to fit neatly into the rubric *blaxploitation*.<sup>31</sup> For the most part his count is accurate but there are several films whose inclusion raises questions about the criteria used in compiling the list. His list includes films, which while exploitative, might not necessarily fit the rubric, such as *Enter the Dragon* (Warner Brothers, 1970), *King Gun* (Ellman Enterprises, 1970) and *Melinda* (MGM, 1972). Gerald Martinez, in *What It Is... What It Was*, offers a more recent accounting close to 150 films and again there are apparent issues one could take with the list and films whose inclusion has to be questioned, *Nothing But A Man* (Cinema V, 1964), *For The Love of Ivy* (Cinerama, 1968), and *The Harder They Come* (New World Pictures, 1973). Can Black films produced prior to *Sweetback*, *Shaft*, and *Superfly* be considered as *blaxploitation* films? Not really, because the aesthetic issues, production values and marketing strategies that led to the coining of the term *blaxploitation* did not coalesce until after the release of the big three.

By 1972, with the formula mastered and the strategy in place, the Black audience came to view the films as the responsibility, at least in part, of Black directors in collaboration with Hollywood.<sup>32</sup> Thus Hollywood was able to combine its traditional moneymaking ingredients of violence and sexploitation

with distorted imagery and the symbols of the urban Black underworld, and at the same time keep insurgent Black political thought and cultural expressions of the times to a minimum.

While the product was targeted for a Black audience eager to see a broader representation of its humanity and aspirations validated on the commercial screen, it failed to do so. By shifting the imagery and stereotypes, the only significant transition in the words of Daniel Leab, was from “from Sambo to Superspade.” This transition allowed Hollywood to manipulate Black people’s newfound identification and the increasingly politicized militant Black underclass.

One could romanticize Hollywood’s production of Black oriented films during this period as a benevolent gesture to make up for the many decades that Black writers and Black directors were excluded from the creative process and Black story lines were neglected and peculiarly absent from the Hollywood screen. But the commercial film industry never engaged in a moral crusade to right the years of wrongs it had committed in its historical mistreatment and abuse of the Blacks on the screen and behind. One must remember that the commercial film industry, or Hollywood, is merely a collection of movie studios that may have concurrent political and social agendas they espouse and support, yet its primary concern is the bottom line. Following *Sweetback’s* success and the “sons of Sweetback,”<sup>33</sup> and aided by the Supreme Court’s liberalization of obscenity laws, which in effect led to more gratuitous sex, drugs, and violence on screen,<sup>34</sup> Hollywood was now positioned to capitalize on its newfound audience. By the end of 1971, one fourth of the films in production were Black oriented films.

*Sweetback’s* independent financing, radical visual style, commercial and critical reception suggested the possibility of an emergent independent Black cinema able to respond to audience desires that could be commercially and critically accepted. The Hollywood adaptation of this vision was different. *Shaft* and *Superfly* were seen strictly as Hollywood productions with an apparent goal of refining and standardizing the conventions of *blaxploitation*. The term “Superspade” is one filled with irony. The designation was first used to identify Poitier as the first Black superstar and was later attached to Black superheroes of the *blaxploitation* cycle. Regardless of its use the term was well within the expectations and boundaries of Hollywood’s ideology of “harmless entertainment.” As Leab points whether “Sambo” or “Superspade,” with few exceptions Black characters have rarely possessed the humanity intrinsic to their White counterparts.<sup>35</sup>

The “Shaft” character played it safe and came across as accommodating to Whites when compared to “Sweetback.” *Shaft* was the first of the films to move beyond the art-house, following its phenomenal success with the targeted Black audience. Thanks in large part to its soundtrack and favorable press it found a significant crossover audience and played surprisingly well with a mainstream audience.<sup>36</sup>



Black and White critics alike hailed *Shaft* as a breakthrough production and acknowledged Parks' direction as an example of the possibilities for Black representation within the confines of the studio system. Still, Lerone Bennett, Daniel Leab, and Clayton Riley all recognized limitations inherent in the *blaxploitation* model and viewed the re-emergence of the *buck* and industry dependence on the same stereotypes historically favored by Hollywood as cause for concern. Riley takes issue with *Shaft's* narrative structure and its lack of a Black social or political program. Of course *Shaft* was not alone in this; Clayton Riley argues that most of the films produced during the *blaxploitation* cycle operate "to insure the well being of the American spirit by offering Black life as an exercise in passive unreality."<sup>37</sup> Riley's discussion of character and story offers clarity.

Film bears mystery before us. About the world we live in. But the new Black movies, in trying to unravel that mystery, have accomplished little more than a re-statement of those themes the American cinema has traditionally bled dry and then discarded. Like the stepchild, we get the leftover, in this case a celluloid hand-me-down. Black movies bringing color to the old movie industry Triple-S stamp: Slapstick, Sadism and Safety-from anything that might disturb the Republics peace of mind.<sup>38</sup>

In effect *blaxploitation* operates to reconfirm White expectations of Blacks, able to contain radical political thought, and thereby serves to repress and delay the awakening of any real political consciousness.

### CASHING IN AND SELLING OUT

Van Peebles influenced the marketing paradigm by releasing *Sweetback* as a commercially viable package, with a companion book and soundtrack album. MGM refined and mastered ancillary marketing to exploit *Shaft*. Within weeks of *Shaft's* release, the soundtrack album by Isaac Hayes not only achieved platinum, but would go on to garner an Academy Award as well.

Many of the subsequent *blaxploitation* films merely tried to capitalize on the success of the early films. Unfortunately they only imitated, filled in, or exaggerated the most pronounced and easily identifiable *Blaxploitation* ingredients. More often than not there was an over reliance on the "Superspade" identified by Daniel Leab.

Superspade was a violent man who lived a violent life in pursuit of Black women, White sex, quick money, easy success, cheap 'pot,' and other pleasures. In these films White was synonymous with every conceivable kind of evil and villainy. Whites were moral lepers, most of whom were psychotically antiBlack and whose vocabulary was laced with the rhetoric of bigotry.<sup>39</sup>

The “Superspade” was enhanced, if you will, with equal parts gratuitous sex, drugs, bumbling White people and groovy soundtracks. The character was rendered with stylistic edgy visuals and the pimped out fashions of the 70s Black underworld; the accompanying musical scores dipped in the soulful sounds of James Brown, Isaac Hayes and Curtis Mayfield that were often superior in quality and narrative structure to the films they energized.

### I SEE DEATH AROUND THE CORNER

With the exception of *Sweetback*, *Shaft*, and *Superfly*, the majority of the films that fall under the *blaxploitation* rubric had at best one note. The films consistently failed to capture the substance of a revolutionary period in Black America. Many of the sons of Sweetback lacked the verve, spirit, resonance and cultural awareness that made the early films successful. In time the Black audience grew tired of seeing what was now nothing more than a generic style of filmmaking, lacking any political and social resonance. One must also remember that very few of these films found a crossover audience. So as the audience for the movies grew tired, there was no urgency on the side of the studios to expand the possibilities or opportunities for Black filmmakers.

The *blaxploitation* cycle serves as an example of the type of calculated profit-making strategy openly embraced by Hollywood. The “Super-spade” hero and his urban exploits have enjoyed a long, colorful history in African-American cultural practices, easily found in Black literature, folklore, musical and oral traditions. The sly victories of the gangster or trickster persona were one of the few ways that African-Americans could turn the tables on an unjust racist society. The transition from “Sambo to Superspade” highlights Hollywood’s ability to minimize reality and wholly ignore Black political, social, and economic advances. The violent, selfish, egotistical, and unscrupulous *superspade* is as detrimental to Blacks as he is to Whites, according to Alvin Poussaint. And the violent imagery coincides with another transition, away from civil rights movement and toward the individualist easy-come, easy-go mentality that marks the 70s.<sup>40</sup>

By the mid 1970s the ability to derive a profit from *blaxploitation* films ended. True to their nature the studios did not attempt to develop new vehicles for Black talent. If it was not action, it was believed to have little potential for critical and, most important, commercial success. This myopic perspective served as a catalyst to filmmakers working against the monolithic audience myth that influenced the resurgence of Black cinema that began in the middle 80s and came of age with Spike Lee’s third film *Do The Right Thing*. Filmmakers such as Warrington Hudlin, Charles Burnett, Robert Townsend, Julie Dash, and Spike Lee decided not to wait for Hollywood. While the *blaxploitation* follow-ups were largely failures, they nevertheless represent the first time that any minority-directed films had sufficient economic impact to spur a wave of rapidly made

knockoffs and imitations. The knockoffs typically ended up as commercial failures.

While I agree that the sons of Sweetback had a laundry list of problems—if you look at structural and systemic issues, you can easily recognize the very emergence of these films was somewhat of a breakthrough and although strange, a genuine, sign of success.

Given the perennial unemployment among Blacks in all fields, we should not be quick to condemn Black artists who take part in the production of these films. But we should be aware of the source of the economic rip-off, the White movie industry. The moviemaking conglomerates are demonstrating that they feel little sense of social or moral responsibility to the Black community and to the healthy development of Black youth.... As long as they are profitable, however, these films will be made and shown.<sup>41</sup>

The success in this case was not sustainable, yet a valuable lesson was learned that critical and commercial sustainability was not enough. Further complicating the challenge of—“rehabilitating the Black cinematic experience”—the new reality that the production of mediocre knockoffs produced in a furious wave that ultimately collapses was not enough.

Many of the films, while aimed at Black audiences, were written, produced, and directed by Whites. Only a handful had any cultural or familial connection to the intended audience. The majority of the films were all made from the same ingredients: 1) low production costs; 2) low production values; 3) minimal story lines; and 4) with a common goal, high profit ratios. For a limited period of time the formula helped all of the participants in the Hollywood food chain prosper, but blockbusters and the end of Hollywood’s recession would eventually spell death for the *blaxploitation* cycle. Following the phenomenal commercial success of *The Godfather* (Paramount Pictures, 1972), *Jaws* (Universal Pictures, 1975), and *The Exorcist* (Warner Brothers, 1973), the industry learned that 30% of the tickets for those three films came from the African-American audience. In other words, the studios realized that African-American audiences would readily attend blockbuster films without any Black-oriented content. Another problem facing Black cinema, in the 1970s and 1980s, according to Donald Bogle, was not only the lack of roles, but also the narrow choices among the types of images available, not to mention the limited narrative possibilities available with the restricted Hollywood notion of a “Black film.” The new economic reality that African-Americans on screen were not an essential factor for drawing a significant African-American audience into movie theaters, by 1975 the *blaxploitation* cycle was taking its final breath and by 1977 Black-oriented production halted seemingly overnight.

The decision to exploit an audience for financial gain and to ignore the potential effect that such practices would have on the representation of African-

Americans, and the effects on the psyche, substantiates the assertion that “race matters.”<sup>42</sup> More often than not, when questioned on issues of content and responsibility, the typical studio response was to quickly place blame on the Black audience, implying that Black audiences had no interest in family-oriented films and the box-office receipts offered by the studios provided tangible evidence to bolster the monolithic audience myth. Ultimately the myth becomes reality in Hollywood, a myth that would present a roadblock and one of the major factors influencing the lack of variety found in the subject matter of the films produced during the period.

One must remember that the majority of the money that financed the *blaxploitation* cycle came from outside of the Black community. This shaped the most important economic realities of the cycle: the more control gained by the studios, the less creative control Black filmmakers would have over the films they would write and direct. An important area of cultural production would be controlled by outside agents who, for better or worse, only had a financial interest. Second, because of alienation the profits that resulted from this lucrative period that should have benefited the Black filmmakers always benefited the studios.

The political economics operating during *blaxploitation* were no different than the economic system that one still finds in almost any large urban center such as Harlem, NY or on the south side of Chicago. Like most inner city communities, the Black clientele who live in these communities do not benefit economically at the same rate as the merchants who own the businesses yet take the profits into their own communities, which prosper from an apparent inequitable system of trade. The same sort of economic system operated during *blaxploitation* for a brief minute in time during the early 1970s. The “hood” became a popular site of film production, and the commercial film industry took full advantage of an audience that was starving for images that in some manner reflected their lives.

The failure of *blaxploitation* was precipitated by Black critical reaction to the increasingly degrading themes of the genre in combination with Hollywood’s recovery from one of its worst fiscal crises that finally culminated in the exhaustion and collapse of the entire cycle. In order to hold its Black audience Hollywood produced more “crossover” films and focused on the careers of a few isolated Black celebrities, such as Richard Pryor and Eddie Murphy, who through their use of humor were allowed to momentarily transcend race and were contained by the remnants of the once mighty White-only “star system.” In considering what at times is a tangled web of influences and overlapping phases, it is also interesting to note that reversals and shifts in the same fluid mix of enabling conditions that came into play at the rise of *blaxploitation* also influenced its undoing. For as Black critical reaction to the violent, drug-dealing pimps and gangsters of *blaxploitation* formula sharpened, and Hollywood became less economically dependent on the genre for short-term profit, *blaxploitation* came to a speedy demise.

Hollywood never engaged in a moral or conscious crusade to reverse years of segregation and discrimination within the industry. The studios saw the opportunity to exploit an audience and they did. Once the ability to derive a profit no longer existed the studios moved on to resurrect and modify the next cash cow, the blockbuster. Hollywood has often been accused of being a racist institution. Such a blanket statement holds truth, but is not necessarily a truism. There is little doubt that the desires of the Black audience to see heroes with whom they could identify and starlets who could be the objects of their desires influenced the production schedule and for a brief time the sexy and hip images one can readily connect with *blaxploitation* flooded the American movie screen. Yet in many cases the images were at best irresponsible and regularly left much to be desired. To call the industry racist for its apparent lack of understanding or compassion for a significant market segment and the historical lack of desire to place Black images on the screen in anything other than inferior and subservient roles particularly during *blaxploitation* period is at least warranted.

By the time the period ended Michael Schultz was the lone Black director from the period working on a regular basis as a Hollywood director, and with the exception of *Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band* (Universal Pictures, 1978) all of his films were Black oriented. A few of the stars from the period were able to cross over into mainstream roles most notably Richard Pryor who at one time was the biggest box-office draw in the world. Similar to the success experienced by Sidney Poitier in the 1960s, in the 1980s there was room for a few talented Black performers to emerge and thrive in Hollywood.

The years immediately following *blaxploitation* would again find Black filmmakers operating for the most part outside the studio gates. On the screen Black women had all but disappeared or returned in the role of domestic help. Black males did not fare much better. Between 1977 and 1986 two types of roles again become dominant for Black males. The majority of work was found either as the buddy or as the emasculated Black male hero. Typically the buddy roles were reserved for Richard Pryor starring opposite Gene Wilder in *Stir Crazy* (Columbia Pictures, 1980), *Silver Streak* (20<sup>th</sup> Century Fox, 1976), and *The Toy* (Columbia Pictures, 1982); and later Eddie Murphy opposite Nick Nolte, Dan Akroyd, and Judge Reinhold respectively in *48 Hrs* (Paramount Pictures, 1982), *Trading Places* (Paramount Pictures, 1983) and *Beverly Hills Cop* (Paramount Pictures, 1984); and finally Danny Glover teamed with Mel Gibson in *Lethal Weapon* (Warner Brothers, 1987) and *Lethal Weapon 2* (Warner Brothers, 1992). In the emasculated hero role you find Howard Rollins in *Ragtime* (Paramount Pictures, 1981) and Morgan Freeman in *Driving Miss Daisy* (Warner Brothers, 1989). There were also musical extravaganzas such as *The Wiz* (Universal Pictures, 1978) starring Michael Jackson and Diana Ross. Another phenomenon emerges early in the eighties: the feeble inept attempts to take advantage of the hip hop fan by making poorly conceived films such as *Beat Street* (Orion Pictures, 1984), *Breakin'* (MGM, 1984), *Breakin' 2: Electric Boogaloo* (TriStar Pictures, 1984), *Krush Groove* (Warner Brothers, 1985), *Disorderlies* (Warner

Brothers, 1987), and *Tougher Than Leather* (1988). None of these films found a significant audience and disappeared at the box-office almost as quickly as they were released.

In the 1980s a new type of Black filmmaker emerged with Spike Lee. Much as Melvin Van Peebles had done in the 1970s, Lee emerges as a Black filmmaker able to effectively fulfill Black audience desires with films and images the audience could relate to and identify with. In the hands of Lee the third significant period of Black commercial film found economic viability.

## *Do the Right Thing* Revisited

IT HAS BEEN MORE THAN A DECADE SINCE *Do THE RIGHT THING* was released. Yet its impact on *post-soul Black cinema* still resonates. Spike Lee's successful track record prompted Hollywood studios to invest in a host of low-budget Black films that they expected to yield high profits. *House Party* (New Line Cinema, 1990), *Boyz N the Hood* (Columbia Pictures, 1991), *New Jack City* (Warner Brothers, 1991), *Menace II Society* (New Line Cinema, 1993), and *Friday* (New Line Cinema, 1995), to mention only a few, were all direct beneficiaries of Lee's success. An industry that has historically suppressed, diminished, and caricatured Blacks had become willing to take a chance on African-American filmmakers, especially when their films were financially successful.

Lee has been able to change the course of Black film by making respectable profits, although he has received meager capital investment from studios. This clearly illustrates that the results of the struggle over film representation are determined mainly by economic factors, and the interests of multinational corporations, rather than by the concerns of filmmakers. However, if a particular studio believes that a film project can be packaged in such a way as to guarantee large profits for investors, disagreements over content are negotiable.

A brief look at recent portrayals of African-Americans before *Do The Right Thing* is instructive. In such films as *Cry Freedom* (Universal Pictures, 1987), *Mississippi Burning* (Orion Pictures, 1988), and *Glory* (TriStar Pictures, 1989), the African-American struggle is a subtext for White heroism. For example, in *Cry Freedom*, a film that purportedly portrays the well-known Black South African anti-apartheid activist Steve Biko, a White journalist is the central character. Consequently, Biko's anti-apartheid struggle is completely overshadowed.

Conversely, in *Do The Right Thing*, African-Americans and their experience are the major focus. The sights and sounds of Black America erupt into a cataclysmic denouement produced partially by circumstance and partially by the characters' own agency. Many studios were reluctant to invest money in Lee's project because of its inflammatory nature. Lee was finally able to secure the financing for *Do The Right Thing* through a negative pickup deal, which required the studio to buy the rights to distribute his film before it was made. Still, theater

owners and film critics feared that the film would ignite the flames of racial violence. Critic David Denby had this to say: “If Spike Lee is a commercial opportunist, he’s also playing with dynamite in an urban playground. The response could get away from him.”<sup>1</sup> Luckily, Universal and many theaters chose to ignore such fears. In the final analysis, *Do The Right Thing*’s popular reception caused many to view the film as commentary on the African-American urban experience.

This chapter chronicles Spike Lee’s battle to maintain his artistic integrity while making *Do The Right Thing*. It describes his struggles with the studio and New York trade unions, and is based in part on the valuable production notebook included in the companion volume to the film. While the production notebook could potentially give a biased view of the process of making *Do The Right Thing*, the value of Lee’s personal firsthand accounting of the process provides details that cannot be ignored. Moreover, in describing Lee’s experience of shooting *Do The Right Thing* this chapter indicates how African-American visual artists struggle for control of the imaginative representation of African-American life and experience.

### THE CHECK IS IN THE MAIL

Film production begins not with the camera but with the checkbook. As with the financing of any other Hollywood film, *Do The Right Thing*’s production budget had to be guaranteed by the studio that would ultimately distribute the finished product. *Do The Right Thing* presented several challenges to the standard formula for distribution by a major studio. Unlike a typical blockbuster, it featured no famous stars. Its subject matter was unconventional by Hollywood standards. But it did have Spike Lee, a successful director with a proven track record. Lee’s first feature, *She’s Gotta Have It* (1986), cost just \$175,000 to produce and earned close to \$8 million. *School Daze* (1988) came in at a cost of approximately \$6.5 million<sup>2</sup> and had domestic box-office sales of \$14 million.

The merchandising of *Do The Right Thing*, as with Lee’s two earlier films, was to be handled by his production company, Forty Acres and A Mule Filmworks. There were the companion volumes to the earlier films—*Spike Lee’s Gotta Have It* and *Uplift the Race: The Construction of School Daze*—and widespread marketing via T-shirts, sound tracks, buttons, letter jackets, and baseball caps. Lee’s comment, “Somebody wearing your T-shirt is a walking billboard,”<sup>3</sup> explains Lee’s strategy of placing his films’ names and the Forty Acres logo on a variety of merchandise.

Because of its subject matter, *Do The Right Thing* represented a major shift from Lee’s two previous feature films. The film was not a modern romance like *She’s Gotta Have It*, with three men vying for the affections of Nola Darling. Nor was it a Black version of a college musical like *School Daze* (1988). *Do The Right Thing* was a sobering and somewhat frightening journey into the seething cauldron of inner-city pathology and racial tension. Were American audiences



ready to visit a Black neighborhood and confront its inhabitants on their own terms? Lee insisted that the set be located in the heart of Bedford-Stuyvesant. He balked at the presence of New York City police, who Lee believed might turn the Bed-Stuy block into an armed camp.

As the pre-production phase bidding began, Paramount and Touchstone were Lee's top choices for studios, with his primary choice being Ned Tannen's Paramount Pictures. Lee mused that since Paramount Communications owned the Knicks, "I might get the season tickets to the games I need and deserve. Regardless, I'm looking for a home, where I can make the films I want to make without outside or inside interference."<sup>4</sup> Even though Lee's two earlier films were made at Island and Columbia, respectively, he did not consider either studio for *Do The Right Thing*. Island Pictures had fallen by the wayside even before *School Daze* because it lacked the necessary financial resources.

In considering Columbia Pictures, Lee reported that working with David Puttnam and David Picker was ideal. When Dawn Steel took over production at Columbia, Lee writes, "we both went at it from the start. I don't like her taste, don't like her movies."<sup>5</sup> Lee knew that more than a strained relationship was involved. "The importance of promotion was driven home when *School Daze* was released in February 1988. It had the misfortune to come out when Columbia was changing leadership, which resulted in the firing of the team of David Putnam and David Picker." The new team, Lee said, "left his film to die."<sup>6</sup> He took personally the failure of the new studio boss Dawn Steel and Columbia Pictures to promote *School Daze* adequately. It was apparent he would not seek financing from Columbia. As his brief relationship with Columbia Pictures came to an end, Lee said:

The classic nightmare of a filmmaker has happened to me; I'm caught in a regime change. Dawn Steel and her crew don't give a fuck about *School Daze* or any film that was made under Putnam. They can say what they wanna say, but I know better. Their actions prove it.<sup>7</sup>

Obviously, no love was lost between Spike Lee and Dawn Steel. After the misguided marketing of *School Daze*, it made sense for Lee to look for a new studio. Eventually, he took control over the publicity for his film by finding support on Black college campuses and universities, an effort that may well have saved the film from oblivion. Not only did *School Daze* receive a better-than-average box-office return of \$14 million based on its cost of \$6.5 million, *Daze* was one of the few profitable films distributed by Columbia Pictures under the Dawn Steel era that was produced while Picker-Putnam were at the helm of Columbia.

For *Do The Right Thing*, Lee first negotiated with Paramount Pictures. As a result of his experience making *School Daze*, his first studio film, he knew that he would demand a contractual agreement that would give him the right to approve the final cut, a privilege extended to few directors. *School Daze* was

financed via a negative pickup deal, meaning that Columbia was required to buy the rights to distribute the film, and that money was then used to produce the film. Several films have been produced in this way, and the primary benefit to the director is the right to approve the final cut. Of course there are alternatives. For instance, a screenplay can be sold to the studio and remain at the studio's mercy, or the studio can finance the production and the filmmaker then loses artistic control.

What transpired during negotiations over *Do The Right Thing* is an excellent example of the kind of tenacity and artistic integrity filmmakers must have. Lee's initial pitch to Paramount emphasized the script and budget. Lee viewed it as a \$10 million picture, while Paramount intended to invest only \$8 million with a proviso that the ending be changed. As negotiations continued, the Paramount production executives Ned Tannen, Sid Gannis, and Gary Luchesi repeatedly urged Lee to change the potentially volatile ending. "They are convinced that Black people will come out of the theaters wanting to burn shit down."<sup>8</sup> According to Lee:

Ned Tannen, the president, has big problems with the end of the picture, especially Sal's line about Blacks being smarter because they don't burn down their own houses anymore... They want an ending that they feel won't incite a giant Black uprising.<sup>9</sup>

In addition to the battle over the script, there were questions concerning the amount of money the studio would make if the film were to explore controversial, only marginally profitable issues. Few films are produced by Hollywood majors in which a lead White male character loses to his African-American male rival. Sure, Rocky initially lost to Apollo Creed and Clubber Lang, but he went on to win the climactic fight in every *Rocky* (United Artists, 1976) film. Similarly, in the *blaxploitation* period, pioneered by the films *Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song* and *Superfly*, success came at a price. The majority of subsequent films were not about "beating the Man," "Mista Charley," or whatever you want to call him, nor were they about improving the lives of Black folks. Usually they were about African-Americans falling deeper into despair and doing little or nothing to change their predicament.

Regardless of how one feels about his films, Spike Lee has helped make significant changes in the way the film industry deals with African-Americans. Before Lee and the Paramount executives arrived at their final impasse in negotiations, Bill Horborg, another Paramount executive, tried to find a resolution satisfactory to both Spike Lee and Ned Tannen. With negotiations deteriorating, Lee sent a script to Jeffrey Katzenberg at Touchstone Pictures, the studio that originally wanted Lee's second film, *School Daze*. Thirteen days before Paramount rejected the *Do The Right Thing* project, Katzenberg informed Lee that Touchstone was not interested in the project. Katzenberg believed the film was not worth the budget Lee wanted. After the two rejections, Lee responded, "I

kinda figured that they were taking too long. Bill Horborg fought for me till the end. But he's not Ned Tannen.... Goes to show you, take nothing for granted till the check is in the bank and has cleared."<sup>10</sup>

Paramount and Touchstone had already turned down *Do The Right Thing*, and it was crucial for Lee to follow up *School Daze* with another film. While any filmmaker feels the need to obtain a production budget that exceeds the budget for his or her last film, it is especially important for African-American filmmakers to succeed at this. According to Lee, "This is crucial; no recent Black filmmaker has been able to go from film to film as the White boys do."<sup>11</sup>

By this time Spike Lee and his lawyer, Arthur Klein, had already made contact with Sam Kitt in the acquisitions department at Universal Studios. Universal agreed to finance *Do The Right Thing*, with a negative pickup deal, but told Lee that the budget would have to be lower than the \$8 million minimum he had sought in earlier *Do The Right Thing* negotiations with Paramount and Touchstone. Lee's negotiations with Universal were more concerned with how to stretch the money than with increasing the budget, but there was an upside to dealing with Universal. The studio was willing to stand behind the script. The studio had already generated controversy when it released Martin Scorsese's *Last Temptation of Christ* (Universal, 1988). Nonetheless, Universal was attracted to Lee because he had a small but successful body of films that were not only profitable but had come in under budget. Tom Pollock, head of Universal Pictures, had this to say:

We're not some crusading studio out looking for social issues. Spike is interested in the subject matter and so are we.... But we can't afford to make movies if we can't make money on them. <sup>12</sup>

On the basis of Spike Lee's first efforts at the box office, Universal felt it was making a pretty safe bet. *School Daze* was a box-office success despite Columbia Pictures' lack of promotional support. Lee is a filmmaker whose name alone has the potential to sell tickets. He thus represents a traditional, tried-and-true market commodity: the big-name director, in his own way a throwback to the likes of John Ford, Howard Hawks, and Alfred Hitchcock.

It is an unfortunate fact that Blacks who work in the U.S. film industry have very few friends in high places. Perhaps this is also true for other people of color. Nevertheless, any film studio that finances a project rejected by other major competitors in the industry not only takes a major risk, but also performs an admirable task. Not only was Universal willing to take a chance but as Lee would later discover, Tom Pollock, the chief at Universal, would give him unrelenting support.

Lee's decision to go with Universal in the wake of failed negotiations elsewhere was probably an easy one to make. Universal offered the money to make the film and allowed Lee to retain artistic control, as well as some degree of financial control. The negotiations that transpired at Universal could not have

been more different from those at Paramount. Lee and Klein got Universal to agree with most of their demands. Lee had the final cut and a mutual agreement over the casting. These issues may seem minor, but they can make or break a film. For example, in the making of *The Godfather* (Paramount Pictures, 1972), Paramount executives did not want Francis Ford Coppola to cast Marlon Brando and Al Pacino in the roles of Vito Corleone and his son Michael. How wrong the studio bosses were proven to be. Even today, despite all of the great roles that Brando has played, people remember him as much for *The Godfather* as for any other film. Spike Lee did what he should as the director and took the responsible position. If *Do The Right Thing* was going to succeed or fail, it would be his doing.

### **PRE-PRODUCTION, FILM TRADE UNIONS, AND DOING THE RIGHT THING**

Although financing for the film was secured, its production faced a series of hurdles. Here was a man with a short but admirable track record. Lee's thesis film, *Joe's Bed-Stuy Barbershop: We Cut Heads* (1982), won a student Academy Award for best director. His first feature, *She's Gotta Have It*, not only won the Prix de Jeunesse at the Cannes Film Festival, but based on box-office receipts of \$8 million made more than forty times its production costs of \$175,000. Lee's talent and determination were already indisputable. Critic Nelson George, who helped to finance *She's Gotta Have It*, pointed out, "I invested because it was shot already. Spike wasn't talking doing, he was talking done."<sup>13</sup>

Universal agreed to finance Lee's film for \$7.5 million and to shoot in New York City, which is strongly controlled by the film trade unions. *Do The Right Thing* would be Lee's first union film, and he experienced difficulties with the unions. Lee wanted a nonunion shoot for the entire ten weeks of shooting. His cinematographer, Ernest Dickerson, expressed concern that a nonunion shoot in a union town such as New York could cause logistical problems. John Kilik, the line producer, was responsible for coming up with a budget that would work. In addition, Lee needed approval on a budget, so he made the decision to have John Kilik draw up a nonunion budget of less than \$7.5 million, the maximum to which he believed Universal would commit itself. The revised budget came in at \$5.5 million, and Arthur Klein forwarded it to Universal. Universal suggested a change of venue, which was its way of saying no more money.

Even though Universal had agreed in principle to finance the film, a final budget had not been reached. When Lee firmly decided that *Do The Right Thing* would be shot in Brooklyn or not at all, he forced Universal either to accept his decision or to reject the whole project. Lee thereby entered into a second significant waiting period in which he actually thought Universal would drop *Do The Right Thing*. The studio proposed a budget of \$6 million even though Lee insisted that it was a \$7.5 million picture. At this point, he was prepared to start shopping again and consulted Klein about giving Orion Pictures a copy of his

script. When Universal finally settled on a budget, Spike was not pleased. The terms included a \$6.5 million budget, a union crew, and a shooting schedule cut from ten weeks to eight. Lee wrote:

Universal is dicking me around. They won't budge from the \$6.5 million budget, won't go a penny over it. It's ridiculous. White boys get real money, fuck up, lose millions of dollars, and still get chance after chance. Not so with us. You fuck up one time, that's it. After the commercial successes of *She's Gotta Have It* and *School Daze*, I shouldn't have to fight for the pennies the way I'm doing now. But what else can I do? I'll make the best film possible with the budget I'm given.<sup>14</sup>

Because Universal wouldn't budge from \$6.5 million, Lee had no choice but to negotiate with the unions. A union shoot in New York would be problematic for several reasons. First, a sizable portion of the \$6.5 million budget would have to be earmarked for an all-union crew. Second, Lee wanted to hire more than one or two Blacks, a nearly impossible task since African-American members are seriously underrepresented in the film trade unions. Lee wrote:

On every film, I try to use as many Black people as possible. A major concern I had about shooting with an all-union crew was whether this would prevent me from hiring as many Blacks as I wanted. There are few minorities in the film unions, and, historically, film unions have done little to encourage Blacks and women to join their ranks.<sup>15</sup>

Although Lee was not able to have a nonunion crew, he succeeded in getting the National Association of Broadcast Employees and Technicians and the International Brotherhood of Teamsters to hire a few African-American nonunion workers for the shoot. Both unions made major concessions that included offering membership to the African-American nonunion workers who filled positions primarily in the grip and electric departments. These gestures by the unions may seem generous, but actually solid business decisions lurked behind them. A local union should do all it can to keep work among its own. Thus, the union's opening of its membership to African-Americans benefited all parties involved.

Despite Universal Pictures' insistence that Lee shoot the film somewhere other than Brooklyn, Lee would not budge. "Universal suggested we shoot the film someplace outside New York, like Philadelphia or Baltimore. I'm sorry, Philly and Baltimore are great cities, but they just aren't Brooklyn."<sup>16</sup> After my initial reading of *Spike Lee's Do The Right Thing*, the companion volume to *Do The Right Thing*, I thought Lee was foolishly stubborn. However, I soon realized that although most major cities with significant African-American populations may seem homogeneous on the surface, the reality is that African-American urban folk cultures differ significantly from city to city. For example, fans in

Philadelphia preferred the bubble gum rap produced by the duo Jazzy Jeff and the Fresh Prince and New York fans leaned toward the edgier sound produced by groups such as Public Enemy and Boogie Down Productions. In other words, the cultural production within the Black community of Philadelphia does not produce the same culture found in New York's Brooklyn, the Bronx, and Harlem.

Lee was determined to shoot the film in the heart of Bed-Stuy. He sent out a location scout to find one block to use for filming. After two weeks had passed, Lee and the film's production designer, Wynn Thomas, chose the first block the scout recommended. Lee thought the location was perfect. It was neither too dilapidated nor too upscale. It also had two empty lots on opposite corners that were perfect locations for Thomas to create the primary locations used in the film: Sal's Famous Pizzeria, the Korean grocery, and the We Love Radio 108 FM storefront station. After choosing a neighborhood, Lee wanted to communicate freely with its inhabitants. Securing a block for a shoot is not usually that difficult. You obtain the proper permits and, maybe, grease a palm or two. This location shoot, however, would present more complications than usual. Most films have multiple locations over the duration of shooting. *Do The Right Thing*, however, would be shot at one location for eight weeks. Concerned that the presence of police and the use of permits during preparation of the location would perhaps anger the African-American residents, Lee took a more diplomatic approach, which Brent Owens the location manager, describes:

During pre-production we scheduled a meeting for homeowners on the block. We went over our production schedule and the improvements planned on several homes. Everyone seemed pleased that we were there. Shutting down the crack houses won us some points with the homeowners. They were much more willing to lease us their property after we did that.<sup>17</sup>

Rather than use a traditional security force, Lee, upon producer Monty Ross' suggestion, hired the Fruit of Islam (FOI). The FOI is the security force of the Nation of Islam, originally trained by Malcolm X. Because the Fruit of Islam has improved the lives of many African-Americans from all walks of life, they have acquired the respect of those who live in Black inner-city communities. By hiring the Fruit of Islam, Lee would have a security force better suited to *Do The Right Thing's* needs than the New York City Police Department could provide. The Fruit of Islam entered peacefully into Bed-Stuy, assessed the security problems, and temporarily rid the shooting location of any unwanted elements rather than taking a more traditional approach and closing the location to the residents. Some reporters who covered this angle criticized what they perceived to be the failings of the FOI. Apparently, the FOI closed down three crack houses but one moved around the corner and went back into business. Some journalists viewed this reopening as an example of the lack of effectiveness of the Fruit of Islam.

Spike Lee made great advances with *Do The Right Thing*. Lee served notice to Hollywood that the rules must change. He knew that at some point a major studio

would give him a larger budget to work with. With each new project, Lee has been able to increase his production budget. However, his budgets remain low in comparison with average production budgets for other Hollywood fare. For instance, in 1989, the average budget for studio-produced films was \$18 million.

Lee is struggling for economic empowerment for African-Americans and the opportunity for other African-Americans to make films. To date, four of the crewmembers from *Do The Right Thing*, Darnell Martin, Monty Ross, Ernest Dickerson, and Preston Holmes, have produced, written, and/or directed their own feature films. Moreover, Lee was instrumental in integrating the trade unions, getting them to use African-American nonunion technicians and filmmakers who would later become active union members and skilled artists.

### DO THE RIGHT THING MEETS THE PRESS

I didn't want to strike a false note with that. It's a very shaky truce. None of this everybody join hands and sing We Are the World. I just don't think that's realistic at this time in America.

Spike Lee<sup>18</sup>

A survey of the articles and reviews that discuss *Do The Right Thing* shows the broad range of commentary that followed the production and reception of this film. It has been nearly a decade since the film's theatrical release. And yet, the ashes from Sal's are still smoldering inside the film industry. By examining what the press had to say about *Do The Right Thing*, good and bad, we are given insight into the prominent role race still plays in the American film industry.

The articles were written from multiple angles. For ease they can be broken down into two types. First there are articles written by writers who recognize that racism is still one of America's most pressing problems and provide honest and thought provoking commentary on the films' attempt to confront racism head on, and discuss Lee's skills as a filmmaker that allow him to handle an obviously touchy subject. Other reviews appear oblivious to racism in America and are much more interested in attacking Lee's mental capacity and his apparent inability to comprehend the after-math that his film would probably cause and the affect it may have on audiences.

David Denby's *New York* magazine review of *Do The Right Thing* is an example of an article whose author recognizes the reality of racism but is clearly oblivious to the problems associated with racism that this film attempts to illustrate. Denby begins by accusing Spike Lee of trying to please too many crowds. While Denby recognizes Lee's immense talent as a filmmaker and storyteller, there are inferences that Lee may lack the sophistication to understand the effect that his storytelling may have on his audience. In fact, Lee, according to Denby, may not understand what he has expressed in this film. Denby describes *Do The Right Thing* as "a demonstration of the pointlessness of

violence that is also a celebration of violence.”<sup>19</sup> While Denby’s accusation is easily recognized as underdeveloped, it deserves discussion. He views *Do The Right Thing* as a celebration of violence, and Denby is not alone in this assessment. Other mainstream journalists have expressed similar conclusions. They tend to focus on the issues that were not central elements of the film, drugs and violence, and effectively subordinate the real issues the film presents.

Denby goes further in his analysis of Lee and his film. He concludes:

If Spike Lee is a commercial opportunist, he’s also playing with dynamite in an urban playground. The response could get away from him.<sup>20</sup>

Of course Mr. Denby might have dealt in his review with the real issues that Lee attempts to tackle in his film. Certainly Mr. Denby cannot believe that the very real social, political and economic issues addressed in Lee’s film do not exist; instead he chose to concoct new ones. It appears that he has a hidden agenda he would like to explore but only hints at it. What does he mean when he says, “get away from him” and “dynamite in an urban playground?” Denby says this as if he has never seen institutional and vigilante violence perpetrated against Black people in New York City. One has to wonder what rock he was hiding under following the racially-motivated murders of Yusef Hawkins, Michael Stewart and Eleanor Bumpurs that influenced the making of the film.

New York City, similar to other over-populated and under-funded urban centers, was at the time, without question, a Rodney King or two away from exploding. The ‘dynamite’ that Mr. Denby refers to was planted long before Spike Lee made *Do The Right Thing*. It is almost as if Denby wanted to indict Spike Lee as the cause of the racial tension that has long existed in New York City in particular, and America in general. But most intelligent and informed citizens know and recognize that interracial tensions were there long before Lee’s *Do The Right Thing*. The only thing *Do The Right Thing* showed us was what could happen if the dynamite were to explode. Of course, many filmgoers were not prepared for such a visual warning.

The Denby article and others have subtle racist undertones. The majority of people in contemporary America know the implications, meanings and power attached to certain words. For example, referring to a Black man as a boy is offensive. At least two articles written about *Do the Right Thing* refer to the characters Radio Raheem (Bill Nunn) and Buggin’ Out (Giancarlo Esposito) as boys. In a *Newsday* article by Mona Charen, she writes “Raheem and another boy had provoked Sal into a rage.”<sup>21</sup> David Denby is guilty here as well when he writes, “When some White policeman arrive and kill a Black boy, the crowd, riots, taking revenge on the nearest White property.”<sup>22</sup> Referring to a young Black man as “boy” may seem trivial, but again these are examples of the ongoing emasculation of Black men. The preceding passages say more than some readers probably recognize. According to the two journalists, the police killed a Black boy not a man. When the Los Angeles rebellion broke out in 1992,



the circumstances were reminiscent of the *Do The Right Thing* scenario. Denby, however, interprets the violence in *Do The Right Thing* as a stylistic gesture:

My guess is that Spike Lee thinks that violence solves nothing, but he'd like to be counted in the Black community as an angry man, a man ready, despite his success, to smash things. The end of the movie is an open embrace of futility.<sup>23</sup>

Less than a decade later little has changed. The Quentin Tarantino films *Reservoir Dogs* (Miramax, 1992), *Pulp Fiction* (Miramax, 1994) and *Jackie Brown* (Miramax, 1997) are certainly celebrations of gratuitous violence, and he gains critical and financial success writing and directing films that can be considered morally impotent. Yet few, if any, critics have linked Tarantino and Lee on this issue, let alone attacked Tarantino. Instead Tarantino has been praised as a genius, and his film *Pulp Fiction* can be found on the A.F.I. list of the top 100 films of all-time.

Critics also assumed that Mookie (Spike Lee) and his sister Jade (Joie Lee) are the only characters on the block with jobs. Although there is little evidence to support such a position, *Newsday* writer Mona Charen writes, "Lee...plays Mookie the delivery man—one of only two Black characters in the story who has a job."<sup>24</sup> In response to the criticism that Lee only shows unemployed Blacks, the film takes place on a Saturday in the middle of the summer. Thus, one can assume that most people do not work on Saturday. Additionally, Sweet Dick Willy (Robin Harris), one of the three corner men, mentions his job. Señor Love Daddy (Sam Jackson), on the other hand, is seen throughout the film performing his job as a disk jockey.

The lack of drugs in *Do The Right Thing* is not as problematic as some reviewers suggest. Richard Corliss' comments exemplify mainstream expectations and ideas of how Hollywood should portray urban Black America. Corliss writes, "On this street there are no crack dealers, hookers or muggers, just a 24 hour deejay Mister Señor Love Daddy."<sup>25</sup> This is a perfect example of preconceived racist images and expectations influencing a misguided writer, with a desire to project White stereotypes onto a Black locale. Does the presence of drugs have to dominate every film that is set in a Black neighborhood? This type of mass-marketed expectation supports the belief that drug-related narratives must dominate any story about the Black inner-city experience. This is just the type of logic that has made the transition difficult for African-Americans into mainstream American society and the entertainment industry as well.

Lee answered the charges and criticisms in the *Rolling Stone* article "Insight to Riot," written by David Handleman. Lee stated that,

This film is not about drugs, it's about people and racism. Drugs are at every level of society today in America. How many of you went and saw *Working Girls* or *Rain Man* and asked, 'Where are the drugs?' Nobody. But

the minute we have a Black film that takes place in the ghetto, people want to know where the drugs are...because that's the way you think of Black people. I mean, let's be honest.<sup>26</sup>

The Handleman article is representative of the articles that try to make sense of racism while remaining objective. Handleman even notices the contrasting opinions of the journalists who covered the 1989 Cannes Film Festival. For instance, Jeannie Williams, a columnist for *USA Today* had this to say, "I live in New York, I don't need this movie in New York this summer. I don't know what they're thinking!"<sup>27</sup> To which Roger Ebert responded, "How long has it been since you saw a film you thought would cause people to do anything?"<sup>28</sup> In their own way, the articles and their authors reflect exactly what Lee accuses America of doing—not dealing with racism. When people spend more time discussing the effects of violence in the movies rather than commenting on the social causes of violence, critics reproduce similar errors in judgment as contained in the Denby, Charen and Kroll pieces.

*Do The Right Thing* was never about violence, nor was it about whether violence was right or wrong. It was, however, about how racism can produce frustration that brings forth violent actions. Most people know that violence for the sake of violence is wrong. Even the quotations by Martin Luther King Jr. and Malcolm X juxtaposed at the film's end support this position. Lee stated his intention:

I wanted to generate a discussion about racism because too many people have their head in the sand about racism, they feel that the problem was eradicated in the 60s when Lyndon Johnson signed a few documents.<sup>29</sup>

Lee's dramatization of racism and the portrayal of violence in *Do The Right Thing* is much more accurate and responsible than most reviewers were willing to acknowledge. The past years have shown us that if things do not change the violence that Lee filmed in *Do The Right Thing* may become commonplace. In *Invisibility Blues*, Michele Wallace warns,

...we are surely headed for race riots much worse than the one depicted in the film if there aren't some drastic changes made in our present economic and political policies, in our representations of 'race', and in our individual attitudes about race.<sup>30</sup>

Wallace indicates the problems and the reality, and provides a grim prophecy about race riots of a different kind and magnitude.

In 1965, Malcolm X announced that the American dream has been a nightmare for African-Americans. The years following the release of *Do The Right Thing* have shown us that African-Americans have begun to violently awaken from the nightmare. The socioeconomic status of Black Americans and

their brutal treatment by municipal and state police agencies have not changed much since the end of slavery, Reconstruction, the *LA rebellion* in 1992 and most recently the murder of unarmed Amadou Diallo in New York city.

Lee's *Do The Right Thing* attempts to present the plight of urban Blacks and the experience of non-Blacks owning businesses in the Black community. Further it dramatizes the reality of inter-ethnic warring. All of these issues are part of the contemporary American psyche. David Ansen of *Newsweek* is well aware of the race issue and the complexities inherently connected. Ansen finds the following shortcomings in his comparison of White-directed films that deal with race and Lee's *Do The Right Thing*,

No matter how fine their intentions, they tend to speak in inflated, self righteous tones, and they always come down to Hollywood's favorite dialectic, bad guys versus good guys. They allow the audience to sit comfortably on the side of the angels.<sup>31</sup>

In contrast, Lee's film has no good-guy versus bad-guy dialectic working because the characters are more complex than essentialist binary oppo sites of good and bad, or dual morality. Sal, for example, is beaming with pride about kids growing up in the neighborhood on his pizza, only minutes before his fight with Radio Raheem. Acknowledging Lee's realistic character types, Clarence Page, a senior editor at the *Chicago Tribune*, adds, "Lee shows admirable balance as he explores the ambivalent, contradictory feelings Whites have about Blacks, feelings that can run from warm love to cold contempt and, perhaps most dangerous, benign indifference."<sup>32</sup> The benign indifference, as Clarence Page calls it, probably is a most destructive and dangerous sentiment. It more than likely played a role in how the film reviewers perceived racism as an important issue treated in *Do The Right Thing*. Ironically, while Sal tells Pino why the pizzeria will remain in the Black Bed-Stuy neighborhood, Sal refuses to place African-American personalities on the Wall of Fame in his Black Bed-Stuy pizza parlor, even though his Black Bed-Stuy patrons provide his Italian-American family with food, clothing and shelter.

*Do The Right Thing* was a serendipitous combination of excellent filmmaking and a timely issue that has grown in significance since the film's release. The Clarence Thomas-Anita Hill hearings, the Rodney King affair, and, most recently, the O.J.Simpson trial, have reasserted the questions dramatized in *Do The Right Thing*.

*Do The Right Thing's* achievement lies in Spike Lee's ability to surmount obstacles and deal evenly with the issue of racism, both in front of and behind the camera. From the outset, he rejected the film industry's suggestions that he make a film about Black-on-Black crime in a drug-infested neighborhood. If he had accepted such a project, the studio would surely have granted him a much larger production budget. Now many post-*Do The Right Thing* films dramatize drug dealers and violence, yet Lee refused to present these issues in *Do The Right*

*Thing*.<sup>33</sup> The recent cycle of Black gangster films romanticizes the drug dealers and gang violence that plague Black urban America. These films focus on one situation and provide a very narrow view of the Black urban experience.

*Do The Right Thing* reminds us that doing the right thing always involves recognizing interracial discord and attempting to eradicate the socioeconomic problems that produce it. For African-Americans, there exist additional right things to do, such as working within the Black community to find solutions. *Do The Right Thing* dramatizes a difficult and perplexing issue that the United States must resolve: how to reapportion psychological, social, and economic space both the individual and various racial and ethnic communities. The resolution of this contemporary political problem will surely promote the betterment of society. Hopefully, Lee will continue to explore these questions throughout his career.

# Check the Gate: Black Cinema at the Crossroads

THE REALITIES OF BLACK CINEMA ARE AS RELEVANT TODAY AS THEY WERE during the developmental stages of the classical style in the early 1930s when a young African-American film pioneer by the name of Oscar Micheaux was hawking his race movies on 125<sup>th</sup> Street in Harlem, NY or in the early 1970s when Melvin Van Peebles was “rated X by an all White jury,” and ushered in the *blaxploitation* cycle. These are the sites of investigation that scholars young and old attempt to unearth and bring forth to study. Yet, we are always drawn to those filmmakers that make films at those precise times we find to be the transformative moments in American film history that tend to garner the majority of attention. A strange irony exists in our own failure to make the obvious connections between the filmmakers whose works often help define the moments. For instance one can easily identify D.W.Griffith as the film pioneer at the epicenter of the birth of the American film industry. One could also make a strong argument for Spike Lee as the filmmaker at the center of the revitalization of the American independent film industry while simultaneously resuscitating Black cinema. Yet Griffith and Lee are often placed as polar opposites with two very different agendas and we fail to see the important similarities. When Griffith and Lee are compared, there are many similarities. That is not to say, however, they both share the same vision, ideology, or growth as filmmakers. The similarities: both are very prolific filmmakers; both generated a lot of audience attention from all Americans, not just audiences within their own race; both were stylistic innovators for their times; both generated social controversy; both will be remembered as major and important American filmmakers for generations to come.

As I thought more about comparing the two, I think they go in different directions when it comes to issues centered on race. Both, it is true, offer pointed and sometimes blunt representations of race relations. But Griffith started out blunt and pointed and remained so, with the result that over time his views of race relations became marginalized and eventually became something to be rejected. Spike, while always accounting for and representing difference, has become more inclusive and more mainstream over time. He has found a way to preserve racial difference throughout his films, and even critique the problems of American race relations, while at the same time crafting films that audiences of all

types increasingly recognize as authentic, genuine, and worthy of deep thought and consideration. When one thinks deeply about Griffith, the ultimate conclusion is always rejection of his representations of race, no matter your skin color. When one thinks deeply about Spike, his films actually build an audience over time that transcends racial boundaries while still allowing the audiences to always see the difference between the races. This is quite an accomplishment, and despite their many similarities, this is, I think, the major difference that sets them apart. Their legacy as filmmakers then is Griffith enduring as the filmmaker who defined what the mainstream representations of race cannot be, while Spike will endure for finding his way through his many films into crafting mainstream representations, thought-provoking and socially responsible, that still demonstrate racial difference.

Often their work is dismissed out of hand because they do attempt to deal with America's fascination with race. While Griffith nor Lee fails or succeeds in the social conversion promoted in *Birth of A Nation* and *Do The Right Thing*, the films do change America's conversation about race during the era the films were released and forced audiences to become more self reflective and discriminating consumers.

### DOES WE STILL HAVE TO SHUFFLE?

The debate continues to rage, whether or not Hollywood remains the best option, or as many recognize, the most viable option for reaching a mass audience. The breakthrough period for Black commercial cinema erupted in the late 1960s and early 1970s. The pervasive presence of stereotypes of Blacks in the culture industry at large and particularly in commercial film indicates that folk fallacies are not confined to bygone forms of entertainment. The racist roots that influenced the popular imagination that created and supported vaudeville, burlesque and the minstrel show have appeared, often thinly disguised, in the works of sociologist, historians, and folklorists. The fallacies embraced by the popular imagination about Blacks can be found in nearly every area of the culture industry. Even the most sensitive writers and directors, with malice or not, have dipped into the body of Black stereotypes to inform their representations of blackness. The historical use of stereotypes and archetypes in the American film industry illustrates the powerful hold that the *mammy*, *tom*, *mulattoes*, *coons* and *bucks* have on the popular imagination. Stereotypical images are fundamentally limiting and have a profound effect on what one views as real, and more appropriately, culturally relevant and authentic representations of blackness.

Racist attitudes towards Blacks and the use of dated source materials in cinema's formative years contributed to the development of film strategies for the representation and positioning of Black images in American cinema. Even when times seem to change in terms of America's ability to deal with its race problem and as society becomes more accommodating and interested in living up

to the notion of the “melting pot”, the racist, stereotypical and degrading depictions of Blacks in the cinema persisted. Even today the idea of a “melting pot” remains problematic for African-American filmmakers because as a collective African-Americans have never been able to assimilate into the dominate culture without denouncing their own identity. Accordingly, racist two-dimensional characters and limited narrative structures continue to plague the representation of blackness in mainstream commercial cinema. In many ways, the mere pursuit for accurate representations and cultural authenticity becomes a double edged sword.

For example, Quentin Tarantino frequently exploits Black culture, language, music, and style as a writer and director. His films are heavily influenced by the 70s *blaxploitation* cycle, a Tarantino staple is his profuse and blatant use of the word “nigger,” In the films *Pulp Fiction* (Miramax, 1994), and *Jackie Brown* (Miramax, 1997). Both films received critical and commercial success, yet each film perpetuates Black caricatures and legitimizes the use of racist colloquialisms. Films like *Pulp Fiction* and *Jackie Brown* recall moments in *Birth*, where Black characters are used to create fear, rage, pity, and comedy for the audience. Hence, these characters are limited in their development and only serve to provide narrative cues.

As Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer observed in the 1940s all of the elements that make up and influence the culture industry existed long before the culture industry came into existence—the same elements, which informed and shaped the image of the Black Americans in the commercial cinema. Early silent films simply liberally borrowed nineteenth-century stereotypes from Southern literary and minstrel forms of “mass-entertainment.” The short vignettes merely presented a Black character or a White actor in Blackface to elicit desired responses. The early use, by Thomas Edison and Edwin S. Porter, of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* as source material is evidence of marketable appeal for the *uncle tom*, and early on the emerging film community recognized the commercial possibilities.

Time and silence worked against the development of accurate cinematic examinations of Black life. Prior to the innovations of narrative editing, the Black image itself frequently functioned as the only dramatic element necessary as a source of meaning as represented in the Lubin films. Audiences entered the nickelodeon and later the cinema palace with a certain frame of reference for filmic representations previously fixed in the popular imagination.

Early sound films briefly entertained the possibility of adding depth to Black characters and the Black experience. The talkie, *Hearts in Dixie*, failed because the writers, producers and director relied on minstrel traditions that worked against any possibilities to make the story somehow universal. The traces of the minstrel traditions are too strong. While *Hallelujah* is clearly created from a similar space, there is a structural complexity that makes up for the fallacies that destroy the attempts made in *Hearts in Dixie*. By drawing from Black folk culture rather than solely from the minstrel tradition, King Vidor is able to present a seemingly informed representation of Black people and of Black life.

*Hearts* and *Hal-lelujah* attempt to use folk culture in addition to religious belief to develop a universal theme. The strategy fails because it suppresses the culture specific nature of Black traditions to such an extent that the possibility to become universal is lost. Material taken out of context, again, contributes to folk fallacies as an informing element.

Whereas *Hearts* and *Hallelujah* fail to pass the cultural authenticity test, *The Blood of Jesus*, maintains much of its cultural integrity, the use of the folk drama and film's embracing of agreed upon Black cultural expressive traditions. Since *The Blood of Jesus* was produced for a specific audience, which shared a common set of cultural assumptions, the film was not as concerned with the "other agendas" that informed the studio films.

Sadly enough, Hollywood continues to draw from the same limited traditions. Thus the five archetypes so brilliantly documented by Bogle are still gainfully employed. They not only remain popular both critically and commercially, but are now rewarded with the film industries highest honor the "Oscar." To date all five of the archetypes have been awarded with a statuette. It is important to understand that a critique of the Academy of Motion Pictures Arts and Sciences is not only warranted, but long overdue. One must also be reminded that this is not a criticism of Halle Berry, Denzel Washington, Cuba Gooding Jr., Whoopi Goldberg, Louis Gossett Jr., Sidney Poitier, or Hattie McDaniel, the actors who make up the very select group of African-Americans also referred to as Academy Award winners. African-American actors have had to struggle for both the work and the recognition, for most the adulation has not been without its own cost. In order to receive a nomination from the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences, the material has to be "Oscar quality," and the performance must then be "Oscar caliber." Historically the Oscar quality roles have neatly fit into the spaces provided by the five archetypes. And the Academy has yet to see African-American actors beyond those narrow confines.

To date there have only been a handful of African-Americans actors deemed worthy to win the Academy Award, and in the 75-year history of the Academy of Motion Pictures Arts and Sciences not a single Oscar given to an African-American performer in the major acting categories has been able to escape the *mammy, tom, coon, buck or tragic mulatto*. The members of the Academy can only see fit to reward African-Americans actors doing their very best, portraying us at our very worst in roles that provide comfort by maintaining the status quo.

### RE-THINKING A BLACK FILM AESTHETIC

The presumption that a Black film aesthetic can only be derived from a film such as *The Blood of Jesus*, *Sweetback*, *Daughters of the Dust*, or *Do The Right Thing* would ultimately confine and limit this study of the possibilities for Black filmic representation. In the past, and certainly in the future, there will be films unable to neatly fit under the rubric Black film or adhere to a stringent notion of a Black aesthetic. Films such as Williams' *Blood of Jesus*, Van Peebles' *Sweetback*, and



Lee's *Do The Right Thing* not only demonstrate the possibility of establishing useful criteria in just such a direction, but at the same time illustrate the danger of using terminology that can almost be stringent at the risk of exclusion. Historically, the term *Black film* has been used to identify variety of productions, primarily defined by the makeup of the cast and the thematic issues tied to the story. Many of these films were produced by a desire to promote racial uplift while simultaneously promoting that Blacks should stay in their place. The often inaccurate and derogatory images have undermined representation of distinctive aspects of Black culture, which in themselves include elements of social and political consciousness. Therefore the term *Black film* and its attendant discourse similar to Black music has to move beyond the boundaries of just being a "Black film." Why can't *Do The Right Thing* be thought of as a social problem film? Why not think of *Car Wash* (Universal, 1976) as a musical? Ultimately the relationships that films have to distinct cultural categories of expression and aesthetic values and, most important, film genres, must be considered.

If anything should have been learned during the *blaxploitation* cycle it was that a Black aesthetic in films does not and cannot guarantee the elimination of stereotypes, social or artistic. Stereotypes are so deeply rooted in the fabric of American society that one should not expect to disappear because of the emergence of Black filmmakers presenting images of Black life that differ from those found by other filmmakers, past and present working, in Hollywood. The persistence of stereotypes into the twenty-first century in films such as *Save the Last Dance* (Paramount Pictures, 2001) and *Down to Earth* (Paramount Pictures, 2001) demonstrate their resilience even in light of contradictory evidence. Yet the Black aesthetic has expanded the possibilities for filmic representations especially in the past thirty years. Even the contributions of Mr. Poitier cannot be ignored; yes, he might have been the ultimate "uncle tom" but without his artistic trials and tribulations the once genteel *Superspade* could not have transmogrified into the iconic images we have now attached to the name, Super-fly, Shaft and Sweetback.

Many filmmakers both Black and White have borrowed from the 1970's *blaxploitation* era. Films such as *Shaft* (Paramount Pictures, 2000), *Jackie Brown*, and *Dead Presidents* (Buena Vista, 1995) have borrowed liberally and literally which helps illustrate the importance of the era and the influence on commercial film industry. However, there are flaws and fundamental problems mainly the inability or failure of the directors to capture the energy and authenticity of the era in meaningful ways. While Singleton's *Shaft* managed to gross \$70 million on a \$45 million budget, the retelling or update stayed away from the primary element that made the franchise successful in the first place. Rather than embrace the myth of the Black superstud, the film's director ran in the opposite direction, essentially emasculating the film and any possibility of connecting the past with the present. In the original *Shaft* is a legendary sexual stud who sleeps with just about every woman he encounters. In Singleton's film, *Shaft* is almost asexual. We do not seem him romantically or sexually engaged with any of the women

who cross his path. Similar to the Bond franchise, Shaft always gets his man or kills the bad guy. However, in Singleton's updated installment, Shaft fails to catch his target. Shaft is repeatedly upstaged, yet the most egregious misstep in the updated version of *Shaft* is the character's employment with the New York Police Department. Thus the update lies in complete contradiction with the principles and social agenda of the earlier film. Like Sweetback, Shaft was an advocate for the Black community. Shaft helps to protect the Black citizens from the cruel injustice of society. In modern New York City, the police have raged havoc on the Black community with numerous shootings and mutilations of Black people. Therefore, placing Shaft in a police uniform is a misguided and uninformed adaptation that pays the price. Shaft, in the new film, eventually becomes a "black private dick" but never a "sex machine to all the chicks".

The modern update of *Shaft* illustrates the challenges lying ahead for African-American filmmakers and actors. Artists must continue to fight for artistic integrity and value the art and craft of filmmakers. Additionally, filmmakers must gain a true sense of the business and politics involved in the completion and marketing of a major motion picture. Cinema revolves around the image. The screen provides a window into one's artistic vision, if this vision is altered or destroyed; the art of cinema becomes bastardized. African-American filmmakers must continue to protect the art of cinema.

While *blaxploitation* was unable to fulfill its early potential, either critically or commercially the contributions cannot be trivialized and should not be demonized because the full range of Black humanity was not presented. Without question the cycle laid the foundation and opened the eyes of the Hollywood elite to the economic realities and benefits associated with Black participation at all levels of the creative process. While Lee, Townsend, Dash and so many others have picked up the torch and carried it so to speak, the work is far from over. But more important the Black films produced since 1970 have dramatically altered the range of possibility for filmic representations of Blacks produced in the commercial cinema and have clearly moved beyond the margins toward the mainstream.

During the first 100 years of American cinema there were many important films, and many important cycles of Black feature film production. Yet *post-soul Black cinema* stands out because it marks a particular set of transformative moments: 1) Black filmmakers are able to negotiate their way into the mainstream with favorable terms; 2) the Black audience begins to make the transformation into discriminating consumer demanding films that are both culturally relevant and authentic. Unlike the earlier breakthrough cycles often associated with Micheaux and Van Peebles *post-soul Black cinema* does not have a rigid and easily identifiable beginning and end. You see *Boyz N the Hood*, *Friday*, and *Do The Right Thing* were not "one shot deals," like so many other false starts prior to 1989. Many of the contemporary filmmakers who have followed in the footsteps of Lee have not only found commercial success, but the representations of Black life and culture are now presented from a more

informed Black perspective and possess the cultural authenticity many have longed for. For better or for worse we no longer have one type of Black film that is easily identifiable, if anything the types of films now finding their way to the marketplace have complicated the very notion of what it means to be a Black film. Where once films with a majority Anglo cast were the least likely to be directed by an African-American even that once foreign frontier has been conquered. While there is still a long way to go for African-Americans attempting to make it in Hollywood for the first time the potential first presented during the *blaxploitation* era is finally being realized.

APPENDIX A  
Text of a Letter Sent to the Motion Picture  
Association of America and Announced at a  
Press Conference in Los Angeles, March 22,  
1971

Attention: Mr. Jack Valenti,  
President

Gentlemen:

As you know I am the director and producer of the film entitled "SWEET SWEETBACK'S BAADASSSSS SONG." "SWEET SWEETBACK'S BAADASSSSS SONG" is a Black film. As a Black artist and independent producer of motion pictures, I refuse to submit this film, made from Black perspective for Blacks, to the Motion Picture Code and Administration for rating that would be applicable to the Black community. Neither will I "self apply" an "X" rating to my movie, if such a rating, is to be applicable to Black audiences, as called for by the Motion Pictures Code and Administration rules. I charge that your film rating body has no right to tell the Black community what it may or may not see. Should the rest of the community submit to your censorship that is its business, but White standards shall no longer be imposed on the Black community.

When an artist refuses to submit work to your jury (all White) your rules require him to self apply an "X" rating to his film. Such a rating necessarily limits the number of persons who will see the film and stigmatizes the film. This is intolerable to me as it should be to any other American. Therefore, I have decided to file suit against the Motion Picture Association and Mr. Jack Valenti, its president, on the basis that existing film rating practices violate state and federal anti-trust, unfair competition and other laws.

Rights of expression, the free flow of ideas, the nature of the creative process, and the rights of the Black community are at issue here. In my suit all appropriate judicial relief will be sought including money damages. The American Civil Liberties Union of Southern California will take an *amicus curiae* position in this suit particularly with respect to the unconstitutionality of the code as a form of prior censorship.

If a satisfactory reply is not made to this letter within ten days, I shall proceed.

Sincerely yours,  
Melvin Van Peebles

## APPENDIX B

### Brief Plot Summary of *Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song*

MELVIN VAN PEEBLES' *SWEET SWEETBACK'S BAADASSSSS SONG* WAS A transformative moment in the history of Black independent cinema and the Black power movement. It was released three years after the assassination of Dr. Martin L. King, Jr. and almost twenty years before the Rodney King beating. Certainly a film about a violent and highly sexualized pimp performing a revolutionary act, fighting back against the institutions of oppression represented by police and city hall, and winning qualifies as revolutionary.

The film takes place in the Watts community of Los Angeles, and stars "The Black Community," with Van Peebles in the title role of Sweetback, a tough pimp raised in a brothel. Sweetback makes a living doing what he does best—pleasing the ladies. One day, he agrees to accompany two White cops down to the station who need to bring in suspects to participate in a lineup for a politically-charged murder case. The cops pick up, arrest, and nearly beat to death a young Black revolutionary named Mu-Mu (Hubert Scalo), before ever arriving at the station. Acting more from a reactionary position than from any type of revolutionary or political agenda, Sweetback steps in and defends Mu-Mu and comes close to beating the cops to death.

The next two thirds of the film follows Sweetback's journey to Mexico in search of freedom. Along the way he must evade the cops and satisfy the ladies just to stay ahead of the cops. The manhunt gives van Peebles the opportunity to explore what's really going down in the community that created, nurtured, and harbored Sweetback. There have been arguments that any victory for Sweetback is hollow. Such arguments ignore the reality of the community presented in the film, which posits that if Sweetback finds freedom, then the community has beaten the "man," and however hollow, has for a change won. We are now thirty years beyond the release of *Sweetback*, and must recognize the film still resonates. Arguments are made that race relations in the United States have improved, but after Rodney King, Eleanor Bumpurs, Yolanda Haggerty, Abner Louima, and most recently Amadou Diallo and Robert Russ, we must ask, have they really?

## APPENDIX C

### Brief Plot Summary of *Do the Right Thing*

For his third film, Spike Lee chose to explore the racial and social divide of the Bedford-Stuyvesant section of Brooklyn, New York. He uses the hottest day of the year as the epicenter of the explosion waiting to happen on a dilapidated block that has seen better times and better days. The only signs of economic life on the block: a storefront radio station, where Mr. Señor Love Daddy (Samuel L. Jackson) provides a running commentary on the state of the block; a typical inner-city convenience store, owned by the typical Korean couple; and Sal's Famous Pizzeria, the only White-owned/operated business on the block. Sal (Danny Aiello) is equal parts nice guy and closet racist, who can remember the kids on the block growing up on his pizza. His two sons represent the two sides of their father, the genial Vito (Richard Edson) and angry, racist Pino (John Turturro). Then there is the lone Black employee, Mookie (Spike Lee), who takes an hour or more to deliver pizzas no more than a block away, yet he's "got to get paid." His sister Jade (Joie Lee, Spike's sister) has a direction and a steady gig, and wants to see her brother Mookie "be a man," and handle his responsibility, notably his son with girlfriend Tina (Rosie Perez). Two of Mookie's best friends are Radio Raheem (Bill Nunn), a larger than life ghetto everyman, who lets his massive "ghetto blaster" speak for him, blasting Public Enemy's *Fight the Power* non-stop; and Buggin' Out (Giancarlo Esposito), the block's misguided revolutionary prophet of misguided rage. It's Buggin' Out who notices the lack of color on Sal's "Wall of Fame," a photo gallery of famous Italian-Americans, and decides to raise the citizens of the block to boycott "Sal's Famous." And on a day well prepared to boil over with tensions already running high, the consequences become tragic.

# Notes

## INTRODUCTION

- 1 Clayton Riley, foreword *To Find an Image: Black Films from Uncle Tom to Super Fly*, by James Murray (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill Company, 1973).
- 2 David Bordwell, Janet Staiger, and Kristin Thompson mark the period 1917–1960 as the classical period in their seminal study, *The Classical Hollywood Cinema: Film Style & Mode of Production to 1960* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985). David Bordwell writes, “Stylistically, from 1917 on, the classical model became dominant, in the sense that most American fiction films since that moment employed fundamentally similar narrative, temporal, and spatial systems. At the same time the studio mode of production had become organized: detailed division of labor, the continuity script, and a hierarchical managerial system became the principal procedures.” While Hollywood still produces films that adhere to the classical mode, Bordwell explains why 1960, “The year 1960 was chosen for reasons of history and of convenience. In the film industry, it was widely believed that at the end of the decade Hollywood had reached the end of its mature existence.”
- 3 Spike Lee, *Spike Lee’s Gotta Have It: Inside Guerilla Filmmaking* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1987).
- 4 Richard Dyer, *The Matter of Images: Essays on Representations* (London: Routledge, 1993) p. 13.
- 5 *Ibid.*, p. 14.
- 6 James R. Nesteby, *Black Images in American Films, 1896–1954: The Interplay Between Civil Rights and Film Culture* (Washington, D.C.: University Press of America, 1982), p. 2.
- 7 Lewis Jacobs, *The Rise of the American Film: A Critical History* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1939), p. 175.
- 8 Donald Bogle, *Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies, and Bucks: An Interpretive History of Blacks in American Films* (New York: Viking Press, 1973), p. 17.
- 9 Manthia Diawara, “Black American Cinema: The New Realism,” in *Black American Cinema*, ed. Manthia Diawara (New York: Continuum, 1993), p. 11.
- 10 Tom Gunning, *D.W. Griffith and the Origins of American Narrative Film* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1991) p. 41. Gunning writes, “Andre Gredault and I have termed the primary motive force of the earliest filmmaking the *cinema of*

*attractions*. This term indicates that filmmakers such as Melies or the British pioneer G.A.Smith were fascinated by other possibilities of cinema than its storytelling potential. Such apparently different approaches as the trick film and actuality filmmaking unite in using cinema to present a series of views to audiences, views fascinating because of their illusory power (from realistic illusion of motion offered to the first audiences by Lumiere, to the magical illusions concocted by Melies) and exoticism.”

- 11 See the Bibliography of the dissertation for a full citation of these works.
- 12 Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno in *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (New York: Social Studies Association, Inc., 1944) p. 121, outline the economic reality of the movie business in the chapter, “The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception.” They write “Movies and Radio need no longer pretend to be art. The truth that they are just business is made into an ideology in order to justify the rubbish they deliberately produce. They call themselves industries; and when their directors’ incomes are published, any doubt about the social utility of the finished products is removed.”
- 13 Mark A.Reid, *Redefining Black Film* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), p. 2.
- 14 See the Bibliography for complete citation of these previously mentioned studies.

## **RACE AND REPRESENTATION IN THE CLASSICAL STYLE**

- 1 Dyer, p. 1.
- 2 Gunning, p. 85.
- 3 Gunning, pp. 90–91.
- 4 Robert Sklar, *Movie-Made America: A Social History of American Movies* (New York: Random House, 1975) p. 47.
- 5 Sklar, p. 47.
- 6 For further clarification see Thomas Cripps’ discussion on the assimilation of Jews into American culture via the motion picture within this context. “The Movie Jew as an Image of Assimilation, 1903–1927,” *Journal of Popular Film*, no. 4 (1975): pp. 190–207.
- 7 Myron Lounsbury, “‘Flashes of Lightning’: The Moving Picture in the Progressive Era,” *Journal of Popular Culture*, no. 3 (1970): p. 77.
- 8 Bordwell, Staiger, and Thompson, p. 16.
- 9 Henry Albert Phillips, *The Photodrama* (Larchmont, New York: Stanhope-Dodge Publishing Co., 1914), pp. 75–76.
- 10 Jack C.Ellis, *A History of Film* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice Hall, 1990).
- 11 Lewis Jacobs, *The Rise of the American Film: A Critical History* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1939), p. 187.
- 12 Thomas Cripps, *Slow Fade to Black: the Negro in American Film, 1900–1942* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977), pp. 8–9.
- 13 Cripps, p. 12.
- 14 Kemp R.Niver, *Biograph Bulletins 1896–1908* (Los Angeles: Locare Research Group, 1971), p. 72.
- 15 *American Mutoscope & Biograph Company: Picture Catalogue* (New York: 1902), p. 37.



- 16 Film historians have noted that in the preclassical cinema Black roles were played by both Black actors and White actors in Blackface. In "Migrating to the Movies: The Emergence of Black Urban Film Culture, 1893–1920," Ph.D. dissertation, University of Chicago, 1999, Jacalyn Stewart writes, "Blackface predominated during this period in part because most studios did not regularly employ Black actors, perhaps indicating both discriminatory hiring practices and segregationist ideas about the social mixing of black and white actors."
- 17 Jacalyn N. Stewart, "Migrating to the Movies: The Emergence of Black Urban Film Culture, 1893–1920," Ph.D. dissertation, University of Chicago, 1999, p. 72.
- 18 Ed Guerrero, *Framing Blackness: The African-American Image in Film* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1993), p. 12.
- 19 Niver, p. 290.
- 20 *Ibid.*, p. 290.
- 21 Nesteby, p. 3.
- 22 Stewart, p. 76.
- 23 Bogle, p. 8.
- 24 See Bogle's description of the early types and films, pp. 3–18.
- 25 Cripps, pp. 237–240.
- 26 Robert Benchley, "Hearts in Dixie," *Opportunity*, (April, 1929): p. 122.
- 27 Sterling Brown and Alain Locke, "Folk Values in a New Medium," in *Folk-say*, ed. B.A. Botkin. (Norman: The University of Oklahoma Press 1929–32)
- 28 Diawara, p. 3.
- 29 Bogle, p. 17.
- 30 Clyde Taylor, describing his movie-going experience as a youth in the *Original Documentary on the Making of Bamboozled* (New Line Cinema: 2001).

### **THE POLITICAL ECONOMY OF BLAXPLOITATION**

- 1 James Monaco, *American Film Now* (New York: Zoetrope, 1984), p. 64.
- 2 August Meier and Elliot Rudwick, *From Plantation to Ghetto* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1976), p. 272.
- 3 Clifford Mason, "Why Does White America Love Sidney Poitier So?" *New York Times*, 10 November 1967.
- 4 James Baldwin, "Sidney Poitier," *Look* no. 23 (July 1968): p. 56.
- 5 Daniel J. Leab, *From Sambo to Superspade: The Black Experience in Motion Pictures* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1975), p. 230.
- 6 Bogle, p. 220.
- 7 Murray Schumach, "Stars Join Drive against Bigotry," *New York Times*, 15 July 1963.
- 8 "Too Much of 'Negro Problem' Put at Films' Doorstep? Wonders Bette Davis," *Variety*, 31 July 1963, 2.
- 9 "Negro Actors in H' Wood Clover," *Variety*, 3 June 1964, 2.
- 10 Vincent J. Burke, "US Plans to Prod Film Industry on Job Discrimination Charges," *Los Angeles Times*, 19 October 1969.
- 11 "Negros Want IATSE Memberships: It's 'Featherbedding' Say Lamp Ops; Civil Rights Gets Craft Union Nix," *Variety*, 7 August 1963.
- 12 *Ibid.*

- 13 Burke, October 19, 1969.
- 14 *Ibid.*
- 15 Vattel Rose, "Afro-American Literature as a Cultural Resource for a Black Cinema Aesthetic," in *Black Cinema Aesthetics: Issues in Independent Black Filmmaking* (Athens: Ohio University, 1982), p. 30.
- 16 Robert Sklar, *Movie-Made America: A Cultural History of American Movies* (New York: Random House, 1975), p. 301.
- 17 Melvin Van Peebles, *Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song* (Detroit: Neo Press, 1971), p. 99.
- 18 *Ibid.*, preface.
- 19 A copy of the letter that Van Peebles sent to the MPAA is included in [Appendix A](#) of this dissertation.
- 20 *Ibid.*, p. i.
- 21 Brad Darrach, "Sweet Melvin's Very Hot, Very Cool Black Movie," *Life* no. 71 (August 13, 1971): p. 61.
- 22 Lerone Bennett, Jr., "The Emancipation Orgasm: Sweetback in Wonderland," *Ebony*, no. 26 (September, 1971): 106–116.
- 23 Huey P. Newton, "He Won't Bleed Me: A Revolutionary Analysis of *Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song*" *The Black Panther Party*, vol. 6 no. 21, 16 June 1971, pp. A–L.
- 24 *Ibid.*, pp. A–L.
- 25 Bennett, pp. 106–116.
- 26 *Ibid.*, pp. 106–116.
- 27 *Ibid.*, pp. 106–116.
- 28 *Ibid.*, pp. 106–116.
- 29 *Ibid.*, pp. 106–116.
- 30 Yearwood, p. 55.
- 31 Marshall Hyatt, *The Afro-American Cinematic Experience, An Annotated Bibliography and Filmography* (Wilmington: Scholarly Resources, 1983), pp. 244–245.
- 32 Riley, "Shaft Can Do Everything," *New York Times*, 13 August 1972.
- 33 Bennett, pp. 106–116.
- 34 Sklar, pp. 296–299
- 35 Leab, pp. 2–5
- 36 Vincent Canby, "'Shaft'— At Last, a Good Saturday Night Movie," *New York Times*, 11 July 1971.
- 37 Riley, "Shaft Can Do Everything," *New York Times*, 13 August 1972.
- 38 *Ibid.*
- 39 Leab, p. 254.
- 40 Alvin Poussaint, "Cheap Thrills that Degrade Blacks," *Psychology Today* no. 7 (February, 1974): 22–26.
- 41 Poussaint, pp. 22–26
- 42 Cornel West, *Race Matters* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1993). West writes, "To engage in a serious discussion of race in America, we must begin not with the problems of Black people but with the flaws of American society—flaws rooted in historic inequalities and longstanding cultural stereotypes. How we set up the terms for discussing racial issues shapes our perception and response to these issues. As long as Black people are viewed as a "them," the burden falls on Blacks to do all the

“cultural” and “moral” work necessary for healthy race relations. The implication is that only certain Americans can define what it means to be American—and the rest must simply “fit in.”

### ***DO THE RIGHT THING REVISITED***

- 1 David Denby, “He’s Gotta Have It,” *New York* (June 26, 1989): pp. 53–54.
- 2 In *Five for Five: The Films of Spike Lee* (New York: Stewart, Tabori and Chang, 1991), p. 14. Lee writes, “*School Daze* was a real movie; *She’s Gotta Have It* had been made mostly with friends and relatives and \$175,000. *Daze* was 6.5 million bucks”
- 3 Pamela Johnson, “They’ve Gotta Have It,” *Black Enterprise* (July 1989): 36–44.
- 4 Spike Lee, with Lisa Jones, *Do the Right Thing: a Spike Lee Joint* (New York: Fireside, 1989) p. 31. In this chapter, all subsequent references to this book are noted in the footnotes by *DRT* and page number.
- 5 *DRT*, p. 31.
- 6 Johnson, p. 38.
- 7 *DRT*, p. 57.
- 8 *DRT*, p. 76.
- 9 *DRT*, p. 76.
- 10 *DRT*, p. 80.
- 11 *DRT*, p. 79.
- 12 Quoted in Jack Mathews, “The Cannes File: Controversial film for a Long Hot Summer,” *Los Angeles Times*, 22 May 1989.
- 13 Johnson, “They’ve Gotta Have It,” p.38.
- 14 *DRT*, p. 87.
- 15 *DRT*, p. 99.
- 16 *DRT*, p. 107.
- 17 *DRT*, p. 97
- 18 Jay Carr, “Spike Lee Spotlights Race Relations,” *New York Times* (June 25, 1989).
- 19 David Denby, “He’s Gotta Have It.” *New York* (June 26, 1989): pp. 53–54.
- 20 *Ibid.*, pp. 53–54.
- 21 Mona Charen, “What is The Right Thing to Do, Spike?” *Newsday* (July 12, 1989): 60.
- 22 Denby, pp. 53–54.
- 23 *Ibid.*, pp. 53–54.
- 24 Charen, p. 60.
- 25 Denby, pp. 53–54.
- 26 David Handleman, “Insight to Riot,” *Rolling Stone* (July 13, 1989): p. 104.
- 27 *Ibid.*, p. 104.
- 28 *Ibid.*, p. 104.
- 29 Michael T.Kaufman, “In a New Film Spike Lee Tries to Do the Right Thing,” *New York Times* (June 25, 1989).
- 30 Michelle Wallace, *Invisibility Blues* (New York: Verso, 1990), p. 107.
- 31 David Ansen, “How Hot Is Too Hot: Searing, Nervy and Very Honest,” *Newsweek* (July 3, 1989): 65.

- 32 Clarence Page, "Spike Lee's Warning About Race Relations in America." *Chicago Tribune* (June 25, 1989), sec. 13, p. 5.
- 33 Lee does treat Black-on-Black violence and drug related issues in *Jungle Fever* (1991) and *Clockers* (1995).

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