

BLACK MOVIE: FIVE PICTURE DEAL TO MAKE GUN MOVIES

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ABSTRACT

Black Movie: Five Picture Deal to Make Gun Movies

Cyril Ryan

Young black filmmakers made a collective noise at the beginning of the nineties with a small group of films. Produced under mainstream commercial banners, these films promised a new era of black involvement in the motion picture industry. Almost a hundred years after the introduction of the cinema (and at the beginning of a time when their ancestors were forced to exist under apartheid laws), these filmmakers are struggling to retrieve a subjective social history, not as the alienated objects of representation, but as the retrieving agents of an historical legacy of exclusion. Through the codes of black cultural presentation as filtered through a variety of discourses and critical vocabularies, two questions arise. Can they succeed in making films that allow the enunciative desires of African-Americans to be manifested? In a terrain that encompasses race, violence and representation, what readings can be taken from a system that has circumvented the humanity of others and substituted a pathology instead?

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PREFACE

The title juxtaposes two symbolic moments. One is about the current preoccupation with the black subject as in the contents of the new wave of black cinema. It is echoed by the occasional attempt to come to terms with the black body (black male body) as in the current art exhibition at the Whitney (Black Male: Representations of Masculinity in Contemporary American Art, 1995). Another instance resides around African cinema, (or Black movie in current popular usage) as a moment that links the political signifier "black" with the struggles of Africans, Asians, African Americans (straight up Niggas), Caribbeans and others in a diasporic struggle against racism and racialist oppression.

"Five picture deals to make gun movies", encapsulates a poetic image borrowed from actress Celia McGee whose friends speak of Hollywood contracts to make gun movies. There is a distinct limitation of roles that actors, especially black women, have as available choice. One actor may choose to follow his *métier* and eventually carry a film for which he is well paid, to participate in yet another Hollywood fantasy. Another actor, after seeing the mindless mayhem he agreed to be part of decides not to accept those kinds of roles. As Orson Scott Card wrote, the mature participant assesses the consequences of his/her actions to choose the level of involvement.

INTRODUCTION

Many of the films from the current wave of black cinema are made predominantly by young black males. The context of these films appears to be representations that mirror the violent nihilistic lifestyle of a segment of the urban population. These "ghettocentric" films suggest an effect, a "mirror on society" take that seems to offer a simple and causal explanation linked to a modernist state of affairs. Discourse in the era of the "post" has pounced on the moral panic of race violence, drugs, teenage pregnancy as a narrow focus emphasis on the failure of African-Americans to lead organized lives. Attacks on the nihilistic images of Rap music, for example, serve to dramatize a relationship between media activity and reality. In fact the medium of film takes some of the heat as an agent provocateur in the correspondence between the "real" and the "reel".

This discourse however, can easily be recognized as a social and politically driven agenda around the formations of myths that circulate at the juncture of race and violence. The complex interactions woven into the relational fabric of the history of African-Americans have been points of dispute on the allowable utterances considered acceptable by the dominant mainstream. Consider this marker by Foucault:

"Madness", he states, "appears as an utterance wrapped up in itself articulating something else beneath what it says, of which it is at the same time the only possible code."¹

Mainstream media has little problem in providing its own decoding to those utterances that do not fit within the skein of its self cloaked delusion. For example, in a country that has more registered gun dealers than it has grocery stores; that produces untold hours of weekly television programs that feature gun play in cop films and police series (both the fictional and reconstructed documents); that produces nightly news containing "the world's small and bitter wars", is effectively to suggest a predominant state of consciousness in America - that of "gun culture". This pervasive culture offers a metaphor that many Americans live by. The sedimented word/phrases that have become a natural part of one's vocabulary - "to take aim", "to shoot straight", "on target", "holding one's fire", "to smoke" and to "blow away" - speaks volumes of the progress of civil society from its days of frontier adventuring and to its notions of personal freedom.

While the gun is a major contributor to high profile violent death in our society, it is the statistics surrounding the amount of violence that is staggering. The United States is first among industrial nations in the rate of violent deaths. The southern states of Louisiana and Mississippi lead the nation with 18.5 and 17.5 homicides per 100,000 population respectively. Homicide and suicide account for one third of violent deaths, about 145,000 per year. Death by homicide among white males is 7.9 per 100,000. For black males, the number is 58.1 per 100,000. For white females, "to whom gun manufacturers target much of their sales", the number of

homicides is 2.9 per 100,000. For black females, that figure is 13.2.² What is evident from these numbers is who in the population is at greatest risk from violent deaths, especially since much of the violence is directed interracially, domestically, and in drug or other related crimes. Violence is an epidemic running rampant in America. An exteriorization of an impulse to eradicate in many instances the ones closest to the individual, family or community.

Part of the "madness" alluded to earlier is the marking of a certain segment of the population to make them responsible for the "monstrous acts" such as those chronicled by hard-core rappers (e.g. Ice-T's Cop Killer), while the very acts of violence directed against Rodney King (which in turn begat Reginald Denny) clearly indicate the scope of racist injustice in the country. Media presentation and national dialogue have coded the presentation of blacks as trouble (makers), blacks as victims of their own inability to regulate their lives and consequently come to be perceived as people who have been pampered after thirty years or so of "preferential treatment" - as the current assault to dismantle affirmative action likens it.

The codification and setting of the face of this monster, while by no means a historical fixity, was established in the first feature length narrative film that enthralled America - D.W. Griffith's Birth of a Nation (1915). This contentious and technically innovative film framed African-Americans, recently freed slaves, as a threat to American society. The effectiveness of this film in its systematic framing and racist depiction of blacks was so virulent that protests

led to race riots upon its release. The images Griffith produced are referred by Ed Guerrero as "a mix of political, psychic and material motives that deployed new stereotypes to justify the repression of ex-slaves and to promote the unification of white supremacists".³ This "plantation genre", according to Guerrero, is resurrected from time to time to fulfill some underlying skein in America's psychic need. As Lipsitz reminds us, America evolved with the brutality and sadism of genocide, slavery, exploitation and conquest.⁴ In the reflexive contemporary parlance, "the white guys won".

If this winning has been so glorious, why are there countless imagineered products made to entertain the mainstream concerned with what they are? Is the resurrection of Margaret Mitchell's Gone With the Wind (1939) sequel, (the television series) Scarlett (1994), a matter of "high concept" entertainment linked to a past success? Is it nostalgic yearning for the plantation saga brought forward to the nineties? This plantation motif is one of the streams of haemorrhaging images in Hollywood's repertoire that has established a hegemony of demonizing models of peoples of African descent and others (Indians, Hispanics, Asians - people of color) in what one might call an "emblematic cultural form of relational power".⁵

Commercial cinema's current project comes in the form of an exploitation of racial demographics that sees a slight loosening in the controls of production while maintaining control over the approval and distribution of the stories of 'others'. This project is not

always as simple as the role reversals established in the blaxploitation period but rather uses African-Americans, "presenting them as medium through which new morality plays are staged for public consumption".⁶ The films by their form and content are geared to return invested capital while subtly affecting a contemporary articulation of earlier plantation discourse into a version of screen delusion. Capitalizing on the wave of young black filmmakers, a generational group that has been, by and large, institutionally trained and hungry for a place in this elite industry, commercial cinema's beckoning door may open into a proverbial hall of mirrors. S/he who enters to forge a working relationship knows that the stake for a black cultural struggle is enormous. By inhabiting the intersecting site of black cultural needs and the vicissitudes of commercial production, his/her efforts may be subsumed to a set of conditions and unanticipated relations of a discursive nature. In the struggle to oppose and displace a historical legacy of exclusion, denigration and displacement which is made to appear as a naturalised process within dominant discursive formation, it will be necessary to do more than critique and demask those naturalizing agents to retrieve the "subject" from the historical parade of "object" relations.

To begin then, Black movie will use the following films as a focus: New Jack City (1991), Boyz N the Hood (1991), Menace to Society (1993), Juice (1992), and Strapped (1993), to look at the codes of black cultural presentation as they are filtered through a variety of discourses and critical vocabularies. "Gun movies" will be the

narrow focus scrutiny to the project. Insofar as they are pervasive representations of a cultural process on ghettocentric discourse, they will be used to address such questions as: "can black films be made that have the power to allow the enunciative desires of African-American peoples to manifest themselves?"⁷ What comes through a delusional system whose pathology veers towards madness?

TRANSFORMATIVE MOMENTS

"the immense misery of the world cinema is to think that people are representable."

Marguerite Duras

Michael Rogin has suggested that four films identify a pivotal moment in the early history of cinema. Each of these films are "transformative moments" which he claims "has founded itself on the surplus symbolic value of blacks, the power to make African Americans stand for something beside themselves".⁸ Edwin Porter's Uncle Tom's Cabin (1903), "the most performed theatrical spectacle of the late nineteenth century brought to the movies", was also the first substantial blackface role to introduce the plantation myth.⁹ D.W. Griffith's Birth of a Nation is highlighted as "the single most important American movie ever made".¹⁰ This 'master' piece is (was) a cinematically innovative full length feature film. "Its construction around the unifying force of white racism served to idealize the South and ridicule Reconstruction".¹¹ In keeping with the times, white actors in shoe polish performed "the inaccurate historical narrative".¹² The Jazz Singer (1927) has the distinction of being "the founding movie of Hollywood sound (that) introduced blackface performer of Al Jolson to feature films".¹³ Consequently, it became the historical marker (if not wholly the true) first sound film making the technological shift from silent to sound films. The problematic spectacle of Jolson's blackface was that he was neither a jazz singer nor black. Rogin's reading offers Jolson's jazz singer as one who ventriloquizes the black by singing through his mouth. "The

Jazz Singer", he claims, "makes its object that which is buried in Birth of a Nation, that the interracial double is not the exotic other but the split self, the white in blackface".¹⁴ Gone with the Wind is "an early example of the producer unit that would come to dominate Hollywood". Gone with the Wind also established the future of the Technicolor process and returned to American film origins in the plantation.¹⁵

Of these films, Birth of a Nation occupies a singularly unique place in cinema history. Griffith's skills, honed by making several experimental features prior to Birth of a Nation, brought together an array of techniques such as close-ups, cross-cuts, parallel narratives, pans, tracking shots and the like. What is disturbing and often overlooked is the gravity of these effects in establishing a cinematic discourse around African Americans and race. Griffith "harnessed the persuasive powers of the medium to reinforce fantasies of a white race under attack by ignorant blacks and their allies". Audience emotions and perceptions were twisted to comply with a vision that at best postulated an ambiguous set of social relations. In fact, some would argue that Griffith's techniques cohered with an accretive force aimed at facilitating the acceptance of a virulent discourse that Snead suggests, forms the morally ambiguous if not downright tendentious effect of the film.¹⁶ The film appealed to those who supported the Klu Klux Klan activities (of lynchings and terrorism) or, who could be so swayed. The resulting protests which led to race riots in some cities were to little avail. The film had found its supporters and may account for the ten years that

it played in Atlanta.¹⁷ But the central dilemma faced by Griffith and America was what to do about the presence of blacks - the African Americans - (becoming), the African ex-slaves that were in their midst. Birth of a Nation, Gone with the Wind, and many other films presented the only acceptable image - the reversion of freed slaves to the nostalgic, happy, singing darkies of the plantation. The Civil War, however, foreclosed such a fantastic solution and by its end, a position of disavowal of responsibility for slavery and a denial of the human rights of "freed" slaves was the rule. Promises for repatriation, "forty acres and a mule", were never honored. They floated in the wind along with all the other promissory utterances (written and otherwise) that established America's relation with Native Americans.

These films then, that identify Rogin's "transformative moments", not only marked the unique offerings of each subject but also clearly outlined the central objects of discourse. Uncle Tom's Cabin was the most extravagant of early classical Hollywood cinema. It was the first to use intertitles and extended narrative with a black character except (and this remarkable exception holds for three of these films although the fourth, arguably, could just as easily fit) "since African Americans were forbidden to play themselves in serious dramatic roles, the first substantial blackface film straddles the border of the most popular nineteenth century form, blackface minstrelsy and (what was to become) the most popular entertainment form of the twentieth century, motion pictures".¹⁸

Griffith's film, Birth of a Nation, "originated Hollywood cinema in the ride of the Klu Klux Klan against political and sexual revolution and confirmed the period of directorial control over filmmaking". David O. Selznick's (the producer supplanting director's control) Gone With the Wind, witnesses the triumphant "white male hero" in the film's black/white conflict.¹⁹ Gone With the Wind's black actors/actresses fulfilled so many stereotypical types that on viewing the film in 1940, Malcolm X ("the only Negro in the theater") said that he felt like crawling under the rug when Butterfly McQueen went into her act. Hattie McDaniel (in the same film) was so effective in her "mammy" role that she was awarded an Oscar for her performance.²⁰

The exploitation and appropriation of the black subject as s/he is transmuted into an object of social and political differentiation perhaps, from the fear of a sexual/racial interpellation, as Rogin suggests, is at the juncture of Birth of a Nation's assimilation/miscegenation text. This strategy is offered as a means of resolving the rupture of North and South by a forceful regeneration through violence.

Birth of a Nation then can be centered as a text that invented the black image on screen as imagined from the plantation perspective by way of Hollywood. The Jazz Singer adds its stake in the service of the integration of Jews into mainstream American life, rising "by putting on the mask of a group that must remain immobile, unassailable, and fixed at the bottom". These texts gave cause to

legitimize increasing government segregation (with KKK as the unofficial arm of terror), allowing the naturalization of racial hostilities.²¹ This journey from the 'reel' to the 'real', "defined for the first time the side Hollywood was to take in the war to represent black people in America".²² As Paul Gilroy notes, "racism does not move tidily and unchanged through time and history", but until the crisis of a world at war intervened, the battle for racist America's fight against black people was set up by "fixing an image of blackness" exemplified in the aforementioned films.²³ These images have scorched an indelible impression of African American representation across time and space. They have been invoked, occluded, deflected and deformed under the authority of particular power discourses. The transgressive uses of these images has established a burden of myths that African Americans must constantly struggle against. One effect under this hegemonic construction has been the wholesale export of the universalized ideology of white supremacy that conflates with the visions of foreign nations. America tells the world its distorted truth about African Americans despite the studied warnings given by Gunnar Myrdal and presently by Andrew Hacker.²⁴

I. Fast forward. It's the 1980's and Patricia J. Williams itemizes a series of logical presuppositions she sees underlying the Howard Beach incident on December 20, 1986.

"Everyone who lives here is white
No black could live here
No one here has a black friend
No white would employ a black here
No black is permitted to shop here
No black is ever up to any good".

These presuppositions illustrated the attributes of a "common-sense" racism, emphasizing the mind set of Howard Beach residents. These views, Williams suggests, are premised on "lethal philosophies of life".²⁵ Within the logic of this senseless event, Williams finds the rationalization for defacto segregation and the privatization of public spaces. The latter, in particular, is an attempt to confine African Americans to their own "turf". These enclaves, "hoods", "ghettoes", are continually shrinking and constrained by exterior forces. When marchers assembled to protest the Howard Beach killing, former mayor Ed Koch (city's first citizen) remarks about invading Queens (Howard Beach) residents' backyard, as something the protesters would not like to see in their own neighbourhood. There is an implication here that if the opportunity was missed to keep African Americans shackled on the plantation, perhaps the next best post-modern thing to do is to contain them within the urban reservation.

Williams' point however, is punctuated by what she calls "spirit murder" - "a disregard for others whose lives qualitatively depend on our regard". Her fear is that "spirit murder produces a system of formalized distortions of thought and social structures centered on

fear and hate".²⁶ The face of this fear and hatred is not new. It was once unofficially sanctioned in the terror of lynchings in the South, until its excess brought official censure. The transmutation of the image of this fear and its companion hatred erupt in the acts of personal violence, such as those perpetrated by Bernhard Goetz or, most recently, William Masters. These two vigilantes commit murder then plea self-defence against victims who they claim were the actual marauders. Four black teenagers and two Hispanics respectively have been dispatched by these gun carrying defenders of decency and good. Williams uncloaks Goetz's confession and displaces its imagery onto a black man with a gun. If he shot as many white high school students as he could within a context similar to Goetz's, what would the outcome be? The responses to her inquiry is the instant pronouncement of insanity - that this individual should be institutionalized or, imprisoned. The image of the criminal is "lodged in a concept of the black 'other'".²⁷

Yet, Mr. Masters is toasted as more than a hero when referred to on a radio broadcast as a saint. There is a glaring contradiction here that defies most known religious precepts, and at least a basic Christian one, in particular. The killing of the body, the feared body of Africans - the killing of the spirit that takes on many forms, is "a conceptual cancer" and "a spiritual genocide on blacks, on whites and abandoned of all races and ages".²⁸ It is a legacy of those already numbed in a "civilization without a conscience". A civilization that manages to normalize its madness as a natural state of affairs. This madness, or the "internal plantation" of Reece Auguste's

description, is "an interior that is defined by racial phantoms, colonial fantasies and power relations formed by the complexities of race, class, gender and sexual orientation".²⁹ This is part of the legacy of white supremacy - the subterranean effect of reaping the benefits of global resources on the backs of super exploited workers who are relegated to second class citizenship and become the symbols of cultural degradation. This status of people of color and their spiritual and material state of being is the axis of the "white man's burden". The mass media, with film as its most popular (if not its most powerful tool- a claim that can effectively be made for television) symbolic apparatus, circulates images with multiple and contradictory implications that on reception, structures experience. When an eight year old in a blast of intuition can determine that all of the characters of color she sees on screen are all negative depictions, her next question about finding better ones creates a tension of unrelieved anxiety. Not only are the proportion of negative depictions and characterizations effective, they create the psychic wounds and scars that a 'despised people' internalize only to respond to in (self) destructive ways. Jameson calls this behaviour "the totalizing anomie and displacement of the subject".³⁰

Has he seen Juice, where the internalized anguish of the bound psyche that has fed on the trope of the gangster gives one of the lead characters the gritty motto something like "if ya gotta to go, that's the way to do it" as he revels in the demise of the Cagney character in *White Heat* (1949). Those who will receive these images - reduced to infinite traces - the new jacks, the mack daddies, gang bangers and

drug dealers, are referred to, in R.A.T. Judy's words, as "an index of the moral despair engendered by a thoroughly dehumanizing oppression, and hence inevitably bearing a trace of that dehumanization".³¹ Their universal motto is "I don't give a fuck!"- the tragic children's language of reduction, as they lose themselves in the nihilistic rituals of disempowerment.

Eugene Genovese raised the question about the African's presence in America:

"How do you integrate into a country that does not want you?
How do you separate from a country that finds it too profitable to let you go?"³²

Once the nigger, the index that referenced black status as labor commodity, shifted in the aftermath of the Civil War, it became necessary to contain the aspirations of the freed slaves. The aspect of productive labor may have changed but as Judy suggests, "a nigger is both productive labor and value, a quantitative abstraction of exchange".³³ Without the physical presence of this "thing" under his direct control, it was necessary to establish a means of control as outlined in Birth of a Nation's text. The use-value of the nigger could be shifted into the form of an index that continuously reinforced the inferior nature of black people and in so doing, bolster that of white supremacy.

Derek Bell has imagined a rather pessimistic but, nevertheless, quite believable scenario (if one finds a substitute for 'space traders') that has all of the United States (whites) deciding in some near dystopic future their willingness to trade all the African Americans in their presence for the material needs that would once again allow America to flourish. The result in itself is not of great interest to Bell although he envisions only one possible outcome. What is of interest to him is the dialogue around the possible transaction and the resolution to the ultimate problem, "the great American racial experiment".³⁴

Native Americans worked out long ago that the object of such frenzy and lust that drove the white man was a pathology akin to madness. It would be best to leave them alone. History however, has not been so magnanimous. A people, whose driving desires are conquest, genocide and slavery, is impervious to the desires of others. The internal baggage that Auguiste's subjects carry are a testament to that. This "culture of oblivion" makes the struggle for authentic expression difficult. Texts argue that "the exclusion of African Americans has more to do with discursive formation that defines whites' definition of reality than it has to with intentionally motivated racism".³⁵ One wonders what texts (presuming the context) and in which discursive formation does Goetz and company find their definition of self and the 'other'. A text such as Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* which produces a different image of the African American is critiqued as being "unable to produce new definitions and assumptions for the protagonist to use in forging his

life".³⁶ This leads to the argument that African Americans do not stand outside the production and reproduction that links separate and fragmented pieces of American social reality. One wonders what would be the effect if the black legacy became a prime focus. Especially since aspects of black culture seep into every frame of the dominant society.

William Styron effectively points out how mainstream would twist such a proposition as he takes on the Walt Disney empire in a pithy opinion piece, "Slavery Disney's Way? No Thanks". What disturbed Styron was a plan by Disney to 'imagineer' what it feels like to be a slave, and what it was like to escape through the Underground Railroad. Styron, a writer, is upset that anyone should try to "visualize such a stupendous experience". He feels that "slavery cannot be represented by exhibits" in the way that "the Holocaust" memorials have been. He says that "slavery's abyssal pain arose far less from its physical cruelty (a point I have been circumlocuting), than from the moral and legal savagery that deprived an entire people of their freedom, along with their rights to education, ownership of property, matrimony and protection under law".³⁷ More fragmented pieces of reality or, in this case, unreality. The fractured body/spirit that endured the legacy of slavery is exemplified in the best known authentic black contribution to American life and its most overworked trope - music.

The lesser practiced art of painting (that is, by African Americans) is Jean Michel Basquiat's form of self expression in which the references to self are his primary channels. The pain in his works - "self immolations", "sacrifices of the self", "black man", bears witness, says bell hooks, of Basquiat's struggle to utter the unspeakable. Attempting to read the emotional response of his work which hooks' feels is often judged from a distance, she makes an attempt to directly confront Basquiat's work.

"The images are nakedly violently. They speak of dread of terror, being torn apart, ravished. Commodified, appropriated and made to "serve" the need of white masters, the black body as Basquiat shows it is incomplete, not fulfilled never a full image".³⁸

In his verbal chastising of Disney imagineers, Styron speaks to the falseness that underlies their assumption "that by viewing the artefacts of cruelty and expression" - one will have succumbed in a "disturbing and agonizing" manner the catharsis of a completed tragedy".³⁹ A similarity he notes, that is nothing like the brief duration and intensely focused destruction of the Holocaust. While that odious portion of history is past and can be illuminated in museums, Styron notes that the drama of slavery's tragedy has never ended.

The two hundred and fifty year history in America (U.S.), says Styron, "intricately bound master and slave in unlimited permutations of emotions and relations". To return to hooks, in her viewpoint, Basquiat's works express "a first hand knowledge of the

way assimilation and objectification lead to isolation", and she offers the example of "Basquiat's black male standing alone and apart". The inhabitants of these paintings, she notes, are "not whole people".⁴⁰

Basquiat then offers a glimpse of the process that has encapsulated Reece Auguiste's "internal plantation". The paintings, borrowing from hooks, "delineate the violent erasure of a people, their culture and traditions". Like disappearing Maasai artefacts that hooks finds problematic, these practices are aimed at enhancing the aesthetics of those perpetuating the erasure. The sovereign past of indigenous cultures and their traces of artefacts have long been infected with the global virus of colonialists' acquisitiveness. The removal of talismans suggests a complex psychology of ownership and dominance of that culture. These universalizations here are solely a means of illustrating in a skip trace manner, a pathway through the imbricated boundaries and complexities of history and historicity, and of utterances warped through space time. This is a space that conflates the power of conquest and ownership with the archeological objects of other cultures. There is the minimal danger of lingering too long over movements from universals to particulars, especially those of the exceptional and individual characterizations. This is, after all, an exploration of moments that can occupy manifold frames of reality. Those frames whose portals limn the constitution of social subjects through the cultural legacy of slavery and its rather reluctant and uneasy spatial co-habitation can become the basis for a glorious future transformation. The kind that liberal

humanists make end notes of in all the large projects to save humanity - the kind that rarely ever achieves any significant local/global progress against the expressed interest of conservative, capitalist dominated, market fuelled economies. What might constitute the fulfilment of Darwinian philosophy (how simply attractive it is) are for those elites, the 1.5% controlling half of the Gross Domestic Products, to step up the production of new generation of machines so that humans can eventually be replaced. And beware of replicants. These constructs, inhabitants of Blade Runner's (1982) future dystopia, would like to have their termination dates extended.

As bell hooks tells it, Basquiat "to be seen by the art world, to be known,...had to remake himself, to create from the perspective of the white imagination". These two dimensional spectacles that was the conflation of Basquiat's art and the minstrel show his life often turned into is a process of self-objectification, says hooks, that is as dehumanizing as any racist assault by white culture.⁴¹

"Hope lies somewhere between two extremes -
the tragic and the grotesque".

Jerzy Grotowski

Cornel West tells a familiar New York taxi story. One familiar to anyone, especially African Americans who want to ride uptown to Harlem. After a tenth refusal, a cab stops nearby to pick up "a kind well dressed smiling fellow citizen of European descent". As she stepped into the cab, she said, "this is really ridiculous, is it not?"⁴² Privileged instance? You're part of the problem/part of the solution? Your privilege and power that reinforces the 'other's' lack? Is the Harlem turf so dangerous that New York cabbies turn into wimps when asked to take a fare? Williams' recognition of the segregated turfs that partition black communities from white, has long been a fact.

Transgressions across these barriers can prove fatal. The driver and his stranded companions in Howard Beach, one of whom is beaten to death, did not wilfully plan to be there. The occasion of going beyond some imagined limit is only different in kind from West's racial memories commanding (!) taxis and being 'jacked' on fake charges of trafficking cocaine. His offered credentials are scorned (a professor of religion) as a cop responds, "Yeh, and I'm the Flying Nun. Let's go nigger!"⁴³ These tragic quotidian tales are the staple experiences of people of color. With very few exceptions and rare conditions, neither wealth, fame, nor power can protect the image of African Americans from such assaults. Blacks have taken on

a universal signifier that flattens all distinctions of individual identity.

The social significance of the cinema is that it becomes "the cultural arena in which society reflects upon and adjusts its image of itself".⁴⁴ Through the underlying text is the carrier for the inherent warning of mainstream film that "visible difference not only justifies discrimination against and oppression of the other, it makes such discrimination and oppression seem necessary".⁴⁵ Jameson echoes Guy Debord's contention that "the ultimate form of commodity reification in contemporary consumer society is precisely the image itself".⁴⁶

PELLICULTURE AMERICAINE

four black movies and some color ones too!

"A film is a girl and a gun"

This is Jean-Luc Godard's pithy summary of mainstream movie making. It is a lament on the diminishing potential of the cinema in the presence of commerce.

"With the advent of sound and then the consolidation of filmmaking into the movie business, the development of cinema's uniquely expressive powers became secondary to commercial gain".⁴⁷

This regret at the passing of "certain ideal cinematic practices,...devoted to artistry, complexity and nuanced emotion" is the passionate remembrance of a dying proficiency. Ironically, this condition expresses the Benjaminian notion on the industrialization of art as a necessary condition not only to be modern but also, to attract and respond to the masses.⁴⁸ This process of industrialization and modernization is attached to a material economy subservient to the imperatives of capital. This has led to an ever evolving highly technologized cinema which overshadows cinema's possible diversity leading to a "decay" as seen in the formularized, reductive, market driven products.⁴⁹ Asked by Jean Paul Belmondo in Pierrot Le Fou (1965) to define cinema, Sam Fuller responds with "love.hate.action.violence.death". This varied mix, "this display of simulacra, of bewitching passions, if not the mind",

has become the staple of popular film. So much so that Aline Isserman (*L'ombre du doute/Shadow of Doubt*) is led to query why American filmmakers spend so much time on crime movies. She states, "I'm interested in crime, very interested, let's have movies about crime! But I am not interested in seeing movies about stupid people who never develop an awareness about what they are doing".⁵⁰

Isserman's point is well taken. The testosterone fuelled pictures coming out of Hollywood are one example of the "vehicles" made by old men for an audience of young men in the 18-24 year age group. These corporate filmmakers and their world is the subject of Robert Altman's film *The Player* (1992). This provides a glimpse at the "relational business" style operating in "tinsel town".⁵¹ Their priority, as one unnamed executive related to Nelson George, is to continually feed "the machine" with products that preferably can go through the US\$100 million plus ceiling. If it approaches the ionospheric boundary of Disney's recent *The Lion King* (1994), (upwards of US\$ 700 million globally), so much the better. A Woody Allen or, a Spike Lee, may make smaller movies for a more select audience but that is not the studio's prime product. George's most striking insight about the Hollywood institution was learning not about its insensitivity to black culture or, Hispanic culture or Asian culture, but rather, its misunderstanding of any subculture with an agenda or values different from any conception Hollywood's bland "universal audience".⁵² This raises the question as to the extent of creative freedom a black artist has when placed between the

demands of his financiers and responsibility to a community requiring inspirational views of their existence in America.⁵³ To reiterate Jafa, how does one make black films that have the power to allow the enunciative desires of people of African descent to manifest themselves. What kinds of things do we do?⁵⁴

George's experience as a writer gained him the opportunity to write and produce a film in Hollywood. An experience that taught him what not to do as he found it "painful, frustrating and embarrassing in the extreme". His unpreparedness for filmmaking on Hollywood scale is due to a self admitted lack of filmmaking knowledge, a failure to understand people being dealt with (Greene's "relational business" style), and a viability to have input into a project he helped initiate. All these factors conspired in the making of a mediocre film.⁵⁵ One key fact in his story is the use of a model to base their film on. Not having studied this model well, nor having a good script to begin with, his learning curve was indeed frustrating.

If George's problems were compounded by the anxieties of "nigger movie" budget nit-picking, Euzhan Palcy's experience in making A Dry White Season (1989) - the first big budget film on South Africa - had its own dimension of frustration. Her film tried to serve black characters in ways Cry Freedom (1987) and A World Apart (1988) did not. Instead, the material had at its center the education of a politically naive white man. No subsequent Hollywood project by Palcy has been forthcoming. In one case, a

neophyte filmmaker is given a shot with admittedly poor material to start with. If he had been successful at the box office, the door of opportunity might have opened a bit wider. Palcy's credentials include Sugar Cane Alley (1984), a keen social and political critique embedded in a coming of age story. Subsequent opportunities on the Hollywood scale may prove difficult. Contemporary Hollywood no longer operates in the same manner as the earlier studio system with its craft guilds and the cross fertilization it engendered. It was a system that allowed one's experience curve to grow on a variety of B projects until one was skilful or talented enough to move up. The increasing cost of movie making cut back on such studio operating style along with rigid unions and advancing technology constantly shifted the ground, and consequently the chance for journeyman skill development. Long arduous apprenticeship based on knowing someone or formal educational training became door openers.

The emergence of "New Jacks" at the end of the eighties, beginning of the nineties, contributed another dimension to African Americans' attempt to breach the walls that all but locked out a very few from mainstream filmmaking. Hollywood had discovered in the early seventies the success of a picture by Melvin Van Peebles, Sweet Sweetbacks' Baadasssss Song (1971), which helped launch the blaxpotation era.⁵⁶ Playing out the reversals of role that placed the black man against low rent villains and winning, might have served as temporary catharsis for the black audiences. As long as the box office coffers were returning profits, this onslaught of B pictures continued. As in previous Hollywood generic cycle shifts, blacks were

removed from the center of these often dubious products, reducing available work for performers. One way Hollywood chose to maintain a black presence, on the periphery or as background, was the use of the biracial buddy strategy to keep African Americans coming to the theaters. Jacquie Jones has outlined in her essay "The Construction of Black Sexuality", the positioning of black male characters as sidekicks. These pairings that place a black actor (usually) "has firmly established the idea of violent differentiation for the black male character" according to Jones, displacing a scopophilic substitution on role playing functions usually assigned to white females.

"In this way, mainstream film can either blatantly ignore and substitute the sexuality of the black male character, or confuse it with issues of gender representations. Either way, the power dynamic of white male - black male is obscured by the less clear issues of social membership and gender roles, and the sexuality of the black male is realized through individualized physical dominance than sex itself, when realized at all".⁵⁷

As Laurence Fishburne pointed out, most of the roles written for Hollywood films are written for white actors. Black actors must compete for these roles since those written for blacks are scarce.⁵⁸

Not only are black male roles suffused with the unconscious product of white script writers (referencing their cultural matrix of white supremacist society), it seems that these imaginings become part of the voyeuristic experience embedded in mainstream films.

Jones makes a distinction between Danny Glover's character in Lethal Weapon (1987) that holds "all the appeal of a fast food job for an inner city youth faced with the prospects of drug peddling".⁵⁹ His co-star, Mel Gibson, is central to the film, in stark contrast to Glover's "one dimensional, unexciting" presence. In one of the three Lethal Weapons made, Glover's character discovers, while sitting on the toilet, that he is pressure stuck with a bomb and the deposit of his previous meals. This kind of scatological imagery invokes, in its crude way, a subtler guise of D.W. Griffith's vitriolic racial construction. There is also the implication of hysteria, of being uncool under pressure leading to the elimination of the black female character in Point of No Return (1994) or, the Wesley Snipes' comic book character in Demolition Man (1994) who foreshadows his own demise by declaring the only way he'll go out is if they take his head off which, his equally cartoonish protagonist played by Sylvester Stallone, proceeds to accomplish with some hi-tech help. Should you consider these inscribed instances as unintended preferred readings, consider the following: A recent news broadcast on CNN (International), March 7, 1995, between 9:00 - 9:45 a.m., carried a piece on the U.S. Army Technical Soldier. Various hi-tech weapons and weapons' technology were presented. Near the end of the segment, a white soldier with his infrared/advanced communication apparatus turned squarely at two weaponless black soldiers standing at ease and pointed his laser equipped weapon at one. Is this paranoia? Is this Donna Haraway's description of a condition in the face of which it is impossible to remain articulate?⁶⁰ But to return, these buddy films of Hollywood can and do supply many of the

metaphoric substitution in diverse combinations. There is a handful of Whoopi Goldberg films including Ghost (1990) and Clara's Heart (1988), Wayans and Willis in the Last Boy Scout (1991), Morgan Freeman and Jessica Tandy in Driving Miss Daisy (1987), ("old snake oil in a new bottle") and so on.

The New Jack spotlight however, returns to the topos of the earlier blaxpoitation film - the "detonating" hoods. These enclaves of Williams' description, the defacto segregated spaces of urban America, continue to be the sites of "brutal physical and moral decline" of apartheid communities. As part of the small but noisy cluster of black films inaugurating the nineties, these films by first time directors share certain similarities. Singleton's take on teenage transition into manhood in South Central Los Angeles hints at autobiographical experience. The coming of age story in the "beleaguered drug, crime and gang violent 'hood immediately found a receptive constituency".⁶¹ Thomas Doherty claims "Boyz N the Hood gives face and value to people unseen, unheeded and undone". "This screen metaphor", as he calls it, "serves up an image of wasted lives in a wasted landscape".⁶²

Menace II Society blankets a similar terrain over in Compton and ups the ante in its depiction of violence. Jafa recounts the rumours surrounding the Hughes brothers' pitch to New Line Cinema. When their script was compared to Boyz N the Hood, they are said to have shouted "Boyz N the Hood, fuck Boyz N the Hood,

we'll show you some real violence", at which point they were quickly signed.⁶³ As Charles Dutton, star of TV series "Roc" relates:

"If the kids who made Menace II Society had gone to a studio and said they wanted to make a movie called Contributors II Society about black kids going to college, it would never have been made".⁶⁴

(Ironically, John Singleton's latest film Higher Learning (1994) is about just that subject, while Menace II Society covers territory similar to Boyz N the Hood).

This staple of violence is another tautachronous route for cinema especially Hollywood cinema. As Godard notes, "violence attracts the camera and the cinema obediently zooms in to attend to it".⁶⁵ Menace II Society uses a typical narrative style but with the addition of a subjective voice over by its central character, Caine. The classic limitations of this kind of subject positioning has been well documented by Bill Nichols.⁶⁶ Menace II Society, however, "subverts this technique by simultaneously giving truth and primacy to Caine's version of events, while underscoring his ability, his unreliability as a narrator". Through this self conscious, unconventional use of a conventional device, the Hughes have moved beyond other films of the 'hood genre with the aim of breaking down Hollywood images of African American life.⁶⁷

Juice is Ernest Dickerson's (Spike Lee's cinematographer on his first five features) drama about another black crew of high school

age students who, like their West Coast counterparts from Compton, run the grave risk of not making it to manhood. The dangers are the "usual suspects" ascribed in sociological fashion to the limited opportunities of ghetto residents that produce in causal terms internalized behavioural dysfunctions. In this film, the parents, as in many of these generic representations, are shown to be ineffective with their children and partly if not wholly absent. The crew takes on the artificial semblance of a surrogate all male bonded family as much for the psychic support as for the physical protection offered on the streets. One crew member in Juice wants to climb towards the status of hardcore gangster and wants to pull his homies along. He is ready to plunge into violent crime. There is a scene outside a bar where the character Bishop and the crew meet with one of the members who has just left an old black acquaintance holding up the bar. He relates what is going on inside and his refusal to take up the acquaintance's offer for a piece of the action. Bishop, however, is keen to join this just released former inhabitant of a house of pain. He is restrained by the others. Later, watching James Cagney in White Heat, he conflates Cagney's "going out in a blaze of glory" and news of the shooting death by police of their acquaintance at the bar as an example of choice - that is, agency to decide how to "go out". This is at once the scope and limit of such agency - the path from despair to death. Dickerson's moral strategy, "is to elaborate to its fated ends the contradictory logic of the gang as family unit - a faulty premise..., in that it overlooks the lack of moral constraints that mean that the gang does not work without destructive consequences".⁶⁸

New Jack City, directed by Mario Van Peebles from a story and script by Thomas Lee Wright with Barry Michael Cooper, has the feel of a 70's blaxploitation film. It was originally intended to recount the life and legend of Harlem black godfather and prominent heroin dealer Nicky "Mr. Untouchable" Barnes. The two writers and director had strong visions as to the direction of the film. The finished film that emerged is described by one reviewer as a "bathetic gangster film". It also clearly illustrates Paula Giddings' contention that African Americans are again the site through which new morality plays are staged for public consumption. This epistemological claim is directed first at the film's plot and its resolution in classic narrative closure. Even the extra-cinematic space of the film extends moral discourse around 'violence' due to actual conflicts that broke out at several screening venues.⁶⁹

None of these films in present or classical sense fulfil any criteria that bestows an authority on a cinematic work as a masterpiece. Neither writing, direction or innovations in use of technical devices in production (camerawork, lighting palettes, sound) or, in post production (editing, sound editing/composition) distinguishes any of these pictures. The characteristics, in short, that inscribe the domain of a unique work of art/commerce. For a variety of reasons, they may be noteworthy as successful first efforts but carry flaws that are attributes of a particular convention of filmmaking. Among the crop of 'black' films that have emerged at the turn of the decade, only two or perhaps three films, have the

assurance of an accomplished piece of work. These will be addressed later.

There is a borrowed notion in cinema studies that there are a specific set of references which a text establishes. From these articulations one can glean the resonating field that the text is "mining". For example, three of the four films previously described are grounded in "the coming of age" discourse. Within the spatial location of these stories is the imminent danger of surplus "negativity" that one could describe as the unreleased force of constructive energy and the dispersion of this force often without reflection onto those who are the very members of one's group. The physical, emotional and psychic danger is focused primarily on young black males whose transition to manhood is beset by lack of agency in their own well being.

The fourth film evokes the popular form of the gangster movie in a similar environ of the other three - that is the 'hood. This locale is the overarching text of all the films. These textual dimensions have particular resonance within the "cultural field" insofar as the imperatives of an African American reading is concerned. The epistemological value for critiques of current film production by black filmmakers particularly under the aegis of Hollywood's systematic process is crucial in dealing with the contradictions of those practices. One concern is the notion of nihilism implicated in these films.

Ghettocentric film may owe its form to Melvin Van Peebles' iconoclastic Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song, which articulates the main feature of blaxploitation formula, namely the "bad nigger", who challenges the oppressive white system and wins.⁷⁰ With the demise of this form, Hollywood's subtle continuation of prolonging racial hegemony is suggested, for example, in the use of a Michael Jordan cut-out running on a toy train track that is used by an abandoned 8 year old (Macaulay Caulkin) to fool burglars into thinking the house in Home Alone (1990) is occupied. The problem with this scene, as Guerrero writes, is not only due to the reification of Jordan as "the extent of black participation in the movie ." but also, because it implies one of the primary ways African Americans are constructed in the popular imagination: as one dimensional, cardboard celebrity cut-outs.⁷¹

The return to the 'hood is not only the result of a ghost effect, it is also imbricated with a new gangsta (gangster-gangstar) strut emerging from the increasing boundary battles between young, specifically, black residents in the 'hoods and the front-line defence of capital's might and order, the police.

These voices could be heard through music - the medium of choice for troping the tragedy of people of African descent in diverse styles from Blues, Jazz, Rhythm and Blues and now Rap - the hybrid East/West Coast, local-global, diasporic rooted musical idiom. "Music as a privileged trope" is a past-present linkage that evokes the global diaspora of Africans.⁷² As with any multiple site, it is

invested with a plenitude of meaning from moral opprobrium to clichéd exhaustion in its use as a primal discursive paradigm in African American communities.⁷³ Greg Tate refers to A.B. Spellman's observation that the outcast reputation of jazz was due to the fact that it was the music created by "the most despised and feared group of people on the face of the earth - the black working class". "Hiphop", Tate continues, "is now the dominant cultural expression of the most despised and feared segment of that class: young black men". It is at once a music of male bonding, the song and dance routine of incipient warrior culture, according to Tate, or, by other accounts, the most violent, misogynist, sexually explicit form drenched in self hatred.⁷⁴

To others, this ubiquitous trope of music reflected in the Rap enterprise may be taken as "a signifier of hetero black masculinity in black studio films" such as Boyz N the Hood and New Jack City. Their interconnections are in the figures of their central protagonists, Ice-Cube and Ice-T respectively, who represent the black commodity fetishes that guarantee box office sales. In Juice, Tupac Shakur (Digital Underground) appears as a central character while Queen Latifah appears in a smaller role. Menace II Society is also graced by a well known rapper. Giving credence to Max Roach's observation that "Hiphop lives in the world - not the world of music and that's why it's revolutionary", each film soundscape is made up from the aural, textual presence of rap music. This new jack swing aesthetic is not only a referent to the metatext that suggests the "real life" of the 'hood (arising as it has from the hybridization of

black practices) and reinscribed on the contentious ground of "the local", but also as a subset of popular culture, "the dominant form of global culture, so it is at the same time the scene, par excellence, of commodification, of the industries where culture enters directly into the circuits of a dominant technology - the circuits of power and capital".⁷⁵

What this holds for Boyz N the Hood, Juice, Menace II Society, New Jack City and other ghetto centered stories like Forest Whitaker's Strapped (HBO, 1993), and South Central (1992), are a series of problematic moments as viewed by various constituencies that make up their audience. Valerie Smith, citing Wahneema Lubiano, sees obstacles in the reference to black vernacular culture as a means of encoding films into authentic black documents. There is a suggestion of "a faithfulness to a monolithic black experience" that is non-existent intercommunally nor intracommunally. This kind of referencing to stand and speak for the black community is a fetishization that the filmmakers collude in to "shrink the distance between referent and representation in film".⁷⁶ In Boyz N the Hood, it is a discourse around black males as an "endangered species". Jacquie Jones and Michele Wallace bring a feminist perspective to the inadequate presentation of women as mothers, friends, lovers. Images such as those presented by Boyz N the Hood, for example, the neglectful, drug addicted mother whose baby wanders out into the street, are among those that relegate women to narrowly defined roles (not unlike those conventions in mainstream media), that center on the "bitch", the 'ho, or the career minded woman who

abandons parental obligations (what Michele Wallace calls the Shahrazad Ali nightmare - the white identified black mother). Menace II Society, by its absence of any sustained discourse (except for Caine's involvement with his 'hood mentor's girlfriend), relegates women to subsidiary roles.

"the boys in the forefront
corps of silent girls
standing on the curb or
sitting on the couch".⁷⁷

This limited sphere of black male dominance is reinforced by "the dynamics of ghetto masculinity". One must die to prove he is not a "faggot or, a bitch". Not to be a "menace" is an admission of powerlessness, of being a victim - in sum, effeminate. This explains the mindless scene that has a male crack addict offering dealer O'Dog a hamburger with cheese as payment for some rock. When O'Dog refuses, the addict offers to 'suck O'Dog's dick'. Not believing his ears, O'Dog asks him to repeat what he said and at the end of this utterance, O'Dog shoots him. This violent response, coded through the overdetermination of Rap aesthetics, seems "a reflexive, unquestioning homophobia and sexism" that is the conjoining of the dysfunctional radial points of mainstream culture with the contained limits of black historicity. Isaac Julien notes the boundary of Afrocentric's privileged new black aesthetic being limited; "not dialogic enough to think through the "hybridity of ethnicity" let alone liberated enough to include "queerness" in its blackness."⁷⁸

The implicit demand for greater enunciative space, sophisticated enough to negotiate the many subject positions of social differentiation, is already on "stressed terrain". Breaking down hierarchies and social divisions of unequal developments within which fixed views - "prejudicial knowledge" of racist and sexist nature that are disinclined to change - exacerbates a condition.

O'Dog's response in Menace II Society is a typical point finale - a closure in violence. The reduction of dialogue into the monologic punctuation of bullets ripping flesh. Juices's Bishop's fascination with the gangster choice can only be achieved with the coerced help of his reluctant crew. The extreme trajectory of his behaviour takes to the gratuitous killing of a store owner (during a neighborhood robbery) with such ease that when he grapples with one of his appalled crew a little later (who is trying to take his gun away), he too is shot. Bishop now has the "juice" - some unfathomable dark force of the black nigger spirit. In the particular relationship between Nino Brown and G-Money here, motivated by a fealty to death, the breach of trust is a "bitch" and the pipe - a suggestive double in the discursive relationship between these two male characters. In Boyz N the Hood, terminal endpoint is quickly reached over perceived slights and greed. Bumping into a person is sufficient cause. Or, as in the film, responding to someone's attitude as they bump you not only gets you killed, but also those others who carry out vengeance in a merry-nihilistic-go-round. The cops at the borders who contain and in cases instigate mayhem in such crime busting procedures as

Operation Hammer, overload this terrain. The Rodney King event was just a breach waiting to be filled.

Cornel West suggests two factors contribute to the nihilistic patterns that undergird these social relations: institutional structures and the behavioural indices that are "the lingering effect of black history, a history inseparable though not reducible to victimization".⁷⁹ "Nihilism", in his understanding, is not "as a philosophic doctrine that there are no rational grounds for legitimate standards or authority; it is, far more, the lived experience of coping with a life of horrifying meaninglessness, and (most important) lovelessness". More important than oppression or exploitation, the nihilistic threat, West feels, bares to the very core of black existence. It is the most basic issue facing black America.

"It is primarily a question of speaking to the profound sense of psychological depression, personal worthlessness, and sexual despair so widespread in America".⁸⁰

An early scene in Menace II Society frames the young Caine as he witnesses his first murder, one committed by his father. In the murky atmosphere of smoke, drugs and alcohol, an argument over a debt owed to Caine's father leads to insults at which point his father shoots his antagonist. This otherwise shocking moment, a disregard for human and particularly, black life, is Caine's introduction to "the last refuge of the incompetent". Nihilism, West contends, occurred

with the landing of the first African in the new world, an encounter with a distinct form of the absurd. In answering to the prevalence and power of the nihilistic threat, West offers the following reasons:

the commodification of black life
and the crisis of black leadership,
-the shattering of black civil society,
family, neighborhoods, schools, churches,
mosques, leaving more people vulnerable
-the resident jungles (the apartheid
townships) of inner cities are not the
result of pathological behaviour rather,

"This behaviour is the tragic response of a people bereft of resources to confront the workings of U.S. capitalist society". It is "a threat that feeds on poverty and shattered cultural institutions" and contributes to criminal behaviour.⁸¹

What is especially evident is the use value to the "culture industries" in their production of images and discourse that disseminate in subtle and not so subtle ways attacks on black intelligence, black ability, black character and black beauty.⁸² As Lisa Kennedy writes, events may not be malleable but their "meaning" certainly is. In the non-existent black future of the Blade Runner, not even replicants are seen to be in color. Race is absent in favor of hybridized Asians and whites (prime occupants of the Pacific rim) who inhabit Los Angeles' dystopic environment. In Terminator 2 (1991), Joe Morton's black scientist character is accused of destroying the world. In a logical, enlightened world, one could think that the

"you" is a collective noun used for those scientists playing in Pandora's Box. When the accusation is hurled at a black man, the reaction to race tends to be immediate. This is not Samuel Delaney nor Octavia Butler.

If America's will to justice has been less than clear (look at the immense difficulty in the criminal trials of the Mendez brothers, O.J. Simpson, and the policemen who beat Rodney King), this opacity is lifted as the contained nihilistic threat surfaces in the larger American society. Acceptable balkanization of politics, with race as delineator to arouse fears rather than ideas and the will necessary to accomplish the efficient running of governments drive the current dialogue. Cornel West suggests that "...it surely reveals one of the many instances of cultural decay in a declining empire". Like alcoholism or drug addiction, he believes nihilism to be a disease of the soul - it can never be completely cured since there is always the possibility of a relapse.⁸³

Yet, the position of moral burdens as external force striking its discordant note for the attention of the larger (white) public is constant in its pressure. Differential treatment that have been put in place to equalize centuries of legally maintained second class citizenship, is considered sufficient after thirty years. "Compensatory deference" has only revealed that blacks have different values and a different agenda and so consequently, to be "won over" by whites, they would have to be pandered to. "I suggest we stay true to ourselves. Blacks who see the wisdom of our ways will join us". Such

is the expression that epitomizes the arrogance, the hubris and the racist character of a letter writer to a national magazine.⁸⁴ This writer is in fine company with another voice that believes affirmative action has had its day. Accordingly, "racial and sexual discrimination have not vanished, but they have substantially abated and no longer require remedies that, however well intentioned, necessitate a compromise of a principle". Said principle being of course the sterling example of merit. The writer, a first generation college educated individual who, through affirmative action, 'lost a career opportunity to a woman of upper class (as if to say - what did she need it for) whose credentials were not quite the quality of his.

Moral burdens, as Lisa Kennedy points out, exist within and across communities. As Cornel West has argued, these communities once possessed cultural armor to buffer and ward off the threat of nihilism. Values that once were based in the religious foundations of the community. The valorization of service, sacrifice, love and care, discipline and excellence were traditions that survived and thrived under adverse conditions. As these community resources fractured, the fissures permitted a commensurable burden to develop from within. Across this divide lies the quest for cohesion.⁸⁵

Cinema is a construct. As suggested *passim*, it is an industrial art form involving a complex division of labor and considerable capital investment. It is a crucial issue for black filmmakers to gain access to resources for production. Whether the choice is mainstream funding and distribution or through the independently financed,

public and other institutional source of funds, each path is distinguished by particular characteristics bearing political and cultural impact.⁸⁶ The "cinematic apparatus" with its high technical requirements engenders consequences around its use, particularly as practiced by Hollywood. Its chronotopic features are well known particularly in its use of narrative fiction of feature lengths. Its most imposing characteristic is the evocation of spectacle of "gobsmacking" proportions unerringly tied to the passive pleasure of scopopic reception. The resulting critical interactions and intellectual deliriums posit audience reactions towards that indeterminate and ineffable state known as art or, imbricate "the artistic" with commerce to result in successful box office. The more popular the film, the larger the box office.

When the magic of "Wet finger in the air to test the Wind" method of project selection is settled (in this realm, it is as appropriate as any in the absence of scientific predictive process), the concept for a product is a universalized, often deficient compromise aimed at reaching the widest possible global constituency. If this particular alignment of factors - timing, subject, stars (interpretation), skill in direction, production values and so on - align themselves propitiously, a heavy conscious/unconscious reliance on the success of the first quickly spawns repeats. The sequels and prequels and competitors' imitations quickly flood the market. The Godfather saga comes to mind (1972, 1974, 1990). Another avenue that has met with occasional successes is the first time director/writer/producer who nurtures a small film into being that

finds an audience. It may range from the cult Rocky Horror Picture Show (1975), to Spike Lee's She's Gotta Have It (1986). In the first case, it may take years to recoup the investment while the latter sees an immediate profitable return within a time frame of several months. Sometimes a student project promises sufficient interest to be expanded. George Lucas' THX 1138 (1971) is one and its success eventually launched an impressive Hollywood career. Or, the cult success of a small film can attract powerful backing to make a sequel that launches not only a successful film, but also a popular culture icon as well. James Cameron's Terminator films emerged this way. Finally, and this is not a capstone to the variations and avenues that have launched as many unsuccessful pictures as successful ones nor, as a highpoint to all the generic conventions such as the martial arts mayhem films, or, horror pictures that help make up the hundreds of films produced out of Hollywood, there is the biracial buddy films mentioned earlier that along with the occasional black film, are tossed out to this particular market to keep that bottom line black (or is it green).

As referred to earlier, the "small" films of young black filmmakers presented to the mainstream carry the baggage of the "burden of representation".⁸⁷ The community of voices referred to earlier in this text attempted to give a cross section of some of the critical concerns reflected in discourse between 'reel' and real, particularly, with the emphasis on the moral obligations that are framed within the filmic text. One writer summarizes the trajectory of *Boyz* as an opaque cultural analysis whereby "boys who don't

have fathers fail, and those who do, succeed", as at the same time they reflect the external concerns of community and society.⁸⁸ Then too, there is the polyvalent problematic of epistemic violence linked somehow to a floating discursive condition embedded in the reality and theorisation of the threat to young black manhood. The films' reception by audiences and their responses around and across these issues are situated within the cradle of dominant film practice. Lipsitz writes that:

"Hollywood films highlight the tensions between confinement and peril, on the one hand, and freedom and imagination, on the other. They depict battles between necessity and desire, between inherited objective circumstances and subjective human will. In that respect they resemble historical narratives. Whether situated in the past, present, or future, commercial motion pictures invariably resonate with the value crises of the times in which they appear. Thus they are historical in the sense of being cultural artefacts and social history evidence about the times in which they were made. But films are historical in another way as well: they reposition us for the future by reshaping our memories of the past".⁸⁹

Thulani Davis once wrote (crediting Richard Pryor) in the *Village Voice* about her observation on the absence of African Americans in films about the future. Her concern was not merely about the practice of peppering speculative science fiction films with the decorative presence of actresses and actors such as Nichelle Nichols as Uhura in *Star Trek* (1979), or Billy Dee Williams as Hans Solo's

friend in Return of the Jedi (1983). Rather, it was the absence of ordinary humans in stories that centered on their ability to portray positive and constructive roles in these future fantasies. While there is a significant presence in the literature of the genre, Samuel Delany and Octavia Butler come to mind; the usual type of depiction is the kind of characterization Wesley Snipes' character plays opposite Sylvester Stallone's in the film Demolition Man. Mindful of the cautionary limits mentioned previously concerning roles not expressly written for black performers, Snipes' presence in Demolition Man is not merely the negativity of the racial 'other' set up in conflictual opposition to the "white hero" although, that is an unmistakable surface reading rendered by the visual manipulation but also, a commercial move that presents two valued commodities to furnish the necessary box office clout. The struggle to become "subjects and agents rather than the alienated objects of representation" is at once the struggle to secure a position in the present that is linked to a retrieval of a subjective social history. By reshaping memories of the past as Lipsitz and Davis suggest, African Americans will be better placed to reposition themselves for the future.⁹⁰ Spike Lee may have recognized that in his promotional and entrepreneurial sideline. For the film, School Daze (1988), the promotional T-shirt reads: "Black to the Future".

Lipsitz has isolated five themes from Hollywood's post World War II era, one of which is referred to as "melodramas that beset manhood". He notes "the groupings may seem more structured than historical, evidence of recurrent myths reworking the same ground

over and over. But what changes over time in these representations is often more important than what stays the same".⁹¹ Problems besetting manhood in Menace II Society, Juice, and Boyz N the Hood are those that already exist in the larger society. One that is not exclusively reduced to the binary of white-black race relations but may be found in its unique cultural variance in Asian and Hispanic milieus. As Lipsitz states it: "These films respond to tensions exposed by the social moment of its creation, but each also enters a dialogue already in progress, repositioning the audience in regards to dominant myths".⁹²

A small digression here over the interposition of critics into the dialogue that a film generates, In the first case writer Kalamu ya Salaam in "Black Macho: The Myth of the Positive Message", performs a critical dissection of Boyz N the Hood, Jungle Fever (1991), New Jack City, and Livin' Large (1991), and the revelry in "celluloid crotch grabbing". The instances recounted from these films are locked into the binary recognition of positive/negative attributes in the depiction of male-female sexual interaction and how they impinge on the politics of sexism. Further, these limitations are exacerbated according to Salaam by mimetic displacement of black males for white thereby fixing images within a status quo and depriving a community of heroic models.⁹³

Another example around two different issues involves the writer Leonard Quart's defense of a charge of "Jewish racism" launched under the heading "The Triumph of Assimilation: Ethnicity,

Race and the Jewish Moguls". These charges of Jewish racism particularly in a reference to the "venomous race baiting oratory" of Leonard Jeffries, were "not only racist in nature, but distorted and simplified the history of Hollywood and the role played by Jews in the industry". This piece of ideological rhetoric which, in the guise of presenting an account that has the appearance of balance in the analogy between one condition and the other (being the problem of Jewish integration and assimilation in contrast to the racist conditions that African Americans were experiencing), in fact is reduced to the neo conservative "bootstrap" argument of Calvinist hard work practice rewarding individual effort. In fact, as Thomas Cripps points out, the protest of lynchings and terrorist tactics leading to the civil rights era was likened by Jews to pogroms in Europe.⁹⁴

Quart sums up his argument as follows:

"Basically Hollywood is at once a relatively liberal and a meretricious industry, primarily committed to making a profit and producing pap. At this juncture, engaging in a shrill, rhetorical attack on "Jewish racism in Hollywood" is morally abhorrent, politically counterproductive, and simplistic. That isn't to say that Hollywood's perpetuation of racial stereotypes and prejudicial executive hiring does not merit anger and resentment. But the *conspiratorial rhetoric* and *emphasis on past victimization* often blurs the fact that, for Blacks in America with talent and drive, from Colin Powell to Spike Lee, there are genuine options. In Hollywood today it's not racism that shapes decision making but what sells."⁹⁵

One further thing to note. Quart's essay begins as a response over a year after Legrand Clegg - president of a media watchdog organization, The Coalition Against Black Exploitation - gave a talk at the NAACP convention in Los Angeles. Quart's essay was based on a talk given at the Jewish Film Festival in San Francisco on July 31, 1991.

The second Quart issue involves his review of Spike Lee's Jungle Fever. His summation states that the "seeds of a much more interesting work about a black upper class architect who tries to sustain a productive life amidst the social wreckage of the inner city and the subtle patronization of his white professional peers. (sic) 'Jungle Fever' is not that film".⁹⁶ Michelle Wallace and Nelson George offer their views on the film noting its limitations and its strengths. For Wallace, the crux of the film is really about the threat of a female or aberrant sexuality to traditional values". George seems more affected by Lee's handling of the dysfunctional families in the film. Neither seem to suggest nor imply (even where Lee falls flat) that there is some other film that is suggested by the completed artefact at hand.⁹⁷ Is this an incursion to wish fulfillment? Is it a means of disguising sedimented ideologies more to the critics favor?

A frequently borrowed utterance from W.E.B. DuBois is the claim that the 'Negro' is the central metaphor of the twentieth century. While acknowledging Paul Gilroy's observation that "racism does not move tidily and unchanged through time and history",

Snead has suggested that the problematic "especially in film, is how stereotypes and codes insulate themselves from historical change, or actual counter examples in the real world. Caricatures breed more caricatures, or metamorphose into others, but remain in place". This hypostasis, as Lipsitz observes, not only addresses popular memories but also re-enacts it.⁹⁸

The conditioned acceptance of blacks, who are positioned as a measure of reference on the socio-economic, political, class, and racial scale, is one that serves utilitarian purpose to build social cohesion in complex post industrial societies such as America. The student as nigger! For a brief historical moment (as a descriptive tool), so were women. And one national discourse referred to Les Nègres Blancs du Québec. In the structuralist insight "all signs can only be defined diacritically" and therefore "any analyses of race must recognize that any definition of black always involves definitions of white". A post structuralist view however, extends the diacritical definition to an ongoing process "articulated in a perpetual process of signification where it was impossible to isolate the complex black/white without examining its ramifications in relation to other fundamental distinctions, particularly sexual ones".⁹⁹ With particular relevance to American Indians, Spanish Americans, Asians, and so on:

"Historical ambiguity", Snead says, "requires some sense of transhistorical certainty and so blacks were as if ready-made for the task. Onscreen and off, the history that Western culture has made typically denies blacks and black skin of historical reference, except as former slaves or savages".¹⁰⁰

In the 'Boyz N the Hood' films (Juice, New Jack City in particular) horizontal mobility barely reveals any agency by black characters particularly for the women. Angela Basset's character in Boyz serves to counterpoint Laurence Fishburne's (Furious) righteous strokes in undertaking the everyday task of parenting his son as if it was exceptional. In Juice, the only character to "escape" the violence of gun play is the character who is seeing a slightly older woman. Like all the "hos", "bitches", girlfriends and sisters represented, hers is another throwaway figure. Queen Latifah as a hiphop entrepreneur (a role she doubles from real life) is the only character to stand out who has some sense of purpose.

The social need to depict the "endangerment of young black men" is not contested by black women critics. They emphasize the resulting effect on them in the images of domination, displacement and denigration. "At the narrative level...successful use of mass cultural codes to entertain makes it possible for a black feminist viewer to enjoy one's own symbolic decimation".¹⁰¹ The need for theoretical discussion of these film works is to er. ole the

development of arguments that can change the articulation and disarticulation in the mythical landscape.¹⁰²

What then constitutes a genuine African American film even when made in Hollywood? Greene provides this answer to his question: it must be a film written, produced and directed by an African American but the fundamental requirement is a film that presents an African American view of the world on a particular subject.¹⁰³ Cognizant of film's affect on consciousness in "unaccountable ways", awareness of the valorizing tendency of the dark underside of black experience requires a careful shaping vision to inform as well as entertain. While the intent is laudable, fissures are already discernible in this basic definition. There is no one African American perspective much less a transnational common ground as Julien and Gilroy would argue.¹⁰⁴ With the plenitudes of subjectivity that constitutes the collective African American identity (especially within the moribund confines of the 'hood) the usefulness of a definition is already suspect. What requisite metaphors then can be formulated to enable thinking through "the complex terrain of combined and uneven development", one that is negotiated in successive daily struggle".¹⁰⁵ This quotidian battle is found most dramatically at the borderline of the underclass, at the locale where "the romance of racial nihilism in gun culture, of misogyny and machismo" reside. This site is also the public eruption of "the experiences...lived as privatised, individualised, pathologised problems".¹⁰⁶ These problems, it must be emphasized, do not belong

to each and every 'other'. As Lisa Kennedy concretizes parenthetically:

"Word to the brother. I will not have some twenty-three year old manchild in LaLa land telling me I must forego a career to be a good mother, that is my responsibility to the embattled black family, just because he made a moving film".¹⁰⁷

"Any 'political discourse' can only be deformed (reduced/reductive) by adopting these forms and means of expression and diffusion whose given function is to reduce the modes and through them the themes of the dominant ideology".

Jean Louis Comolli

The cover of the New York Times magazine of July 14, 1991 is graced with the likeness of eight young black male filmmakers adjacent to a caption that reads "They've gotta have us" and above an explicatory title "Hollywood Black Directors". Excluded under this banner is the likeness of women filmmakers. Mentioned somewhere in the last paragraph of the article however is the Martinique filmmaker Euzhan Palcy (Sugar Cane Alley, for her Hollywood MGM/UA film A Dry White Season; Julie Dash, an independent African American women filmmaker for Daughters of the Dust (1990) and several other women, mostly television directors. The paucity, if not absence of women of color in Hollywood is not surprising given reasons suggested earlier. The very competitive milieu and style of business is exclusionary to "white women" filmmakers who, according to Guerrero, account for five percent or less of films made in Hollywood.¹⁰⁸

While it may be difficult to find consensus among the constituents making up that indeterminate locale - the African American community - it is possible to find some acknowledgement of the kind of images that offer the valorization antithetical to many

of the films mentioned previously. These films address the consciousness of newly found subjectivities who desire more in narrative, character and political acuity than "the co-opting, homogenizing pressures of commercial cinema".¹⁰⁹ Placing their centers at the core of African American experiences, films such as Wendell B. Harris' Chameleon Street (1989), Julie Dash's Daughters of the Dust, and Charles Burnett's To Sleep with Anger (1990) are three of a handful independently made films that are "articulations of fresh cinematic styles and vision". By no means isolated from the independent anti-hegemonic impulse of independent filmmakers such as Jim Jarmusch and John Sayles (whites) or Mira Nair, these black independents struggle "to affirm their cultural and political space in the expanding arena of black cinema production".¹¹⁰

Wendell B. Harris' Chameleon Street, though lacking in technical polish, is an exploration of an African American psyche (joining such literary figures as Ellison's "Invisible Man", Wright's "The Man Who Lived Underground" and Reed's "Reckless Eyeballing") and is "a metaphor for the double consciousness, masked anger" and constant pretense necessary to live in a racist society. Chameleon's shock (based on a true story) is of a brilliant, ambitious black man who successfully impersonates professionals to infiltrate that cadre in the white professional world. Without credentials he performs surgery, becomes a graduate student, a lawyer and so on. What is frightening about these changing roles, says Guerrero, is the audience realization of the permanence and

ubiquity of "a black every man sentenced to a life of dissembling" in a society that is hierarchical and race obsessed.¹¹¹

Julie Dash's Daughters of the Dust is a ten year effort that "sets out to reconstruct, to recover a sense of black woman's history". Set in 1902 on a long summer's day in the Sea Islands off the coast of South Carolina, a picnic is being held by the Peazant family who are leaving the family's ancestral island home to move north to jobs, assimilation and upward mobility. These black women speaking a "Geechee" dialect in white dressed Victorian costumes, "occupy the visual, spiritual and moral center of the screen". Daughters of the Dust, states Guerrero, "represents an uncommon, one-of-a-kind challenge to the cinematic containment of expressions of race and gender. The film aspires to counter the erasure of black women and their stories" through the director's vision and techniques around its construction.¹¹²

Charles Burnett's To Sleep with Anger reveals the director's experience having several previous features to his credit (in comparison to Dash's shorter "tone poems and films of shorter duration) including his masterpiece Killer of Sheep (1977). This film employs a classic narrative style more intricate in its interrelationship of plot, characterization and drama that centers the usual formulaic expectations of mainstream efforts. Working with a trickster figure to reveal the tensions of black family life in middle area of L.A., "the film's power and appeal reside in the way the filmmaker turns his gaze inward on the...black community, as

microcomically rendered in the intricate conflicts and tangles of three generations of an extended family".¹¹³ Interestingly, all three films were poorly received at the box office. This "commercial" failure had more to do with proper distribution and marketing of black films especially, those that are independently produced. Burnett's film was opened for one week in Halifax to accommodate the largest black audience in Canada. The reaction of one trade paper in relation to Daughters of the Dust as "an investigation into a very little known African American culture" "that played" "like a two hour Laura Ashley commercial" " is typical of any style different from Hollywood's. If working within the system and its demands is understood to merely refract the forms and themes of the dominant system, any expression of difference is shown with the kind of insensitivity Variety expressed above.

Angles At Which Realities Meet

"Cuban novelist Guillermo Cabrera Infante
interrogated about his favorite readings.
Fragments, any sort of fragments".

Recent media reports on high tech weaponry for the armed forces and police have not only indicated the future of the lethal virtual digital soldier but also the "non-lethal" forms of intervention in confrontational arenas. Non-lethal weapons' advocates are concerned about military overkill, (especially in sensitive peacekeeping assignments as in Somalia), international censure and the political repercussions (as in the Gulf War) and a reduction of media criticism these adventures bring about. In previous eras (at least until W.W. II), wars were fought for territorial conquest and the spoils they brought in. Now, certain postmodern factions are finding it ethically unacceptable to engage in these types of conflicts, and see the need to protect "populaces of the civilized world from the rogue states and aggressive powers who want to engage in GENOCIDE, ETHNIC CLEANSING, WHAT HAVE YOU".¹¹⁴ The irony here is twofold. One comes from the utterances of the descendants of people who have committed the very same acts they now disavow.¹¹⁵ The United States, as a global superpower for example, can take on such policing tasks as it sees fit so long as it is of benefit to it and its allies. Fighting "wars of divestiture", that is, "to divest smaller enemies of their ability to upset the status quo" is ringed with a peculiar hypocrisy. These very same enemies who were once colonial subjects, strategic allies or otherwise part of some complex political "check

and balance" fall out of favor when the equation changes. These changes may range from ambitious national leaders desiring more power; changes in the fundamental interpretation of social and religious values at odds with a world moving too fast without structures or, care for those societies whose traditions are at variance with modernity and accelerating postmodernity. These changes, basically caught in the force of corporate capitalism and its Darwinian values, intersect. And herein lies the other face of irony. Once armed by their powerful allies, these "smaller enemies" have been and are responsible for the "small and bitter wars" being fought around the globe. If the weapons are not updated, they go to a willing market that will sell them all but the most sophisticated tools of destruction (reserved for the seller). Elbowing for its market share is the United States and all those technologically advanced nation states who then decry the use to which these weapons are put. The resulting rhetoric notwithstanding, the spin placed on how the barbarians with death toys talk about the containment of the "other" they recognize as barbarians, is an illogical displacement that conveniently steps somewhere beyond an inclusive sphere of responsibility and history.

This organized occlusion, as Barker labels it, "places the savage beyond the limits of the civil..., to locate 'out there' the violence which it codes as barbarism but which in fact belongs dangerously 'in here'".¹¹⁶ But then who is the savage? Some hapless primitive that plays out the desires of power? The continually new manifestation of material desire by someone who entertains being in the spotlight of

nations? Or, is it as mundane as, for example, the recent territorial dispute between actor Kevin Costner's business corporation and the Lakota Sioux. Having made their acquaintance while making the film Dances with Wolves (1990), (where Native Americans were used yet again in another Hollywood western fiction centering on the white man), Costner was embraced for his efforts to portray Indians "fairly". At some point he acquired a sizeable piece of land adjacent to the Sioux reserve that was not advantageously situated for his entrepreneurial purposes and was able to swap said land with the U.S. government. This area, that contained a site of origin for the Sioux (on land set aside for their use), created a contentious situation. The corporate director of acquisition and development, in addition to making the usual charges about the Indians' business ability (they were in the process of developing a casino-leisure area not far from Costner's proposed site), also had this to say: "The U.S. Supreme Court has decided in favour of the white guys. The reality is that the land belongs to the people who won it".¹¹⁷ The nature to acquire in unique situations such as this is aided by the structured mechanisms of a judicial system that is systematically adjusted for the benefits of commerce and, as noted earlier, primarily for a particular constituent body of the nation. Far from subsiding, the acquisitive nature moves onto another front. Barker notes that culture and violence may not be antithetical. "Culture", he claims, "does not stand in humane opposition to political power and social inequality but may be profoundly in collusion with it, not the antidote to generalised violence, but one of its more seductive strategies".¹¹⁸

In his overview of "violence and culture in the United States", Robert Brent Toplin identifies four categories of violence. The first category is collective and political violence that includes group demonstrations, riots, strikes and the like. The second refers to criminal violence committed by individuals or small groups and includes murder, rape, assaults and so on. The third grouping he calls psychopathic violence, and it includes assassinations, serial killings, and mass "gratuitous" violence. The last of the four is "the problem of violence in late twentieth century foreign policy".¹¹⁹ This short piece is remarkable for its linearity and flattening of one of the most critical aspects of human life anywhere on the planet and particularly, the United States, and also for its failure to indicate from its empiricist position the kind of overlap suggested by the categories identified. For example, the decade of the 60's was chosen as a marker for the kinds of collective violence that erupted in the United States. Different from the unique eruptions such as "The Railroad Strike of 1877, the Homestead Massacre of 1892, and the Ludlow Strike in the Colorado in 1913-1914", the 60's was a decade that conjoined the "Free-Speech" movement from the University of California at Berkeley (that also grew into a national student protest against involvement in the Vietnam war); with the developing civil rights movement that had begun with Rosa Parks and freedom riders. This led to the Brown vs. Board of Education civil rights case and the emergent leadership of Martin Luther King, SNCC (Student NonViolent Co-ordinating Committee), and the Black Panthers. In recognizing the "two peoples, two cultures", Toplin states the following:

"It is noteworthy that the United States has succeeded in removing a great deal of tension in the late twentieth century by taking measures to ensure equality under the law and seeking ways to integrate its major minority population into the mainstream of economic, political, and social activities".¹²⁰

This optimistic scenario begs to know who Toplin presumes his audience to be. For he continues: "The struggle for racial equality in the United States is not complete, of course, but it has made enough substantial progress to relegate most collective white-black violence to the history books".¹²¹ As Andrew Hacker has noted, "Race is a tense terrain, where we often try to hide crucial truths from ourselves". At best the unconscious subjectivity expressed by those such as Toplin stands in sharp contrast to the attempt made by Hacker and others to make the premises of crucial truths "as vivid as possible".¹²² From Alexis de Tocqueville to Gunnar Myrdal, the American dilemma has always been "the Negro problem", "the color line", that is to say, the perspective has always been from the viewpoint of dominant mainstream. The existence of this problematic has never witnessed any systematic effort to accommodate African peoples fully into the economic, social and political currents of the mainstream as Toplin indicates. Any such measures achieved have been piecemeal through continuous struggle since the end of the civil war. Any progress towards this end that

arguably began over a century after the proclamation of emancipation of the slaves has always seemed like retrograde action. *Brown vs. Board of Education* was a judicial exercise to undo a previous judicial mischief that had introduced apartheid in America. Legislation often "won" by turbulent social lobbying for, what would be considered the 'given' of basic civil rights are always under assault.¹²³ The connotative weight of black/white division of epidermal consciousness is a descriptive trope of the antecedents of the racial categories identifying peoples from Africa and Europe. Since 1975 and particularly 1980 with the election of Ronald Reagan, race has been center stage in politics. His legacy, through George Bush and a current all Republican Congress led by Newt Gingrich in the era of Bill Clinton's presidency, has all but declared war across the color line in dismantling programs perceived to give advantages to African Americans (along with women, children, the poor, etc.). If Toplin sees white/black violence as something to be relegated to the history books, he is either prescient of future solutions to be implemented (perhaps on a wider scale than FBI's COINTELPRO), that will foreclose any future anxieties of the white population regarding African Americans or, is sufficiently naive to believe the conditions of such "truth" as to be tantamount to the same conclusion. Blacks will not be a problem. It is striking to note in the light of Hacker and Williams in events described such as Goetz, Bensonhurst, Howard Beach, etc., in the 200 year sentence (he plans to appeal) of black Long Island RR subway shooter Colin Ferguson, that the face of justice is meant to send a message about blacks who violently kill whites. Toplin's category of psychopathic violence

relegates (despite the relationship between collective/political and criminal violence) sole responsibility directly to the individual. This may in part account for the national hysteria over the O.J. Simpson trial. Nevertheless, Toplin in his conclusion can state that despite the assassinations of John F. Kennedy, Martin Luther King, Robert Kennedy, Malcolm X (persistent rumours of FBI involvement always present), and the attempt to assassinate Ronald Reagan, that "Americans remain essentially non-violent with respect to their handling of political issues".¹²⁴ While it may be "essentially" true that Americans do not usually physically tear each other apart over political issues, it is rather difficult to assess the damage that politically derived decisions have put into practice. What kind of violence is engendered somewhere else, such as the dangerous but lucrative drug dealing to underemployed, undereducated black youths in the 'hoods? Let us not forget those transparent observations that as end users with their souls confined to hell, according to one film (*The Godfather*) or, as businessmen such as Cash Money Brothers in *New Jack City* or, the denizens of Walter Hill's film *Trespass* (1992) with Ice-Cube and Ice-T who are small cogs symbolically representing the visible end of the vast corporate game of global drug trafficking.

But the occlusion of violence, as Barker warns, is achieved and depends on "an inherently complex form of representation which does not entail simple suppression of the occluded material".¹²⁵ So that the hundreds of victims who die by gun violence for example, not only become part of a routine "natural" landscape, but also seem

to preclude the commonsense and courage necessary to remove such instruments from the ranks of civilian society. Americans are blind to their own condition and to the criticism of western neighbours who occasionally note the abnormal degree of civilian slaughter that they fatalistically accept as common. Or, if not blind, their deliberate disavowal of responsibility for the direction of their society speaks to a system that is seriously dysfunctional. The hatred and malaise, resulting in mounting deaths, becomes the tragic representation of a system in decline.

II

"History is the angle at which realities meet".

To what extent does film underwrite the signifying practices of the dominant culture - the social/political as well as cultural authority - "or alternatively unsettles such structures and institutions by transgressing, erasing, confusing, contesting or making 'dysfunctional' (sic) the categories and representation they support and which in turn support them".¹²⁶ As noted earlier, the strongest impulse from black oriented films seems to reside in the small examples of independently made products. The paucity of numbers makes it difficult to develop strong comparative assessment particularly against the financial success of the mainstream products. Even here, with greater political access to a marketplace, films of *Boyz N Hood* type make relatively small profits in comparison to the 'average' Hollywood product. While independent

films seem to exhibit greater complexity in their chosen subject matter, the Hollywood process of filmmaking inescapably links the young black film makers with the paradigmatic practices that define Hollywood productions. Whether the filmmakers are smoothly apposite from institutions of higher learning that teach the craft according to its historical imperatives or, whether the desires of the filmmakers to be willing participants in this style of working, amounts to the same thing. Even the iconoclast Spike Lee, with his reputation for 'doggin' Hollywood, must bend to the dictates of the studios when working for them. With growing power over initiating and producing his own material, the control of financing and distribution are not currently in his hands. This is why, unlike the independents, it is extremely difficult to separate the desire to articulate the presence (the stories) of African Americans on center stage without courting the danger of being lost in the blurred borders of the imaginary and the real.

As touched upon earlier, the films made by young black filmmakers not only evoke criticism of moral shortcomings as an external justification for the poor state of affairs within black communities but also from within those communities itself. The constituents of these communities are at odds with the totalising sense of discourse that implies a consensual position on issues depicted in the films. Though laboring under the very difficult burden of representation, nevertheless, the ambiguities that present themselves require constant engagement. Women are asked to look at themselves in ways that demean and demonize them even while

deriving some pleasure from the ocular spectacle that uses them. Gay and lesbian members of the community are belittled in the reflexive homophobia and intolerance seen to be harbored by the young male subjects of these films. It may be argued that these shortcomings about knowing can be rationalized by the relative age of the filmmakers and hence their maturity in handling the medium in such uncompromising ways as to create better, more serious works. Yet this may only partially explain a lapse or gap in their knowing. The efforts by their independent brethren already begin at a point that attempts to discard such limitations or at least offer critiques of them. It is in taking a political stance that does not rely on the subjugation or denigration of a particular group that the young black filmmakers can find a more enlightened direction. The history of African Americans has been dramatically presented in "difference" and social division. Mainstream society and media (film in particular) have marked, mythified and omitted African Americans from positions illustrating autonomy and importance in daily life. Despite the acknowledged fact of the social endangerment of young black males in the society, the depiction of this problem cannot be fulfilled at the cost of circulating images that subtract from the lives of others in the community. This only serves the destruction of the "community" - the violent engagement of these young men against each other, the denigration of the social constituents of other members of the "community" and the use-value that external mainstream critics level against these "communities" to disrupt and dismantle the possibilities of gaining social, political, economic and cultural equality.

But realities intersect at odd angles. In McLuhan's world of tactile supercession of the visual, the cinema would become archaic even though (which seems to be the occurrence as cost becomes prohibitive to any other than corporately financed, while electronic webs seem to offer the possibility of global interaction) it has not yet attained ascendance. What is coalescing at this juncture is a shift in the object relations of commodity culture. This shift embraces information as the new dominant form of consumption. And its reality creates a defacto displacement of Africans who at best inhabit the precarious cracks in the periphery of mainstream at another immeasurable remove from central participation. African Americans, the previous slaves who in their commodity state came to be known as niggers, now bear the mark of a historical legacy so "exceptional" to the United States. As "niggerdom" became a social index, an index of productive labor that was placed in the unrewarded servitude that gave backbone to the South and nourished the economy of America, the eventual dismantling of this most overt practice precipitated a crisis whose aftermath underpins de Tocqueville's, Myrdal and Hacker's observations of the untenable position of Africans in America. Their presence no longer desired (Griffith's visual emphasis in Birth of a Nation), nor in the absence of any serious attempt by the nation to honestly ensure a future apart (as with Native Americans) makes them relics. Too dangerous, less they devise methods for exacting what? Justice? Revenge? Repatriation as in 40 acres and a mule? Other? Nightmarish possibilities from those whose minds could conceive of what 'they' would do under

those conditions if 'their' positions were reversed. one conclusion reached about these "Black folk, who have always been defined in relation to work", is that they "went the way of work".

"Real black folks are already dead,
Walking around consuming themselves
in search of that which is no longer
possible, that which defines them".¹²⁷

And that which defines them, establishes their identity could not be found in the culture. At least not in any positive guise. R.A.T. Judy offers that in this historical moment what emerges from the demise of human capital is a "nigga". He (and the gender specific assigns the threat as has been historically marked to the male) is "what gets articulated when the field nigger loses value as labor".¹²⁸

The nigga is unemployed, null and
void, walking around like...a
nigga who understands that all
possibility converts from capital.
and capital does not derive from
work".

"This nigga is dangerous".¹²⁹ The catalogue of atrocities linking the "bad nigger" of slavery and the postbellum South - lynchings, assassinations, terror, denigration, erasure and on, and on - to the nigga of the present age is the echo heard in rap music and hiphop culture. It is what places young black men at risk. Not because of the

present commodified identity but as a "contradiction constitutive of popular culture that defines authenticity as adaptation to the force of commodification". In fact, this hyper commodification of the hardcore nigga has been key to the demise of black people. As Judy writes, "Nigga is not an essential identity, strategic or otherwise, but rather indicates the historicity of indeterminate identity".¹³⁰

This "historicity of indeterminate identity" has endured the struggle to a name that best reflected the multiple facet of Africans in diaspora. In the United States, nigger as a term of denigration and as marker (social index, etc.) gave way to Negro as the attempt to establish unique communal organizations formed to aid development and social growth. The National Association for the Advancement of Colored Peoples (NAACP), Blacks, Niggaz and Africans all speak to an effort to broaden an interstitial identity the ex-slaves had to carry. Either in hyphenated sense as in African-American or African-Canadian, yet somewhat awkward as a referent say, to African-Caribbeans who now live in England. The politization of the term Black, as Mercer points out, became useful not solely as an epidermal descriptive but as a cultural site to rally for Africans, Asians, African Caribbeans and Indians. The "burden of discrimination" then, which forces explanations of persistent racism in America "translates into radically different perceptions of the world". This is the twentieth century dilemma of race and of people with an indeterminate identity. The two "parallel universes" as Hacker describes (following de Tocqueville, Myrdal and DuBois) "in which individuals and groups cohabit the same social, political and

cultural space" yet with profound divergent perspectives.¹³¹ Even in cyberspace, another interfacial construction/obstruction, the historical baggage of racism is toted along.¹³² McLuhan's vision of the "global village" (now the cyberwell) carries the taint of intolerance inasmuch as the human "software" brings along its baggage of social, political and cultural detritus.

III

"History is guilt. It's mostly guilt".

From out of the demise of human capital, the nigga emerges. The face of this contemporary figure, especially of the hardcore variety, "blurs with the gang banger, mack daddy, new jack, and drug dealer, *becoming an index of the moral despair engendered by a thoroughly dehumanizing oppression, and hence inevitably bearing a trace of that dehumanization*" (italics mine). The intricacies of this terrain is best left to those with the psychological skills necessary to re-articulate spaces that reverse, displace or otherwise dismantle the apparatus of value coding. But as that struggle continues, hints as to that landscape have been given by Foucault. Once the pathology has been removed, he claims the memory of this evil sits more dangerously than the ever present pathology. This pathology he speaks of is, of course, madness. It is "...the relationship of a culture to the very thing it excludes or, more precisely, the relationship of our culture to this truth about itself, far away and inverted, which it discovers over and over...".¹³³ The

extension of the physical domination of slavery continued in social, political and economic practice simply assuming another, more effective process, not necessarily by design initially (although collusion through lack of active intervention on a national scale is sufficient cause for doubt) but certainly more apparent as time wore on since the civil war. The meeting of race and violence is not only "a rent in the curtain of rationality", it exists also as an exemplary juncture of the denied, suppressed pathology as practiced by white supremacist society responsible for the state of dehumanization that has touched its victims.

For those young black males, for the other constituent members of colored communities, it is akin to an exposure with a lethal virus. If the bulwark of the individual/community immune system is sufficiently resilient, it may be able to withstand it. More than likely, as co-habitants and actors within the same realm, a degree of unwilling, unknowing collusion will also render this ill-ness to the victims. Unwelcome and unbidden, the systematic adjustments and symbolizations (as in the naming/labelling and renaming of African Americans) that have been effected (see Judy's description of "das nigga affekt") as a necessary means of survival, have now become the invisible chains that bind.¹³⁴ This is the new face of social domination reiterated daily in the media, in government, educational and other institutional bodies. It is the shape of darkness that most times hides its systematic contradictions and at other times, places them in the full light of day to maximize specific projects. At one time it may have been as simplistic as Les Krim's "An

American Dream - Five million black Americans swimming back to Africa with a Jew under each arm".¹³⁵ But these scenarios are no longer merely tragic. They will bear millennial consequences, as they have been developing for a long time and exemplify the fundamental lack of respect for life and the world we live in.

Our daily bread in this regard is the regular sustenance of violence. Attempts to reduce it in society appear futile. We are immersed in a culture that is not only entertained by violence but actually admires its applications. Being badder than bad is the norm. Negotiations or other means of settling disputes are no longer valued processes. Being mean is popular. Bombing the other to oblivion is good. Each outrage depending on one's position demands retaliatory vengeance. Colin Ferguson's trial and sentencing, Reginald Denny and Rodney King all play their macabre acts and fade out for the next outrageous tableaux. Today, Tokyo subway trains with deadly nerve gas, tomorrow's epidemic can only be conjectured. This "squirming" experience is achieved by not taking things as they are, by pulling the audience deeper into human depths, and leaving a memorable mark of the character's travails.

These brief extractions of the operation of violence can stand another comparison; here that of the film Just Another Girl on the IRT, a first in contemporary African American popular film to embrace female subjectivity. Leslie Harris' film, in contrast to the Boyz films such as Hughes brothers' Menace II Society, delineates issues of concern emphasized across gender lines. Issues that deal

with consequences, multiplicity of meaning and ability to arouse empathy in audience become fundamental in a perception of life in the 'hood. As Amy Taubin notes, "the Hughes brothers fetishization of the representation of the macho violence they critique places them in global tradition of great filmmaking. The violence they fetishize, however, has such an immediate and tragic referent in the world to render it a painful viewing experience".

The contradiction in this enterprise of representation can be expressed as McKinney suggests: "Those who communicate violence in its varied forms are eager to provide the means by which the receptor can reify it into a construct, something not messy and uncontrollable but regimented, with the workable outlines of fiction".¹³⁶

IV

"Reality is being constantly interrupted".

"In film", Wollen reminds us, "perception in the form of shocks was established as a formal principle".¹³⁷ This factual claim harkens back to the screening of Lumières' pioneering film Arrivée d'un train à la Ciotat, at which audiences ran for the exits to escape the realistic effect of the train bearing down on them. The innocence of this reaction to illusory motion was not to last long. As a phenomena that frames objects / subjects in apparent motion - as a succession of still images - linked to an optical mechanical process of the

recording/projecting apparatus, the brightness of this innocence would diminish at the discovery of cinema's construction. 'Til this effect became familiar, its earliest manipulation as in Griffith's ideological discourse on race and the exploitation of horror in such early classics as The Golem (1920), Nosferatu (1922), Vampyr (1932), and The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari (1919), became the staple jolts through the ocular passage for passive human consumption. This capacity for the cinema to seduce and sedate its audience implicated the medium in certain atrocities of the century - what Godard calls "criminal acts of blindness and forgetting".¹³⁸ The stellar use of the medium can produce a dark "success" such as Leni Riefenstahl's Triumph of the Will (1935). This is filmic material so relentless in its presentation of an ideology that it becomes "antagonistic to thought and reason". While the effects of such film practice can be seen, it is extremely difficult to reduce its specific effects to individuals. The affective nature can only be gleaned by observing the continual levels of excess that filmmakers somehow find to surpass previous limits. The audience, having seen it all before, demands these ever increasing dosages to jazz its jaded palate. And it is given to them. The serialized horror products such as Friday The Thirteenth and Nightmares on Elm Street join other genre pieces as Scarface (1983), the bloodier (in color) updated version, or John Woo's Hardboiled (1993), are served up for these insatiable consumers.

What this amounts to is a new ethos of violence whose accretion in commercial cinema has now reached crisis level. Rating boards must monitor films whose claims to be about something else

is actually fuelled by thematic violence. In an apathetic society, the marketplace competition for audience dollars is increasingly vicious. Even the ideas that take into account the methods of these films, offer ambivalent directions on this violence. One writer distinguished violence into two categories: the weak and the strong. Citing Robin Wood, he observes that "many of the most violent and interesting films are so multi-layered and resistant to singular meaning that their systematization can be built only on contradictions".¹³⁹ This observation extends the fifties pop psychology found in the film The Forbidden Planet (1956), wherein a mystery surrounding the disappearance of a race of aliens, the Krells, is attributed to the struggle waged in psychic make-up. With the use of machines (a seemingly constant trope in human imagining of "next stage development"), the Krells are able to amplify their dreams into the realization of an ideal society. Their downfall, as we discover is due to the unnoticed effect of their nightmares which were also generated as if they were corollary to their dreams. By the time the Krells "woke up", it was too late. McKinney (the writer referred to above) suggests that the bifurcation of violence on an opposing scale of strength is a necessary introduction "to accept the notion that some nightmares are worth having".¹⁴⁰

First, there is a suggestion that "if successful socialization depends on a neutralizing of extremes, then (strong) violence of this kind is a rent in the curtain of rationality". Strong violence, he suggests, "amounts to a carnage that is haunting in the truest sense - that gives meaning and import to our moral twitchings!" Films

which raise such a level of catharsis include Wild at Heart (1990), One False Move (1991), Casualties of War (1989), and many of Martin Scorsese's work.¹⁴¹

One of the recent mainstream releases, Pulp Fiction (1994) by Quentin Tarantino, has been described as old fashioned violence and pop trivia giving birth to a whole new cinematic genre "shoot and get cute".¹⁴² Actually, wisecracking characters have inhabited Hollywood films for a long time. Humphrey Bogart's persona in The Maltese Falcon (1941) and Casablanca (1942), are films with popular generational appeal. What Tarantino offers is to show "the sheer banality of evil so starkly" as no American film director has shown.¹⁴³ Others have been there of course, including Peckinpah's Wild Bunch (1968) and Straw Dogs (1971), and Arthur Penn's Bonnie and Clyde (1967). Tarantino's first effort, Reservoir Dogs has been described by Vincent Canby (New York Times) as "the most aggressively brutal movie since Sam Peckinpah's Straw Dogs". Peckinpah's objective was to "take the facade of movie violence and open it up, get people involved...and then twist it so that it's not fun anymore, just a wave of sickness in the gut".¹⁴⁴ Unlike Anthony Burgess' Clockwork Orange (1971) that Kubrick turned into a filmic exploration of individual violence in society, those who consume films by Peckinpah, Woo and others are simply into it for the kick. They would neither care about Peckinpah's justification nor see the ugly, terrible thing that the graphic depiction of violence evokes. Nor would Burgess' viewpoint, chillingly crafted by Kubrick, signal much shift in consciousness from your general film audience. "Violence or,

the threat of it", as Burchill notes, "was what the cinema was built on".¹⁴⁵

The link between film's signifying practices and its relation to social discourse in the real is witnessed by the eruptions of daily occurrences ranging from terrorist bombings (New York Trade Center), to a poison gas attack (Tokyo subway), to the incomprehensible act of Colin Ferguson's massa/spree. According to McKinney, "bloodshed has a subtext" in film that strong violence serves to reshape in the context of a narrative and in audience proclamation of the experience.¹⁴⁶ The young black male filmmakers find themselves in experiential confines, portraying screen violence such as Caine's father shooting a card playing companion when he was a child in Menace II Society, or G-Money's exultation in watching one of his cohorts blast a rival drug dealer on the street in daylight in New Jack City. Yet, according to McKinney's ideas, the violence one finds in these Boyz n 'hood films (exception might be certain scenes in Menace II Society) is within the classical realist tradition (of Hollywood filmmaking), but is lacking the necessary commitment to break the barriers on the narrative level by giving an outcome of the violence a determining role. Interestingly, an independent effort by Leslie Harris, Just Another Girl on the IRT, au courant with the requisite hip-hop soundtrack (female rappers) and its "budgetless aesthetics", reveals a violence that does not originate with guns or gangstas "but from the contradictions of being bright, female and seventeen". Leslie Phillips states, in her review, that "the film's one act of rage is unmistakably female and brilliantly

unexpected: the standard gun battle bloodshed of most indie films rarely strays so far from the romantic, or gets audiences squirming so hard".¹⁴⁷

Current media coverage of topical subjects such as the trial of O.J. Simpson, reveal the extent to which race matters in America. To which in fact, it permeates the ribbon of discourses across inter/intra-communal sites, not to mention its pervasive effects on the perceptions of peoples from other nations. There is among some of the populace a remembrance and acknowledgement of the "many brutal images etched into the consciousness of black America". But this backhand memory is always contextualized to inhibit any totalising impulse by African Americans. While this is laudable in a community of civil subjects (many who bear scars of historical legacies of intense evil), there is also the strongly felt rationale that this is in the past, it is the concerns of the future that one should worry about. In this comforting place, rhetorical strategies suggest that "black Americans view whites with anger and resentment while many white Americans view blacks with barely concealed fear". This rationale serves weapon producers and sales of arms (to deal with the enemy within), to isolate the two groups into the enclaves of habitation, job opportunities, economic and social limitations - in short, life chances. The trajectory has been set ever since the nascent nation chose to import Africans as slave laborers. Subsequently, a constant state of ambiguity precluded the ability to transcend the consequences of that choice. Or, at least, not beyond the historical imperative of the victorious conqueror stepping over the vanquished.

This situation then, of a biracial nation (that is white dominant, everyone else of color independent), with pretense to power, committed to humanistic, democratic and religious principles, constitutes an illusion of fantastic proportions. The avowal of one state of affairs while practising another is evidence of the significant depth of denial, and of the horrendous damage towards a relation of the possible.

Under, within, around and even underground, African Americans have tried to survive, to flourish. Adversity may at times have sustained the muses of creation but all at terrible cost. The imminent danger in the field of the visual is to play out the imbalances that not only create hegemony over cultural, social and political economy, but also nullifies equitable agency, equitable power in the theatre of human operations.

When Denzel Washington (Mo' Better Blues (1990), Malcolm X (1993), Philadelphia (1993), Pelican Brief (1993), etc.) decided never again to make a film such as Ricochet (1991), he made a conscious choice not to participate, irrespective of the rewards possible, in the mindless violence such a film represents. This loss in economic and artistic terms (i.e. opportunities) for him was paid back by other, more rewarding politics. Gun movie deals do not necessarily lead to a process of liberation and self determination and power if one has not truly seen himself.¹⁴⁸

Anything otherwise and "the sharp image of reason will wither in flames. The familiar game of mirroring the other side of ourselves in madness and of eavesdropping from our listening posts on voices that, coming from very afar, tell us more nearly what we are - this game with its rules, its strategies, its contrivances, its tricks, its tolerated illegalities will once and for all become nothing but a complex ritual whose signification will have been reduced to ashes".¹⁴⁹

ENDNOTES

- 1 Michel Foucault, "Madness, the Absence of Work", p. 295.
- 2 Jane Ellen Stevens, "Treating Violence as an Epidemic", pp 25-27. See also "Dressed for Success But Armed for Survival" by Jerry L. Cannon in *Combat Handgun*, February, 1994
- 3 Ed Guerrero, *Framing Blackness*, pp. 11-14
- 4 George Lipsitz (1993b), "Race and Racism", p 21
- 5 Arthur Kroker, "Television and the Triumph of Culture: Three Theses".
- 6 Paula Giddings, "Black Males and the Prison Myth", p. 50.
- 7 Arthur Jafa considered this problem in "69", p. 253.
- 8 Michael Rogin, "Blackface, White Noise: The Jewish Jazz Singer Finds His Voice", p 417.
- 9 Ibid, pp 417-418
- 10 Ibid, p 418
- 11 George Lipsitz (1993a), "No Way Out: Dialogue and Negotiation in Reel America", pp. 130-131.
- 12 Ibid, p. 131. Also Thomas Cripps, *Making Movies Black*, pp. 3-34. Also, Ed Guerrero, op. cit., pp. 9-40.
- 13 Michael Rogin, op. cit., p. 418.
- 14 Ibid, p. 419.
- 15 Ibid, p 418.
- 16 James Snead, *White Screens/Black Images*, p. 39.
- 17 George Lipsitz (1993a), op. cit., p 131. Scott Simmon's *The Films of D. W. Griffith* offers an extended examination (Chapter 4) of "Mr Griffith's Civil War".
- 18 Michael Rogin, op. cit., p. 417. Also, for a cogent analysis of blackface minstrelsy, see Eric Lott "Love and Theft: The Racial Unconscious of Blackface Minstrelsy".
- 19 Michael Rogin, op. cit., pp. 417-419
- 20 Thomas Cripps, *Making Movies Black*, p. 3 and p. 11. For a further description of black screen stereotypes, see Donald Bogle, "Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies and Bucks: An Interpretative History of Blacks in American Film", (1973).
- 21 Michael Rogin, op. cit., p. 431.
- 22 Manthia Diawara, *Black American Cinema*, p. 3.
- 23 Paul Gilroy, "Race and Cinema: An Interview", *Critical Sociology*, Vol. 19, No. 3, 1992.
- 24 Gunnar Myrdal, *An American Dilemma*; Andrew Hacker, *Two Nations: Black and White, Separate, Hostile and Unequal*, MacMillan: Toronto, 1992.
- 25 Patricia J. Williams, *The Alchemy of Race and Rights*, p. 59. Note "privatized innocence and publicized guilt" for a typical reaction as exemplified by ex-mayor Koch, pp. 69-72.
- 26 Ibid, p 73.
- 27 Ibid, pp. 74-77. Also Kobena Mercer in "Recoding Narratives of Race and Nation", p 4.
- 28 Kobena Mercer, op. cit., p. 78.
- 29 Reece Auguiste, "Antillean Cinema in the Absence of Ruins: The Case of Felix de Rooy", p. 36.
- 30 Attributed to Frederick Jameson.
- 31 R.A T. Judy, "On the Question of Nigga Authenticity", p. 217. (emphasis mine).
- 32 George Lipsitz (1993a), op. cit., p. 133. See also Ralph Ellison, "What America Would Be Like Without Blacks", in *Going to the Territory*, pp. 104-112. Ellison says, "When we consider how long blacks had been in the New World and had been transforming it and being Americanized by it, the scheme appears not only fantastic, but the product of a free floating irrationality, a national pathology."
- 33 R.A.T. Judy, op. cit, p. 223.
- 34 Derek Bell, *Faces at the Bottom of the Well*, pp. 158-194.
- 35 Lawrence W Hogue, *Discourse and the Other: The Production of the Afro-American Text*, p. 24.
- 36 Ibid, p. 44
- 37 William Styron, "Slavery Disney's Way? No Thanks", p. 5.
- 38 bell hooks, "Altars of Sacrifice; Re-membering Basquiat", p. 72.
- 39 William Styron, op. cit., p. 5.

- 40 bell hooks, op. cit. p. 71.
- 41 Ibid. p. 74. It is noteworthy that hooks' recognition of Gilles Turler's contention (in *Art of Maasai*) that colonialist perpetrators who have enslaved, plundered and oppressed, cannot abide contemporary criticism for to do so "they would have to condemn themselves", not only anticipates the problem of madness as raised by Foucault, but presents the problem of what strategies the victims must adopt to survive. See also Franz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*
- 42 Cornel West, *Race Matters*, p. IX.
- 43 Ibid, p. IX.
- 44 Kobena Mercer, "Recoding Narratives of Race and Nation", pp 4-5
- 45 Christine A. Holmlund, "Displacing Limits of Difference: Gender, Race and Colonialism in Edward Said and Homi Bhabha's Theoretical Models and Marguerite Duras' Experimental Films", p. 3.
- 46 Frederick Jameson, *Signatures of the Visible*, pp 11-12
- 47 Katherine Dieckmann, "Godard's Counter-Memory", p. 67
- 48 Peter Wollen, *Raiding the Ice-Box - Reflections on Twentieth Century Culture*, p 47
- 49 Katherine Dieckmann, op. cit., p. 67.
- It is "bitter irony" that motion picture technology was perfected during the period 1890-1915, the same period that witnessed savage persecution of blacks and other minority groups. The culmination of this period could be marked by the film *Birth of a Nation* (1915), a film which served as a tool for supremacist dogma. It is ironic for the fact that in order to achieve its purpose, the film presented innovative techniques such as close-ups, crosscutting, flashbacks in an epic length that has made it a pivotal piece of cinematic art. Its appeal can still sway those susceptible to its message. A recent editorial included the comment that "...someone early in the history of film figured out that the new medium could cause peoples' hearts to race and their rational perceptions to be twisted...". (International Herald Tribune, November 2, 1993)
- Two events in this period contributed to the politics of racial exclusion and consequently made black independent cinema inevitable. The social controls that resulted effected a shift in the plantation motif, particularly as extended to the film industry. The first event was Thomas Edison's innovation that made mass viewing of cinematic products possible. Edison demonstrated a large screen projector on April 23, 1896. The single person viewing of his previous machine, the kinetoscope, became obsolete. The second event occurred about a month later (May 18, 1896), when the U.S. Supreme Court gave assent in the Plessy vs. Ferguson case, that endorsed the American version of apartheid - the "separate but equal" use of facilities for whites and blacks. This decision was not reversed until 58 years later in the Brown vs Board of Education case. The creation of a legally enforced separation created an environment wherein black independent cinema developed. The initial stages and "success" of "race movies" were not to last long (See Thomas Cripps, "Making Movies Black", pp. 126-150 - note the illustration on p 127 of a 'colored' only theatre front). But it provided a legacy for later generations - see bibliographic references to Julie Dash's *Daughters of the Dust*, Wendell Harris' *Chameleon Street*, and Charles Burnett's *To Sleep With Anger*.
- 50 Kate Fillion, "Film as Consuming Passion".
- 51 See Denis Greene, "Tragically Hip: Hollywood and African American Cinema", p 28
- 52 Nelson George, "Blackface", p. 203.
- 53 Ibid, p. 138.
- 54 Arthur Jafa, op. cit. p. 253.
- 55 Nelson George, op. cit., pp. 88-89 and pp 136-193.
- 56 Ibid, p. 46 and p. 52. Tom Cade Bambara (1993), "Reading the Signs, Empowering the Eye: Daughters of the Dust and the Black Independent Film Movement", Karen Jaehne (1990), "Melvin Van Peebles: The Baadasssss Gent", pp. 4-8.
- 57 Jacquie Jones, "The Construction of Black Sexuality", p. 251.
- 58 Laurence Fishburne, *New York Times*, Sunday, August 8, 1993, p 20
- 59 Jacquie Jones, op. cit., pp 252-253.
- 60 Donna Haraway, "The Promises of Monsters: A Recuperative Politics for Inappropriate/d Others", p. 325.

- 61 Karen Grigsby Bates, "They've Gotta Have Us - Hollywood's Black Directors", pp. 14-19, p. 38, p. 40, p. 44 Also Nelson George, op. cit., pp. 164-165.
- 62 Thomas Doherty, "Two Takes on Boyz 'n' the Hood", p. 16.
- 63 Arthur Jafa, "Like Rashomon But Different - The New Black Cinema", p. 10
- 64 Charles Dutton quoted in Manning Marable's "Reconciling Race and Reality", p. 15.
- 65 Katherine Dieckmann, op. cit., p. 67.
- 66 Bill Nichols, *Ideology and the Image*, pp. 182-195 and pp. 198-204.
- 67 Paula Massood, Film Review, *Cineaste*, p. 44.
- 68 Michael Eric Dyson, "Out of the Ghetto", p. 21
- 69 Nelson George, op. cit., pp. 109-111 Also, Kim Newman, *Sight and Sound*, Vol. 4, No. 4, 1994 and Paula Giddings, op. cit., p. 50.
- 70 Ed Guerrero, op. cit., pp. 86-91; Toni Cade Bambara, op. cit. and Michele Wallace (1992a) "Afterward: Why Are There No Great Black Artists? The Problem of Visuality in African-American Culture", pp. 260-261
- 71 *Ibid*, p. 163.
- 72 See Paul Gilroy, "It ain't where you're from, it's where you're at: the dialectics of diaspora identification", pp. 125-127.
- 73 Sherley Anne Williams, "Two Words on Music: Black Community", pp. 167-168 and Michele Wallace (1992a), op. cit., p. 345, are emphatic about the state of current music.
- 74 Greg Tate (1992), *Flyboy in the Buttermilk*, Simon & Schuster, New York, p. 133.
- 75 See Isaac Julien (1992), "Black Is, Black Ain't", p. 252; Patricia Rose (1992), "Black Texts, Black Contexts", pp. 223-241, and Paul Gilroy, "It's a Family Affair", pp. 308-309, for a distinction between East Coast/West Coast rappers and Stuart Hall (1992), "What is this 'Black' in Black Popular Culture", *Black Popular Culture*, pp. 24-28.
- 76 Valerie Smith (1992), "The Documentary Impulse in Contemporary U.S. African-American Film", in *Black Popular Culture*, p. 58.
- 77 Michele Wallace (1992b) "Boyz N The Hood and Jungle Fever", pp. 124-125.
- 78 Isaac Julien, op. cit., p. 258.
- 79 Cornell West (1992), "Nihilism in Black America", p. 39.
- 80 *Ibid*, p. 38.
- 81 *Ibid*, p. 41.
- 82 *Ibid*, p. 42.
- 83 *Ibid*, p. 43.
- 84 Abe Krueger, *Newsweek*, June 2, 1995
- 85 Lisa Kennedy (1992), "The Body in Question", in *Black Popular Culture*, pp. 106-111. Cornell West, op. cit., p. 40, The advocate who writes "Affirmative Action Has Had Its Day", is Richard Cohen in the *International Herald Tribune*, Friday, February 3, 1995.
- 86 Kobena Mercer, op. cit., p. 6.
- 87 Kobena Mercer, "Black Art and the Burden of Representation", p. 62 and p. 65.
- 88 Michele Wallace (1992b), op. cit. p. 125.
- 89 George Lipsitz (1993a), p. 164.
- 90 *Ibid*, p. 164.
- 91 *Ibid*, p. 165 See also Northrop Frye (1957), on discussions of myths, romance, mimesis and irony in "Anatomy of Criticism".
- 92 George Lipsitz (1993a), op. cit., p. 169.
- 93 Kalamu Y. Salaam, "Black Macho: The Myth of the Positive Message", in *Black Film Review*, V. 7, No. 1, pp. 6-9.
- 94 Leonard Quart, "The Triumph of Assimilation: Ethnicity, Race and the Jewish Moguls", pp. 8-11.
- 95 *Ibid*, pp. 8-11. See also Dennis Greene, "Tragically Hip: Hollywood and African American Cinema" who claims that Hollywood black executives, if not household names, are known industry wide. Doug McHenry and George Jackson, producers of *House Party* (1991), are executives, overeducated for the Hollywood milieu, who have left to do their own thing.

- 96 Leonard Quart (1992), Review of Spike Lee's *Jungle Fever*, *Cineaste*, V. 19, No. 4, p. 99
- 97 Michele Wallace (1992b), op. cit., p. 127 and Nelson George, op. cit., pp. 114-117
- 98 James Snead (1994), op. cit., p. 3 and George Lipsitz (1993a), op. cit., p. 164
- 99 James Snead (1994), op. cit., p. X
- 100 Ibid, p. 3.
- 101 Michele Wallace (1992b), op. cit., p. 130; Valerie Smith, op. cit., pp. 58-60 and Lisa Kennedy, op. cit., pp. 109-110.
- 102 George Lipsitz (1993a), op. cit., p. 170
- 103 Dennis Greene, op. cit., p. 29.
- 104 See Isaac Julien (1992), "Black Is, Black Ain't" and Paul Gilroy's "It's A Family Affair" in *Black Popular Culture*.
- 105 See Kobena Mercer (1993b), "Back to My Routes: A Postscript of the 80's", p. 34.
- 106 Ibid, p. 34 and Paul Gilroy, op. cit., p. 311.
- 107 Lisa Kennedy, op. cit., p. 110.
- 108 Ed Guerrero, op. cit., pp. 174-175.
- 109 Ibid, pp 168-177.
- 110 Ibid, p. 175.
- 111 Ibid, pp. 173-174
- 112 Ibid, pp. 175-177.
- 113 Ibid, pp. 170-173.
- 114 *GQ*, March 1995, p. 250.
- 115 George Lipsitz (1993a), op. cit., pp. 120-128.
- 116 Francis Barker, *The Culture of Violence*, p. 191
- 117 See "Sioux Go On The Warpath Over Costner", *World News, The (London) Sunday Times*, February 5, 1995, p. 20.
- 118 Francis Barker, op. cit., p. VIII.
- 119 Robert Brent Toplin (1994), "Violence and Culture in the United States", in Kumar Rupesinghe and Marcial Rubio C. (eds.), *The Culture of Violence*, p. 238.
- 120 Ibid, p. 244.
- 121 Ibid, p. 244.
- 122 Andrew Hacker (1992), "Two Nations", page X.
- 123 See Richard Cohen's "Affirmative Action Has Had Its Day", *International Herald Tribune*, February 3, 1995.
- 124 Robert Brent Toplin, op. cit., p. 253.
- 125 Francis Barker, op. cit., p. 192.
- 126 Ibid, pp. 194-195.
- 127 R.A.T. Judy, op. cit., p. 212.
- 128 For concurrent reading through images, see James Snead's discussion of King Kong - "Spectatorship and Capture in *King Kong: The Guilty Look*", (1994), pp. 1-28. Donna Haraway (1989), "Apes in Eden, Apes in Space: Mothering as a Scientist for *National Geographic*", in *Primate Vision*, Routledge, London, pp. 133-184.
- 129 R.A.T. Judy, op. cit., p. 212.
- 130 Ibid, pp. 227-229.
- 131 Paul Sniderman and Philip Tetlock, *Race and Inequality: A Study in American Values*, p. 16
- 132 See Michelle Slattala and Joshua Quittner, "Gangwar in Cyberspace"
- 133 Michel Foucault, op. cit., p. 292.
- 134 R.A.T. Judy, op. cit., pp. 226-230.
- 135 Les Krims, a photographic artist, creates enigmatic titles and aphorisms for his work. This is one
- 136 Devin McKinney (1993), "Violence: The Strong and the Weak", *Film Quarterly*, V. 46, No. 4, Summer, p. 23.
- 137 Peter Wollen, op. cit., p. 50.

- 138 Godard quoted in Dieckmann, op. cit., p. 67.
- 139 Devin McKinney, op. cit., p. 16.
- 140 Ibid, pp 16-17.
- 141 Ibid, pp 17-22
- 142 Julie Burchill, "Shooting for the Hip", pp. 10-16
- 143 Ibid, pp. 10-16.
- 144 From James Greenberg, *International Herald Tribune*, March 1, 1995.
- 145 Julie Burchill, op. cit., pp. 10-16
- 146 Devin McKinney, op. cit., p. 17.
- 147 Julie Phillips, "Leslie Harris' Just Another Girl on the IRT", p. 86
- 148 This reluctant public admission from Denzel appeared in a mass circulated magazine (particulars unknown) as casual reading in a waiting room
- 149 Michel Foucault, op. cit., p. 291

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