

IMAGES OF BLACK PEOPLE IN CINEMA:

A HISTORICAL OVER-VIEW *

by

Teshome H. Gabriel

"Western cinema from the beginning has and continues to destroy the system of African culture to such an extent that there are an enormous number of people who have never left Africa but who continue to have a certain alienation that they've learned from the cinema. At times they've gone to the point of abandoning their family names to take the names of movie stars and actors."

- Ousmane Sembene (African)

"We must insist that our children are not exposed to a steady diet of so-called black movies that glorify black males as pimps, dope pushers, gangsters and super males with vast physical prowess but no cognitive skills"

- Junius Griffin (Afro-American)

Cinema history gives stark evidence of how filmmakers from the Western world presented the African and his environment in an all degrading light. Early film ventures of the Western world concentrated on the popularization of the myth; white as superior and black as inferior and Europe as civilized and Africa as primitive. Until recently, Africa meant some or all of the following - "Dark continent", "savage", "Tarzan", "Spear", "jungle", "cannibal", "primitive" and "mysterious".¹ These negative images were transmitted to western audiences with no alternative images to counter-attack instilled prejudices acquired from colonial literature of the period.²

The damage inflicted from the initial intrusion of the cinema into Africa is so great that modern day attempts to rectify the damage, however sincere and convincing, have only helped to further enforce the caricatures and popular stereotypes that have followed the black race since the invention of motion pictures.³

*This is the first of a two part series on the subject. We will announce the next installment in a subsequent number of this journal.

The First Fifteen Years

In the United States, from the beginning of films, the blacks were portrayed as "childlike" lackeys meant for abuse and condescension. The earliest example of a film dealing with a wholesale stereotyped character is *Fights of Nations* (1905). In this film the Mexican was caricatured as a "treacherous fellow", the Jew as a "briber", the black as a "cake walker", "buck dancer", and "razor-thrower". The white race was presented as the bringer of peace to all mankind.⁴

Of all the races none were so consistently and systematically slandered as the black peoples. Here are two examples of the early periods blatantly anti-black portrayals: *The Wooing and Wedding of A Coon* (1905) was described as "a genuine Ethiopian Comedy" but instead the picture poked grotesque fun at a black couple on their honeymoon by showing them as complete idiots;⁵ *The Masher* (1907) was a film in which a lady's man wooed anyone in skirts and always suffered rebuffs until one day he succeeded with a lady wearing a veil, but, alas, the object of his romantic pursuit turned out to be "a Negro woman!"⁶

Other caricatures and stereotypes were also to be found in a series of slapstick comedies appearing between 1910 and 1911, for instance, *Pickaninnies and Watermelon*, *Chicken Thief*, *Coon-town Suffragettes* and *The Rastus* series; *How Rastus Got His Turkey*, *Rastus and Chicken*, *Rastus in Zululand*. Rastus was a person who did all sorts of odd jobs only when he had to, and once he acquired a few coins he preferred to sleep.⁷ A caption of the time read, "a darky needs warmth". The central black character in this series was Stepin Fetchit.

Fetchit's great gift was in rendering his coons as such thoroughly illiterate figures that they did not have to respond when demeaned because they were always unaware of what was being done. ⁸

Racial stock attitudes also appeared in the *Sambo* series between 1909 and 1911. Sambo was described as "docile but irresponsible, loyal but lazy, humble but chronically given to lying and stealing".⁹ Such caricatures in which the black race was systematically exemplified not only as moronic, clownish and menial but also subhuman prompted critic Daniel Lead to comment:

Just about everything traditionally held to be of some value in the United States was absent from this movie stereotype of the Negro. ¹⁰

The Uncle Tom themes began with the "perennial favorite", *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1910) and expounded to the fullest in such films as *The Dark Romance of a Tobacco Can* (1911), *For Massa's Sake* (1911), *The Debt* (1912) and *In Slavery Days* (1913). In the film, *For Massa's Sake* "a faithful slave" was so loyally attached to his master that he voluntarily offered himself for sale in order to save his master from the pain of paying off gambling debts. Before the deed could be completed the master discovered a gold mine! White supremacist ideology thus maligned and ridiculed the black peoples in malicious stock attitudes and in all other facets:

*Always as toms are chased, harassed, hounded, flogged, enslaved and insulted, they keep the faith, n'er turn against their white massas, and remain hearty, submissive, stoic, generous, selfless, and oh-so-very kind.*¹¹

Hollywood's tactic in promoting society's racial fears were also effectively utilized in the series of "miscegenation films" dealing with the curse of mixed blood. In, for example, *The Nigger* and *The Octoroon* (1913)--

*In all the films made during this period dealing with Octoroons and mulattos the apparent shame and degradation of being even the smallest degree non-white was exploited to the full, with the obvious implication that there was something sub-human in being black.*¹²

Actually, the anti-black images of the films were tolerated because audiences were coned and/or willing to accept the view of Africans and peoples of African descent as being less human than themselves. This way they were made to feel better in their own deprivation. The negative images coupled with their own prejudices psychologically cemented "justifiable acts" in the legal, socio-economic and political level against the black race, a race that historically claimed nothing but its' very own.

In keeping with its tradition Hollywood through D.W. Griffith saw massive economic benefits and the enormous myth-making potential of the motion picture. In *The Birth of a Nation* (1915) every racist syndrome conceivable and the entire pantheon of caricatures were exploited to the fullest.¹³ The film was an adaptation from a book, "The Clansman", also the original title of the film. The film depicted "freed" blacks as lustful villains, ignorant and arrogant and viciously falsified their lives and struggles and their remarkable roles during the Reconstruction era.

The film was reported to have revived and stimulated the brutal anti-black activity of the K.K.K. [In this period the Klan could boast its greatest expansion in membership which reached a high of 5,000,000]¹⁴ and it no doubt contributed to and encouraged the escalation of wholesale anti-black hate campaigns by the wider public.

*In the South, the film was often advertised as calculated to "work audiences into a frenzy...it will make you hate." In some regions, the ad campaign may have been effective, for in 1915 lynchings in the United States reached their highest peak since 1908.*¹⁵

From the very moment of its public screening the film won phenomenal success. *First:* It was the most costly film yet made (a hundred thousand dollars) and the longest (twelve reels). *Second:* It was artistically the most professional (the close-ups, the cross-cutting, the iris, and the impressionistic/realistic lighting), *Third:* It was the most financially rewarding film ever (presently ¹⁶ estimated at a gross of some \$114 million) and *Fourth:* It was also the first film to be honored with a White House screening, after which President Woodrow Wilson commented: "it is like writing history with lightning".¹⁷

The Birth of a Nation is widely regarded to have set the style for all future slanders of the black image. Its contribution to unjustifiable illegal acts against the black race could be summed up in the following account from Du Bois' autobiography:

*With the accession of W. Wilson to the presidency in 1913 there opened for the American Negro a period lasting through and long after the world war and culminating in 1919, which was an extraordinary test for their courage and a time of cruelty, discrimination and wholesale murder.*¹⁸

The film's commercial success further established "Racism" as an enormous profit making theme. It came as no surprise, therefore, when Dalton Trumbo [later blacklisted as one of the Hollywood Ten], speaking at the Hollywood Writers Congress in 1943 remarked:

*The most gigantic milestones of Hollywood's appeal to public patronage have been the anti-Negro pictures like the Birth of a Nation and Gone with the Wind.*¹⁹

Many critics believe that where *The Birth of a Nation* ended *Gone with the Wind* began. Where the former was blunt and direct the latter was subtle in its anti-black campaign. Twenty-four years separated the two films and what happened during those years cannot be hard to imagine.²⁰

Black American Response to "The Birth of a Nation"

It needs to be pointed out that though a general level of acceptance marked the initial screening of *The Birth of a Nation*, the film also did arouse negative sentiments among black and white organizations, who mounted massive demonstrations against the film's racist propaganda. The pro-Griffith forces were so indignant at the charge against their tastes and "their standards" that the Houston chronicle of Texas went so far as to comment:

*The time has not come when the people of Houston are to have their standards of thought or taste set or fixed or regulated by the Negro citizenship.*²¹

Nevertheless, the campaign mounted against the film by NAACP and supporting groups was in some measure successful since some schools and organizations that stocked the film soon regarded it as just another museum piece. The major effect of the film, however, was in making blacks aware of the need to produce film(s) that would show black peoples' achievements and contributions to American society. NAACP at first wanted to tack a prologue of black attainments to *The Birth of a Nation* but when this plan failed, it was decided to turn to a professional writer, Elaine Sterne, to write a scenario on Lincoln's Dream for a feature.²² The scenario was completed only to be later rejected by Universal Studio. Then, Emmett J. Scott, personal secretary to Booker T. Washington enlisted the aid of black capitalists for funds and after three years, *Lincoln's Dream*, later retitled *The Birth of a Race* was completed. The film was some twelve reels long and ran for three hours.

During the same period several companies, black and white owned and operated, sprang to produce films catering to black audiences. According to Robert Cripps "more than one hundred firms and corporations were founded to produce Negro films".²³ The number of films and corporations must have been somewhat exaggerated because according to another film historian, George Johnson, there were only thirty-one firms of which sixteen were distributing companies under the trade name 'Film Company' and of the remaining fifteen some were companies on paper only and others existed for a few months.

The most noted of the companies was the black owned and operated "The Lincoln Motion Picture Company." The firm was incorporated on May 24, 1916. It produced such films as *The Realization of the Negro's Dream*, *Trooper K*, *Law of Nature*, *American Colored Troops at the Front*, *A Man's Duty* and *By Right of Birth*. Other firms that were managed and run by blacks were Democracy Film Corporation, the short lived Unique Film Company, Foster Film Company and Frederick Douglas Film Company, to mention only a few.²⁴

Then what happened? For one thing novelty wore off and for another, insecure and uncertain methods of financing productions menaced the success of the black film companies to a great degree. Continuously plagued by financial, technical and particularly distributing problems since the white theaters would not screen their films, most of them folded. Also, after their initial successes in ghetto theaters, white film companies entered into the competition. For instance, "The Lincoln Picture Classic, Inc.", a white organization in Chicago made their name similar to the "Lincoln Motion Picture Company" in an attempt to capitalize on the black firm's popularity and reputation. While the black companies were invariably engaged in producing clean race films the white owned and operated companies like the "Ebony Film Corporation", produced negative and abusive films about blacks.²⁵

The one black filmmaker who survived the tragic ordeal was Oscar Micheaux. He was a novelist turned filmmaker. His first film, *The Homesteader* (1919) was an adaptation of his first novel. For about thirty years, 1919-1948 he directed and produced some thirty-four films. Though his films did not enter on black ghetto life and seldom treated black exploitation and racial misery, he was nevertheless credited with furthering the interests of his race rather than hindering it. His films mostly dealt with themes of difficulties facing professional blacks, like lawyers and doctors, and the problems of "passing" as whites.²⁶ Oscar Micheaux died in 1951.

Hallelujah - The Impact of Sound

King Vidor's *Hallelujah* (1929) is significant for several reasons. Briefly, the film was the first Hollywood-produced all black feature; secondly, it was King Vidor's first film with sound and thirdly, it dealt with the theme of the eternal struggle between good and evil which helped it to acquire a universal significance outside of the confines of any race.

King Vidor's *Hallelujah* has been credited by some as a sincere effort of what the film director set out to do - "a real Negro folk culture" while other critics talked of his "filthy hands reeking with prejudice". The emerging black film historian Donald Bogle wrote:

Hallelujah's plot may border on operatic absurdity, but director Vidor was able to capture in music a whole emotional aura. In its best moments Hallelujah proved to be the finest record of black grief and passion to reach a movie screen.²⁷

Another critic, Jim Pines regarded *Hallelujah* as a quaint spectacle with the traditional trappings of the "legendary negro" as white America liked to see him.²⁸ Blacks within the film were cast in roles such as domestics, stable boys and chauffeurs and were shown preaching, shouting, gambling, love making, baptizing and generally having a good time--there were 375 extras besides the lead actors, and forty singing sequences of folk songs, spirituals, blues and work songs. Mr. Pines argued that the film instead of depicting authentic black folklore presented blacks as fanatical preachers and lazy crap-shooters all obsessively singing and dancing with almost superstitious zeal.

Though several critics were divided in their appraisal of *Hallelujah*, the film nevertheless was epoch making for the period. In particular if one is to compare this film with another film of that time, *Hearts in Dixie*, starring the coon of all times, Stepin Fetchit whose stereotyped characterization of the beloved good-for-nothing lazy black went all the way to sheer idiocy, the historical significance of *Hallelujah* is most obvious. It is perhaps this fact and other considerations that prompted W.E.B. DuBois himself to comment, "a sense of real life without the exaggerated farce and horseplay...marks *Hallelujah* as epoch-making".²⁹

The Move to Africa

Without dealing exhaustively with all the films of the early period, let us say that the good example set by black companies and such directors as Oscar Micheaux and King Vidor soon vanished. Since the consciousness of the nation had developed to the point where racist films about blacks no longer served as profit boosters for the film industry, Hollywood began to move to Africa in hopes of ploughing a new furrow. Here American film industry joined hands with British imperialism. Hollywood's first full length spectacle was W.S. Van Dyke's *Trader Horn* (1931), an MGM production. The film was based on a novel by Ethelreda Lewis. An advertisement of the time read:

Here is romance for you, real romance...of menacing jungles, roaring lions, rivers swarming with crocodiles and shrieking black savages ruled by a white goddess with beautiful golden hair... 30

Yes, Africa at her "savage" best was the constant reference. The promotional advertisement aside, the facts about the making and distribution of the film speak more bluntly about the real "savage" of the whole episode. *Trader Horn* was in fact a film "which created a sensation by showing an African devoured *alive* by a crocodile (it was never learned whether the scene was faked or an accident)"³¹ The fact that this barbaric incident was never

cleared up is one further proof of the absolute insensitivity and "savage" nature of Hollywood black image makers. Of course the film was a financial success particularly since it won the unequalled endorsements from, for instance, California Congress of Parents and Teachers, International Federation of Catholic Alumnae, General Federation of Women's clubs and Loyola High School of Los Angeles.³²

The overwhelming dominance of Hollywood cinema in the world market also conditioned negatively the European cinema ventures in Africa. The images of Africa in films were, up to the 1930s wholly derived from the racist images of early Hollywood films. The ideological posture and content of Hollywood early films sought to divorce the blacks in America from their origins by depicting Africa as full of painted "natives" and ignorant brutes. The exposition of Africa in unrealistic and negative light had two distinct functions. On the one hand blacks in the US were being insidiously warned that even in their present total deprivations they had never had it so good, while on the other hand the negative films on Africa justified Europe's dominance over Africa. Thus the popular misconceptions of the black man expounded and perpetuated by Hollywood found its fullest expression in the European cinema on Africa. The U.S. film industry and that of the British became twin partners in the further exploitation and dehumanization of blacks everywhere. Immune to the cultural wealth of the Africans by being unable to understand his language, European cinema in the best Hollywood tradition refused to portray Africans as a people sharing basic experiences common to all mankind.

In pursuit of the themes and emphasis of early Hollywood films, the pre-war period gave us a British film production, *Sanders of the River* (1937) starring Paul Robeson as a servile King of an African tribe. The film was based on a novel by Edgar Wallace. It is significant that in Paul Robeson's first role in a British film he was made to unknowingly propagate the idea that Africa needed the British. This stands as one of the cruelest moments in British film history. It must be pointed out that the Paul Robeson scenes were shot in London studios in faked sets while the documentary parts of the film, which Robeson was not aware of, were shot in Nigeria. As soon as he found out how he had been tricked into glorifying colonialism, he tried, though unsuccessfully to destroy all the copies of the film.³³ The harm had already been done for Nigerians campaigned strongly against Robeson who regretted ever having played such a pernicious part.

The logic of luring an international figure so highly regarded by Africans as Robeson was, to defend, even though unknowingly, British colonialism was part of a grand design. London's *Daily Herald* of that time commenting on the film stated that if Britain could only

give its subjects in Africa a native king with Robeson's physique, talent, looks, voice and personality, problems of the cry for self government prevalent then would easily vanish away.³⁴ As for Robeson, he not only regretted his part in the film but never again played similar roles. (Incidentally Jomo Kenyatta, now President of Kenya, who was a student in Britain at the time, also played the part of a minor tribal chief in the film).³⁵

To further confirm that Britain was out to demonstrate to the Africans how good colonialism was, their next film involved itself with the theme of a British trained African being the ultimate solution to Africa's surging call for independence. Regarded as a landmark in British film production, *Men of Two Worlds* (1946) treated the conflict between the British educated African (Kisenga) and the embodiment of evil superstition, the witch doctor (Magole). That Kisenga won over Magole was a justification of the imposition of British rule over Africans. It perpetuated the erroneous view that colonialism ushered a new era of enlightenment, peace and freedom from superstition and barbarism in Africa.³⁶

World War II and its Aftermath

The 1940s marked a change in the portrayal of blacks in cinema. Whereas previously blacks were depicted as sub-human and subservient, and played negligible roles, now they became the subject of films treating the dilemma of the "social acceptance gap" of black emancipation. Various reasons could be given for this about-face of the film industry.

First, there was the second World War that gave blacks a new image due to their role in fighting against Nazi Germany and Fascist Italy. By aiding Europe against the Nazi onslaught, Africans became somewhat human.

Second, protests by Hazel Scott, Paul Robeson and Rex Ingram marked by their rejection of roles that would further dehumanize the Black peoples also helped in the creation of a new Black image. Their protests, coupled with those of Africans conscripted into the French War efforts in Indochina and who after the war started their "16mm movement"³⁷ helped in arousing public consciousness against the historical portrayal of blacks by the film industries.

Thirdly, "the red baiting witchhunt" of the House Un-American Activities helped white liberals move closer to the cause of black peoples. As repositories of all the injustices known to mankind blacks could be justifiably counted as allies in any venture against the establishment. Thus, the white liberals began to speak out forcefully in favor of the emancipation of blacks and to hold Africans as symbolic figures in struggles against oppression.

Lastly, the dramatic rise in the Civil Rights Movement accentuated and solidified the direction of black liberation. These changes therefore, signalled to the Hollywood experts in black image making, the need to depart from old practices. Thus, was born a new cycle of 'black interest' films.

The first full length Hollywood film produced with the new "about-face" approach was *Home of the Brave* (1949) which was originally a stage play by Arthur Laurents on the theme of anti-semitism, not anti-black. The film is about a black soldier fighting in the Pacific who suffers paralysis because of a white G.I.'s bigotry. The "white expert on the Negro problem" succeeds in helping the black soldier recover from his illness. The climax of the film reaches a point where the white doctor, a psychologist, in deliberate provocation calls out, "You dirty nigger get up and walk."³⁸ The lesson of the film as well as the other new cycle films is that the black's seemingly insolvable problem is caused by a pathological inferiority complex.

Other representative films of the period were, *Intruder in the Dust*, *Lost Boundaries*, and *Pinky*, all made in 1949. Often called social dramas, these films constitute and signal a newer approach, although each film deals with basic negative assumptions about blacks.³⁹

Are blacks cowardly soldiers?	<i>Home of the Brave</i>
Are blacks the polluters of the South?	<i>Intruder in the Dust</i>
Have mulatto blacks the right to pass as white?	<i>Lost Boundaries</i>
Should black Pinky marry a white man or should she help her race?	<i>Pinky</i>

Ralph Ellison related an interesting experience connected with the viewing of these films. He said that while "profuse flow of tears and sighs of profound emotional catharsis" were heard when white audiences saw the films, predominantly black audiences reacted with derisive laughter. "These are not films about blacks" wrote Ellison, "they are films about what whites think and feel about blacks".⁴⁰

Mr. Ellison, a social critic of the time, considered *Intruder in the Dust* as the only film that could be shown to predominantly black audience without arousing unintended laughter. This, he explained was not so much for the film's racial image but its portrayal of basic human qualities.

In these so-called social dramas, white liberalism singularly continued to play the role of the definer of black consciousness and how it ought to function in an integrated society. It saw the black problem simply as a social problem, and the only solution, the bridging of the social acceptance gap. The Liberal cinema, though integrationist in approach remained, nevertheless, allied too closely to liberal gradualism to create any meaningful radical social change.

In the period following the 1950s and 1960s a series of films still patronizing in theme and style but pro-integration in their intent and overall emphasis made their debut. All the films were the works of white directors. The need to be relevant, aside from the commercial pay-offs, stemmed from a deep-seated guilt feeling for the wrongs the film industry had perpetuated against blacks over the years. The new 'about face' did not rise out of the vacuum; it came in the advent of civil rights movements and the development of worldwide liberation movements, particularly African struggles. The growing power of Blacks to make their presence felt in America joined with the rising consciousness of the wider public in favor of emancipation forced Hollywood into a new tactical concession, and in defense of the threatened interest of western values a new period was ushered in. Sidney Poitier was the token black performer chosen by white liberalism to portray the required new image of blacks in the movies. The various roles Poitier played began to present the black middle class acceptability image.

Poitier as doctor.....	<i>No Way Out</i> (1950)
Poitier as student leader.....	<i>The Blackboard Jungle</i> (1955)
Poitier as sergeant.....	<i>All the Young Men</i> (1960)
Poitier as Jazz Musician.....	<i>Paris Blues</i> (1961)
Poitier as psychiatrist.....	<i>Pressure Point</i> (1962)
Poitier as reporter.....	<i>The Bedford Incident</i> (1965)
Poitier as cop.....	<i>In the Heat of the Night</i> (1967)

The list goes on with Sidney Poitier acting one or two major roles each year throughout the decade of the 1960s.⁴¹

The supreme example and one of the most controversial films, often cited, that topped box-office success and cemented a whole new stereotype in theme and style was Stanley Kramer's *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner?* (1968) The film starred Sidney Poitier in an Oscar-winning role of a brilliant and debonair candidate for the Noble Prize who wants to marry the daughter of a white publisher. The theme revolves around the acceptance of Sidney Poitier by the white newspaper publisher (Spencer Tracy) as a son-in-law. The film's advertising campaign turned the film into a big box-office success but the main issue of the film was no issue at all. The *New York Times* columnist Clifford Mason, in an article titled *Why Does White America Love Sidney Poitier so?* had this to say:

But he [Poitier] remains unreal, as he has for nearly two decades, playing essentially the same role, the antisepctic one-dimensional hero. 42

The article further accused Poitier of living in a totally white world and of playing the role of a "sexless Black eunuch". While, for instance, the film was about love and marriage, Poitier and wife-to-be [Katherine Houghton] seemed very unromantic and were only seen through a rear view mirror of a cab, kissing just once. The film also had stereotyped characters from the "old days". The old "mammy" in the film, the maid of the publisher, reacts very negatively to the "smart-assed nigger's" intent:

You one of those smooth talking smart-assed niggers, just out for all he can get, with our black power and all that other trouble-making nonsense and you listen here. I brought up that child from a baby in a cradle and ain't nobody gonna harm her...43

The image of Poitier in films has had a round of applause from critics as well as social reform minded peoples. Many agreed that Poitier's image in the various films he played served as an important breakthrough compared to the old stereotypes. But most of the criticism revolved around the fact that the black image of Poitier was not sufficiently humanized. The criticism is indeed valid, for except in *A Raisin in the Sun* (1961) and in his Oscar-winning performance in *Lilies of the Field* (1963) where he played his most human roles, the rest were idealized figures of "the good guy hero". Most anti-Poitier critics, therefore, insist that since he has already achieved national and international prominence as an actor he should not be bogged down in similar roles, i.e. the fully integrated, assimilated black.⁴⁴

When Jim Brown entered Hollywood from a well deserved fame in pro football there appeared a welcome relief. Even Sidney Poitier exclaimed "I am not just a token black representative" any longer. Jim Brown soon signalled a new wave in black image in the movies, that of the "noble savage" whipping everyone and every mob, and his effective weapon at times was phallic. Brown made his acting debut in *Rio Conchos* where he played a courageous black soldier in the period following the Civil War. After that he starred in various films; *The Split* [cops 'n robbers]; *Black Gunn* [night club operator]; *Slaughter* [doing in the Mob]; *Cool Breeze* [black supercreek].

Jim Brown also began the black super sex image. The sexless image of Poitier was changed to a super sex image and found its fullest expression in roles that Jim Brown played. The black/white sexual mythology, the white scare tactic of other years, began to be exploited with black super stud Jim Brown "doing it" with white sex symbols Racquel Welch in *100 Rifles* (1968) and Stella Stevens in *Slaughter* (1972).

Although films of the 1950s and 1960s truly evidenced the death of Rastus and Sambo and the Octoroon series of the early days, the black man/woman as a social problem, sometimes the vestiges of old stereotypes continued to flourish. The full, articulated characters of Poitier and Brown, though in the main a departure from the old buffoonery, were nevertheless creating new ones, that of the black who cannot be humanized without the support of whites. The over-riding question of black lives and struggles continued to be the major issue left out completely from most of the films of the 1960s. How a people under strain survive without being seen as merely types, emerged only once and mention must be made here of a film classic that has been widely regarded as an excellent example of films pertaining to black lives. Michael Roemer's 1965 production, *Nothing But a Man*, tells the story of a railroad worker [Ivan Dixon] and a school teacher [Abbey Lincoln]. The overriding issue of the film was how people in general behave under strain and how they survive as human beings of abiding worth and dignity.

Films Espousing Separatism:

With Jules Dassin's *Up Tight!* (1968) a new black image was again introduced to challenge the Poitier and Brown integrationist appeals. Films trying to bridge the black middle class acceptance gap were forced out by the new types that advanced "separatism", not on class but racial lines:

*Selma...Lynch counters...Birmingham...Yesterday. A phase we live through together. Now we don't walk together anymore. (No No whites!)*⁴⁵

Therefore, "No whites!" was the obvious message in *Up Tight!* In the film not only whites were to be excluded but integrationist blacks, moderates and all non-violence prone pacifists. What was very ironic about *Up Tight!* was that the film was a hybrid of sorts, its theme having come from *The Informer*, a book by Liam O'Flaherty about the secret Irish Republican Brotherhood. And what's more the director of the film, Jules Dassin, is a white. These facts were perhaps instrumental in robbing the film of its seemingly militant "separatist" approach. It also comes as no surprise, therefore, that critics described the major actor in the film, black Raymond St. Jacques, as a "black Lee Marvin".⁴⁶

The theme of militancy introduced in *Up Tight!* was also evident in *Putney Swope* (1970) where the 'black arrogance' espoused in the former film was reinforced in the 'hip racism' of the latter. Robert Downey's *Putney Swope* was a comedy about an advertising company taken over by blacks committed to revamping the whole structure.

Putney, the black member of the board was elected Chairman when each "liberal" board member voted for him thinking no one else would. As

the chairman he proceeded to turn the agency into a black concern, renaming the company, "Truth and Soul", replacing the white members of the staff with militant blacks and subjecting those whites allowed to remain to indignities. The film, ascribed, in a one dimensional manner, the standard black stereotyped images to whites; for instance, a lazy black couple have a white maid, a black employer turns down white applicants for jobs, and a black employer orders a white delivery boy to go down 30 stories in order to come back up on the service elevator. Blacks in the film were dressed in revolutionary costumes and advocate militancy (result: a spoof on revolution!) while they find time to lounge with beauties. The oversexed males and females and the reverse racism only helped to reinforce the old stereotypes of the "negroes running amok".

"Blaxploitation" Films

Each era of black oriented films through the years has, in one sense or another, carved a newer image of blacks. Each succeeding period could, therefore, be viewed as a progression in the historical continuum of films pertaining to blacks. When the first black Director was hired by Warner Brothers, Jack Vallenti, President of the Motion Picture Association hailed the appointment as "one of the finest hours of Hollywood history".⁴⁸ With the consent and direction of the industry, Gordon Parks, Sr. began a new experiment in black image (a threatening shift had again took place) with Harlem's answer to James Bond - John Shaft. *Shaft* began the whole experiment of the now current vogue of black visibility in films. Because *Shaft* was an enormous financial success (it was a hit by the fourth week of its initial screening and in less than six months the film grossed in excess of \$15 million) MGM proceeded to make *Shaft's Big Score* (1972) and *Shaft in Africa* ⁴⁷ (1973). In the last of the series, the Harlem private-eye moves to Africa where he shows himself more Shaftian than ever. The cool private eye travels from New York to Addis Ababa to Paris, and in under two hours running time he kills more than ten people while finding time between killings for successful love-affairs.

The film that seems to have topped them all is *Super Fly* (1972) a Warner Brothers production which quickly caught up with *Shaft*, grossing in excess of 11 million in two months of its initial screening. The film was directed by Gordon Parks Jr., son of Gordon Parks, Sr., and with its enormous financial success, a sequel was not far behind... Paramount cashed in on the popularity of the name and *Super Fly TWT* was made the next year. *The Man, Slaughter, Blackbusters, Coffy, The Mack* [street slang for 'pimp'], *Hit, Black Caesar, Trick Baby*, etc. were all follow-ups on the *Shaft* and *Super Fly* escapist themes, often employing the same characters, and using the same sort of plots, i.e. (a) the hero always triumphs over whites and the law (b) the hero indulges in a great deal of multi-racial sex scenes, black male with white female (c) the hero kills a great number of people or gangsters. In essence the heroes are not ordinary heroes but super: super-sexed, super-slick, super strong, who could have any woman, outrun any car and out-

smart *any* cop. These kinds of films with their heavy emphasis on violence, drugs, prostitution, pimps, continued to flourish with more than fifty features appearing in the theater houses in 1973. According to film critic James Murray "within five years 200 features were filmed entirely in New York" alone.⁴⁸

The catch-all aspect of these "blaxploitation" films goes to an absolutely ridiculous extent in their blatant attempts to attract black audiences through the attachment of racial adjectives to their titles. A short list of the films that paraded the nation's theaters in the last few years reads like a chant: *Black Jesus*, *Black Chariot*, *Black Gunn*, *Black Rodeo*, *Black Eye*, *Black Heat*, *Black Mama...*, *Black Father*, *Black Godfather*, *Black Love*, *Black Bunch*, *Black Caesar*, *Black Bart*, *Black is Beautiful* [also known as *Africanus Sexualis*], *Black Fantasy*, *Black Majesty*, *Blackula*, *Black Bolt*, *Africa Erotica*, *Africa Uncensored*.

Most of these films glorify black males as pimps, black women as whores, and gangsters and the mafia types as saviours of the black community. All in all each one of the films listed above carries some negative and false images about blacks:⁴⁹

- a) False ideas about the black community, a community whose historical role in fostering unity and survival is indisputable. Instead the modern films continue to project pimps, prostitutes and drug pushers and Mafia types as viable and "honored" members of the black community.
- b) False ideas about the black family: The family that had assumed key roles in the survival of the race is abused if not at times totally ignored.
- c) False ideas about what is true womanhood. Women in the films are invariably portrayed as objects for macho gratification.
- d) False ideas about education: To get ahead and for "quick hustle" the streets are preferred to the schools and colleges.
- e) False ideas about communication: It is always initiated and accomplished by the sheer power of one's muscle or one's phallus. Sisterly/brotherly love plays negligible roles.
- f) False International viewpoints - Third World in general and Africa in particular - most of the films titled *Africa*..are either porno films or excessively ritualistic.

Furthermore most of the films are made on cheap B-picture budgets and the enormous profits that accrue from them go to the film industries. Strangely enough one still hears claims of the significant role the films play and some well meaning individuals and critics have argued that:

- a) Since the movements of the 1960s and the deaths of Martin Luther King, Malcolm X and George Jackson, with drugs as the catalyst "throughout America crime and violence mushroomed... Muggings, burglaries, rape, killings, spread like a lethal plague across the urban centers of the nation".⁵⁰ The argument presupposes that the exploitative films have authenticity. However, most of the scripts for the films were not researched but were a result of someone's wild dreams. Blacks are no more than hired hands in the whole project.⁵¹
- b) One also often hears, 'the whites had their turn to play God and now it is our turn'. This is another false notion since the movies are still controlled and guarded by the old Hollywood hands; "our turn" becomes rhetorical.
- c) Still others argue that the films 'gonna blow whitey's mind' substantiating his fears of the sexual and physical threat of blacks. But 'Whitey' does not even get to see them, since these films do not play in his area or neighborhood.
- d) Some also argue that the films serve up a new mythology and a "black aesthetics"⁵² because they reflect black culture [read language], black dress and style and black music. Cocaine culture, gaudy clothes are not, I am afraid, the general norm among the great masses of blacks. Yes, "black cinema" has been regarded as "black music", but a film that relies too heavily on music is more music than film.

Reaction of Blacks to "Blaxploitation" Films

In *Watts Times* of October 12, 1972 under the headline, "Do Black films exploit?" a major editorial was carried on the front page:

*While many people have expressed only a passing interest in the subject, several local and national organizations have mounted eager campaigns to suppress what they have termed "black exploitation" films.*⁵³

The National Catholic Office had adopted a "C" rating [read "Condemned"] in respect to the series of "Blaxploitation" films. The Southern California NAACP and the Black Artists Alliance of Hollywood also had gone on record as being opposed to the general depiction of their people as always engaged in "lumpen" activities. In fact some have

been organizing to draw a hard line and also to finance films away from the "super-spade-murder-addict-blood-and-gore films". One of the foremost proponents of the idea, himself an emerging black filmmaker, Brock Peters, had stated:

*...and I believe the public is getting tired of all the blood and gore, and we feel blacks and whites alike will respond to warm and human films. Like everyone else, there are a lot of blacks looking for films to which they can take their families.*⁵⁴

There has been some doubt as to whether a general protest against these "blaxploitation" films would not make them thrive with more run-away productions. The problem, therefore, is not whether people disapprove of such films but rather the general indifference displayed. In a survey conducted by *Watts Times* one patron's remark could be cited as typical:

*What can I say, it's not real. It's just entertainment. There were some parts in it I didn't like, but it's a personal thing really.*⁵⁵

And one of the foremost black directors, Gordon Parks, Sr. said "It's ridiculous to imply that blacks don't know the difference between truth and fantasy and therefore will be influenced by these films in an unhealthy way. I knew a black preacher in Chicago and I remember people who wanted to kill their white bosses coming to the prayer meeting and being calmed down by the preacher. These movies are serving the same therapeutic function".⁵⁶

The controversy surrounding the *Shaft* and *Super Fly* experience and the other escapist thriller films seems to have been confused on still another level. Some argue that though they do not approve of the films, they are, however, pleased that some brothers and sisters are amassing large sums of money from either directing or starring in the films. This belief, of course, is not reflected by the facts. For instance, Richard Roundtree, the star in the *Shaft* series received only \$13,500 for the first of the series and fought unsuccessfully for a \$50,000 salary for the second of the series, in spite of the arm twisting done by the director of the film.⁵⁷ M.G.M. on the other hand, made more than \$10 million in profits.

Although accusations against the film industries are indeed justifiable the help they are getting from black artists is alarming. Black artists have failed to show integrity not only in the face of the moral damage they are doing to their own profession but also in the perpetuation of the confusion and dehumanization of the people on whose behalf they were initiated into the industry in the first place. The black filmmakers' role in the movies has raised a lot of eyebrows:

*Many black artists are not displaying an integrity comparable with their artistic prowess and stereotyping their black brothers and sisters in pursuit of the almighty dollar.*⁵⁸

Incidentally, the problem is even more compounded when one considers the overall result in financial terms that blacks pay annually at the box-office -an estimated "rip-off" of \$120-200 million.⁵⁹

One might legitimately ask how this can be. How can such negative films amass such enormous sums? Three main reasons, all other than clever advertising, can be cited as contributing to their box office success:

- First: Black youngsters, the main film viewing audience, prefer films with black characters to non-black characters.
- Second: The theater houses in the black communities give less alternatives to their audiences and continuously glut the screen with the same exploitative adventure thrillers. In addition, if one must spend some time at the movies, proximity also becomes a factor.
- Third: For a people hungry for some victory in their day to day struggles for survival films that portray them as winners rather than losers and victims are bound to generate (even if it is pure illusion) some psychological gratification of sorts.

Indeed, sometimes, the illusion might be all that matters. But one must ask at what price and in place of what? The real danger therefore, is that in spite of what Gordon Parks Sr. said, the less films reflect reality, the more they will tend to replace reality.

Although one can draw from the preceding argument the conclusion that there is no change in the making, that will not altogether be the truth. The process of change is already on. On January 28, 1976 the Rev. Jesse Jackson, president of Operation PUSH (People United to Save Humanity), declared that only increased economic pressure - in the form of picket protests and boycotts - will force white theater owners to display "corporate social responsibility." As Rev. Jackson put it, "the movie house operators, most of whom would have been out of business by now had there not been the rise in black exploitation films, could do a lot of things to express a commitment to the black community."⁶⁰ This proposition leaves out a central truth as one honest entrepreneur commented, "The more blacks you involve the more their employers are also patronized. One hand scratches the other."⁶¹

A second solution proposed calls for outright ownership and control of the production, distribution and exhibition of films. Both solutions therefore leave the distribution of black exploitation films in the hands of black capitalists who so far have shown a reluctance to mix morals with business. If blacks instead of whites do the exploitation, the situation is not altered. So the modest attempts at finding a solution to the exploitation of blacks seem to have failed to tackle the main problem. Rather, blacks are intent on partaking of the "ill-gotten" gains.

The Black Film-Makers

The Pros:

Four major directors and a number of unknown independent free-lance directors have emerged in the last few years.

Ossie Davis, actor turned filmmaker, opened the decade with *Cotton Comes to Harlem* (1970), a comedy adventure thriller of cops 'n robbers shot on location in the idealized black world, Harlem. He also produced *Black Girl* (1972) adapted from a play (it has been billed as one fit for family viewing) and directed *Gordon's War* (1973) the first anti-drug film to be made in Harlem and 20th Century Fox's answer to the growing criticism of films that romanticize the drug scene. Davis had on previous occasion made *Kong: 's Harvest* from a book by Nigerian novelist Wole Soyinka, who incidentally did not like the film. Of late, as recently as March/April 1976 the release of *Countdown at Kusini* has been receiving a round of publicity and commendation. The film has been billed as "hard-hitting melodrama of political intrigue and revolution in Africa" fit for family viewing. Financed by the 85,000 member Delta Sigma Theta, largest black women's service organization in the United States, it was initiated to counter the growing stereotypical and violent models of "blaxploitation" films.

The second black film director is Gordon Parks, Sr., a former photo-journalist for Life Magazine and also author of several books, stories and poem. His first film, *The Learning Tree* was no more than an idealized autobiography produced, directed and scored by the director himself. His second and third films were the M.G.M. productions *Shaft* [1971] and *Shaft's Big Score!* [1972]. Gordon Parks who had promised not to direct any more sequels like the herein mentioned, recently released a new film on the black folk singer entitled *Leadbelly* [April 1976]. At its initial screening at the sixth annual USA film festival in Dallas the film won phenomenal acceptance marked by a standing ovation after its showing.⁶²

Gordon Parks Jr. is the man who solidified the wave of *super bad* image with his film *Super Fly*. He has, however, since changed gear. He recently made *Aaron Loves Angelá* [1976] a cliché story of a black teenager in love with a Puerto Rican girl in New York City.

The third director, Melvin Van Peebles, made his first film, *The Story of a Three Day Pass*, as an adaptation of a novel about an interracial love affair in 1967. His second, *Watermelon Man* [1970] was no more than a domestic comedy treating the subject of a white bigot who woke up one day and discovered he had turned black. Van Peebles' successful film is *Sweet Sweetback's Baadass Song* [1971] (*Sweetback* for short). The film, shot in nineteen days, grossed close to \$20 million in less than a year, and was the top grossing film for five weeks.⁶³ Melvin Van Peebles co-produced, directed, scripted, scored the music and starred in it. The film's story centers around a black called Sweetback, who is chased by cops throughout the duration of the film. Sweetback always manages to ward off the bigoted police, at times by hacking them with handcuffs, and by continuously slipping out of tight situations. After a series of assaults, wild chases and intermittent sexual adventures, Sweetback evades capture and the audience is left with the feeling that he will indeed return and settle accounts.

The film's romanticization of ghetto life, elevation of the "leisurely fellows" of urban centers-the pimp as folk hero, the ghetto as a kind of Hollywood or Tarzan jungle, the depiction of women as prostitutes and all the trappings of 'invisible super bad', puts it in the genre of blaxploitation. [Van Peebles says of his hero: "He's a brown Clint Eastwood"]⁶⁴ Most critics suggest, however, that *Sweetback* should not be equated with the series of escapist films of the James Bond types. They argue that the hero in *Sweetback* was able to surmount the many problems he faced only with the concerted effort of the community at large rather than by his own sheer powers or super powers. Even Huey Newton, Chairman of the Black Panthers, who finds most films counter-revolutionary, exempted *Sweetback*, calling it the "first truly revolutionary black film". It is most likely that Newton was encouraged by the changes in consciousness that Sweetback, the rebel, went through from a man unto himself to a man of the community. A point that is widely held in favor of the film is that the experience of *Sweetback* did prove that a film can be made by blacks and successfully distributed to black audiences without the intermediary film distribution companies. This fact stands out as a worthwhile contribution of the filmmaker.

The fourth film director, Ivan Dixon, is admired by a growing number of young educated blacks. Coming from a distinguished role as the lead actor in a film classic, *Nothing but a Man* [1965], he and Sam Greenlee [also author of the book by the same title] produced *The Spook Who Sat by the Door*. The film tells the story of Spook, a black agent for the CIA turned Activist, who "splits" from the agency after five years service and begins to run a clandestine training center for black urban guerrillas. He plans to bring about a revolution by barricading the ghetto limits and eventually the entire city. Before his dreams materialize Spook dies but audiences are left with the feeling that his cause will be carried on by his admirers. The film is

certainly an interesting divergence from the other films discussed in this essay, but it errs conceptually--revolutionary truth does not lie in individual geniuses of the urban guerrilla type but in people who understand and share the knowledge of the idioms of class struggle.

The Independent Free-Lance Filmmakers

A growing number of young men and women are beginning to make their impact felt in film circles. Although they differ in their styles and subject matters, they all seem to share in one common interest - depicting BLACKNESS in films. St. Claire Bourne has been the subject of a variety of critical appraisals. James Murray in his book, *To Find an Image*, devotes a whole chapter on the filmmaker's views and opinions about "Black Films". St. Claire Bourne comes with experience gained in television documentaries. His films include *Nation of Common Sense*, on the Muslim brothers/sisters of USA; *Soul, Sounds and Money*, a study of the recording industry; *Something to Build On*, a film designed to encourage youth to attend college; *Pusher Man*, an anti-drug film; *Nothing But Common Sense*, about modern technology; and several others including but not limited to those on the history of Afro-American dance, Portrait of Paul Robeson and a report on sickle cell anemia. His recent and most famous film for which he won a bronze medal at the New York International Film-TV Festival, *Let the Church Say Amen* is about a young black minister's growing consciousness. There is no doubt that Mr. Bourne has emerged as a producer of meaningful films, his most recent being *The Long Night* [directed by Woodie King], a film about the life of a Harlem youth.

St. Claire is also publisher of *Chamba Notes*, a bi-annual publication on black activity in various medias. *Chamba* [from a Swahili word meaning "images of the Eye"] is also a research center and a distributing agency for educational films. What his emphasis is in his work can be derived from his own statement:

Q: How would you define a Black film?

A: I would say it's a Black perspective. You could make a film from Black perspective, which means you can make a film about whites from a Black perspective. 65

Madeline Anderson, also a proponent of Blackness in films, comes with an experience in television [NET]. Her films for television, to mention a few are *Integration Report 1*, *I Am Somebody*, *Malcolm X*. She also has made several short films for Children's Television Workshop, a film about *Clementine Hunter*, the primitive artist in Natchitoches, Louisiana. She is now in the process of finishing or has already finished a film for the Boston Bicentennial, about Ida Wells Barnett, not only the first black but also the first woman newspaper editor. Madeline Anderson defines her work in terms of Black experience:

Actually, the thing I want to do most in film is record the Black experience...because if we don't do it no one else will. I think because we still have to tell each other what's happening with us.⁶⁶

Madeline Anderson is a strongly committed person. A few years ago Universal Studios approached her to direct a black love story film [NOTE: You can see the bold headlines, "First Black Woman Director" etc...], she read the script and turned it down.

Bill Gunn's *Ganja and Hess*, according to black critic, Clayton Riley promised to be a winner among the genre of "Blackness" films.

[*Ganja and Hess*] is a film detailing the personal collective, what we understand and remember, a style reflection, moods not measurable by traditional Western ethics or training.⁶⁷

The film's finer moments have been described as scenes of an African woman beckoning her sons to return spiritually from the Western world. Clayton Riley calls *Ganja and Hess* "a true and fundamental Black film", although he suspects that the film which has been sold to a Distribution Company will be edited, rearranged and renamed *Blood Couple*, a black vampire movie!

This last year, three young blacks screened their films at the First Oscar Micheau Film Festival at the Oakland Museum. Haile Gerima's *Harvest: 3,000 Years* won First Place in the feature film category. The film dwelt on the culture of poverty as seen in the closing days of Haile Sellassie's Ethiopia. The film was recognized for its cinematic brilliance and a mastery in the use of African space and time in its style. Larry Clark's *As Above So Below*, a film about a black guerrilla struggle won First-Place as Best Medium Length Film. He is presently completing a feature film--*Passing Through*--in which a black trumpet player reconstructs black struggle and history as he plays his instrument. Mr. Clark is using the flashback technique to tell most of the story and has introduced documentary film footage of rare vintage to make it all the more authentic. Another black filmmaker, Tony Batten, also won the first place for best documentary--his film was a biography of Paul Robeson, entitled, quite appropriately, *Paul Robeson*.

Matt Robinson, who started out as a staff writer for WCAU, a CBS affiliate in Philadelphia, made his first feature *Save The Children*, which was enthusiastically received. His next film, *Amazing Grace*, was about a black candidate for mayor of a large city, who is kept honest by a wise, elderly black woman. Robinson, according to Dolores Elliott, editor of *Chamba Notes*, promises a new dimension in black oriented films as he believes that the key to having better films is, first, "keeping the cost as inexpensive as possible" and, second, "finding a way to control [black] talents".⁶

The Emergent Young Filmmakers

Leroy McDonald, a Fellow of the American Film Institute, fought a determined battle against AFI and succeeded in completing *Tuskegee* (1976), a film that centers around the sterilization of black women in the South.

Of late, Jamaa Fanaka [né Walter Gordon] did an extended student film project at UCLA entitled *All Niggers Love Red*. The film caught the attention of a Hollywood distribution company, Crown International. They bought the film and began to distribute it nationwide, after renaming it *Welcome Home Brother Charles*. The story of the film revolves around Charles, who is castrated by bigoted police and thrown in jail. Once out of prison, a funny thing happens, as a tree that is cut grows better, Charles' thing also grows, grows and grows and strangles his enemies [all white males] to death.

Q: Aren't you perpetuating the super-sex image of Blaxploitation films?

A: No, by exaggerating the size of the thing I am only showing how absurd it is.

Mention must also be made of others in Graduate School at UCLA. Charles Burnett, director-producer of *Killer of Sheep* and *The Horse* whose sensitive portrayal of the lives and struggles of blacks as they eke out an existence will, no doubt, earn him recognition once his films get into circulation; Ben Caldwell, whose creative works exemplify the need for blacks to go back into black history and Africa for inspiration, has thus far produced two short films, *Madeah* [a term that blacks use in the south which means 'Mother Dear'] about the African heritage of blacks, and *Iiska* [African goddess of Wind] explores the lives of blacks in America through African Spirituality. John Rier, who is opposed to the negative images of blacks in films and TV is in the process of finishing a film that examines the relationship between film and TV mediated black characters and the effects on black children.⁶⁹

From the preceding accounts it can be seen that changes are indeed being forced in by these up-coming young filmmakers. A theme that distinguishes all of them is their insistence of viewing Black experience from a 'nationalistic' stance. The literary equivalent to filmic expressions of "Blackness" is "Negritude". Negritudism in film has its merits, but unless such an experience is seen as merely transitional, it is bound to serve as its own destruction, as has happened in Literature. As Frantz Fanon once observed, unless color consciousness loses itself in the absolute ultimate consciousness [class consciousness] a limitation to experience alone is or has to be ignorant of what largely determines its being.

CONSTRUCTS FOR CRITICAL ANALYSIS

With the preceding arguments in mind the need arises to critically appraise the achievements and direction of the black experience in the filmmaking process. In his search for a methodological approach for critical analysis this author has drawn inspiration from the theoretical works of Frantz Fanon and Amilcar Cabral.⁷⁰ What follows, therefore, is a construct of three Phases that could be used as a stringent framework for the critical appraisal of films.

PHASE I: We will call this phase "The Assimilation Phase". Various characteristics identify this category--(a) a *grossmundo* and uncritical acceptance of Hollywood's aesthetics and concepts--for instance, most of the films listed in this essay proclaim their origins in their titles, e.g., *Blacula* [a black version of *Dracula*] *Cool Breeze*, a remake of *Asphalt Jungle*. (b) A pattern that reflects the *Hollywood imitation process*: for instance, Melvin Van Peebles, whose work shows some independence of Hollywood, unwittingly overlooked the implication of his statement when he identified Sweetback as a "brown Clint Eastwood" or consider Calvin Lockhart's role in *Joanna* which earned him the name "Black Paul Newman". Raymond St. Jacques protests "I want to be a Black Raymond St. Jacques" matters little; he remained typed as the "Black Lee Marvin". (c) The *psychological longing* of some black filmmakers and actors to merge themselves with the film industry [that has excluded them for so long] manifests itself in their struggles for 'box-office' success at any price. A major characteristic of the filmmakers of this phase is their distance from their people.

PHASE II: "The Remembrance Phase". This stage signals the complete return of the exiles to the source, to their own experiences and to their own past. The proponents of "Blackness in films" discussed earlier falls into this category. Also a predominance of themes such as folklore, legend and myth identify this phase. The most positive aspect of this phase is its rejection and negation of the points of reference laid down by the film industry, including the values the industry espouses. Here, the assimilation, as in Phase I, is totally negated. The key in this phase is "control", control of talents, production, exhibition and distribution. The inspiration comes from experience, from Africa or from Black History. This phase continues Phase I, even though it goes in the opposite direction. The primary danger of this stage is the uncritical acceptance or undue romanticization of ways of the past which could entail a romanticism as destructive as Hollywood's Tarzan jungles. It could also develop into opportunistic endeavors unless it manages to escape or advance to the next phase.

PHASE III: "The Combative Phase". This phase signals the maturity of the filmmaker and is distinguishable from the others by its insistence to view film or any other art form in all its

ramifications. Here film is ideology. Filmmakers in this phase give primacy to the ideological content of their work and a clear identification of partisanship is advanced. Collective film-making is encouraged. Demystification of the filmic process is seen as highly imperative.

While this essay has been devoted to films that pertain to Phases I and II, we have not mentioned any film that comes under Phase III because there are so few of them. One of the few is *Teach Our Children* [1973] a film by Sue Robeson, grand-daughter of Paul Robeson, and Christin Choy [Asian American]. *Teach Our Children* focuses on a single issue, the Attica Prison rebellion and its aftermath to take a larger ideological stance on the oppression of blacks and other peoples, by showing that the source of all evil is in the Capitalist system. Using graphic animation, stills, documentary footages, and effective sound and montage, the struggles of blacks is inextricably linked with worldwide anti-imperialist struggles. The film, in form and subject matter, stands as the exact negation of all the propositions and concepts found in the genre of the Hollywood types.

Three African filmmakers who regard film as a political and ideological weapon in the hands of the artist should also be cited as belonging to Phase III. Ousame Sembene from Senegal, whose *Xala* is a thorough indictment of African leadership today, and Med Hondo from Mauritania, whose film *Soleil O* is a stream of consciousness celebration of the intrinsic nature of "blackness" in "class struggle" and Sara Maldoror, from Angola, the distinguished woman filmmaker whose *Sambizanga* exposed Portuguese colonialism as an imperialist war of genocide.

Up to the dawn of the decade of the 1960s, Africans and blacks in the diaspora have had parallel historical developments. After Africa's wave of independence in the 1960s a split seems to have taken place. Of course Africans could no longer blame the white colonialists for all their misfortunes. With independence the enemy was wrapped in the same likeness, spoke the same language, shared in the culture of the masses, visited the same churches and even dressed like everyone. The color of the skin no longer served as the obvious identifying factor of the oppressor. The need to pinpoint the real enemies of Africa created a cinema of cultural decolonization and for total liberation. The birth of a cinema aimed at awakening the consciousness of the masses to the enemy in the home front seems to have signalled a split between Afro-American and African films.

The black experience in the United States is unfortunately weighed down by the inheritance of racial injustice and all activities seem to be marked by bitter memories of discrimination and

exclusion and a reactionary desire for assimilation. Instead of class consciousness, therefore, black filmmakers seem to concentrate on the unfinished task of a definition of the black/white conflict. This is partly why such vague terms as "Black film" and "Black cinema" have a wide currency. Some people use the term to indicate inferior quality or as examples of the debased form of the genre of Hollywood types, while others employ it to cover their ignorance precisely because they never cared to analyze its significance. I have not used the term because I honestly do not know what it means. However, its amorphousness calls for an examination, and if necessary a whittling down of its implications.

WHAT IS BLACK CINEMA?

A short time ago, as early as the late 1950s, the demand was to let the black filmmaker, as an observer of himself, be his own historian. Many well meaning social reformers and progressives thought the black will give to the world something in originality equal to his sculpture, music, and dance. The notion is still with us. Indeed, nothing can replace the special insight and sensitivity that a particular race can bring to bear in interpreting its own historical past, present and future. Because blacks have been the main repositories of all the injustices known to humanity, they are expected to "explode" with a creative cinema that will shake the world. This notion seems to have blinded us to the fact that being a member of a black race is no guarantee that any black will necessarily emerge as the genuine spokesperson of the people. In fact, the short history of black cinematography sadly proves otherwise.

A solution to the problem of blacks in the cinema, therefore, requires more than a search along racial lines, since we cannot be blinded by the fact that being a member of a race is any guarantee that one will make non-exploitative films of that race. In fact, mention has already been made of *Nothing but a Man*, a film directed by a white in the era of the Sidney Poitier and James Brown films. To demonstrate further how complicated all this is, a film that was released during the wave of "Blaxploitation" films, *Sounder* [1973] is acknowledged as a positive film, with Phase II characteristics. Furthermore, this film has been accepted as one that features heroism of a meaningful order and an encouraging divergence from the fantasy super heroes of the James Bond types.

Ousmane Sembene, the foremost African cineaste, made this thoughtful observation:

I saw Sounder and wondered if it had been written by a white man or a black man, I was very happy...I sense a man who loves

his people and who, by means of this story (even though it is limited), wants to tell us something...it's a film that I would like for all fathers to see. 71

Souder portrays, in a very realistic manner, a black American sharecropper family during the depression era who survive as a family unit despite continuous social, political and economic harassment waged against them by white America. The family survives even the long separation of the head of the family who was serving a prison term. The film, an adaptation from a book, was scripted by Lonnie Elder III, a black.

The case of *Souder* and other "black interest" films discussed so far raise a single and important question. When should a picture be called "Black Film"?

Should *Up Tight!* which explodes with rage and anger and calls for nothing short of "separatism", be called "black film" although we know the story-line is not only a direct copy of a theme from the Irish Rebellion but the film is directed by a white person? Is *Putney Swope* a "black film" because it is so blatantly anti-white? Is Ossie Davis' *Cotton Comes to Harlem* (a humor-filled domestic comedy) a "black film" because the director happens to be black? How about *Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song* which Melvin Van Peebles directed, scripted, scored and starred in? Should we as many have, call it a "black film" because he claims entire credit for it? Is Ivan Dixon's *The Spook Who Sat by the Door* a "black film" because it espouses black revolution?

Just what is "Black Film" or "Black Cinema"? If the criteria is success at the box-office then the *Shaft* series and the other black James Bond types will escape with the prize. Now, how about *Souder*, a film rightly applauded as totally black in theme, relevance and approach--does the fact that it was directed by a white person negate its being called a "black film"? What are the criteria or the characteristics of a "black film"? Does it become a "black film" if the majority of the cast is black, or the film is directed by a black and the producing crew is also black, or if its theme and subject matter reflect black lives and struggles? Or point blank! Do we deny the term in reference to *Teach Our Children* because the film is definitively anti-capitalist, anti-imperialist and supportive of national liberation struggles of peoples the world over?

These questions are of profound interest because the term "Black Cinema" is being tossed around with no definitive meaning. Its vagueness has, as mentioned earlier, raised two distinct interpretations--films informed with a "black experience" and films of inferior quality. Consequently when one criticizes a film for

not being "black enough", one implies that it lacks the "super-spade-murder-addict-blood-and-gore" or that from conception to production to finish it has not utilized complete black input. When one says a film is a "*black* black film", one implies it contains all the ingredients to make it took "super bad". The impreciseness of the term can thus be easily seen.⁷²

My contention therefore is that films should be defined in terms of their implicit or explicit meaning. If a film deals with dope, pushers, pimps and prostitutes the appropriate all encompassing terminology for these events is "lumpen activities", and the name for the cinematic genre that dwells on these activities should be "lumpen cinema". To classify all kinds of films--crime, social, fiction, documentary, mystery, farce and fantasy, comedy and eroticism--that have some black input as "black films" or "black cinema" is to confuse and render such classification meaningless.

The term "black cinema" has functioned as a rhetorical catchword coined for the express purpose of covering up the reluctance or inability of Hollywood directors, black or white, to produce films that deal realistically with black peoples. The race of the makers of an exploitative film cannot, and should not, change the exploitative nature of the film, and since directors, casts, crews and script-writers are needed to make a film, this statement applies equally to all of them. The pretension that "black cinema" is an alternative to "evasive cinema" or "lumpen cinema" is a falsification. What's more, "black cinema" is a term imposed on black audiences and the news media. "Cinema" implies "industry" and blacks do not own a cinema industry to warrant consideration of the term in the first instance. The probability that it was coined to embrace, blunt and divert the growing and outspoken desire of blacks to *tell it like it is* both artistically and politically, should not be overlooked. "Telling it like it is" has no racial overtones, rather it is a demand for unvarnished truth in a world that prefers it otherwise. Its effects on black history and literature have been great and extremely liberating.

The history of black cinematography has always been conditioned by extremes: from *Sub* (human) of earlier years to *Super* (human) of modern times. Some have argued that the *Super* image must be viewed as a welcome reaction to the *Sub* image of the earlier times but they overlook the fact that the *Sub* and *Super* images are both doing a great disservice to Black people. The super image of blacks in contemporary films is a threat to both black and white.

The extent to which normal black working peoples' lives are ignored is a measure of not only pure indifference to their aspirations and existence but an outright subversion of their struggles.

Indeed the unfinished task of studying all humanity as engaged in a never ending process of struggle should be central to any filmic experience and endeavor. Films have always operated in presenting problems and resolving conflicts. And the highest form of conflict is the one between those 'who lose sleep because of fear of the hungry and the homeless' and those who are led by the philosophical viewpoint according to which, before society can engage in other activities "mankind must first of all eat, drink and have shelter". Two world views are presented here, and two diametrically opposed concepts. It is precisely because of this disparity that the task of film has always been [and continues to be] to entertain, educate, and organize the class for which it speaks. The pivotal question is then: On whose behalf are blacks being bombarded with celluloid ritual of mythic images of fantastic escape from gloom, inner city confusion, and confrontation? And Tarzan-supermen-- gangsters and demigods of "so called black movies"--who needs them? You guessed it! Certainly not the decent working men, women and children of the Black Community.

FOOTNOTES

1. Of late, since the advent of Africa's political independence of the 1960s and the subsequent liberation struggles, Africa evokes, "Motherland", "Freedom Fighters", "Blacks", "Cultured Peoples", "Liberation Movements", MPLA, FRELIMO, etc.
2. No author has done more damage to Africa's image as Edgar Rice Burroughs [1875-1950], the literary 'father' of Tarzan. Burroughs, who popularized the myth of "Dark Continent" and "savage" was an American business executive turned 'pop' fiction writer. Burroughs has never been to Africa. His "Africa" was the savage jungle of his own fantasy. Another myth of Africa was compounded by H. Rider Haggard, English Barrister turned novelist and an agent of British imperialism in Africa. His novel, *King Solomons' Mines* [1897] clothed Africa with the wild tales of "savage" rituals and tribes.
3. Beyer, Barry and Hicks, Percy, *Africa South of the Sahara: A Resource and Curriculum Guide* (New York: Thomas Crowell, 1968)
4. Jacobs, Lewis, *The Rise of the American Film* (Teachers College Press, Columbia University, New York, 1968), p. 75.
5. Bogle, Donald, *Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies and Bucks: An Interpretive History of Blacks in American Films* (New York: The Viking Press, 1973), p. 8.

6. Jerome, V.J., "The Negro in Hollywood Films", (*Masses and Main Stream*, New York, Dec. 1950), p. 12. *The Masher* should not be confused with the film of the same title which appeared in 1919 starring Mary Pickford and was directed by Mack Sennet.
7. Lead, Daniel J., "From 'Sambo' to 'Superspade': The Black in Film", *Film and History*, Volume II, Number 3, September 1972, p. 1.
8. Bogle, *op. cit.*, p. 43.
9. Lead, *loc. cit.*
10. *Ibid.*
11. Bogle, *op. cit.*, p. 4.
12. Noble, *op. cit.*, p. 29.
13. Reddick, L.D., "Educational Programs for the Improvement of Race Relations: Motion Pictures, Radio, The Press and Libraries", *The Journal of Negro Education*, XIII, Summer 1944, p. 369, n. Lawrence Reddick noted nineteen stereotypical images of blacks—Some of these are: the savage African, the happy slave, the devoted servant, the corrupt politician, the vicious criminal, the sexual superman, the superior athlete, the unhappy non-white, the natural born cook, the natural born musician, the perfect entertainer, the superstitious church-goer, the chicken and watermelon eater, the razor and knife "toter", the mental inferior.
14. Maynard, Richard, *The Black Man on Film: Racial Stereotyping*, (Hayden Book Co., Inc., Rochelle Park, New Jersey, 1974) p. 8. See also: Noble, *op. cit.*, p. 20.
15. Bogle, *op. cit.*, p. 15.
16. *Variety* (Anniversary Edition), January 1973. *The Birth of a Nation* is reported to have grossed \$50 million in rental distribution in the U.S. and Canada alone. The film has always been omitted from the annual list of "updated All-Time Film Champs" because the film was handled on a state's right basis which often results in outright cash sales. Also omitted from the list is foreign market rentals. It is believed that in recent times foreign rental equals or slightly surpasses domestic play-off. The over-all result of estimable pay-off for *The Birth of a Nation* could be commuted to give results of \$114 to \$120 million.

17. Bogle, *op. cit.*, p. 10. See also Jacobs, Lewis, *op. cit.*, p. 175.
18. Du Bois, W.E.B., *Dusk of Dawn* (New York, 1940), p. 235. See also Cripps Thomas R., "The Reaction of the Negro to Silent films: The Motion Picture Birth of a Nation", *The Historian*, XXV, May 1963, p. 362.
19. Noble, *op. cit.* p. 79. See also: *The Cinema & the Negro 1906-1948*. (A Special Supplement to Sight and Sound), March 1948, p. 11. *Gone With the Wind* though in a subtler way perpetuated and expounded the image of blacks as in *The Birth of a Nation*. In *Gone With The Wind* the popular Southern myth that the black is inescapably fettered to the whites and that blacks are happier as slaves was expounded further adding justifiable acts socially, politically and economically.
20. For a complete list of films done between the two films consult Bogle's book and that of Noble's *The Cinema and the Negro 1905-1948*.
21. Potamkin, Harry Alan, "The Whiteman's Negro", *Liberator*, 28 March 1931, p. 4.
22. Blacks response to the negative portrayals of early films is well accounted for in THE GEORGE JOHNSON SPECIAL COLLECTION at the Research Library of the University of California, Los Angeles. George Johnson, the brother of Noble Johnson the first black actor to be employed by Universal Film Company, was the director of General Booking of the Lincoln Motion Picture Company whose collection of clippings, scenarios and any and all mass information on black film-makers, actors and producers bears his name.
23. Bogle, *op. cit.*, p. 105.
24. From THE GEORGE JOHNSON SPECIAL COLLECTION. A clipping information, unmarked.
25. *Ibid.* In the clipping entitled *Ebony Film Corp.* there appears an insert from the *Chicago Defender*, May 12, 1917 which reads: "Ebony Film Cancelled" "People who attend the theaters do so to be entertained, and not to be insulted. We want clean Race pictures or none at all, and the sooner that these detractors discover that the Defender is in the fight against their rotten stuff, the better."

26. Few of his other films are: *The Brute* [1920], *Gonzales Mystery and Deceit* [1921], *Son of Satan* [1922], *Daughter of the Congo* [1930] *Harlem after Midnight* [1934], *God's Stepchildren* [1937] and *The Betrayal* [1948]. The last in this series has been credited according to George Johnson, see *Supra* 22, as the "Greatest Negro photoplay of All time." For an extended account of the man and his work, see Bogle, *op. cit.*, pp. 110 and *passim*.
27. Bogle, *op. cit.*, p. 29.
28. Pines, Jim, *Blacks in the Cinema: The Changing Image*, (London: British Film Institute) p. 4 and *passim*.
29. Quoted in Maynard, Richard, *op. cit.*, p. 9.
30. Maynard, Richard A., *The Celluloid Curriculum*, (New Jersey: Hayden Book Company, Inc., 1971), p. 139.
31. Rouch, Jean, "The Awakening African Cinema", *The UNESCO Courier*, No. 3, March 1962, p. 11.
32. Maynard, Richard A., *Africa on Film: Myth and Reality* (New Jersey: Hayden Book Company, Inc., 1974), p. 52.
33. Vaugh, Jimmy, "The Dark Continent—the Wrong Light", *Films and Filming*, January 1959, p. 10. See also NB *Cineaste* Col. V., No. 3, p. 30.
34. *Ibid.*, p. 31.
35. Murray-Brown, Jeremy, *Kenyatta*. (London: George Allen and Unwin Ltd., 1972) pp. 185-187.
36. Vaugh, *op. cit.*, p. 31. *Men of Two Worlds'* erroneous view has often been overlooked due to the fact that the film has often been referred to as the first feature length British production to give a black actor a co-starring part with a white star.
37. Rouch, *op. cit.*, pp. 14-15. After the War, there was also an 'about face' in regards to the British film experiment in East Africa. The Bantu Educational Cinema Experiment gave way to the establishment of the British Colonial Film Unit, 1939. For a more complete picture see Notcutt, L.A. and Latham, G.C., *The African and the Cinema* (an account of the Bantu Education Cinema Experiment, 1935-37), (London: Edinburgh Press, 1937) and *Rapport General, Recontres Internationales: Cinema et l'Afrique au Sud du Sahara*, (Bruxelles: Exposition Universelle et Internationale, 1958).

38. Quoted in Mapp, Edward, *Blacks in American Films* (New Jersey: The Scarecrow Press, Inc., 1972), p. 37.
39. Ellison, Ralph, "The Shadow & The Act", *The Reporter*, Dec. 6, 1949, p. 18.
40. *Ibid.*
41. Sidney Poitier's later works are suggestive of the exile's complete return. He had, himself, directed and co-produced with H. Belafonte, *Buck and the Preacher* (1972), a film about a train of ex-slaves going west to a new life after the Civil War. Mr. Poitier has proudly taken this film to Black Colleges and even to Africa (e.g., Tanzania) - film is meant to popularize Black History. He has, since then, directed and produced, *The Organization* and *A Warm December* [1973].
42. Clifford, Mason, "Why Does White America Love Sidney Poitier So?", *New York Times*, September 19, 1967, Section II, p. 21.
43. Quoted in Mapp, *op. cit.*, p. 160.
44. Concerning Sidney Poitier's feelings about criticisms of his film roles there is an interesting account of his views on the matter in James Murray's book, *To Find An Image*, pp. 27-35. Briefly, on page 33 Mr. Poitier says the following, "You may have noticed--and this is the first time I've mentioned this-- that when I get jumped on for a bad movie, you never hear a peep out of me. You never hear any refutations, no placing the blame somewhere else,..."
45. Pines, *op. cit.*, p. 8.
46. Patterson, Lindsay, Ed., *Black Films and Film-makers* (Dodd, Mead & Company, New York, 1975), p. 99.
47. John Guillermin, director of the last of the escapist fare, *Shaft in Africa* was also the film director for *El Condor* (1970) - a typical Jim Brown western with lots of action but no substance.
48. Murray, *op. cit.*, p. 154.
49. For an interesting and complete Marxist analysis of *Sweetback*, *Superfly*, *The Mack* and *Trick Baby* see: Washington, Michael & Berlowitz, Marvin J., "Blaxploitation Films and High School Youth: SWAT Superfly", *Jump-Cut*, No. 9, Oct-Dec., 1975, pp. 23/24.

50. Hairston, Loyle, "The Black Film—"Supernigger" as Folk Hero, *FREEDOMWAYS*, Vol. 14, No. 3, 1974, p. 220.
51. The creator of the *Shaft* series is a white novelist, Ernest Tidyman. The last of the series, *Shaft in Africa*, was written by Stirling Silliphant who got the idea while reading a French newspaper article about Africans being brought from Italy to France for free labor. (Bingo!) See the *Los Angeles Times*, Calendar Section, Sunday, March 25, 1973, p. 20 and *passim*.
52. Concerning an attempt to create a genre of "black films" in terms of aesthetics, mythology and ritual, see Wander Brandon, "Black Dreams: The Fantasy and Ritual of Black Films", *FILM QUARTERLY*, Fall 1975, pp. 2-11.
53. Culbert, Michael, L., "Do Black Films Exploit: Black Films Corrupt Youth", *Watts Times*, Vol. 1, No. 39, October 12, 1972, p. 1.
54. *The Hollywood Reporter*, November 7, 1973, p. 3.
55. Culbert, *loc. cit.*
56. Michener, Charles, "Black Movies", *Newsweek*, October 23, 1972, p. 74 and *passim*. In the Michener article, Fred Williamson [*The Legend of Nigger Charley, Hammer*] claims he is doing no more than white screen actors. He has been criticized by JET magazine, Philadelphia Chile Emergency Committee and other Third World groups—for his having agreed to go to Chile this summer to shoot a film entitled *Greed*. The anti-Williamson forces argue that he is giving support to fascism in Chile if he does go. The actor has not responded to these charges.
57. Murray, James, *To Find an Image*, (The Bobbs-Merrill Company, Inc., Indianapolis/New York, 1973), p. 170. See also Burrell, Walter, "Richard Roundtree: A Players Interview", *Players* Vol. I, No. 1, Premier Issue/November 1973, p. 19. According to the Players Interview the figure that Roundtree earned is slightly different than cited in Murray's book—here Roundtree is supposed to have received \$25,000 for the first and \$50,000 for the second of the series.
58. Culbert, *loc. cit.*
59. Murray, James P., "Black Movies/Black Theater", *The Drama Review*, Vol XVI, No. 4, (T-56), December 1972, p. 56. \$120 million is the amount collected from Black Community areas—but consider the number of blacks who see films outside of their community.

60. Sachs, Lloyd, "Blacks Plan Theater Protests", *Variety*, Vol. 170, No. 37, January 29, 1976. p. 1.
61. *Ibid.*, p. 12.
62. According to *Newsweek* (April 19, 1976): "this partially fictionalized account falls a little flat". See also Cover story article, "On Location and in-depth interview with director Gordon Parks", *Millimeter*, Vol. 4, No. 4, April 1976.
63. Murray, *op. cit.*, p. 58.
64. Wander, *op. cit.*, p. 6.
65. Oliver, Franklin, *On Black Film: A Film and Lecture Series*—Annenberg Center for Communication Arts & Sciences, University of Pennsylvania, 1974, p. 5.
66. *Ibid.*, p. 6.
67. *Chamba Notes*, Winter-Spring, 1974, p. 4.
68. *Ibid.*, p. 6.
69. As opposed to black images in films, television portrayals have sought a wider audience. According to UCLA's Dr. Howard Suber [*Television Quarterly*, 4, 1975]: "...humanizing America's minorities is one of the most useful social tasks television has undertaken.." Mr. Rier believes tv's image is no better.
70. Fanon, Frantz, "On National Culture", *The Wretched of the Earth*, (New York: Grove Press, Inc., 1963), pp. 207-248. Also; Cabral, Amilcar [Selected Speeches], "Identity and Dignity in the Context of the National Liberation Struggle", *Return to the Source*, (N.Y: African Information Service 1973) pp. 57-69.
71. Weaver, Harold, Jr., An Interview with Ousame Sembene, *Cineaste*, Vol. VI, No. 1, 1973, p. 29.
72. For more information on "Black Cinema" see James Murray's *To Find an Image* and Charles Michener's article in Lindsay Patterson's book *Black Films and Filmmakers*, pp. 235-246.

TESHOME H. GABRIEL, former editor-in-chief of UPARAMU (1972-73) is a Faculty Development Scholar and doctoral student in Film/TV Criticism in the Theater Arts Department, UCLA.