Adventures of Perception

Cinema as Exploration: Essays/Interviews

SCOTT MacDONALD

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Desegregating Film History

Avant-Garde Film and Race at the Robert Flaherty Seminar, and Beyond

When national and ethnic [I would add aesthetic] identities are represented and projected as pure, exposure to difference threatens them with dilution and compromises their prized purities with the ever-present possibility of contamination.

Paul Gilroy[1]

At the final Friday evening discussion session of the fiftieth annual Robert Flaherty Seminar,[2] held at Vassar College in June 2004, there was a remarkable moment. We were in a large classroom lecture hall; the evening's filmmakers—Morgan Fisher, who had shown his *Standard Gauge* (1984), and Louise Bourque, who had shown four short films—were sitting at a table in front. It was the end of a week of screenings and discussions and late-night conversations about the mixture of documentary and avant-garde films that had been programmed by Susan Oxtoby in conjunction

with several Flaherty stalwarts; the end-of-the-seminar party would begin in an hour or so.[3] A hand was raised, and ethnographic documentarian Sarah Elder broached an issue that had been hovering around the seminar all week. "Why is it," Elder asked, "that all the avant-garde filmmakers, and their films, seem so *white*?"[4]

The potential volatility of this question could be heard in the silence that followed. All faces turned slowly from Elder to Fisher, who had been brilliant and witty during discussions throughout the week. Fisher paused for a moment, then said tersely, "I think we all *know* why." It was a clever and amusing evasion that allowed members of the seminar to feel that perhaps they *did* know, or ought to know, without actually knowing precisely what it was that they knew. And it was pure Morgan Fisher, whose films resonate with subtle, dense conceptual moments. Fisher's response led into a brief discussion of the issue of race and avant-garde film that cannot have satisfied anyone present.[5]

This Flaherty moment was far from my first confrontation of the issue of race and avant-garde cinema at the seminar. Indeed, it has been a perennial issue, especially during those seminars that have made avant-garde film a substantial part of the programming. Since many documentaries are explicit polemics for progressive political and social change, and most avant-garde films are not, it is easy to suspect that the avant-garde filmmakers are comfortable with the political status quo, including the status quo of race relations. This suspicion is exacerbated by the fact that the Flaherty Seminar itself has long had difficulties in attracting people of

1. Paul Gilroy, *Against Race: Imagining Political Culture beyond the Color Line* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000), 105.

2. The Robert Flaherty Seminar was begun by Frances Flaherty, the director's widow, as a testament to her husband's commitment to independent filmmaking, in 1955. What began as a small gathering of filmmakers to discuss work in progress became in time an annual seminar attracting filmmakers, programmers, teachers, librarians, and independent media aficionados. The primary focus of the Flaherty has been documentary, though a strong secondary focus has been avant-garde cinema—reflecting two rather different ways of understanding Flaherty himself: he is generally recognized as the first great documentarian (though he himself did not think of himself as a documentary filmmaker in our current sense of the term) *and* as an experimental narrative filmmaker.

In recent years, attendees at the annual weeklong gathering have numbered approximately 150. Programmers are hired to curate shows of generally recent films and videos several times a day for a week. Each program is discussed by the assembled attendees. The mood of the annual Flaherty Seminar has depended on the programmers, the topic, and the era when a program is offered. While particularly volatile discussions have become the stuff of Flaherty legend, most seminars are generally affable gatherings.

3. In honor of the Flaherty's fiftieth anniversary, a group of Flaherty stalwarts—Ruth Bradley, Richard Herskowitz, Louis Massiah, William Sloan, and Patricia R. Zimmermann—programmed a retrospective of films of particular importance in the history of the seminar; their selections were interwoven with Oxtoby's programming.
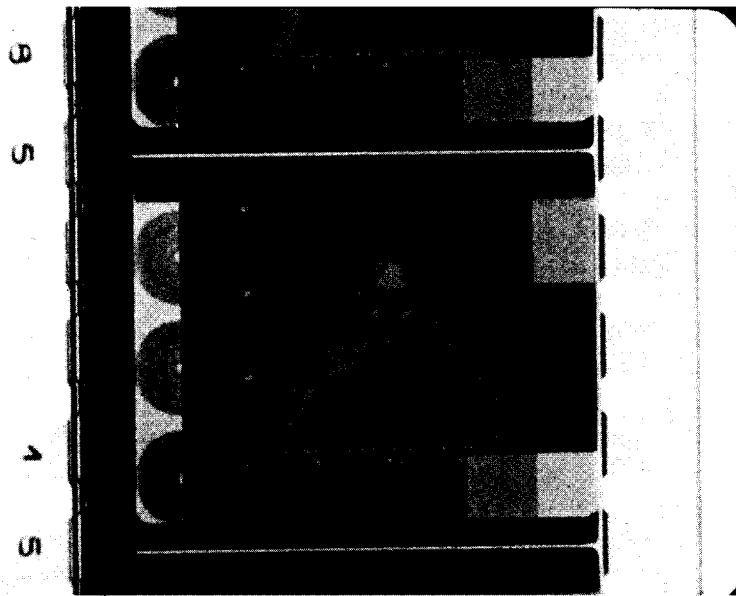
4. I am working from memory vis-à-vis Elder's question; her exact words might have been other than what I have quoted her as saying, but I am confident that this catches her meaning, and it represents my memory of this moment as precisely as I can render it.

5. I do not mean to suggest here that Fisher, as a filmmaker, avoids the issue of race. In fact, race is one of the issues engaged by *Standard Gauge*. In that film, Fisher presents us with a series of filmstrips of 35mm film ("standard gauge") that he has collected over the years while working in various businesses that service the industry. The filmstrips are presented in one continuous 16mm shot, as Fisher tells us the context for each filmstrip and the reasons he finds it of interest; often this has to do with the words and other symbols on the filmstrip, signals of one kind or another to lab technicians, projectionists, and others who, while outside the spotlight, help to get films made and keep theaters working. After Fisher discusses I.B. Technicolor, he focuses on several versions of the "China Girl," usually the frame (or frames) of a colorfully dressed European American woman included on film leader that allows film labs to correctly adjust the color of prints, using as a guide the correct tonality of "flesh" (that is, the color of white skin).

Frames of a China Girl in Morgan Fisher's *Standard Gauge* (1984). Fisher's discussion of the China Girl foregrounds the issue of skin color (for more information, see note 5). Courtesy Morgan Fisher.

color, except as guest filmmakers or curators.[6] To some considerable extent, this seems to have been an economic issue, but it also seems clear that African Americans are not particularly drawn to the seminar, despite the apparent desire for diversity on the part of most of those who attend the annual seminar and those who have served on the board of International Film Seminars, which sponsors the annual gathering.

The legendarily volatile 1989 seminar, programmed by Pearl Bowser and Grant Munro, was probably the most fully integrated Flaherty (guests included Ignacio Aguero, John Akomfrah, Orlando Bagwell, Ayoka Chenzira, Julie Dash, Mouse Diakite, William Greaves, Henry Hampton, Phillip Mallory Jones, Gaston Kabore, Olley Maruma, Louis Massiah, Susana Muños, Kwate Nee-Owo, Horace Ove, Pratibha Parmar, Lourdes Portillo, Jacqueline Shearer, Cheick Omar Sissoko, Valery Solomin, Osamu Tezuka, Trinh T.

6. Interestingly, "whiteness" is also an oft-noted reality at gatherings of avant-garde film aficionados. For example, the annual shows at Views from the Avant-Garde, curated by Mark McElhatten and Gavin Smith as a sidebar to the New York Film Festival, are rarely attended by anything like a significant percentage of people of color—much to the consternation of many who do attend.

Minh-ha, and Csaba Varga), but even this seminar was read in some quarters as not exactly racially progressive. For Toni Cade Bambara, it was

> a predictably mad proceeding in which colonialist anthro-ethno types collided with "subject people" who've already reclaimed their image, history, and culture for culturally specific documentaries, animations, features, experimental videos, and critical theory (the program of lectures and screenings of works primarily drawn from the African diaspora was curated by Pearl Bowser; an unprecedented commandeering of the guest curator's program time was used to screen post-glasnost works from Eastern Europe, and the highlight of the usurping agenda was a screening of the spare-no-expense-to-restore Flaherty/Korda colonist work *Elephant Boy*).[7]

I did not attend the 1989 seminar, but I am sure that some white seminarians would have been shocked to be considered "colonialist." At the 1987 seminar, which was my first, seminarians made clear their hostility to anything that smacked of colonialism, and the same attitude has been pervasive at every seminar I have attended since. Flaherty seminarians certainly think of themselves, and hopefully are, progressive about issues of race and culture.

The fact that Flaherty attendees and programmers have long been concerned about the seminar being, or being seen as, elitist and racially unfriendly has been particularly obvious at moments when filmmakers have seemed to straddle the categories of "black filmmaker" and "avant-garde filmmaker." At the 1991 seminar, programmed by Coco Fusco and Stephen Gallagher, William Greaves presented his *Symbiopsychotaxiplasm: Take One* (shot in 1968, first version finished in 1972), a brilliant exploration of the filmmaking process. The excitement generated was a function of the film's sophistication and ingenuity, and the fact that the seminar was playing a role in the rediscovery and long-overdue appreciation of a remarkable

7. Toni Cade Bambara, "Reading the Signs, Empowering the Eye: *Daughters of the Dust* and the Black Independent Cinema Movement," in *Black American Cinema*, ed. Manthia Diawara (New York: Routledge, 1993), 143.

Bambara's complaint that the screening of the Flaherty film and Grant Munro's programming represented an "unprecedented commandeering of the guest curator's time" seems to me a mistaken assumption. Since its inception, the Flaherty has always shown at least one Flaherty film at the annual seminar. In some instances, programmers meld the Flaherty screening into their curating; in others, it takes the form of a ritual observance, an interruption in the programming, a gesture of respect to Flaherty himself and to Frances Flaherty, who instigated the seminar to promote the study of Flaherty's films and related work. Further, it has not been uncommon for the seminar to use multiple programmers for individual seminars. A listing of those who have programmed Flaherty seminars up through 1995 is included in Erik Barnouw and Patricia R. Zimmermann, eds., *The Flaherty: Four Decades in the Cause of Independent Cinema*, special issue of *Wide Angle* (17, nos. 1–4 [1995]): 415–16.

work (completely misunderstood when it was first shown, *Symbiopsychotaxiplasm: Take One* had disappeared for nearly twenty years).[8] But many at the 1991 seminar (and I include myself) seemed particularly excited because here was an undeniably important African American contribution to avant-garde cinema. Much the same response was evident at the 1992 Flaherty, which included a considerable presence of avant-garde film, to Cauleen Smith's *Chronicles of a Lying Spirit (by Kelly Gabron)* (1992), a short film by and about an African American woman that was clearly within the avant-garde traditions of collage filmmaking and personal diaristic work. Seminarians were so excited about it that many demanded, and received, a repeat screening of the film—the only time I remember this happening during the dozen or so seminars I have attended.

However, when Elder asked her question about avant-garde filmmaking and race at the fiftieth seminar, it was the first time—or at least the first time that I am aware of—that this particular issue has been put in front of the assembled seminar in such a straightforward manner, and Elder's question stayed with me after the seminar was over. During the brief discussion that followed Fisher's response to Elder, I commented that I thought that while many of us who follow, write about, and teach avant-garde film *are* embarrassed by the degree to which our field seems "white," the issue is more one of terminology than of the racism of avant-garde filmmakers or programmers. And while, at that moment, I was not entirely convinced that this was correct, I have come to think that the issue *is* largely one of terminology or, more precisely, of categorization and segregation.

During the past generation, as film studies has become ensconced within American academe, various threads in the weave of film history have been delineated, in part as a way of defining and focusing college courses. Specific films have tended to become identified with individual threads. There are exceptions, of course: the "city symphonies" of the 1920s— Walther Ruttmann's *Berlin: Symphony of a Big City* (1927), Cavalcanti's *Rien que les heures* (1926), Vertov's *The Man with a Movie Camera* (1929), and the proto–city symphony *Manhatta* (1921) by Charles Sheeler and

8. Greaves had hoped the film would get into the Cannes Film Festival, but the "problem was that Louis Macorelles, the influential critic, went to a pre-screening of the film and the projectionist got the reels all fouled up. *Take One* is already chaotic. It's so fragile that if you mix it up even a little, you lose the film. Macorelles and I had dinner after the screening, and he said, 'I couldn't understand what the film was about!' I was surprised at his reaction, and then later, too late, I discovered that his projectionist had screened the reels out of order. I like to think of that incident as divine intervention: it has kept this film buried for almost twenty-five years." Greaves in Scott MacDonald, *A Critical Cinema 3* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), 49–50.

Paul Strand—have traditionally been considered important contributions to both documentary history and avant-garde history (the city symphony is one of the earliest cinematic forms to privilege experimental composition and editing over storytelling).[9] But for the most part, until very recently the histories of documentary and avant-garde film have been seen as quite separate.[10]

Much the same has been true of African American cinema and avant-garde film. The few clear instances of crossover have been European American directors working with African American performers. The unusual career of Dudley Murphy is a useful example. Murphy began as an avant-garde filmmaker, most notably as a collaborator on one of the quintessential films of the 1920s European avant-garde: *Ballet mécanique* (1926; Fernand Léger and Man Ray were the other collaborators; George Antheil composed his *Ballet mécanique* as an accompaniment to the film). When Murphy returned to the United States from Paris, he became the director and scriptwriter of two of the best early jazz films—*St. Louis Blues* (1929) with Bessie Smith, and *Black and Tan* (1929) with Duke Ellington and Fredi Washington—and in 1933 he directed the screen adaptation of *The Emperor Jones,* starring Paul Robeson.[11] For the most part, however, at least as these fields have generally been understood, there have been relatively few significant intersections of avant-garde film and African American film.

Historians of American avant-garde film have traced the trajectory of the field from the 1920s European avant-garde, focused primarily on dada and surreal work, to the emergence of Visual Music in the 1930s and 1940s (Oskar Fischinger, Len Lye, Norman McLaren) and the "psychodramas" or "trance films" of Maya Deren, Kenneth Anger, Sidney Peterson, Curtis Har-

9. The city symphonies document aspects of the industrial societies that have developed and supported filmmaking; in several senses, they are the polar opposites of the exploratory films of Robert Flaherty—*Nanook of the North* (1921), *Moana* (1926—and Miriam C. Cooper and Ernest P. Schoedsack's *Grass* (1925), which function as early cinematic forms of salvage ethnography, capturing images of preindustrial cultures whose disappearance, or transformation, is implicit in the fact that they are being filmed.

10. That a change is occurring became evident at the end of the 1990s, in such books as Barry Keith Grant and Jeannette Sloniowski's collection *Documenting the Documentary* (Detroit, MI: Wayne State University Press, 1998), which includes essays on Flaherty, Basil Wright, Joris Ivens, *and* Stan Brakhage and Bill Viola; Catherine Russell's *Experimental Ethnography* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1999), which discusses an ingenious combination of men and women identified either with ethnographic documentary or with the avant-garde; and Patricia R. Zimmermann's *States of Emergency* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998), which explores political dimensions of documentary and avant-garde film and video.

11. Susan Delson's biography of Murphy, *Dudley Murphy: Hollywood Wild Card* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006), carefully reviews Murphy's involvement in all these projects.

rington; to the diverse accomplishments of Anger, Stan Brakhage, Andy Warhol, and Jonas Mekas; to "found-footage film" or "recycled cinema" (Joseph Cornell, Bruce Conner, Ken Jacobs, Raphael Montañez Ortiz); to "structural film" (Tony Conrad, Michael Snow, Ernie Gehr, J. J. Murphy); to the feminist critiques of cinema of the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s (Yvonne Rainer, Su Friedrich, Peggy Ahwesh); and to "trash" or "punk" film (Jack Smith, the Kuchar Brothers, early John Waters).[12] More recent years have seen remarkable accomplishments in films on place (James Benning, Peter Hutton, J. Leighton Pierce, Sharon Lockhart), in a widening sense of recycled cinema (Alan Berliner, Phil Solomon, Robert A. Nakamura), in various forms of hand-processed work (David Gatten, Jennifer Todd Reeves, Lawrence Brose), and in "polyvalent montage" (Warren Sonbert, Nathaniel Dorsky). The field is complex and has developed a complex cinematic discourse, as well as its own history of distribution and exhibition.

The academic field of African American cinema began to develop in the 1970s, when scholars—most important, perhaps, Donald Bogle, in his *Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies, and Bucks,* and Thomas Cripps, in *Slow Fade to Black: The Negro in American Film, 1900–1942*—mined Hollywood film history for instances where blacks had been negatively stereotyped and in some instances had found ways of triumphing over stereotyping and limited opportunity.[13] But the late 1960s and the 1970s also saw the development of filmmaking projects that were rebelling against Hollywood and its

12. Crucial historical texts include Sitney's *Visionary Film: The American Avant-Garde* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1974), and the revised edition, *Visionary Film: The American Avant-Garde, 1943–2000* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002); Paul Arthur's *A Line of Sight: American Avant-Garde Film since 1965* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2005); and Jan-Christopher Horak, ed., *The First American Film Avant-Garde, 1919–1945* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1995). David James's *Allegories of Cinema: American Film in the Sixties* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1989) and *The Most Typical Avant-Garde: History and Geography of Minor Cinemas in Los Angeles* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005); William C. Wees, *Light Moving in Time: Studies in the Visual Aesthetics of Avant-Garde Film* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992); Ed Small, *Direct Theory: Experimental Film/Video as Major Genre* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1994); James Peterson, *Dreams of Chaos, Visions of Order: Understanding the American Avant-Garde Cinema* (Detroit, MI: Wayne State University Press, 1994); and Jeffrey Skoller, *Shadows, Specters, Shards: Making History in Avant-Garde Film* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2005) are also important contributions toward the chronicling of this history, as I hope are my five volumes of *A Critical Cinema: Interviews with Independent Filmmakers* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988, 1992, 1998, 2005, 2006).

13. Donald Bogle, *Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies, and Bucks* (New York: Continuum, 1973) and Thomas Cripps, *Slow Fade to Black: The Negro in American Film, 1900–1942* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977), respectively; the fourth edition of Bogle's book appeared in 2006. Other important contributions to chronicling the history of African American cinema include Daniel J. Leab, *From Sambo to Superspade: The Black Experience in*

depictions of African America, by such directors as Melvin Van Peebles, William Greaves, Bill Gunn, Charles Burnett, Kathleen Collins, Billy Woodberry, Haile Gerima, Julie Dash, and Charles Lane. These filmmakers, and the rediscovery of the underground "race films" of the 1920s, 1930s, and 1940s—particularly those by Oscar Micheaux—allowed the history of films made by, and for, African Americans to seem a coherent project with a particular ongoing purpose: to critique and revise the assumptions about African America communicated in the mass media and, by doing so, to assist in righting some of the wrongs with which African America has struggled.

Related developments have occurred in other ethnic cinemas as well. In his programming for the 1993 Flaherty seminar, Chon Noriega demonstrated that "Chicano cinema" has a similar history: the recognition and exposure of stereotyping and the rebellion against bigotry have produced a variety of Chicano alternatives to commercial Hollywood. The same is true, of course, for the history of Asian American filmmaking/videomaking, though Asians and Asian Americans have been making important contributions to avant-garde cinema, as well as to Asian American cinema, for decades: Teiji Ito composed the sound track for Maya Deren's *Meshes of the Afternoon* (1959); Taka Iimura has been a fixture on the independent film and video scene since the 1960s; and Nam June Paik and Yoko Ono made major contributions to video art and avant-garde film in the 1960s and 1970s.

The fact that some African American, Chicano, and Asian American filmmakers have made work that is closely related to films produced by filmmakers identified with the avant-garde seems generally to have been less interesting and important to many filmmakers and scholars than dealing with issues of ethnicity. Of course, this "interest" and "importance" is both a theoretical/critical matter and a practical one. In both academic contexts and governmentally funded arts contexts, African American cinema, Chicano cinema, and Asian American cinema sell more effectively than avant-

Motion Pictures (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1975); Thomas Cripps, *Making Movies Black: The Hollywood Message Movie from World War II to the Civil Rights Era* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993); the collection *Black American Cinema*, ed. Manthia Diawara (New York: Routledge, 1993); Jane M. Gaines, *Fire and Desire: Mixed-Race Movies in the Silent Era* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001), which includes a detailed overview of scholarship relating to race films; Jacqueline Stewart, *Migrating to the Movies: Cinema and Black Urban Modernity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005); and two books focusing on Oscar Micheaux: Pearl Bowser and Louise Spence, *Writing Himself into History: Oscar Micheaux, His Silent Films, and His Audiences* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2000), and Pearl Bowser, Jane Gaines, and Charles Musser, *Oscar Micheaux and His Circle: African-American Filmmaking and Race Cinema of the Silent Era* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2001).

garde cinema does. This has been especially true in recent years, since most colleges and universities have been at pains to diversify (or at least to seem to diversify) their faculty and their student bodies, and since most governmental arts organizations feel pressure to spread whatever resources they have at their disposal across as many geographic and ethnic constituencies as possible.

As practical as the decision to align oneself with one's ethnic comrades in a collaborative effort at social change can seem, and as understandable as a rejection of avant-garde film on the grounds that it is apolitical may be for some, the maintenance of these different histories as separate and unrelated cultural projects obscures important aesthetic, historical, and practical realities and creates divisions where they need not be. Most obviously, both avant-garde filmmakers and the makers identified with the various ethnic cinemas see the commercial media as at best a mixed blessing that has regularly distorted and obscured social reality in the name of the status quo, has generally reduced human beings to consumers, and has often stifled many forms of resistance and creativity. Both cultural projects evolved as countercinemas to these tendencies, and both have explored a range of alternatives to the mass media with generally limited means.

Often, the makers within these two traditions have worked in ignorance of each other. As a result, filmmakers uninformed about avant-garde film history can see dimensions of their work or the work of their comrades as aesthetic breakthroughs, even as instances of a specifically black aesthetic when, in fact, these aspects of their work are echoes of avant-garde projects of earlier decades; and those in the avant-garde who are not aware of Oscar Micheaux or of Spencer Williams's *Blood of Jesus* (1941) may assume that certain approaches to independent filmmaking were new in the 1960s, when in fact aspects of these approaches were part of African American cinema a generation earlier.

For much of American film history, filmgoing was a segregated activity; and even once theaters were finally integrated legally, African American and European American audiences seem to have remained largely distinct in terms of both their preferences and their modes of reception. The eight discussions that follow do not deny this troubled history, but I do attempt to suggest some specific areas where avant-garde film and African American cinema can be usefully integrated in our thinking and, for those of us who are film educators, in our teaching and our programming. With a single exception, I am focusing on African American film and video history, rather than the other ethnic cinemas, because the gap between this ethnic cinema and avant-garde film seems especially troubled and because their intersec-

tions are of considerable interest. Obviously, none of these brief discussions is exhaustive; hopefully, each suggests ways of thinking beyond conventional cine-historic categories.

EARLY CROSSOVERS

One of the earliest attempts to build a bridge between the histories of avant-garde film and African American film involved the rediscovery of Oscar Micheaux by film aficionados during the late 1970s and the 1980s. In his "Bad Cinema," published originally in *Film Comment* in 1980, J. Hoberman (a critic long identified with American avant-garde film) argued that what had usually been considered Micheaux's ineptitude as a director and/or the result of his having to work without adequate financial resources—the many strange narrative constructions, the awkward editing, the cheesy sets, the unconvincing acting—can be understood as the formal expression of Micheaux's anger and rebellion against American society and the Hollywood cinema produced for it: "Micheaux's films are so devastatingly bad that he can only be considered alongside Georges Méliès, D. W. Griffith, Dziga Vertov, Stan Brakhage, and Jean-Luc Godard as one of the medium's major formal innovators. . . . And if Oscar Micheaux was a fully conscious artist, he was the greatest genius the cinema ever produced."[14] What Hoberman calls Micheaux's "badness" as a filmmaker (referring not only to his supposed ineptitude as a director, by Hollywood standards, but to his rebelliousness toward those blacks who were more committed to protesting African American disenfranchisement than to taking advantage of the entrepreneurial opportunities available in the United States), J. Ronald Green argues "might be understood better as a retention of early film traits, from before the advent of glossy illusionism, than as a failed imitation of White movies"; and sometimes, Green suggests, Micheaux's "bad" production values "can be read as part of a representation of desire for financial means."[15]

If one approaches Micheaux in this way, it is easy to see him as closer to certain avant-garde filmmakers than to some of his race film colleagues. *Ten*

14. J. Hoberman, *Vulgar Modernism: Writing on Movies and Other Media* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1991), 22. Hoberman was educated in the Cinema Department at what is now Binghamton University (then the State University of New York at Binghamton), the now-legendary department established by Larry Gottheim that nurtured a considerable number of the leading filmmakers, programmers, and writers of the American avant-garde.

15. J. Ronald Green, "'Twoness' in the Style of Oscar Micheaux," in *Black American Cinema*, ed. Manthia Diawara (New York: Routledge, 1993), 40, 44.

Minutes to Live (1932), for example, has a good bit in common with Luis Buñuel and Salvador Dali's *Un chien andalou* ("An Andalusian Dog," 1929). The Buñuel-Dali film has become the best-known avant-garde surrealist film and is, of course, a virtual compendium of anti-Hollywood gestures. Seemingly unrelated actions are combined within a structure that provides constant surprise to anyone expecting a normal narrative, starting with Buñuel's slicing the eye of the central female protagonist in the film's opening sequence, which relocates the "climax" of the film to the beginning. From then on, virtually every conventional cinematic trope is defied. When a young woman is hit by an automobile, the action is presented with a "mistake" in continuity: we see three shots of the woman (actually it is difficult to be confident about the gender of characters in *Un chien andalou*); in the first, she is holding a striped box, then her hands are in the air and no box is sight; then, she is holding the box again. This refusal of conventional continuity is so obvious that we cannot imagine it was not a conscious choice on the part of the filmmakers. Once the woman has been hit by the car, the focus moves to a young man and woman who have been looking down at the events from a second-story apartment; the man is suddenly sexually aroused and begins to molest the woman, to the accompaniment of tango music. Surprises to our conventional expectations, affronts to the "rules" of commercial narrative filmmaking, continue throughout the film.

As Arthur Jafa has suggested, "Some of the most interesting aspects of Micheaux's films are their refusals, what they don't do . . . how they resist certain Hollywood tropes and ways of organizing things."[16] Many moments in *Ten Minutes to Live*, for example, seem to draw attention to themselves as mistakes. In one instance, we see, in succession, what were apparently two versions of the same shot, recorded from slightly different distances, and I believe we hear "cut" at the end of the first. In another instance we see exactly the same sequence, during which the character Letha Watkins (Willor Lee Guilford) reads a note telling her she has ten minutes to live and discusses the situation with her boyfriend, twice in succession. The repetition is obvious and seems as obviously conscious as Buñuel's inclusion of the same sequence twice at the beginning of his *The Exterminating Angel* (1962). The location of much of the action in *Ten Minutes to Live* within a nightclub, the Lybia, is a device familiar from many early sound films, including a number of race films, but Micheaux's nightclub scenes simultaneously provide moments of conventional entertainment (singing and

16. See "The Notion of Treatment: Black Aesthetics and Film," an interview with Arthur Jafa by Peter Hessli, in *Oscar Micheaux and His Circle*, 14.

dancing, a comedy routine) *and* resist the usual conventions for presenting such action: as Jafa says, "The way Micheaux uses those music and dance sequences is both entertaining and formally radical. They're totally jagged and they completely disrupt the narrative flow."[17] Further, just as *Un chien andalou* presents one primary location, the apartment, to which we return almost at random, in *Ten Minutes to Live* the Lybia serves as the location for two separate, unrelated stories (adapted, according to the opening credits, from two stories of "Negro night life in Harlem") during both of which some of the same characters participate and some of the same moments occur: it is almost as if we are seeing two options of events that might happen in this nightclub milieu.

There are, of course, a good many differences between *Un chien andalou* and *Ten Minutes to Live*. The Micheaux film seems to mean, however jaggedly, to reveal the climaxes of two stories that do have some continuity, whereas *Un chien andalou* avoids story altogether. And the Buñuel-Dali film is full of subconscious images culled from the dreams and hallucinations of several people, whereas it would be a stretch to call Micheaux's film "surrealist" in this sense. Nevertheless, both films assume an audience that can enjoy discontinuity and absurdity within a film experience that simultaneously alludes to Hollywood commercial cinema in a variety of ways, while refusing to abide by conventional moviegoing expectations. They are two instances of conscious rebellion, made at the opening of the sound era by independent filmmakers working with limited resources and using formal abrasions as a means of expressing their distance from the industry.

In recent years, Spencer Williams—and especially the first feature he directed, *Blood of Jesus*—has been of particular interest both to those chronicling African American filmmaking and to those who keep abreast of avant-garde cinema. Unfortunately, at this point we know relatively little about Williams or about the context and production of *Blood of Jesus*; indeed, we may never know as much as we would like because, as is true of so many early African American directors, whatever paper trails were created by the production of their films seem to have disappeared, or at least have not yet resurfaced.[18] While *Blood of Jesus* exemplifies the low-budget quality of so many race films, it is, for many viewers, charming and revealing, precisely because of its limitations. Compared with King Vidor's *Hallelujah* (1929),

17. "The Notion of Treatment," 13.

18. Jacqueline Stewart is currently doing research for a book on Williams—a challenging, frustrating (and exciting) project, as she has suggested to me, because of the lack of good information about Spencer and his directing.

another film that focuses on some of the same aspects of African American religion, *Blood of Jesus* seems almost intimate, as if it were made by a group of Christian friends from inside an African American religious community. Indeed, at times the film seems like a church pageant, where the dramatization is less about creating a believable illusion than about the community's providing a wholesome and intimate entertainment for the congregation. The fact that Williams and his collaborators were willing and able to complete the film, despite what must have been their recognition that the result could not compete with conventional commercial movies, at least in terms of its production values, is evidence of their commitment as filmmakers, and apparently as Christians, to the story the film tells and the belief it seems to express. That is, the "spirit" of the filmmakers seems to transcend their material limitations, a perfect reflection of the rural southern African American Christianity the film depicts and the particular vision of Christ at its center.[19]

Blood of Jesus could not, at first glance, seem more different from such early "trash films" (see the discussion of trash cinema in section 4 of this essay) as Jack Smith's *Flaming Creatures* (1963) or George and Mike Kuchar's *A Town Called Tempest* (1963) in terms of the kinds of people it depicts and the story it tells. However, the commitment of Smith, the Kuchars, and their colleagues to make films despite limited financing and questionable talent suggests a comparable faith in the spirit of a disenfranchised community to transcend its own limitations—in films that will probably be of interest only to like-minded souls. And in all three instances, this community spirit seems embedded within the stories enacted, in related ways: all three films evoke the idea of divine retribution. In *Flaming Creatures* and *A Town Called Tempest*, an earthquake and a tornado, respectively, are presented as divine responses to communities immersed in sin, just as in *Blood of Jesus* the near accidental death of Sister Martha at the hands of her husband, Rastus, forces him to reconsider his resistance to being part of her religious community. Of course, *Blood of Jesus* was presumably made by true believers in Christianity, while the Kuchar and Smith films seem made by men in rebellion against what are usually considered Christian values—but the use of filmmaking as a dramatization of a level of spiritual life deeper and more committed than what is seen in the commercial cinema

19. I say "seems to" because there may have been commercial motives to *Blood of Jesus* that might have made its producers decide to use what had become one of the conventions of race movies: that is, the struggles of believers to resist the temptations of urbanity, symbolized by the nightclub.

unites the three projects. Indeed, one can see *Blood of Jesus, Flaming Creatures,* and the Kuchar Brothers' early films as cinematic forms of folk art that relate in a number of ways to the work of self-taught painters like Mose T (Tolliver) and Howard Finster, and to the New York City graffiti artists of the 1980s who did what Martha Cooper and Henry Chalfant called "Subway Art"—to the whole history of self-taught artists whose impassioned work has been created entirely outside of recognized institutional channels of financial and critical support.[20]

DO THE RIGHT THING: ETHNIC CITY SYMPHONY

One of the dangers of using our usual categories, and especially with distinguishing African American cinema from other strands in the weave of film history, is that even obvious connections between these different strands can be missed. Earlier, I mentioned that the city symphony has traditionally been claimed by both documentary and avant-garde film. American filmmakers have made a number of memorable city symphonies: Pat O'Neill's *Water and Power* (1989), Weegee's *Weegee's New York* (c. 1952, co-made with Amos Vogel); the several New York city symphonies made by Rudy Burckhardt; and the remarkable *Forest of Bliss* (1986), a city symphony of Benares, India, by American Robert Gardner. But this country's most remarkable city symphony is usually considered neither a documentary nor an avant-garde film. Like Ruttmann's *Berlin: Symphony of a Big City,* which established the city symphony form, Spike Lee's *Do the Right Thing* (1989) begins in the early morning as the city is waking up, moves through an entire day, in this case a hot summer Saturday (most city symphonies have focused on workdays), and continues into the night.

Do the Right Thing not only conforms to the overall temporal structure of the city symphony but also incorporates crucial dimensions of the classic 1920s European city symphonies that are usually considered the most characteristic instances of the form (I have detailed this idea in chapter 6 of *The Garden in the Machine*), while at the same time broadening our definition of the form and using it to redefine what a city *is.* The overall organizational similarity between *Berlin* and *Do the Right Thing* is obvious, but while Ruttmann's film ends with literal fireworks, Lee's film focuses on so-

20. I am referring to Martha Cooper and Henry Chalfant's *Subway Art* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1984). I mention Howard Finster and Mose T in particular here because the work of both painters is featured in *North on Evers* (1991) by James Benning, who is discussed in section 7 of this essay.

cial "fireworks": the late evening conflict that ends in the death of Radio Raheem and the fire that destroys Sal's Famous pizza parlor.[21]

Like Dziga Vertov in *The Man with a Movie Camera*, Lee is at pains to draw attention to the fact that his film is a constructed artifact. Vertov means to define cinema as the quintessential art form for a society in the throes of industrial modernization, and he depicts the filmmaker as a worker, like other workers, committed to the new, industrialized communist society. During the film, Vertov draws continual attention to the three processes cinema requires: a central motif within his film is an actual cameraman (Mikhail Kaufman, Vertov's brother) shooting imagery; the process of editing (conducted by Vertov's wife, Elizaveta Svilova) is also demonstrated; and *The Man with a Movie Camera* begins and ends in a theater, where we watch an audience arrive for a screening and the projectionist and the theater orchestra prepare and present the screening.

Lee draws attention to his filmmaking by giving free rein to the expressionist tendency that is evident at some point in most of his films. Beginning with the opening credits, during which Rosie Perez dances to Public Enemy's "Fight the Power" in continually changing outfits in front of what is obviously a projected image of a portion of a city neighborhood, Lee is continually at pains to punctuate the flow of his narrative with aspects of image and sound that draw attention to themselves as cinematic devices, as directorial flourishes, including, most obviously, several instances where characters address Lee's camera directly, in one instance to perform a now-famous set of racist diatribes; in another, to reveal Radio Raheem's philosophical side (while simultaneously alluding to a cinematic progenitor of Lee's film: Charles Laughton's *Night of the Hunter* [1955]). Of course, the fact that most people who see *Do the Right Thing* know that Lee not only is the film's director but also plays Mookie, one of the film's central protagonists, helps maintain our awareness of Lee-as-director, as does the casting of Joie Lee, Lee's sister, as Jade, Mookie's sister.

While Vertov's goal in drawing attention to the various processes that make cinema possible is to demonstrate his excitement about modern, socialist Russia, Lee's goal in drawing attention to himself as director is to demonstrate an alternative to Mookie's inability to find a way to move beyond maintaining his personal status quo. Although Mookie, to use an early description of the character from Lee's journal for *Do the Right Thing,* "has

no vision. . . . The future might be too scary for kids like Mookie, so they don't think about it. They live for the present moment, because there is nothing they feel they can do about the future,"[22] Lee himself *is* a person of vision who *does* think he can affect the future. Indeed, in the case of *Do the Right Thing,* he is at pains to demonstrate that an African American man can do more than maintain his own economic status quo; he can produce a film that offers immediate (if admittedly limited) benefits to a disenfranchised New York neighborhood, and he can model a creative alternative to the feeling of powerlessness. To put it succinctly, *Do the Right Thing dramatizes* the unfortunate consequences of a neighborhood's inability to work through its ethnic differences, while *demonstrating* the potential for New Yorkers (the director, his crew, the cast, the residents of the neighborhood) to overcome their differences during the production of a work of cinematic art.

Lee's decision to ask St. Clair Bourne to document the making of *Do the Right Thing* (in what became *Making "Do the Right Thing" with Spike Lee* [1989]) reveals that, even before the production got under way, Lee recognized that the process of producing this new film was something his audience needed to be aware of. Bourne's documentary helps to make clear the degree to which Lee saw his project as a contribution to the history of African American cinema: during the documentary, Lee is filmed talking about Oscar Micheaux, and Melvin Van Peebles visits the set and is introduced to the neighborhood and to the filmmakers as one of Lee's cinematic forefathers.

Do the Right Thing makes a significant contribution to the genre of the city symphony in several ways. First, it expands the fictional component of the form.[23] From early on, the city symphony sometimes included fictional elements. This was particularly the case with the now least known of the major European city symphonies of the 1920s: Cavalcanti's *Rien que les heures,* which develops several characters whose lives intersect during a day in the life of Paris. Lee's film is full of characters; indeed, it is clear that for Lee, New York *is* the immense cluster of personalities who inhabit the city and whose interactions are its life. Indeed, it is evident throughout *Do the Right Thing* that it is the particular multiethnicity of New York that makes it distinctive and quintessentially American. The directors who invented the city symphony form emphasized industrialization, transportation, and the commercial energy of the modern city. For Lee what energizes the modern

21. Other city symphonies—*Weegee's New York,* for instance, and several of the Burckhardt city symphonies of the 1940s, as well as Francis Thompson's *N.Y., N.Y.* (1957)—substitute the lights of theater marquees and advertisements for Ruttmann's literal fireworks.

22. From Spike Lee's book companion to the film: *Do the Right Thing,* ed. Spike Lee and Liza Jones (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1989), 63.

23. Federico Fellini used this structure before Lee did, in *Fellini's Roma* (1972), which Lee saw "as a good model for this film" (Lee and Jones, *Do the Right Thing,* 28).

Vito (Richard Edson) and Mookie (Spike Lee) argue sports in *Do the Right Thing* (1989). Courtesy Museum of Modern Art.

city is not industrial or commercial labor, though, of course, many of his characters presumably have jobs, and much of the action in *Do the Right Thing* occurs in and around the three commercial establishments on the single block of the Bedford-Stuyvesant neighborhood to which the action of the film is confined. Lee's focus is evident in his setting *Do the Right Thing* on a summer Saturday, when most of the neighborhood is not away at work and when the neighborhood children and young people are not in school. The modern city in *Do the Right Thing* is not simply a place where people work; it is where concentrations of individuals of a variety of ethnic heritages make their homes.

Lee sees the fundamental energy of his city as the interaction of the many ethnic groups that have been drawn to New York as a result of several centuries of immigration from all over the United States and the world. This is obvious within the narrative of *Do the Right Thing*, during which various ethnic individuals and groups interact—sometimes with pleasure, sometimes causing friction, sometimes both—and it was evident within the production process. Lee saw John Turturro as "ideal" to play Pino, Sal's openly racist son, because Turturro grew up "in a Black neighborhood in Queens."[24] One of the most interesting moments in Bourne's documentary

24. Lee and Jones, *Do the Right Thing*, 109.

is a conversation between Danny Aiello (who plays Sal) and Giancarlo Esposito (who plays the most volatile anti-Italian African American character, Buggin' Out). Aiello explains that he feels no particular connection to Italy and thinks of himself not as an Italian American, but as an American Italian. Esposito, who is (Lee explains in his journal) "half Black and half Italian," responds that he *does* feel a connection to his Italian roots and considers himself an Italian American. That is, not only are Lee's cast and crew ethnically mixed, but the actors themselves play across ethnic lines.

Lee's commitment to the idea of the modern city as distinctive in its ethnic diversity and in the interchange among ethnic groups that inevitably occurs in such an environment is expressed not only by the unusual ethnic range of the characters he includes in *Do the Right Thing* but also through his expressionist use of color throughout the film. This immensely "colorful" city block functions as a synecdoche not only for modern American urban life—every American city is increasingly a "colorful" mixture of ethnicities that is a major determinant of the nature of life in that environment—but also for urbanization throughout the world. The city symphonies of the 1920s include, or at least emphasize, very little diversity, less than might have been emphasized had their directors been less swept away by modern industrial processes (and perhaps less prejudiced against certain groups). The evolution of modern transportation so important in *Berlin: Symphony of a Big City* and *The Man with a Movie Camera*, even in *Manhatta*, had already helped to transform many of the world's urban areas into increasingly complex ethnic mixtures; and the past seventy-five years have seen an expansion of this development that previous centuries could hardly have imagined. Lee's film is the first city symphony (or at least the first I am aware of) to fully recognize this development and to simultaneously mourn its frustrations and failures, and not only celebrate, but *demonstrate,* its potential.[25]

"STRUCTURAL FILM" AND *SYMBIOPSYCHOTAXIPLASM: TAKE ONE*

From 1965 to 1975, the most important cinematic development, at least in American avant-garde film (or, perhaps more precisely, in the minds of those who functioned as critics and chroniclers of American avant-garde cinema)

25. Many of Rudy Burckhardt's New York City films emphasize and celebrate the city's diversity: *The Climate of New York* (1948), *Doldrums* (1972), and *Zipper* (1987) are excellent examples. Much the same can be said of Weegee's *Weegee's New York*.

was what came to be called "structural film." P. Adams Sitney gets credit for the term, which was defined in his breakthrough book *Visionary Film:* "There is a cinema of structure in which the shape of the whole film is predetermined and simplified, and it is the shape which is the primal impression of the film"; "Four characteristics of the structural film are its fixed camera position . . . the flicker effect, loop printing, and rephotography off the screen."[26] Sitney was trying to account for what was clearly a new kind of cinema, though in the long run his attempt to characterize a set of films by what he saw as their unusual formal elements was not particularly successful, or at least, not nearly as successful as the term "structural film" itself. Indeed, what the diverse films designated by Sitney's term have in common is not so much a set of formal elements but a particular goal: to transform explorations of fundamental elements of the cinematic apparatus into aesthetic experiences. Thus, and here, of course, I am oversimplifying, Andy Warhol (whom Sitney saw as the forefather of structural film) can be said to explore duration; Tony Conrad explores flicker in *The Flicker* (1966); Michael Snow and Ernie Gehr explore the zoom lens in *Wavelength* (1967) and *Serene Velocity* (1970); Snow, the panning camera in *Back and Forth* (1969); Taka Iimura, duration, in *1 to 60 Seconds* (1973); Gehr and J. J. Murphy, different aspects of the filmstrip in *Eureka* (1974) and *Print Generation* (1974), and so forth.

Understood this way, structural film can be seen as part of the larger social and political context of that period, during which the fundamental structures of a good many traditional elements of American culture and society were being reexamined. One crucial subject for cinematic exploration during this moment—one not reflected in Sitney's discussion of structural filmmakers—is cinema's status as a collaborative medium, both during its production and during its reception. Certainly, all the films I list here were confrontations of the traditional audience expectations for both mainstream and avant-garde cinema, and, in many cases can be said to have demanded, and to some extent to have created, new forms of film audience. Further, some films identified as structural films made an examination of the social nature of film reception a subject; Anthony McCall's *Line Describing a Cone* (1973), for example, literally reconstitutes the film-viewing audience: spectators move around a smoky, nontheatrical space (often an art gallery) that allows for mobility within the darkness, as a cone of light gradually forms between the projector, which is placed within the darkened space, and the

26. Sitney, *Visionary Film,* 407, 408.

Line Describing a Cone (1973), during a projection of the film at Artists Space in New York City in 1974. Photograph by Peter Moore. Courtesy Anthony McCall.

opposite wall (no screen is used). For McCall, *Line Describing a Cone* was a way of exploring a particular dimension of cinema—projected light—and using it as a metaphor for a reconsideration of the assumptions that underlie the "normal" screening situation, where audience members sit in regular rows of seats, all looking in the same direction, and are led by a set of visual and auditory cues through a generic narrative that is broadcast from the projection booth, a space separated from the theater and accessible only to a class of experts.

During the half hour of *Line Describing a Cone*, most viewers become physically active in examining the developing cone of light and in keeping it visible (originally, smoking was considered intrinsic to the experience of the film; that smoking is no longer allowed in public spaces has changed the

experience, and to some extent the meaning, of the film), and as the growing arc on the far wall becomes a circle, they form a new kind of social circle. McCall's film creates a democratic screening situation and places the "means of production"—of the look of the cone, at least—"in the hands of the people." Further, McCall reduces the social class gap between producer and consumer, since the various pleasures of *Line Describing a Cone* (its loveliness as a light sculpture, its political insights) were produced with virtually no expenditure: the film was produced by animating the drawing of a circle with a simple protractor on a three-by-five-inch card.

William Greaves's *Symbiopsychotaxiplasm: Take One* can be understood as a contribution to structural film, specifically, as an exploration of the social dimensions of the cinematic apparatus of independent film *production*. While it is widely assumed that many avant-garde films, including most of those Sitney describes as structural films, were made by individuals working alone, in fact filmmaking is virtually always a social activity. To take a particularly extreme example, even when Ernie Gehr shot *Serene Velocity* in a hallway at Binghamton University (then the State University of New York at Binghamton), absolutely alone during an exhausting single summer night in 1970, he had already bought film stock from someone (and he would subsequently take the resulting footage to someone to have it developed and good prints struck); also, he needed to work within the social reality of the university to be sure he would be alone and uninterrupted as he shot; and of course, he would not have considered the process complete until he had shown the finished film to an audience. All film production, including avant-garde film production, has social dimensions, and at least as inventively as any other American independent film, *Symbiopsychotaxiplasm: Take One* explores aspects of this fundamental dimension of the filmmaking process.

Greaves's particular approach to investigating the social aspects of film production evokes another structural film. When J. J. Murphy made *Print Generation* (1974), he designed an unusual procedure for generating imagery—he made a one-minute diary film, then asked a film laboratory to make a set of contact prints: a contact print of the original, then a contact print of that contact print, then a contact print of *that* contact print, and so on, until no significant change was visible from one contact print to the next (this was true after the fiftieth print). In other words, he allowed this process to generate his imagery, which was subsequently organized so that during the first half of the film, we travel up through twenty-five layers of emulsion on the filmstrip to the original contact print, then, during the second half, down through another twenty-five layers to the final contact print

included in the finished film.[27] The stratification of color emulsion is usually hidden territory; Murphy allows us to explore it.

For *Symbiopsychotaxiplasm: Take One*, Greaves designed a (social) process that would produce imagery of pairs of actors performing a screen test using a scripted argument between a man and a woman.[28] Greaves decided at the outset that this set of screen tests would take place within the "symbiotaxiplasm" (Arthur Bentley's term for any social organism and all that is contingent to it) that included the actors, the group of men and women working as Greaves's crew, and the social space of Central Park, where the film was shot. Greaves added "psycho" to emphasize his interest in the psychology of collaborative creative activity. Having provided the script and generally organized the shooting so that the camera and sound people would simultaneously record the actors, *and* the shooting *and* the surround, depending on where most of the psychic energy seemed to be at any given moment, Greaves stepped away from the usual film director's role to allow his process to generate its own experiences and its own imagery. Greaves's assumption that his refusal to direct in the conventional sense would, sooner or later, create rebellion among both cast and crew and his expectation that the visibility of the filmmaking process in Central Park would create interest among those moving through the park were correct: many of the crew began to meet secretly to discuss what for them was a most unusual and frustrating filmmaking experience, and at various times, individuals and groups of New Yorkers did become involved in the shooting.

Originally, Greaves had hoped to produce a series of *Symbiopsychotaxiplasm* films, but only *Take One* was completed, and that not for several years (in 2005 Greaves would revisit the project in *Symbiopsychotaxiplasm: Take 2½*).[29] After an introductory passage and the opening credits (visually, the credit sequence evokes Edward Steichen's photo sequence *The Family of*

27. Contact printing this way creates one set of prints organized left to right (A wind), another right to left (B wind); in order to see all the images in the same right-to-left configuration, alternating prints need to be flipped. This results in one set of prints with the imagery slightly nearer the projector lens than the imagery on the other set of prints. Murphy wanted all the prints seen in the same configuration and decided to divide them so that viewers see all the A-wind prints, then, after an adjustment in projector focus, all the B-wind prints.

28. To the extent that Greaves's film focuses on the repetition of the argument between Alice and Freddy, it resembles another remarkable avant-garde film of the same era, Hollis Frampton's *Critical Mass* (1971), which also focuses on an argument between lovers that is repeated over and over during the film. *Critical Mass* and *Symbiopsychotaxiplasm: Take One* might make a fascinating double bill.

29. So far as I have been able to determine, the version of *Symbiopsychotaxiplasm: Take One* finished in 1972 was the one shown at the Brooklyn Museum retrospective and at the 1991 Flaherty Seminar. In 1994, presumably because of the interest the film had created, Greaves added four minutes. At the beginning of the new version, we briefly see several of

William Greaves (left) and Victor, a homeless man who walks into the production of *Symbiopsychotaxiplasm: Take One* (1972), near the end of the film. Courtesy William Greaves.

Man [1955]; the sound track combines Miles Davis's "In a Silent Way" and the sound of a rising sine wave that reminds anyone familiar with Michael Snow's *Wavelength* of that film's sound track), Greaves intercuts between one pair of actors (Don Fellows and Patricia Ree Gilbert) repeatedly trying to play Freddy and Alice within the group of technicians recording the dramatic scene and the Central Park surround, and several meetings of cast and crew, including those that were originally filmed without out Greaves knowing, during which Greaves's goals and direction—or his apparent lack of direction—are discussed. The focus of the finished film is the complex nature of the layered social enterprise of producing a film, including the interchange between the fictional characters, between director and actors and director and crew, between the crew and the actors, between the actors themselves, between various crew members, and between members of the production unit and others in Central Park.

In *Line Describing a Cone*, McCall uses his exploration of the cone of light between projector and wall as a means to consider the social implications of film spectatorship; in *Symbiopsychotaxiplasm: Take One*, Greaves sees his exploration of the production process as more than an end in itself, however fascinating that might be. Greaves models an attitude toward production that, to that point, seems virtually unprecedented in American cinema in general and in avant-garde cinema. Greaves's cast and crew, and even the people enjoying Central Park who find their way into the shoot, are unusually multiethnic for a film—though at no point in the film does Greaves make a point of this multiethnicity; it is never overtly mentioned.[30] In part, this is because Greaves saw his collaborators as people who had moved beyond the issue of race ("The people who worked on *Symbiopsychotaxiplasm*

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the other pairs of actors playing Alice and Freddy; and one pair—Susan Anspach playing Alice—later does the scene as a musical, or tries to do the scene (they cannot stifle their own laughter). I must say that I prefer the original version—though it is interesting to see what other "takes" Greaves had in mind.

30. It is clear at least in one instance that Patricia Ree Gilbert is conscious of the issue of race: when Greaves makes a joke about George Wallace, Gilbert's laughter suggests that she is at pains to prove she is not racist.

were Age-of-Aquarius-type people, who were in many respects shorn of the encumbrances that many white Americans are burdened with. If you investigated the psychology of these people, you wouldn't discover racism or prejudice").[31] During an informal meeting with cast and crew, Greaves goes so far as to refer to himself as "the establishment" against which his collaborators should feel free to rebel—and neither Greaves nor any actor or crew member seems to find his inversion of the "normal" racial power structure worthy of comment. They may not understand why Greaves is ignoring, or seeming to ignore, the usual prerogatives of directorial power, but their puzzlement and resistance never seem to involve the issue of race.

Greaves is certainly not unaware of the history of American racism, and its then current realities—one of the primary sites where Alice and Freddy argue is the small knoll that includes a monument erected in honor of fifty-eight men of the New York National Guard's Seventh Regiment who were lost during the Civil War, and at one point Greaves lists racial strife as one of the contexts for his film—but *as a filmmaker* he is at pains to create a collaborative community that can model ways of constructively building on and moving beyond this history. From the beginning of his career as a documentarian, Greaves "wasn't interested in just making movies. I was interested in social issues and corrective social action,"[32] and over the years, this interest has taken a wide variety of forms, including a series of formally conventional but widely admired documentaries about important but under-recognized contributors to African American history, as well as a good number of films that have experimental elements.[33] The angel financing that made the *Symbiopsychotaxiplasm* project possible, however, allowed Greaves to demonstrate that working interethnically should not be considered strange or unusual, that, in a sensible world, it *shouldn't* even inspire comment.

In 2005 Greaves returned to the *Symbiopsychotaxiplasm* project in a major way (over the years, he had made minor changes to the 1972 version of *Take One*, in order to make clearer the nature of the original project). In *Symbiopsychotaxiplasm: Take 2½* Greaves focuses on the interracial couple introduced during the final credits of *Take One* (they are played by Au-

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31. Greaves in MacDonald, *A Critical Cinema 3*, 57

32. MacDonald, *A Critical Cinema 3*, 47.

33. Greaves has made documentaries on Booker T. Washington, Frederick Douglass, Ida B. Wells, and Ralph Bunche. Among his more experimental works are *In the Company of Men* (1969), a cinema verité film that focuses on frustrated white foremen in a factory and the frustrated blacks who work under them (psychodramatic techniques are used to break through racial barriers); and *From These Roots* (1974), a brief history of the Harlem Renaissance, using only photographs, music, and narration. Greaves's career is in need of serious exploration.

Audrey Henningham and Shannon Baker as Alice and Freddy in 1968 during the shooting of *Symbiopsychotaxiplasm: Take One* (1972). Thirty-seven years later, they would be reunited to play Alice and Freddy, thirty-seven years older, in *Symbiopsychotaxiplasm: Take 2½* (2005).

drey Henningham and Shannon Baker) as the focus of the upcoming *Take Two*, which was never completed as planned.[34] *Symbiopsychotaxiplasm: Take 2½* confirms the interethnicity of the original production while focusing on Freddy and Alice, decades later, as Freddy convinces Alice to become involved in nurturing a talented young African American woman who reminds him of Alice—she is the daughter of a lover who has recently died of AIDS (in *Take 2½* Freddy is infected with HIV).

"TRASH": *PINK FLAMINGOS* AND *SWEET SWEETBACK'S BAADASSSSS SONG*

While structural filmmaking was, for many who were following the evolution of American avant-garde cinema, the crucial development of the late

34. What was for a time called *Symbiopsychotaxiplasm: Take Two* was the slightly modified version of *Take One* discussed in note 29 of this chapter, in which Greaves includes bits of Freddy and Alice's argument as played by several pairs of actors, so that viewers can understand the original serial conception of the project. *Symbiopsychotaxiplasm: Take Two* was made during the aftermath of the rediscovery of Greaves's project; it is now the version of *Symbiopsychotaxiplasm: Take One* in distribution through Criterion DVD.

1960s and early 1970s, it was, of course, not the only game in town. Indeed, for some the structuralist project of exploring various dimensions of the cinematic apparatus was little more than an intellectual and aesthetic exercise that had no impact on social reality; for others, it was an utter bore that was destroying the audience that had been developing "underground" for non-Hollywood filmmakers unafraid of sexuality and politics. Not surprisingly, a range of filmmakers demonstrated their rebellion against both Hollywood convention *and* what they saw as avant-garde effeteness in what became known as "trash film" and, later on, "punk" or "no wave" cinema. Crucial figures in the early development of trash film include Jack Smith, George and Mike Kuchar, John Waters, Paul Morrissey, and Melvin Van Peebles, whose *Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song* (1971) is usually considered a pivotal film in the history of African American cinema.

Like structural films, trash films are aggressive in their confrontation of conventional filmgoing expectations, but unlike structural films, trash films do not ignore commercial film history; rather, they often "liberate" its methods and storytelling approaches and use them for overtly anti-industry, sometimes revolutionary goals. Both *Pink Flamingos* (1972) and *Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song,* for example, employ the good-guys-against-bad-guys paradigm so intrinsic to the Western and other mainstream genres, but they invert its normal assumptions. The "good guys" in *Pink Flamingos* are "the filthiest people alive," characters (and actors) willing to do *anything* in order to defy "good taste." The heroine of the film, Divine, is played by the late Harris Glen Milstead, a fat man who dresses in drag outfits that flaunt his/her deviation from Hollywood standards of beauty and fashion. In *Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song,* the hero is a sex-show performer, a black man who has sex with black and white women, then becomes a cop killer who shows no remorse for his defiance of authority and, in the end, escapes to Mexico. Just as Divine and her/his director Waters were heroes to those who were sick of the repressions of bourgeois American culture and the cinema produced for it, Sweetback and Van Peebles became heroes to those who were sick of a nation, and a film industry, that repressed the realities of African American life in order to maintain the bourgeois canons of good taste. "Good taste" for Waters and Van Peebles, and for trash filmmakers in general, is an index of a soulless society; in cinema it represents the repression of all dimensions of society that might reveal the failures of commercial capitalist culture.

As Mario Van Peebles makes clear in *Baadasssss* (2003), his entertaining paean to his father's struggle in getting *Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song* produced and released, financing was the elder Van Peebles's biggest

hurdle. *Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song* was shot in nineteen days on a budget of half a million dollars, using nonunion personnel (feasible only because Van Peebles pretended he was making porn). While this can still seem a small budget by Hollywood standards—and by Van Peebles's standards at the time, since *Watermelon Man* (1970) had made him a bankable African American director—this was a considerable budget for a trash film. John Waters was establishing his reputation as an independent filmmaker with *Multiple Maniacs* (1970) and *Pink Flamingos* (1972) at exactly the same moment Van Peebles was making and distributing *Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song;* according to Waters, *Multiple Maniacs* cost $5,000, and *Pink Flamingos,* $10,000. And Waters's predecessors, Jack Smith and George and Mike Kuchar, made films for far less than this: J. Hoberman explains that Smith shot *Flaming Creatures* (1963) on film stock he stole from the outdated film bin at Camera Barn: "According to [Tony] Conrad [who produced the sound track for *Flaming Creatures*], Smith made particular use of Perutz Tropical film—a German stock designed for shooting at high temperatures—because, thanks to its counter location, it was the easiest to shoplift."[35]

The fundamental aesthetic of trash filmmakers is to demonstrate their defiance of financial limitations and their outsider status by producing films that are in one way or another *more* powerful than big-budget commercial films. Van Peebles may not have stolen the film stock he used in *Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song,* but his choice of film gauge was driven by related considerations:

At the beginning, I swore that I wasn't going to use 16mm, that I was going to make a big film, that I was going to shoot entirely in 35mm. I over-used the rule of thumb about 35mm being Big, Professional, etc., and 16mm equaling amateursville, low-budget. Both production value and professional quality are determined more by what's going on in front of the lens and how it is recorded than by what film stock is in the camera magazine. We decided to use 16mm in the streets for four reasons: its two usual advantages, economy of the stock and the mobility of 16mm equipment; third, security reasons: 16mm is less noticeable, minimizing police hassles[,] and 16mm is taken less seriously by Hollywood types, minimizing Union hassles. My last reason for using 16mm was for its texture—a paradox, because texture is exactly what is considered the big drawback of 16 over 35. 16mm is more grainy, less slick than 35mm, i.e.,

35. J. Hoberman, *On Jack Smith's Flaming Creatures (and Other Secret-Flix of Cinemaroc)* (New York: Granary Books, 2001), 27.

Divine (Harris Glen Milstead) dressed to kill in *Pink Flamingos* (1972). Courtesy John Waters.

more newsreely, more documentary. The more I thought about it, the more I felt 16 would even add to the flavor of realism I wanted in the street.[36]

Coming to *Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song* from working in the industry, Van Peebles had come to the same conclusion that the previous generation of American avant-garde filmmakers had reached: not only can interesting and important cinema be made using small-gauge film, but the supposed limitations of smaller gauge can be transformed into its strengths by committed, imaginative filmmakers interested in alternatives to the status quo. Of course, for Van Peebles, 35mm was the gauge of choice because his goal was not simply to make a film that undercut the assumptions of conventional, commercial depictions of African America and African Americans, but to make a film that might challenge the mainstream in its own theaters.

The idea that what are normally conceived of as limitations can be a film's strengths is also evident in other dimensions of trash film production. In avant-garde film circles, Jack Smith is famous for arguing that what is considered bad acting is better than good acting. In defense of his favorite movie star, Maria Montez, who in her time was considered by some "the World's Worst Actress," Smith argues that acting may be "lousy," but if "something genuine got on film why carp about acting—which HAS to be phoney anyway—I'd RATHER HAVE atrocious acting." Speaking of Montez, Smith explains, "Her real concerns (her conviction of beauty/her beauty) were the main concern—her acting had to be secondary. An applying of one's convictions to one's activity obtains a higher excellence in that activity than that attained by those in that activity who apply the rules established by previous successes by others."[37] In other words, what often shines through a poor acting performance is a kind of personal integrity, a glimpse of a real person (who does not have the ability or does not feel the motivation to create an illusion) *through* the role, rather than a person successfully creating a character invented by a screenwriter.

Trash films frequently have what would conventionally be considered terrible acting, but often, the very attempt and failure to create a believable illusion through acting reveals a level of personal commitment quite rele-

36. Melvin Van Peebles, in *Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song*, Voices of Conscience Edition (Ann Arbor, MI: NEO Press, 1994), 64–65.

37. Jack Smith, in "The Perfect Filmic Appositeness of Maria Montez," collected in *Wait for Me at the Bottom of the Pool: The Writings of Jack Smith*, ed. J. Hoberman (New York: High Risk Books, 1997), 25, 34.

vant to the goals of the filmmakers. One famous instance occurs in the final sequence of *Pink Flamingos*. In order to create a buzz for his low-budget feature, Waters was determined to end the film with something "no one would ever be able to forget."[38] In a single continuous shot, he has Divine reconfirm her status as "the Filthiest Person Alive" by literalizing a common slang phrase: the actor, dressed in spectacular drag, follows a miniature poodle, catches some poodle shit as it comes out of the dog, and eats it. A "good performance" of this action, given the premise of the film, would have involved Divine enjoying "eating shit." But the subsequent close-up of Divine's face reveals him attempting to stay in role, while gagging and struggling not to reveal his obvious disgust. What comes through is Divine's commitment to the film and his poignant willingness to do whatever is necessary to make a place for himself and for his director in the wide world of cinema.

Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song is full of bad acting that often functions in similar ways. While Divine's shit-eating is the grand finale of *Pink Flamingos*, the most controversial sequence in Van Peebles's film occurs early on, when the young Sweetback, a foundling taken off the streets by the prostitutes in a brothel, has sex with a prostitute who discovers the talent that leads to Sweetback's subsequent occupation and, during her orgasm, provides the young boy with his moniker.[39] The young Sweetback is played, awkwardly, by Mario Van Peebles, at age fourteen; and as is true of the shit-eating sequence in *Pink Flamingos*, the scene is less effective as illusion (we certainly do not believe actual sex is occurring, though the nude child is clearly lying between the up-drawn legs of a nude woman) than as evidence of the elder Van Peebles's commitment to put himself and his family on the line for a film that would defy not only white society but those elements of African America that in Van Peebles's view had found ways of working within white society's strictures (the sex scene with the child and the prostitute is pictured as a baptism and is accompanied by a chorus singing religious music). The use of a child in this sex scene was widely criticized by reviewers and others who saw the film; indeed, I would conjecture that one of Mario Van Peebles's reasons for deciding to make *Baadasssss* was to demonstrate that Melvin was in fact a good father who "became the ulti-

38. Waters, in MacDonald, *A Critical Cinema*, 236.

39. There are other instances where *Sweet Sweetback* works at shocking viewers, including an interracial sex scene with an audience, and, near the end as Sweetback nears the Mexican border, his eating a lizard raw (this is less effective than it might be, since the lizard seems to be rubber!) and his urinating and using the urine to sterilize an open wound on his leg.

mate role model for my career choice and continues to be a strong influence on my life."[40]

More fully than some of the better-known trash films, *Sweet Sweetback's Baadassssss Song* makes use of techniques of shooting and editing familiar from avant-garde film of the 1950s and 1960s.[41] Indeed, at pivotal moments in the film, these techniques are crucial. After the sex performance that follows the credits, which is witnessed by several policemen who enjoy the performance so long as it does not become interracial, the police strong-arm Beatle, who runs the brothel and its sex shows, demanding that he loan them Sweetback for a day so they can pretend they have apprehended a criminal. On the way to the police station, the cops are directed to a political demonstration, where they apprehend a young man, Moo Moo, apparently the demonstration's ringleader. They handcuff Moo Moo to Sweetback and decide to take the troublemaker somewhere where they can work him over without being seen, which turns out to be an oilfield. The cops uncuff the men and begin beating Moo Moo up. For a while, Sweetback allows this to go on (as the larger society always has), but then he makes a decision to become involved and attacks the cops, using the handcuffs still attached to his wrist as his weapon. After Sweetback beats the cops unconscious and bloody, he escapes, along with Moo Moo. From this point on, *Sweet Sweetback's Baadassssss Song* is about Sweetback's avoidance of capture.[42]
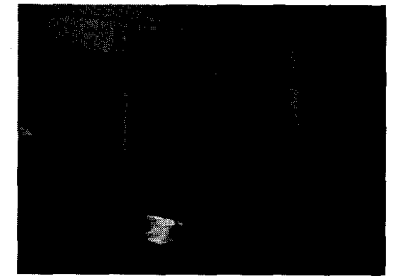
For this transformative moment in Sweetback's life—his direct involvement in a rebellion against racist oppression and brutality, and his subsequent decision to escape from the authorities—Van Peebles employs a technique used only during this one sequence: the multiple imposition of color solarizations of the oil derricks and of Sweetback running from the scene of the "crime." This particular set of effects was added during postproduction at a small company run by avant-garde filmmaker Pat O'Neill

40. Mario Van Peebles, introduction to Melvin Van Peebles, *Sweet Sweetback's Baadassssss Song,* Voices of Conscience Edition, iv.

41. Of course, Van Peebles was no stranger to cinematic experiment. His experimental narrative film *Three Pick-up Men for Herrick* (1959) was shown at Cinema 16, a leading American exhibitor of experimental cinema during the 1950s, and it was part of the Cinema 16 rental collection; his first feature, *Story of a 3-Day Pass* (1967), is full of experimental touches. However, the experimentation in these films is of a different order from what happens in *Sweet Sweetback.*

42. In some senses, John Waters's *Female Trouble* (1974) is more fully related to *Sweet Sweetback* than *Pink Flamingos*. In *Female Trouble*, the protagonist, Dawn Davenport (played by Divine), becomes a criminal (she kills her own daughter for becoming a Hare Krishna and during a nightclub performance shoots into the audience) who leads police on a chase, though unlike Sweetback, she is caught and sentenced to the electric chair, where she defies law enforcement and convention by delighting in her execution.

(a master of the optical printer, whose *Water and Power* was mentioned earlier), Marty Muller (Neon Park), Burt Gershfield, and Cisco Curtis.[43] That Van Peebles had decided to use a special effect for this particular sequence reflects his assumption that the sequence is pivotal within the larger narrative of *Sweet Sweetback's Baadassssss Song.* And it encapsulates the multileveled formal rebellion that had characterized 1960s avant-garde film: that is, as Sweetback violently breaks with authority, the look of

The young Sweetback (Mario Van Peebles) having sex with the prostitute who provides his moniker in *Sweet Sweetback's Baadassssss Song* (1991). Courtesy Melvin Van Peebles.

Van Peebles's film breaks from the "authority" of traditional Hollywood imaging of violent scenes by using a process that literally reveals action in a new light and transforms the image from a single, clear representation into a multilayered, colorful, alternative expression.[44] In other words, the use of this effect to interrupt the look of Van Peebles's narrative per-

43. O'Neill, in an e-mail to the author, July 15, 2007: "Not much to relate about Mel Van Peebles—I met him in about June 1970 when he brought some work in for opticals. Marty Muller (Neon Park), Burt Gershfield, Cisco Curtis, and I had a little production company in a rented house on De Longpre Street in Hollywood. I was in the process of leaving that relationship at the time, as I was about to start a new job at CalArts. I sat in on the meeting, which took place in the driveway, as it was too hot inside. Mel was clever and fast talking, and wanted to try a lot of things, but as I recall had almost no budget to work with, as was so often the case with projects we were offered. The lease on our optical printer was overdue, one of our clients was actually living in the kitchen, and I was looking forward to a new start. Mel showed us his tattoo—a dotted line all the way around his neck just below the collar line. Discussion got down to just what we could do with what was there. I remember some shots of an oilfield, a man running past oil derricks. I'm sure there were others. We were to convert the picture to a high-contrast black and white, and then print it back to color through a range of bright colors. Cisco ran the job, it got done in a week or so, and Mel paid in cash. I have never seen the film."

I assume Van Peebles is referring to O'Neill in his book *Sweet Sweetback's Baadassssss Song* when he says, "I had to use two sets of optical people to get the results I wanted, one brilliant but spaced out [O'Neill?], the other expert but numb" (85).

44. Of course, by the late 1960s and early 1970s, the commercial cinema was peppering its products with comparable formal extravagances, some of them "borrowed from" or done by avant-garde filmmakers. This practice has a history, of course, which includes Hitchcock's use of James Whitney's animations in *Vertigo* and his use of Dali dream sequences in *Spellbound* (1945). One can imagine that Van Peebles was signaling that increasingly common tendency, in a hope that echoed the industry hope that such formal freedom might help attract the young moviegoing population. But his use of an avant-garde tactic in *Sweet Sweetback* seems quite sensitive to the social meanings of formal experiment.

fectly reflects Sweetback's decision to enact a violent break with the conventional way of dealing with the LA police.

Throughout the remainder of *Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song* Van Peebles's style is characteristic of sixties avant-garde film's rebellion against Hollywood stylistics. Much of his imagery is handheld, and in a gestural manner as reminiscent of the avant-garde tradition instigated by Marie Menken in the 1940s and elaborated by Stan Brakhage, Jonas Mekas, and others in the 1950s and 1960s as it is of cinema verité documentary. There is also frequent use of superimposition, including much superimposition of gestural imagery—again a characteristic of much personally expressive avant-garde cinema.[45] At times Van Peebles uses looped images and sound, a tactic employed by any number of structuralist filmmakers. Finally, during the concluding section of *Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song*, once Sweetback escapes into the desert, Van Peebles controls duration in a manner highly unusual for a Hollywood film, then or now.

One of the most frequent tactics of structural cinema is defiance of normal expectations of duration. Even once one can see that the continuous zooming employed by Michael Snow in *Wavelength* will ultimately deliver viewers to the far wall where several images are pinned up, one must endure Snow's relentlessly gradual pace—precisely the opposite experience from most Hollywood films, where climactic action usually involves acceleration. Sweetback's journey through the desert in the direction of the Mexican border seems to take forever, and its duration is emphasized by a vocal chorus that repeatedly addresses Sweetback, commenting on his progress toward freedom using variations on the lines "They bled your Mama; they bled your Papa, but they won't bleed me!" By testing viewers' patience in this way, Van Peebles provides an ongoing emphasis of the persistence and stamina needed by blacks in their struggle toward freedom and embeds the chorus's poem in the consciousness. Indeed, when I have screened *Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song* for classes, students have difficulty refraining from singing this poem in the hours and days following the screening.

In one of the classics of early trash film, *Hold Me While I'm Naked* (1966), George Kuchar plays a young filmmaker struggling to make a romantic melodrama with as much nudity and sexuality as he can get away with. His protagonist is clearly a version of himself—though it appears that Kuchar, as director, has had more success than his protagonist in getting actresses to take off their clothes for their romantic scenes (looked at another way,

45. In several instances, Van Peebles includes multiple images by embedding frames within the frame, a tactic used also by Greaves in *Symbiopsychotaxiplasm: Take One*.

the finished film can be understood as the final product of the protagonist's efforts). In a sense, *Hold Me While I'm Naked* is a confession; it is clear that Kuchar's protagonist's commitment to filmmaking includes his recognition that being a filmmaker gives him the power to ask people (women especially) to do things that he otherwise would not have the nerve to ask them to do. Of course, the director does not always receive what he asks for: the central plot of *Hold Me* involves a woman refusing to work with the voyeuristic director any longer and leaving the production with her boyfriend and costar, and the director's failed attempt to find another couple to play the role of lovers. In *Hold Me While I'm Naked*, Kuchar functions in many capacities: he is his own lead, he is the director, the cameraperson, the editor; he even dubs the voices of all the actors himself (*Hold Me While I'm Naked* was not shot in sync).

Like Kuchar in *Hold Me*, Van Peebles plays the protagonist in *Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song*, and he functioned in a variety of capacities as director (the film's final credit line: "Written, Composed, Produced, Directed and Edited by Melvin Van Peebles"). It cannot have been lost on the film's original audiences that while, on one level, Sweetback is a mythic black hero who does the right thing for African America and gets away with it, on another, Sweetback is a metaphor for the film's director, who breaks the "rules," escapes the authority of Hollywood and its censors (Van Peebles refused to submit the film to the ratings board), and gets away with making this outrageous film, despite the odds. Indeed, if the first major result of *Sweet Sweetback* was to instigate blaxploitation (commercial films with black heroes as sexual, as rebellious, and as unstoppable as Sweetback), the longer-lived result has been the recognition and honoring of Van Peebles for *his* efforts in getting his film made, and thereby demonstrating that blacks in America could in fact produce films for black Americans, films that confronted, in no uncertain terms, conventional white society and the cinema produced for it.

FILM PRODUCTION AS ETHNIC UTOPIA

When William Greaves returned to the *Symbiopsychotaxiplasm* project to make what would become *Take 2½*, he confirmed the attitude about race and ethnicity implicit in *Take One*. Despite the fact that this time Alice and Freddy are an interracial couple (Audrey Henningham is black; Shannon Baker, white), once again the issue of race is never referred to by the characters or the actors who play them, or by anyone involved in the production. In *Symbiopsychotaxiplasm: Take 2½*, as in the original film, Greaves
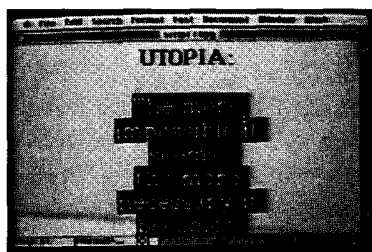
The final computer-screen text in Yvonne Rainer's *Privilege* (1990). Courtesy Yvonne Rainer.

and his collaborators seem to assume that whatever is going on in the American culture that surrounds them, the essential function of film-making is to model a productive, creative social utopia. Indeed, as is clear in *Take 2½*, this utopia has achieved longevity: not only are two of the original actors who performed in *Take One* involved in a related production more than thirty-five years later, but many of the original crew members returned to work with Greaves on *Take 2½*.

The lack of comment about race becomes particularly obvious during the early portion of the new film, which focuses on Alice and Freddy in 1968: as the couple argue, their ethnic difference is never mentioned, despite their anger and frustration with each other. And during a moment when some members of the 1968 crew are filmed off-duty during the original shoot, we see that a romantic relationship has developed between Henningham and Jonathan Gordon, who is white (Gordon is a central character in both films, and worked as sound recordist for both productions): he and Henningham exchange a passionate kiss. A final confirmation of Greaves's refusal to mention race involves the fact that, in the conversation that Greaves wrote to function as the central focus of the contemporary story within *Take 2½*, Freddy, whose health is now deteriorating, asks Alice to become responsible for Jamilla (Ndeye Ade Sokhna), the daughter of a woman with whom Freddy had a relationship. Before the woman died, Freddy promised to look after the daughter, a talented young African American singer who is recovering from a drug problem. At first, Alice refuses this responsibility, but Freddy is able to overcome this resistance: we see Alice meeting Jamilla at the end of the film.

Greaves's decision to work creatively with a remarkably diverse group of people in a way that celebrates their ability to rise above ethnic distinction and racism places both *Symbiopsychotaxiplasm* films within a mini-tradition in independent cinema where the filmmaking process is imaged as a form of ethnic utopia: films that are particularly noteworthy in this context include Robert Nelson's *Oh Dem Watermelons* (1965), Peter Watkins's *Punishment Park* (1971) and *The Journey* (1987), and Yvonne Rainer's *Privilege* (1990).

Of course, any number of films can be seen as premonitions of this tendency, including Jack Smith's *Flaming Creatures* and Kenneth Anger's *Inauguration of the Pleasure Dome* (1954), even if these earlier films do not obviously suggest an *ethnic* utopia, the way *Symbiopsychotaxiplasm: Take One* and the Nelson, Watkins, and Rainer films do. And this tendency is evident in two commercial films that have already been mentioned. I have suggested that the production process of *Do the Right Thing* is the implicit answer to the problem dramatized in the film; and in *Baadasssss*, Mario Van Peebles reveals that during the making of *Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song*, actors and crew members of various backgrounds collaborated across ethnic and class lines in ways virtually unheard of in Hollywood.

Oh Dem Watermelons was commissioned by the San Francisco Mime Troupe, perhaps the best-known guerrilla theater group of the decade, as an entr'acte for *A Minstrel Show, or Civil Rights in a Cracker Barrel*, a frontal attack on American racism using the minstrel show format. *A Minstrel Show* was written (or at least instigated) by Ron Davis, Saul Landau, and Nina Serrano and performed during a nationwide tour in 1966.[46] Once Nelson had decided to focus on the watermelon as an emblem of negative stereotyping and had a general idea of the approach he would use, he met with Landau and Davis, who suggested further ideas, and then shot the film over a two-week period mostly on the streets of San Francisco, with members of the mixed-race Mime Troupe.

The twelve-minute film begins with a nearly two-minute continuous opening shot of a watermelon positioned like a football ready for kickoff.[47] Then, a voice-off instructs the audience, "Follow the bouncing watermelon!" The watermelon bounces wildly, completely out of sync with the words of the song, mocking the idea of singing along with these lyrics (in the film they are presented all in capitals): "Down in de corn-field / Hear dat

46. Alternately subtitled "Jim Crow a Go-Go," *A Minstrel Show* "consisted of a series of skits performed by a racially integrated cast, all but the white, straight-man 'interlocutor' in blackface. The self-designated 'darkies' were costumed in blue and ivory satin suits, white cotton gloves, and topped off with short-haired wigs like jet-black scouring pads. Audiences found it perplexingly difficult to discern the true racial identity of the six masqued [sic] performers, a predicament which rendered the actors' raucous banter all the more unsettling." Michael William Doyle, "Staging the Revolution: Guerilla Theater as a Countercultural Practice, 1965–1968," available online at the Digger Archives, www.diggers.org/guerilla_theater.htm.

47. Actually, this is more than one shot, though it has the impact of a single shot. At one point, end-of-roll perforations interrupt the audience's contemplation and subtly suggest (as do the opening, narrated credits that precede the watermelon-as-football shot) that this frustrating beginning will not be the entirety of the film.

mourn-ful sound / All de darkies am a weep-in / Mas-sa's in de cold, cold ground / Mas-sa make de dark-ies love him / Cause he was so kind / Now they sadly weep a-bove him / Mourn-in cause he leave dem be-hind." A chorus follows: "Den oh, dat wat-er-mel-on / Lamb ob good-ness you must die / Gwine to join the con-tra-band child-dren / Gwine to get home bye and bye." The lyrics come partly from Stephen Foster's "Massa's in de Cold Ground" (1852): specifically, from the chorus and from the first half of the third verse. The chorus of the song in *Oh Dem Watermelons* is not part of "Massa's in the Cold Ground"; I assume it is a Nelson–Mime Troupe invention.[48] We see the lyrics and bouncing watermelon once; then when other imagery replaces the text and watermelon, the phrase "oh dem watermelons" is repeated several times, after which "watermelon" is chanted, until we return to the chorus at the finale.

After the "singalong" portion of *Oh Dem Watermelons* is over, Nelson and his cast insert paper watermelons into outrageous animated and live-action contexts (little watermelons are inserted into a newspaper photo of black delegates to the United Nations, for example) as a way of reminding viewers of the pervasiveness of this stereotype and the racism it represents; and they attack and destroy actual watermelons in every conceivable way. Nelson and the Mime Troupe members are able to foreground the stupidity of the watermelon stereotype, which has played a role in film history since *A Watermelon Feast* (American Mutoscope and Biograph, 1896), *Watermelon Eating Contest* (Edison, 1896), and Edwin S. Porter's frightening "comedy," *The Watermelon Patch* (1905), and of stereotyping in general, by taking control of the watermelon image in the context of race, in much the way Ice-T takes control of the word "nigger" in his "Straight Up Nigga" from the *O.G. Original Gangsta* album (1991).[49]

For Nelson, making films during the 1960s and 1970s was usually a collaborative experience, and the collaboration needed to be a pleasure if

48. Of course, Nelson is satirizing not only Stephen Foster but also the experience of going to a commercial theater and being faced with singalong cartoons that encoded various kinds of racism.

49. For a discussion of early films that made the blacks-and-watermelons stereotype part of film history, see Stewart, *Migrating to the Movies*, 55, 75–78.

Of course, the stereotype of African Americans loving watermelon has also played an important role in African American filmmaking. Melvin Van Peebles's *The Watermelon Man* has already been mentioned. In *Chronicles of a Lying Spirit (by Kelly Gabron)* (see above), Cauleen Smith uses the image of the watermelon to represent stereotyping of blacks. Of course, the titles of Cheryl Dunye's *The Watermelon Woman* (1996) and *How to Eat Your Watermelon in White Company (And Enjoy It)* (2005), the documentary about (and with) Melvin Van Peebles by Joe Angio, suggest how pervasive this stereotype (or, more precisely, at least within academe these days, an awareness of this stereotype as a stereotype) still is.

The bouncing watermelon in Robert Nelson's *Oh Dem Watermelons* (1965). Courtesy Robert Nelson.

the resulting film was to be worth watching: "The artists I knew at that time felt pretty genuinely that if the process got too heavy or ponderous or worried, if you weren't having a good time at least part of the time, something was wrong. We were bent on having a good time."[50] It is obvious in *Oh Dem Watermelons* that Nelson and his Mime Troupe colleagues are having a blast working together to confront the fundamental imbecility of racism and the absurd forms it has taken during several centuries of American history. *Oh Dem Watermelons* was made quickly and for almost nothing, but it remains one of American cinema's most telling attacks on racist stereotyping. The film does not expand on the interrelationships among those who participated in the production; we can only deduce from the evidence of the finished film that a brief, ethnically utopian collaboration produced what we see.

Peter Watkins's *Punishment Park* was one of this inventive director's most remarkable experiments. Usually identified as a documentarian—largely because of *The War Game* (1965), which won an Academy Award

50. Nelson, in Scott MacDonald, *A Critical Cinema* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988), 263.

for Best Documentary Feature—Watkins has made films that have generally defied easy categorization, and this is certainly true of his fifth feature. Made in California at the height of resistance to the Vietnam War, *Punishment Park* is a social psychodrama that asks viewers to imagine a near future during which China has become involved in the Vietnam conflict, simultaneously instigating further American resistance to the war and more elaborate attempts on the part of law enforcement authorities to deal with this resistance. The film intercuts between the trial of seven ethnically diverse war resisters (closely based on the Chicago Seven) and a previous group of ethnically diverse resisters, all of whom were found guilty in a previous tribunal, as they attempt to navigate an expanse of California desert called "Punishment Park": they are told that if they can reach the American flag some fifty miles across the desert before law enforcement officials can apprehend them (they are given a head start), they will earn their freedom.

. Instead of scripting the dialogue, Watkins created a basic scenario and then cast the roles according to type: that is, the resisters, law enforcement people, and tribunal members are generally played by people who closely identified with these roles,[51] and Watkins allowed cast members to generate their own dialogue on the basis of what they really felt and believed. The result is a level of candidness that expresses that volatile moment of American history to a degree that few other films do. One can certainly not claim that this production process created anything like a harmonious group, but it was utopian in the sense most important to Watkins: a politically and ethnically wide range of individuals came together to express themselves to each other about real issues and to collaborate in imagining the horror of a future that might still be avoided. The film "creates a framework within which the very participants in the film release their pent-up emotions and frustrations and fears; these that are common to us all, and which are created by the pressures of contemporary society."[52]

Watkins's *The Journey*, shot during 1984–85 and completed in 1987, was the epic (14½ hours) result of an attempt to use the making of a film to create a grassroots global utopian community of like-minded souls (the film was shot in several American locations and in Mexico, Canada, Australia, Japan, the Soviet Union, Norway, Germany, France, Scotland, Mozambique,

51. In a few cases, cast members played roles that did not represent their own opinions, apparently in an attempt to imagine how people committed to very different attitudes thought. The most extensive discussion of *Punishment Park* can be found in Joseph A. Gomez, *Peter Watkins* (Boston: Twayne, 1979), 99–122.

52. Peter Watkins, "Open Letter to the Press," Oslo, Norway, January 1972 (unpublished, author's files).

and on the island of Tahiti). Watkins seems to have imagined that once the various support groups that produced the film learned to work together despite national, linguistic, and ethnic differences, they would become a transnational community that could continue to work together for the global common good once the film was completed—and might use the film as part of their ongoing work. That the community Watkins imagined did not last beyond the production and release of the film, except in relatively minimal ways, represents a failure of imagination on the part of those of us who were involved in the project: except for Watkins, few of the many participants in *The Journey* were able to conceive of a film production as a catalyst for a new form of mediated, politically active, global community.[53]

Yvonne Rainer's *Privilege*, a feature that focuses on issues of gender, aging (menopause, in particular), and ethnicity, was made in the wake of a controversy that erupted over a series of screenings and panels presented at the Collective for Living Cinema in 1988, curated by Rainer and Bérénice Reynaud: the general title was "Sexism, Colonialism, Misrepresentation."[54] Media artist Coco Fusco attacked the events on the grounds that while the organizers proposed to deal with the ways in which gender, age, and race problematized cinematic representation, they were unable to see beyond their own whiteness: as Rainer would explain later, "By not examining our own 'otherness'—in the panel discussions—we 're-centered' our whiteness."[55] Rainer revisits these issues in *Privilege*, within which both Yvonne Rainer and an alter ego, "Yvonne Washington" (played by African American Novella Nelson), are working on a documentary on menopause—the implication being that the trials of aging are fundamental to all ethnicities. At one point, Yvonne Washington vehemently argues against the psychoanalytic explanation for racial difference advanced by the film's other pro-

53. See "The Mohawk Valley Journey to *The Journey*" in this collection for further information on the production of *The Journey*. For a detailed description and analysis of the finished film, see Scott MacDonald, "The Filmmaker as Global Circumnavigator: Peter Watkins's *The Journey,*" *Quarterly Review of Film and Video* 14, no. 4 (August 1993): 31–54.

54. The program and the papers were published in the Summer/Autumn 1990 issue of *Motion Picture*.

55. Rainer in Scott MacDonald, *A Critical Cinema 2* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992), 349. Fusco's critique of "Sexism Colonialism, Misrepresentation" appeared as "Fantasies of Oppositionality," in *Screen* 29, no. 4 (Fall 1988): 80–93, and in *Afterimage* 16, no. 5 (December 1988): 6–9. Fusco's argument was that while "the majority of panelists were people of color, the organizing principles of the discussions were drawn from (largely French) feminist psychoanalysis. Throughout the conference there operated a Eurocentric presumption that sexual difference could be separated from other forms of difference and that the theoretical models that privilege gender-based sexual difference could be used to understand other differences" (9).

Jenny (Alice Spivak) and Robert (Dan Berkey) in the front seat enjoying their newfound passion and oblivious to the issues of ethnicity and class that surround them in the form of Digna (Gabriella Farrar), dressed as Carmen Miranda in the backseat (our foreground), and the laborers on the truck in front of them, in Rainer's *Privilege* (1990). Courtesy Yvonne Rainer.

tagonist, Jenny (Alice Spivak), an aging dancer loosely based on Rainer herself. The central dramatic narrative in *Privilege* focuses on Jenny's struggles with ethnicity—or, really, her failure to recognize the implications of ethnicity and class—during her early years in New York.

Throughout the long, concluding sequence of *Privilege*, Rainer intercuts between her extensive end credits and scenes from what is clearly the wrap party for the shooting. During the body of *Privilege*, much of which takes place within Jenny's memories, the various actors play roles that dramatize various dimensions of the ongoing struggles of African Americans and Hispanics within a New York City dominated by white wealth and power. But in the scenes of the wrap party, we see a different reality and realize that this dramatization was the result of considerable interethnic collaboration by the diverse actors and crew members who have gathered to celebrate the experience of producing this film. Periodically during *Privilege*, Rainer uses a computer screen to interject quotations that in one way or another comment on the developing action and the issues it raises. Once the final credits begin, one further computer statement is included:

UTOPIA:

The more
impossible it
seems,
the more
necessary it
becomes.[56]

Like Greaves, Rainer has always seen the collaborative creative process of filmmaking as a way of coming to a more complete understanding of social issues. By including the wrap party as the long final sequence of *Privilege*, Rainer brings this attitude toward film production into the foreground.

RECYCLED CINEMA: RAPHAEL MONTAÑEZ ORTIZ AND MARTIN ARNOLD

African Americans and European Americans often seem to have different senses of film history and different expectations of cinema. For many African Americans, the historical tendency of the commercial film industry to exclude nonwhites—both nonwhite characters who ring true to the realities of African American life as well as nonwhite directors—has posed the most important cinematic challenge. And given the power of Hollywood and its utter domination of film production and exhibition, the mere fact that some African American directors have been able to get films produced and exhibited has certainly been a cause for celebration. One, and perhaps the primary, goal of filmmaking by groups excluded from full participation in film history and its potential for affecting American society is increased inclusion, influence, and financial reward. In this context, independent filmmaking is seen as primarily a means to an end: a filmmaker may need to make films independently in order to be able to make films at all, but working independently of Hollywood is valuable primarily to the extent that this experience helps to train filmmakers for later entry into a largely segregated industry.

For the avant-garde film audience and for a good many avant-garde filmmakers, independence in filmmaking means something quite different. While they recognize the power of commercial cinema, and believe that this power is a problem, they do not believe that struggling to be part of the in-

56. According to Rainer, these lines are "a variation on a quote from an essay by Alexander Kluge. Utopia: the more we desire it the farther away it gets. Or something like that. I think mine is more optimistic." E-mail to the author, August 3, 2007.

dustry provides the best response to this problem: since the bottom line for Hollywood film production *is* the bottom line, whoever works within that system becomes part of it, at the cost of other forms of independence. Most avant-garde filmmakers, at least during recent decades, have decided to direct their filmmaking energies elsewhere. The goal of the avant-garde filmmaker is to demonstrate that great cinema can be made, if not without money, with a level of financing almost unimaginable for a Hollywood director. That is, for avant-garde filmmakers and those who admire their work, the function of independence is to offer a distinctive and accomplished alternative to Hollywood.

Not surprisingly, for many African Americans, avant-garde cinema has seemed relatively pointless, since it cannot alter the still-exclusionary status quo of the industry, while for many aficionados of avant-garde film, the African American focus on breaking into the industry is equally pointless, since inclusion, even when it does occur, functions for the most part as simply a confirmation of the cinema-as-commerce status quo. Of course, there have been instances where individual filmmakers have defied one or the other of these positions. Spike Lee's use of the city symphony form, often identified with the avant-garde, was fundamental to the considerable impact of *Do the Right Thing.* And whatever reservations one might have about some of Lee's commercial melodramas, his continuing success can hardly be said to have made him a conventional industry filmmaker. Indeed, it has allowed him not only to create a variety of works that are sometimes unusually experimental for commercial filmmaking but also to make important contributions to independent cinema, including the documentaries *4 Little Girls* (1997) and *When the Levees Broke* (2006).

While many avant-garde filmmakers try to avoid Hollywood altogether, a considerable number have made avant-garde films or videos that engage the industry by providing rereadings of Hollywood films and Hollywood gestures. The audience for this work is certainly smaller than that for commercial cinema, but it can be substantial and can have long-term impact. Two interesting instances are Raphael Montañez Ortiz, a native New Yorker with a mixed Puerto Rican, Native American, and European American ethnicity; and Austrian avant-garde filmmaker Martin Arnold.

My decision to become seriously engaged with Ortiz's work came at the end of a two-year process that, while personally embarrassing for me, is certainly relevant to the issue of ethnicity and avant-garde film. For a brief period, I was a member of the board of directors of International Film Seminars. It was during my tenure as board member that a seminar focused on "fourth world" filmmaking—filmmaking by indigenous, original peoples—

was proposed for the summer of 1992, with Faye Ginsburg as primary programmer. At a point well into the process, soon after Ginsburg had asked Jay Ruby to assist her with preparations for the seminar, several board members became increasingly uncomfortable with the idea that two "white" Americans were now programming a set of events focusing on indigenous makers. So far as I remember, no one doubted Ginsburg's (and Ruby's) expertise, but after considerable discussion, the board decided to ask Ginsburg to add a third programmer to her process, ideally a person of indigenous heritage who had had experience in programming media events.

Programming a Flaherty seminar is a considerable challenge in the best of circumstances; programming an indigenous Flaherty faced Ginsburg and the board with unusual challenges: the necessity, for example, to supply translators for the indigenous makers. For Ginsburg, the brouhaha over her ethnic right to program such events, coming in the midst of her preparations, added a complicating and distracting factor. In the end, she refused the board's request and (along with Ruby) withdrew from the process entirely—and the "indigenous Flaherty" idea was dropped.

With the 1992 seminar only a few months away, several board members—I was one of them—agreed to share the programming responsibilities.[57] I had been very excited about meeting indigenous makers and was angry with what seemed to me the misplaced political correctness that had caused the demise of the "indigenous Flaherty." I volunteered, knowing that in my programming I would, at some point, take revenge on PC, which I did by inviting Ken Jacobs to the seminar to present his *XCXHXEXRXRXIXEXSX* ("Cherries"—the *X*s are a humorous reference to X-rated films—in various versions since 1980), a "Nervous System" performance in which Jacobs explores a passage from a French pornographic film.[58] I expected that Jacobs's use of pornographic imagery, especially in a long work that involves considerable strobe effects, would be an affront to many seminar attendees, even perhaps to some members of the Flaherty board—and I was correct (I have described the reception and aftermath of this Flaherty moment elsewhere).[59]

57. I programmed the first two and a half days of the 1992 seminar. The other programmers of that seminar were Austin Allen, Ruth Bradley, William Sloan, Jackie Tshaka, and Lise Yasui.

58. The "Nervous System" is a projection apparatus invented by Jacobs that allows him to achieve a variety of effects, including moments of 3-D, by moving two superimposed prints of a filmstrip, one frame at a time, through two projectors, so that the individual frames are slightly out of sync.

59. See my *A Critical Cinema 3* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), 158–65. Other writings on this event include Jesse Lerner, "Flaherty in Motion," *Afterimage* 20, no. 5 (December 1992): 3–4; and Laura U. Marks, review of the Flaherty, *The Independent* 16, no. 2 (March 1993): 26–31.

For me, however, the most important result of my programming at the 1992 Flaherty (in addition to Jacobs, I invited John Porter, Godfrey Reggio, Holly Fisher, and Chris Welsby—all filmmakers related to my focus on cinema as motion study) occurred after the screening of Martin Arnold's *pièce touchée* (1989), which I used to introduce my programming. Film scholar Chon Noriega, who had agreed to program the 1993 Flaherty, approached me to say that seeing the Arnold film had made him confident that I would be interested in the "digital/laser/videos" of Raphael Montañez Ortiz, whom he planned to feature at the next seminar.

When I saw Ortiz's videos at the 1993 seminar, I was astonished at their similarity to Arnold's work. Indeed, on first viewing, Ortiz's *The Kiss* (1985) seemed to me nearly identical to Arnold's *pièce touchée*. I had been aware of Arnold's work since *pièce touchée* had toured as part of the Black Maria Film Festival in 1990 and had been in contact with Arnold himself beginning in 1991. My first reaction to *The Kiss* was a vestige of the frustration with ethnic PC that had fueled my programming in 1992; I remember thinking to myself, "Because of his ethnicity and because the folks interested in ethnic cinemas don't realize what has been going on in avant-garde film, this guy's work may seem original, but in fact it's a rip-off of an avant-garde filmmaker." When I realized that, in fact, *The Kiss*, along with a considerable body of related work, had *preceded pièce touchée*, and further, that Arnold had seen a show of Ortiz's videos in Vienna before he made *pièce touchée*, I was forced to recognize my own obvious prejudice: it was clear that, if in fact any "ripping off" had occurred, it had been the European ripping off the Puerto Rican American.

In the years that followed, I explored Ortiz's work in detail and learned, among other things, that Ortiz had begun working with recycled cinema around the time Bruce Conner was making his breakthrough recycled work, *A Movie* (1958). In 1958, Ortiz chopped up a print of Anthony Mann's *Winchester '73* (1950) with a tomahawk as part of a ritual performance. Then he put the chopped-up bits of film into a medicine bag, which he used as a rattle to accompany some ritual chanting. Finally, he randomly reedited the shards into *Cowboy and "Indian" Film* (1958). Whereas Conner's film provides an amusing and somewhat cynical meditation on the surrealism of a violent century, *Cowboy and "Indian" Film* foregrounds and confronts the implicit racism of one of the most popular commercial film genres. Conner's focus is general; Ortiz's, quite specific.

When I interviewed Ortiz about his early work and the digital/laser/videos, I came to understand that while *pièce touchée* and *The Kiss* do have a great deal in common, the combination of their similarities *and differences* is as

fascinating and instructive as the similarities and differences between *A Movie* and *Cowboy and "Indian" Film*. In *The Kiss*, Ortiz recycles a passage from an American film noir—Robert Rossen's *Body and Soul* (1947)—using a homemade apparatus: his laser disc player and an Apple computer combined with a Deltalab Effectron II sound effects generator. Ortiz unpacks a conventional Hollywood moment, the first kiss of potential lovers. *Pièce touchée* also recycles a passage from an American film noir—*The Human Jungle* (1954), directed by Joseph M. Newman—exploring the passage frame by frame, wittily foregrounding the gender politics within a conventional Hollywood moment (a husband returns home to his waiting wife) and, using a homemade optical printer, transforms a narrative cliché into an astonishing visual tour de force.

At some moments the Ortiz video and the Arnold film look nearly identical: in both there is a focus on a kiss, and in both much of the action takes place in the doorway to a living room; both use a fast-paced alternation of forward and reverse to humorous and humorously erotic effect. Both implicitly comment on the way in which, during the years when the Hays Office rigorously applied the Production Code, Hollywood filmmakers were forced to repress eroticism. Using forward and reverse, Arnold gives many passages in *pièce touchée* an erotic dimension; and Ortiz transforms an "innocent" kiss into faux sexual intercourse.

Other elements of the film and the video reveal considerable differences. In a sense, Arnold is a classicist: his patient, painstaking craftsmanship is dependent on a time-tested cinematic apparatus (the optical printer); and the almost obsessive precision of both *pièce touchée* and Arnold's more recent films, *passage à l'acte* (1993) and *Alone: Life Wastes Andy Hardy* (1996), reflects the intelligence and craftsmanship one traditionally expects of classic works of art. Arnold is much indebted to his compatriot and mentor Peter Kubelka, whose carefully wrought films have long been legendary for their brevity, their density, and their considerable insight (Kubelka's *Unsere Afrikareise* ["Our Trip to Africa" (1966)] remains one of cinema's most penetrating exposés of colonialism and one of film history's most impressive montages).[60] Like Kubelka, Arnold works very slowly; a fifteen-minute film can take him several years.

In his digital/laser/videos, Ortiz's approach is closer to cultural contributions identified primarily with African America: specifically, jazz improvisation identified primarily with African America: specifically, jazz improv-

60. Arnold is also indebted to the now considerable avant-garde tradition of "recycled cinema," whose best-known forefathers are Joseph Cornell and Bruce Conner. In fact, making new films out of earlier films has become a common, perhaps the most common, avant-garde approach.

isation and rap sampling. For *The Kiss* and the other digital/laser/videos made during the 1980s and early 1990s, Ortiz would study a laser disk of a classic film, often looking for a moment that he felt encapsulated social injustice or some other dimension of experience that was repressed in the film, and then, during a single, continuous moment, he would rework the chosen passage in an attempt to reveal its implications, improvising as he went, and recording the results. Ortiz's method allowed for the production of many works (he no longer makes digital/laser/videos) in a relatively short period of time: forty-six between 1985 and 1995.[61]

In other words, what at first appear to be (and in some ways *are*) two nearly identical works can be understood, simultaneously, as emblems of quite different ethnic, cultural, and technological backgrounds. The bottom line here, however, is that it is to the advantage of both *The Kiss* and *pièce touchée* that they are seen and worked with together. While each has been understood as an impressive contribution to a different dimension of media history—*pièce touchée*, as an instance of recycled cinema,[62] of Austrian avant-garde cinema; *The Kiss*, as an instance of video art, of Chicano media—each is more interesting within the context of the other.

Much the same is true of Ortiz's *My Father's Dead* (1991) and Arnold's *passage à l'acte* (1993); in fact, this pairing is useful in distinguishing a fundamental difference between the two artists' approaches to Hollywood filmmaking. *Passage à l'acte* recycles a brief sequence from Robert Mulligan's *To Kill a Mockingbird* (1963)—the breakfast-table scene during which Atticus Finch tells Jem to wait until his sister is finished eating before leaving for the first day of school; the presence of a female neighbor causes the group to look like a nuclear family. This sequence is presented in much the same way as *pièce touchée*: Arnold uses his optical printer to retard the progress of the filmed movement, so that many bits of the original movement (and, in this instance, sound) are seen (and heard) in forward and reverse, over and over, as Arnold teases out dimensions of the original sequence not ev-

61. For a complete listing of Ortiz's digital/laser/videos, see Scott MacDonald, "Media Destructionism: The Digital/Laser/Videos of Raphael Montañez," in *The Ethnic Eye: Latino Media Arts*, ed. Ana M. López and Chon A. Noriega (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), 183–207.

62. "Recycled cinema," or "found-footage film," has a long history. The Russian Esfir Shub may have invented the form in *The Fall of the Romanov Dynasty* (1927), but its becoming one of the primary approaches in modern American avant-garde film owes more to Joseph Cornell and especially to Bruce Conner, whose ingenuity with recycling older films, especially in *A Movie* (1958) and *Cosmic Ray* (1962), inspired a generation of filmmakers, including Arnold.

Raphael Montañez Ortiz is also an early contributor to this genre of avant-garde filmmaking: his *Cowboy and "Indian" Film* (1958) and *Newsreel* (1958) are among the earliest such works—though so far as I am aware they were not widely shown.

ident at normal speed and transforms the action into a strange, exhilarating, and very funny mechanical ballet.

Arnold's decision to work with this particular moment in *To Kill a Mockingbird* was a function of the various formal options this particular family sequence offered him: at the breakfast table, "the family, home, and gender theme could pair best with my formal ambition to work with repetitions of sounds. There would be a lot of clatter and scraping at the table, the shrill voices of the kids, and the lower voices of the grown-ups who 'educate,' that is, repeat certain orders to furnish the kids with a decent behavioral repertoire."[63] In a sense, Arnold's formal intervention reflects the action in the scene: Atticus is forcing his son Jem to slow down and wait for his sister; and Arnold is forcing the viewer to slow down and examine the sequence in detail. Jem is frustrated; and we viewers would be too, except that Arnold's careful reworking of the action is very funny both in a visceral sense and because of its witty allusiveness (for example, under Arnold's control, Scout beats well-known rhythms on the kitchen table with a spoon). Arnold has made these characters, and the actors who play them, his own; they become his puppets.

Though *To Kill a Mockingbird* is a film about race, Arnold consciously avoided this theme by using a scene "that is not vital for the narrative structure of the original movie and which does not have anything to do with the central theme of racism. . . . I would have been afraid to use a scene where, for example, the black man is on trial. I wouldn't want to play around with that material."[64] The irony here is that, by avoiding the issue of race in a film where it is important, Arnold implicitly reconfirms a basic weakness of Mulligan's film.[65] The African Americans in *To Kill a Mockingbird* are for the most part passive victims, generally distanced from the viewer; the focus is on the nobility of Atticus Finch (Gregory Peck) in defending Tom Robinson (Brock Peters) against the charge of raping a white girl. For all practical purposes, Mulligan segregates his black and white characters from each other as fully as southern society segregates them. Virtually the only African American character who is visible in this southern town, outside the courtroom and outside brief trips to Tom Robinson's home, is the capable, dignified Finch

63. Arnold, in MacDonald, *A Critical Cinema 3*, 357.

64. Ibid.

65. Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird* is a thoroughly pleasant, readable novel; but for those familiar with Faulkner, and with *Intruder in the Dust* (1948) in particular, it is clear that *To Kill a Mockingbird* is Faulkner lite. Lee's novel eliminates all the moral, ethnic, and historical complexity so fundamental to *Intruder in the Dust*. The adaptations of both novels are disappointing—though at least Clarence Brown (with the help of a fine performance by Juano Hernandez) was able to portray Lucas Beauchamp, the strong, defiant African American character at the heart of the Faulkner novel, without embarrassing himself or viewers.

maid and cook, Calpurnia.[66] In the breakfast table sequence, Calpurnia is as fully in the foreground of our attention as she is in any other sequence in the film. Arnold's reanimation of the sequence eliminates her, except for the torso and arm in the background of the shot of Jem telling Scout to "Hurry up!" While this movement is visible longer in *passage à l'acte* than it is in *To Kill a Mockingbird* (she is visible for about a second in the original shot), Arnold keeps it in the background of his and our attention. Arnold's fear of dealing with the issue of race causes him to pretend, and to ask us to pretend, that we do not see race, even when it is literally in front of us.

In *My Father's Dead*, Ortiz combines material from three separate films—*High Plains Drifter* (1973; an explosion in a building), *Quest for Fire* (1981; two shots of a cave man and woman having sex), and *Excalibur* (1981; the child, Morgana, saying, "My father's dead!")—into a jagged montage that intercuts between the three excerpts forty-one times in less than four minutes. If one reads the three images as a kind of mini-metanarrative, the sequence suggests, perhaps, the precariousness of childhood and family life in general: the child seems poised between powerful social, psychological, and physiological forces. Ortiz's method of working with these materials, however, suggests a further meaning. By taking the three excerpts out of context and combining them, Ortiz "liberates" them, allowing them to be read in a manner that has little to do with their original functions, that is, in whatever way the audience pleases. If we imagine the commercial film industry as the "father" here, Ortiz's appropriation and invasion of the excerpts suggests his rebellion against the smooth continuities and simplistic meanings characteristic of commercial media-making; for Ortiz, the arrival of electronic technologies and their capacity for responding to commercial cinema are a premonition of the death of film: the media "father" that for several generations has taught Ortiz and his audience "what this culture means, what it is about, and where it should be going."[67] While the new technologies offer the possibility of an ethnic revenge on conventional Hollywood, the chance to expose the full context of the constrictions within which Hollywood representation usually works ("I found other meanings submerged in that cement that allowed me to relocate the more conventional meanings into the context of the infinite—the infinity of possible meanings"),[68] the digital/laser/videos are ultimately a means for transforming the explicit and implicit

66. Another maid is visible on the porch of a nearby home, apparently tending to an elderly woman, though she has no lines.

67. Ortiz, in MacDonald, *A Critical Cinema 3*, 339.

68. Ibid.

messages within commercial media into a kind of ritual, something like an exorcism, that might help to free Ortiz and his audience from their power.

Fathers as authority figures are central to both *passage à l'acte* and *My Father's Dead*. And both makers are responding to cinematic emblems of the corporate film industry, one of the more patriarchal institutions of modern culture. But Arnold's and Ortiz's attitudes toward these fathers are subtly different. At the end of *passage à l'acte*, Jem and Scout finish eating and run out of the kitchen through the screen door (all this in Arnold's witty retardant style); but Scout hesitates, then returns to give her father a kiss, and yells "Bye!" as she runs out the door, and we immediately see Arnold's name (as though he is also saying "Bye!" to Atticus and to us). In *My Father's Dead* there is no interaction between this daughter and the father (if indeed within Ortiz's pasticcio the man having sex can be read as the child's father): she can only cry out her loss, over and over. I read this difference in the two works as a reflection of Arnold's and Ortiz's positions with regard to Father Cinema: for all his wry detachment from the patriarchal familial scene he works with and from the commercial cinema that envisions the nuclear family as the core of modern civilization, the concluding kiss in *passage à l'acte* betrays Arnold's romance with the father and what he represents. His is an affectionate rebellion.

Ortiz, on the other hand, is pleased to kill the cinematic father, since he has been responsible for creating, or at least confirming, much of the prejudice Ortiz has become an artist to confront and move beyond. As a member of American minorities largely excluded from commercial film history and as a slum kid on New York's Lower East Side during the 1930s and 1940s, Ortiz confronted the various forms of prejudice intrinsic to the Hollywood cinema that surrounded him as he grew up. At a certain point during a viewing of a Western, he remembers wondering, "What am *I* doing cheering *the cavalry*?!"[69] His realization that by doing so, he had been unwittingly participating in his own disenfranchisement led him to the more aggressive aesthetic evident in *My Father's Dead*.

COMING OUT: MARLON RIGGS / SU FRIEDRICH

One of the crucial currents in avant-garde filmmaking at least since the 1940s has been the representation of alternative sexualities; indeed, the success of the American film society movement and of "underground film" in the 1960s seems to have had much to do with the fact that film audiences were

69. Ibid., 330.

fascinated with cinematic considerations of sexuality, including homosexuality and lesbianism. Two of the films that were of particular importance at Cinema 16, the widely influential New York film society directed by Amos Vogel from 1946 until 1963, were Willard Maas's *Geography of the Body* (1943) and Kenneth Anger's *Fireworks* (1947). *Geography of the Body* provides a visual tour of the human body in extreme close-up, accompanied by a voice-off narration by poet George Barker that takes the form of a discovery narrative by a naturalist-explorer. Maas's argument that the entire human body is mysterious sensual territory is expressed, first, by his refusal to distinguish between the male and female body in his close-ups and by the film's witty use of one body part to represent another: a close-up of a bit of tongue between lips, for example, at first appears to be a woman's labia. Maas's decision to intermix the two sexes and his refusal to see one female or male body part as more sensual/sexual than another is a premonition of what would come to be called "Queer Cinema": that is, cinema that questions those heteronormative understandings of gender and sexuality that have informed nearly all popular film and television.

Fireworks may be the first openly gay film produced in this country and presented to audiences; like *Geography of the Body*, Anger's psychodrama was shown more than once at Cinema 16 and was controversial each time.[70] *Fireworks* takes the form of a dream during which a young man (Anger himself) goes to a bar where he becomes the victim of sadomasochistic violence by a group of sailors. The violence is a dream transformation of sexuality; milk poured on the dreamer's body is clearly a dream version of semen. He awakes in bed next to a young man. *Fireworks* is full of a whistling-in-the-dark humor, simultaneously reflecting Anger's excitement about his own gay desire and his recognition that this society, which pretends to honor freedom, punishes the honest expression of any but heterosexual desire: one of the "climactic" images in the film is a man (we don't see his face) with a firecracker hard-on; when lit, it explodes into an ejaculation of sparks.

During the early 1960s, after the heyday of the American film societies, avant-garde films dealing with homosexuality often ran into legal hassles. Two of the most controversial of these films were Jean Genet's *Un chant*

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70. In American avant-garde cinema, a "psychodrama" is a dramatization of a disturbed state of mind. The most famous instances include Maya Deren's *Meshes of the Afternoon* (1943, co-made with Alexander Hammid), Sidney Peterson's *The Lead Shoes* (1949), and Anger's film. In some instances the nature of the psychic disturbance is ambiguous—as it is in *The Lead Shoes*—while in others it is obvious, as in *Fireworks*, where it is clear that Anger is excited by his desire for men, even as he understands how dangerous the expression of this desire can be in a repressed society.

Kenneth Anger, dreaming, in *Fireworks* (1947). Courtesy David James.

d'amour (1952) and Jack Smith's *Flaming Creatures* (1963). Genet's film, which focuses on homosexual desire within an ethnically integrated prison environment, dramatizes the irony that it is only within prison that homosexual desire is "normal," that, in other words, incarceration frees men to express a form of desire that the society outside of prison obsessively imprisons. The seizing of the Genet film by the San Francisco police in 1964 resulted in an eloquent defense, "An Essay on Censorship: On Arresting Movies (Not People) in San Francisco," by Saul Landau, member of the board of directors of the San Francisco Mime Troupe—the first important longer essay published in the *Canyon Cinemanews*.[71] The arrest of Ken and Flo Jacobs and Jonas Mekas in 1964 for showing *Flaming Creatures* in New York City resulted in a court case that, in the end, found its way into the halls of Congress (Mekas was later arrested again for showing *Un chant d'amour* as a benefit for the *Flaming Creatures* defense fund).[72] The trans-

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71. This essay, which appeared in the October–November 1964 issue, helped to transform the *Cinemanews* into an important source of thinking about alternative cinema during the 1960s and 1970s; it is available in Scott MacDonald, *Canyon Cinema: The Life and Times of an Independent Film Distributor* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007), 46–52.

72. For a review of the controversy surrounding *Flaming Creatures* and the film's legal battles, see J. Hoberman, *On Jack Smith's Flaming Creatures and Other Secret-Flix of Cinemaroc*, 36–51.

vestites in Smith's film create an orgy of self-expression that is sometimes funny, sometimes frightening (it is a struggle to excuse the "gang rape" of the woman, however obvious its unreality). Like *Un chant d'amour*, *Flaming Creatures* exposes both men's and women's bodies in a manner far more open than conventional films of that era (or our era, for that matter). "Normal" assumptions about gender roles are turned upside down, and America's overseriousness about sex is burlesqued. Indeed, *Flaming Creatures* is less about sex than about playing dress-up; limp male genitals are jiggled from time to time, and a large woman's breast is diddled with a finger, but generally we are looking at men—grown-up children, really—playing women playing their favorite film roles.

During the decades since *Un chant d'amour* and *Flaming Creatures*, American avant-garde cinema has continued to produce films that have argued for the honest expression and acceptance of gay desire. Two of the most pivotal are *Damned If You Don't* (1987) by the New Yorker Su Friedrich and *Tongues Untied* (1989) by the late San Franciscan Marlon Riggs (Riggs died of AIDS in April 1994). Appearing during the same cultural moment, both films use a comparable combination of approaches to provide defiant responses to the relentless commercialization of desire and to the repression of gay desire and of its depiction in cinema. Each film has also been understood as a formal breakthrough in the genre with which it has usually been identified: *Damned If You Don't*, in avant-garde film; *Tongues Untied*, in documentary.

The film that established Friedrich's reputation was *Gently Down the Stream* (1981), in which poetic texts, adapted from a dream diary and scratched directly onto the filmstrip, express the filmmaker's angst-ridden attempt to reconcile her Roman Catholic upbringing with her lesbian desire.[73] At the time Friedrich arrived on the scene, feminist filmmaking, which had been an important component of avant-garde filmmaking and videomaking in the 1970s, had found itself in a cul-de-sac. The rebellion on the part of many feminists against the conventional exploitation of women's bodies had moved feminist filmmakers toward what Laura Mulvey called "scorched-earth" cinema: an approach to moving-image making that avoided all forms of conventional pleasure—both sensual imagery (including all female nudity) and, at its most extreme, the careful crafting of beautiful images of any kind.[74]

73. For a thorough reading of *Gently Down the Stream*, see P. Adams Sitney, *Eyes Upside Down: Visionary Filmmakers and the Heritage of Emerson* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 298–304.
74. See Mulvey's comments in MacDonald, *A Critical Cinema 2*, 334.

During the 1980s, Friedrich, who identified both as a feminist filmmaker and as an avant-garde filmmaker, began to rebel against the scorched-earth approach, which she had used in her earliest films, believing that to abjure sensuality and the production of beautiful imagery merely reconfirmed the conventional phallocentric idea that men had something that women lacked. By the time Friedrich made *Damned If You Don't*, this rebellion was in full swing.

Damned If You Don't combines a variety of elements into a composite of documentary and poetic narrative. Friedrich focuses on Roman Catholic nuns, a formative influence on her early life, as a metaphor for the kinds of feminist filmmaking that *Damned If You Don't* was rebelling against. Early in the film, one of her two protagonists is seen watching the Michael Powell–Emeric Pressburger film *Black Narcissus* (1947) on a black-and-white television; we see a visual synopsis of the film, as Martina Siebert offers an often ironic voice-over, describing the action in *Black Narcissus* in a manner that suggests the ways in which the film represses the complex sexual implications of the situations in the film into a love triangle between the film's protagonist, the church, and Mr. Dean, who flaunts his anti-Catholicism and sees the nuns as sensual/sexual women-in-hiding. Later, Cathy Quinlan reads passages from Judith C. Brown's *Immodest Acts: The Life of a Lesbian Nun in Renaissance Italy*.[75] Another form of information is supplied by an interview with (African American) Makea McDonald, who remembers early school experiences during which some nuns attempted to repress all sexual thoughts, while others subtly modeled the possibility of lesbian relationship. These three sources of information are supplemented with filmed images of nuns in public, here and abroad.

The documentary elements of *Damned If You Don't* provide a context for a silent, fictional, poetic narrative in which a sensuous woman (Ela Troyano), the one seen watching *Black Narcissus*, romantically pursues a nun (Peggy Healey), following her at times, planting a flower where the nun will find it, making a needlepoint of Christ—until, at the film's conclusion, the nun comes to the woman's apartment, where the two make love. Frequently, during the body of the film, the woman's pursuit of the nun is evoked by Friedrich's lovely, sensuous imagery of swans and albino whales and other creatures filmed at the New York City Aquarium (where the nun goes on her day off). This animal imagery implicitly argues that the desire felt by both pursuer and pursued is quite natural (and socially constricted). The lovemaking sequence, at the beginning of which the Troyano charac-

75. Judith C. Brown, *Immodest Acts: The Life of a Lesbian Nun in Renaissance Italy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986).
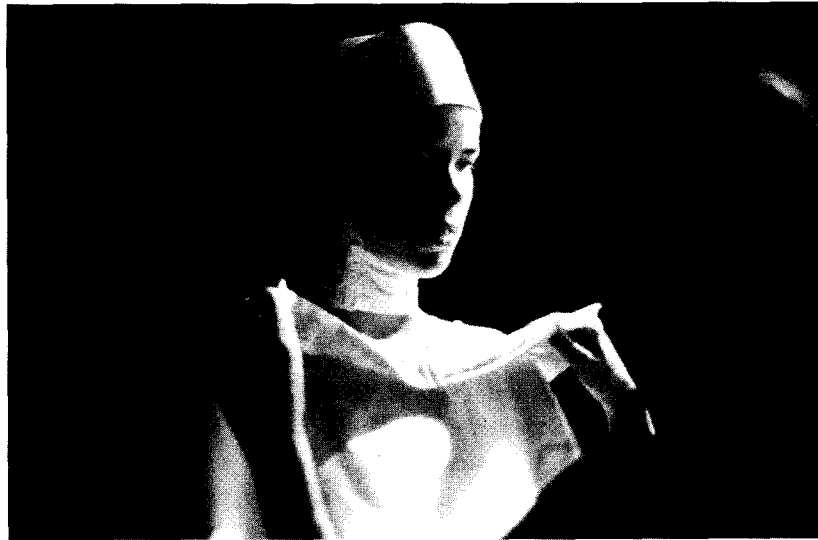
The nun (Peggy Healey) is undressed by her lover (Ela Troyano) in Su Friedrich's *Damned If You Don't* (1987). Courtesy Su Friedrich.

ter carefully undresses the nun, removing item after item of her habit until she is nude, defies not only the Catholic Church and Friedrich's upbringing but the feminist repressions of sensuality in scorched-earth filmmaking. From Friedrich's point of view, since a lesbian is damned by the church simply for recognizing her natural desires, she might as well express her true nature. Similarly, since scorched-earth filmmaking avoids all sensual pleasure, this approach can only damn the resulting films to invisibility (except perhaps for those interested in a form of sisterhood analogous to life in a convent). In other words, to quote a song Mr. Dean (David Farrar) sings in *Black Narcissus* (and that Friedrich herself sings during the film), Friedrich "can*not* be a nun" for she is "too fond of pleasure"—the pleasures of love, the pleasures of cinema.

Overall, within the evolution of Friedrich's work, *Damned If You Don't* is not particularly surprising. It seems a logical extension of *Gently Down the Stream:* the frightening conflict embodied in the dreams in the earlier film is resolved in *Damned If You Don't*. However, I cannot imagine that anyone familiar with *Ethnic Notions,* the hour-long documentary Marlon Riggs finished in 1988, would not have been surprised by his *Tongues Untied. Ethnic Notions* is formally a thoroughly conventional documentary about the stereotyping of African Americans in nineteenth- and twentieth-

century pop culture. It relies on a set of talking heads (all of them college professors) to explain the development and implications of particular stereotypes (the mammy, the sambo, the coon, the savage, the uncle), illustrated by photographs, drawings, clips from film and television, and items from Jan Faulkner's collection of racist memorabilia (according to the end credits, this collection was the inspiration for the film). While *Ethnic Notions* is informative, but conventional *as a film,* Riggs's combination of a no-nonsense sexually political aggressiveness with formal experiment in *Tongues Untied* seems to me nearly unprecedented, not only within the history of Riggs's work, but within the history of cinema in general and within the histories of avant-garde cinema and African American cinema, in particular. And nearly twenty years later, it remains as surprising—and, for some viewers, as jarring—as it was on its release.

Like *Damned If You Don't, Tongues Untied* combines elements of documentary and fiction, in this case to offer a sense of the individual and collective struggles of black gay men coming of age during the era of Stonewall and the AIDS epidemic. Riggs uses a variety of sources, including, most important, readings of poems by several poets, including Essex Hemphill, whose physical presence is a central motif in the film.[76] The importance of poetry in *Tongues Untied* is suggested in the film's title, which implies not only a general rebellion of people who have been repressed but the practice of poetry as a way of freeing the spirit. Indeed, the centrality of poetry in *Tongues Untied* and the ingenuity with which poetry is presented make Riggs's film a landmark within the long and complex tradition in avant-garde cinema of incorporating poetry (see "Poetry and Film: Avant-Garde Cinema as Publication" in this collection). *Tongues Untied* also includes several group performances designed for the film (a choreographed demonstration by several "Snap Divas" of the techniques and meanings of finger-snapping; a similar demonstration of voguing by New York City gays; a black, gay doo-wop quartet, the Lavender Lovelights, singing music written for the film by Riggs and Alex Langford), and several gay pride marches and demonstrations in support of gay issues.

While Friedrich uses a dramatized narrative as the central thread of *Damned If You Don't,* the narrative thrust of *Tongues Untied* is achieved

76. Hemphill's poems "Without Comment," "Homocide," "In the Life," "Conditions," "Black Beans," and "Now We Think" are included in the film, along with poems by Reginald Jackson ("Initiation"); Craig Harris ("Classified," "The Least of My Brothers"); Steve Langley ("Confection," "Borrow Things from the Universe"); Alan Miller ("at the club"); and Donald Woods ("What Do I Do about You?"). Riggs himself supplied four "monologues": "Black Chat," "Three Pieces of I.D.," "Snap Rap," and "The Wages of Silence."
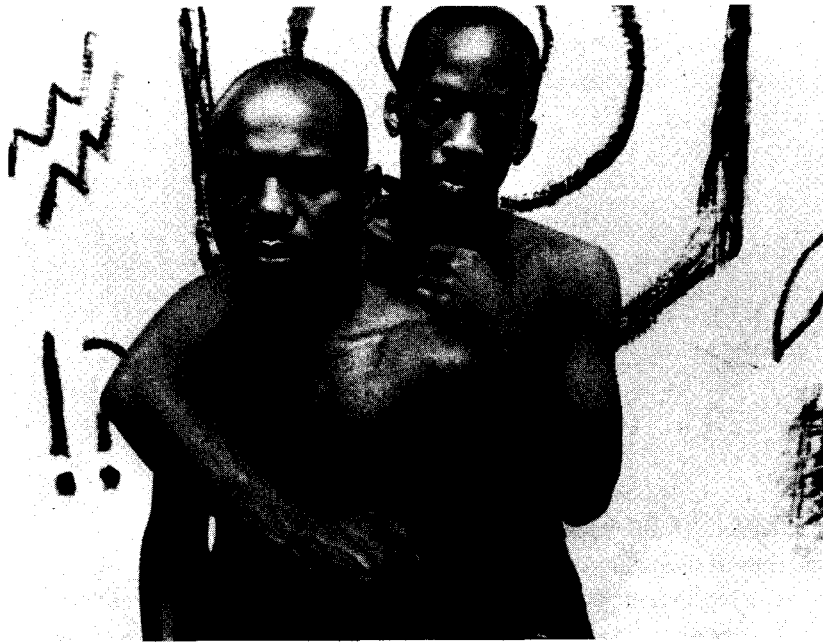
Marlon Riggs (left) and Essex Hemphill. Courtesy Richard Herskowitz.

through the ordering of a series of individual poems so that they seem to tell a roughly chronological story of a gay man growing up and coming to terms with himself. The film is organized so as to create a sense not simply of Riggs's life but of the lives of a generation of homosexuals. Riggs reads only the first poem, the one dealing with childhood and adolescence (this text is available as "Tongues Untied" in Essex Hemphill's anthology *Brother to Brother: New Writings by Black Gay Men*).[77] Riggs's reading of "Tongues Untied" suggests the perils (and fleeting pleasures) of a childhood as a black gay man in the Deep South, where he must fight not only the hatred of whites who consider him a "mutha fuckin' coon" but also the hatred of blacks, who see him as a "punk," a "homo," a "freak." The young man is momentarily saved by a white boy who helps him trust passion again ("What a joy! / That it should come from a whiteboy / with gray green eyes, / what a curse!"); then he finds his way to San Francisco and the Castro, where he becomes "immersed in vanilla" and refuses even to notice black

77. Essex Hemphill, ed., *Brother to Brother: New Writings by Black Gay Men* (Boston: Alyson, 1991), 200–204; this anthology includes Riggs's shorter monologue, presented later in the film, on discovering he had AIDS.

gay men. Finally, the young man faces the fact that by immersing himself in a white gay world, he has become an invisible man (whites see him as an exotic, not as an individual); finally, he learns to love, and to accept the love of, black men.

Of course, in an era of AIDS, even this love, once found, provides continual challenges: of remaining a passionate and sexual person under the threat of the disease; of dealing with the loss of lovers, friends, and personal heroes; of standing up to the black church's homophobia; of dealing with one's own mortality. However, it is precisely the HIV virus and AIDS—and the refusal of heterosexual American culture, white and black, to see the epidemic as more than the just punishment of homosexuals—that energizes Riggs and his colleagues to concentrate their energies to produce *Tongues Untied* and, in the end, to argue that the struggle for gay liberation is part of the struggle for civil rights (a montage near the end of the film combines images of Frederick Douglass, Martin Luther King, and civil rights marches with imagery of gay liberation activities) and to conclude that "black men loving black men is *the* revolutionary act."

Tongues Untied is not simply a message film, however. Like Friedrich in *Damned If You Don't*, Riggs expresses his understanding of gay life and culture through the film's formal means: the film's composite structure, the variety of its forms of address, the obviously collaborative qualities of its production are all implicit arguments for a pluralistic society, for an embracing of ethnic and sexual difference, and for a recognition that, in many ways, personal identity is a process, not a product. One of the strategies of a number of landmark Queer films—Kenneth Anger's *Inauguration of the Pleasure Dome* (1954), for example, and Ron Rice's *Chumlum* (1964), Lawrence Brose's *De Profundis* (1997)—is to visualize the complexity of personal and social identity by superimposing multiple layers of imagery, as if to literalize the idea that any individual or group contains a far wider range of selves than conventional media representations allow. In these films the complex, layered expressions of self are quite gorgeous in their extravagance, arguing for the beauty of a more complex sense of identity. The mixture of forms in *Tongues Untied* is closely related to this strategy of layering, though Riggs's film differs from the others I have mentioned because of the circumstances under which it was made.

Riggs's experience of the devastation of his community by AIDS and his subsequent personal battle with the disease did not allow for the kind of euphoria implicitly expressed in so many landmark Queer films, including Friedrich's *Damned If You Don't*. As was true of Anger's *Fireworks*, in *Tongues Untied* the release and acceptance of gay desire are shadowed by

fear and danger. In the end, Anger fled to Europe, where he found a world more congenial to sexual variety—and where he expressed his excitement about this release from American repression in a companion piece to *Fireworks:* the gorgeous *Eaux d'artifice* (1954; Anger's title is a play on the French term for fireworks, *feux d'artifice*). Riggs refused to flee America and, indeed, could not have fled his disease. He came to see filmmaking as a way to celebrate the creative energies released by the pressures of mortality. Like *Damned If You Don't, Tongues Untied* is resonant with craft, full of sensual compositions and moments of tour de force editing; it can be thought of as a cinematic version of James Weldon Johnson's breakthrough anthology, *The Book of American Negro Poetry*,[78] which introduced African American poetry to a much expanded readership during the Harlem Renaissance. Riggs means to introduce an accomplished new group of (gay) black poets to an expanded audience—within a new form of poetic cinema.

Tongues Untied created a firestorm upon its release. Riggs had received a small Western States Regional Media Arts Fellowship from the National Endowment for the Arts (the grant request was sponsored by the Rocky Mountain Film Center in Denver), and while a substantial number of public television stations refused to show the film, it was part of the 1991 "P.O.V." series, which itself had received federal support. This government involvement with *Tongues Untied* was met with outrage by Senator Jesse Helms and others, who claimed that the NEA's support of Riggs's film was tantamount to taxpayer support of pornography. The reaction against the film was widespread enough, as was support for the film by those who understood its cinematic accomplishments, that Riggs could say, "The general desire to suppress any realistic acknowledgment or exploration of homosexuality in America has spawned the ultimate postmodern [political] coalition!"[79] *Tongues Untied* and *Damned If You Don't* can be understood as landmark contributions to the evolution of several film histories: *Damned If You Don't*, to avant-garde cinema, women's cinema, and Queer Cinema; *Tongues Untied*, to documentary, Queer Cinema, and to both avant-garde and African American cinema.[80]

78. James Weldon Johnson, ed., *The Book of American Negro Poetry* (New York: Harcourt, 1922).

79. From Marlon Riggs's "Tongues Re-tied?" reprinted from *Current*, August 12, 1991, and available on the *Current* website: www.current.org/prog/prog114g.html.

For details on the *Tongues Untied* controversy, see Jack C. Ellis and Betsy A. McLane, *A New History of Documentary Film* (New York: Continuum, 2005), 285–87.

80. Friedrich's *Hide and Seek* (1996) also caused consternation by suggesting (as does *Tongues Untied*) that young people are often aware of being gay earlier in their lives than much of conventional society is usually willing to admit.

TEXT AND IMAGE; JAMES BENNING / TONY COKES

As alternative cinemas have evolved, their histories have come to resemble the history of commercial cinema in certain ways. Most obviously, perhaps, within any particular countercinema, specific approaches develop and, as they are used over and over, sometimes become genres. During the 1970s and 1980s, UCLA became a nexus for the development of an independent black filmmaking movement, which often expressed the everyday lives of African Americans in a distinctive form of neorealism: fictional melodramatic family dramas focusing on disenfranchised blacks in Los Angeles are enacted within real locations and often with the involvement of local nonactors, in such landmark independent films as Haile Gerima's *Bush Mama* (1974), Charles Burnett's *Killer of Sheep* (1977), and Billy Woodberry's *Bless Their Little Hearts* (1984). During the same period, many filmmakers identified with avant-garde structural filmmaking created what might be called the text/image film: that is, films in which the uses of visual text were expanded and explored. Hollis Frampton's *Zorns Lemma* (1970) and *Poetic Justice* (1972), much of Yvonne Rainer's work, Patrick Clancy in *Peliculas* (1979), Su Friedrich's *Gently Down the Stream* (1982) and *The Ties That Bind* (1984), Michael Snow's *So Is This* (1983), Peter Rose's *Secondary Currents* (1983) and *SpiritMatters* (1984), Morgan Fisher's *Standard Gauge* (1984), and James Benning's *American Dreams (lost and found)* reveal ways of foregrounding the use of visual text as a means of providing a new kind of viewer engagement with film and new forms of cinematic engagement with a wide range of issues. Of filmmakers involved with the American avant-garde, James Benning has been most engaged with the issue of race, and his *American Dreams* can serve as a particularly useful instance. Further, Benning's work with image and text in *American Dreams* is interesting to consider along with the videos Tony Cokes has made during the past ten years.

American Dreams is a fifty-eight-minute film with a highly formal organization that tracks several narrative developments. One of these is Hank Aaron's pursuit of Babe Ruth's home run record, from his entry into the white major leagues in 1954 through his capturing the home run record in 1976. Benning, a Milwaukee native who grew up idolizing Aaron, details Aaron's career by using items from his collection of Aaron memorabilia— baseball cards, bottle caps, and the like—one item per year, shown from the front and from the back. A second narrative element is added through a handwritten text that scrolls across the bottom of the frame from right to left: at first, viewers may assume they are reading excerpts from Benning's

own diary, but when we see that the diary writer is focused on assassinating a presidential candidate (Richard Nixon at first, Alabama governor George Wallace, later on), we realize that the diarist is not Benning but Arthur Bremer (another Milwaukee native), who shot Wallace in Laurel, Maryland, on May 15, 1972. A final major source of information in *American Dreams* is the sound track: Benning presents a series of excerpts from significant public speeches of the period (everything from an Elvis Presley news conference to a Nixon-Kennedy debate to an Angela Davis lecture) and from popular songs—a single excerpt of each kind for each year (in the film, a new year is signaled by a number representing the cumulative total of home runs Aaron had hit by the end of that year).

These several sources of information combine to create a cinematic collage that reflects a wide array of American dreams and provides a challenge to the viewer's perceptual and conceptual capacities. Most obviously, the attempt to focus on the Aaron memorabilia and to read their texts in some detail is continually interrupted by our desire to read the rolling Bremer text: Bremer's visit to a massage parlor early in the film seduces viewers away from the Aaron memorabilia, as does the evolving mystery of who the diarist is and what he means to do. The regular changing of items of memorabilia and Benning's periodic indications that one or another item is special in some way (small flashing texts signal these instances) lure us back to the image and away from the rolling text. By the end of the film, the juxtaposition of the two forms of American dreaming represented by the film's visuals, and emphasized by its structure, has become increasingly suggestive, particularly within the plethora of dreams represented by the many speeches and popular songs. In many instances we recognize interconnections between the various strands of information.

Obviously, in one sense Aaron's pursuit of Ruth's record is a quintessentially positive American Dream, while Bremer's is the epitome of a negative dream. But this distinction is more complex than it may seem. After all, the attack on Wallace, while negative in the obvious sense, is "positive" in a different sense. During this era, Wallace was the nation's primary spokesperson for segregation, easily identifiable as the kind of person responsible for impeding the many African American dreams represented on the sound track. That Bremer would attack the southern governor (though, ironically, his attack seems to have had nothing to do with Wallace's racial attitudes) is not entirely inconsistent with Aaron's final success in hitting his record-changing home runs for the Atlanta Braves (an accomplishment made all the more special by the fact that Aaron's life had been threatened). That is, the import of both Aaron's accomplishment and Bremer's success
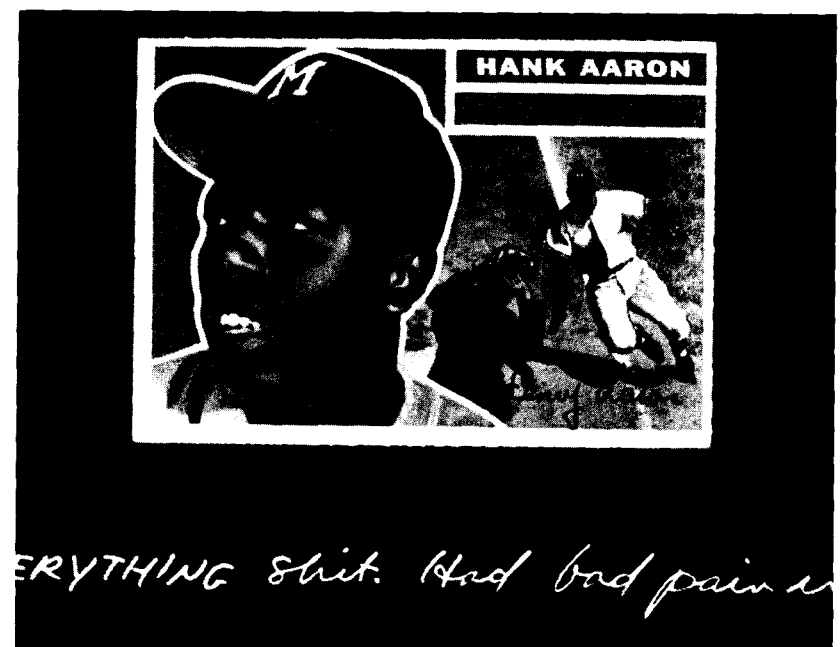
From James Benning's *American Dreams* (1984): imagery of Hank Aaron memorabilia and handwritten excerpts from Arthur Bremer's diary. Courtesy James Benning.

in attacking a presidential candidate, at least for Benning, has mostly to do with the issue of race.

A further implication of the Aaron-Bremer juxtaposition becomes clearer once one takes Benning's approach to filmmaking in *American Dreams* into consideration. The structure of *American Dreams* was, even for Benning, unusually rigorous and minimal. Once under way, the film unfolds in an absolutely regular fashion, for fifty-eight minutes, until the final "shot" (Bremer's shot at Wallace, Aaron's shot to left field, and Benning's final image). The only movement in the film is the scrolling text. The relentlessness of Benning's minimalist organization of the film can be read as analogous to Aaron's increasingly relentless pursuit of Ruth's home run record and to Bremer's dogged pursuit of a victim. And all three of these "relentless pursuits" can be seen as emblematic of a particular male way of functioning in the world (years ago, when I suggested to Benning that the issue of gender informs all three levels of the film, he responded, "That's exactly what I was trying to suggest!")—though this implication may have been more obvious in 1984, during the heyday of feminist art production, than it is now.[81] In the 1970s, some feminists theorized that structural film was male, not simply in the sense that few women used the structural approach but because the focus on the cinematic apparatus was characteristic of a phallocentric engagement with tools and with power and control.[82]

For Benning the information overload in *American Dreams* is simply a reference to one of the realities of contemporary experience, where we often feel overwhelmed by a continual barrage of information. For videomaker Tony Cokes, however, media overload was a crucial dimension of the aesthetic of his *Fade to Black* (1991) and continues to be important in the postmodern videos he has made during recent years. Unlike most of the African American media-makers discussed in this essay, Cokes was familiar with American avant-garde filmmaking by the time he began making the videos that established his reputation. He studied with Yvonne Rainer, "whose work I admire greatly," in the Whitney Museum Independent Study Pro-

81. Benning in MacDonald, *A Critical Cinema*, 243.

82. There were, of course, instances where women did employ a structural approach, including the landmark *Riddles of the Sphinx* (1977), co-made by Laura Mulvey and Peter Wollen; and Su Friedrich's *Sink or Swim* (1992), which was Friedrich's response to her real father and to a cinematic father, Hollis Frampton: Friedrich's use of the alphabet as a structuring device recalls Frampton's *Zorns Lemma*, while simultaneously revising that earlier film's vision. While Frampton's film is an epistemological work that does not take gender into account, *Sink or Swim* argues that gender is a crucial element of what and how we learn.

gram; by the time he made *Fade to Black*, he had seen Michael Snow's *So Is This*, which he calls "a landmark" in regard to its use of visual text, and knew about the films I listed earlier.[83] Visual text was also explored during the early history of video art (for years, understood by both makers and critics as a different history from avant-garde film), and Cokes was influenced by this history as well: "There are two direct influences I can think of that aren't filmic: Richard Serra's *Television Delivers People* (1973) which is a textbook case informing my work, and Dan Graham's use of text in *Rock My Religion* (1984)."[84]

Fade to Black is framed by the trailer for the 1950 film adaptation of Richard Wright's *Native Son* (1940), directed by Pierre Chenal, with Wright playing Bigger Thomas. The trailer, a montage of Bigger Thomas being chased by the police, uses the novel's tripartite division—"Fear," "Flight," "Fate"—as a visual text. During the prologue that follows the trailer, Cokes uses a series of visual texts presented on the bottom third of the screen to consider his seduction, as a film viewer, by *Vertigo* (1958), the opening credits of which are seen, cropped, in the middle third of the screen (on the sound track we hear Jesse Jackson talking about rap music, which transforms "mess into a message," and then a reading of a Louis Althusser quotation discussing "interpellation": the way in which the implicit ideology of a society calls individuals into complicity with it). As we listen to the Althusser text and read the commentary on the experience of viewing *Vertigo*, we cannot help but notice the animated special effects in the *Vertigo* credits, which function as a series of hypnotic images, suggesting the way in which commercial film and its implicit ideology transfix us, drawing us into its way of understanding the world (these animated hypnotic images were created by avant-garde animator John Whitney).

After the opening credits, *Fade to Black* divides the screen into horizontal thirds. The middle third presents imagery, mostly opening credit sequences, from a series of commercial films that, in one sense or another, relate to the history of the cinematic depiction (and/or exclusion) of African Americans: *Intruder in the Dust* (1949), *Manhattan* (1979), *Taxi Driver* (1976), *Jailhouse Rock* (1957), *Mississippi Burning* (1988), *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968), *Gone with the Wind* (1939), *Chariots of Fire* (1981), *Cry*

83. In his July 24, 2007, e-mail to me, Cokes mentions that my article "Text as Image (in Some Recent North American Avant-Garde Films)," *Afterimage* 13, no. 8 (March 1986): 9–20, "was quite valuable to my thinking during the late 1980s." In that article I discuss films by the text/image filmmakers I mentioned earlier in this section, including James Benning's *American Dreams*.

84. E-mail to the author, July 24, 2007.

Freedom (1987), *The Emperor Jones* (1933), *Desperately Seeking Susan* (1985), *Do the Right Thing* (1989), *To Sir, with Love* (1967), and *Babes on Broadway* (1941). In the upper third of the screen, Cokes presents titles and dates of films historically significant for the depiction of African Americans in cinema, beginning with *Uncle Tom's Children* (1903) and continuing chronologically until the Douglas Sirk version of *Imitation of Life* (1959). This listing is based on Donald Bogle's *Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies, and Bucks*; it ends with Douglas Sirk's *Imitation of Life* (1959) because it was "among the first films dealing with African-Americans that Donald and I both remember seeing."[85] In the bottom third of the frame, we read a series of texts that comment on the films recycled in the middle third of the screen and on the stories presented on the sound track.

The sound track is as complex as the visuals. During the body of *Fade to Black*, we hear montaged clips from rap songs (and other music) intercut with a series of stories narrated by Cokes and Donald Trammel (both of them, African Americans), describing incidents that keep African Americans aware of how racism continues to function in day-to-day American life. The voice-off narration of these stories is ironic and curt, even abrasive (for some white viewers, at least). The focus is on white racism toward blacks, but in at least one instance, Cokes suggests how a black man's perception of a white woman's fear of him—he is a moviegoer enjoying the aftermath of a pleasurable film in a theater lobby when he realizes she is glaring at him out of fear—triggers racism in him: he thinks to himself, "That stupid bitch—I could cut her fucking heart out! That could have been 'stupid White bitch,' or 'stupid rich White bitch' but I have trained myself not to think that way," as we read a blue text: "THERE IS NO RACISM HERE"—a phrase that is repeated periodically during the video, always in an ironic context that reflects the consistent resistance of whites to admit the presence of racism in themselves or in the here and now generally.

The primary visual and auditory motifs in *Fade to Black* are supplemented by several additional visual texts that are presented, in various colors, in the center of the frame, normally when no other imagery is visible. The texts in blue are poetically organized statements: for example,

85. E-mail to the author, August 19, 2007. Cokes goes on to say, "It was a Saturday matinee staple on WTVR, the local Richmond, VA, CBS affiliate I watched when I was a kid. I also like the idea that it was a remake, but I didn't know that until reading Bogle's book. . . . I was particularly intrigued by the idea that there was a history of cinema as an institution (and a repertoire of racial stereotypes) before we were born that preceded and informed our experience of cinema, perhaps without our knowledge, which was one of the points of Bogle's book for me as a reader. And then there's the Sirk-Fassbinder connection to melodrama as potential subversive form, which I came to appreciate after a few years of university film study."

CHAINED? FRAMED?
YOU KNOW WHAT I MEAN?

One implication here is that the way African Americans are framed, and "framed," by the history of cinema is a remnant of slavery, a modern media version of keeping blacks confined to "their place." Many of the blue texts seem to continue the set of textual statements and questions about *Vertigo* during the prologue; others refer to the stories told on the sound track (e.g., "WAITING FOR THE / LIGHT TO CHANGE," which refers to a story of how a white driver locks the doors of her car when African American men are near but pretends her action has nothing to do with race). Green texts, presented the same way, often refer to financial issues. The three sections of Cokes's frame, the two sound track elements, and these other textual bits are presented as a set of interwoven motifs revealing parallel histories that frequently intersect—much as the various elements in *American Dreams* do.

As Cokes's thirty-three-minute video draws to a close, we see "THIS MOVIE IS OVER" in blue several times (for aficionados of American avant-garde film, this is reminiscent of Bruce Conner's repetition of "The End" near the end of *A Movie*). The repetition of this statement, followed by the continuation of the film, suggests that just as the movie does not stop, the racism that is its subject continues as well, and requires a continuing struggle.[86] Finally, after the repeat of the *Native Son* trailer, a textual epilogue uses the upper and lower thirds of the frame to dedicate the video to the memory of Eleanor Bumpers, Michael Griffith, Yusef Hawkins, Phillip Pennell, Edmund Perry, Juan Rodriguez, and Michael Stewart (all of whom died as a result of racism, and several of whom are mentioned in Spike Lee's dedication at the end of *Do the Right Thing*), to the accompaniment of an excerpt from *Carmen Jones* (1954) of Joe Adams singing "Stand Up and Fight" ("The Toreador Song"). *Fade to Black* concludes with a text from Malcolm X, presented in alternating lines of green and red against a black background, evoking black nationalism and warning readers of the trickiness of whites in their dealings with blacks. Ending with this text is in part a response on Cokes's part to the final texts from Martin Luther King and Malcolm X in *Do the Right Thing*: "I

86. In her *Chronicles of a Lying Spirit (by Kelly Gabron)*, Cauleen Smith uses a similar tactic. The film works with two voice-off narrators: an apparently white man, probably an academic, and an African American woman (Smith herself). At the beginning of the film, the male voice dominates, and Smith's comments provide a counterpoint, but by the end of the film, this has changed: "The male narrator may seem to have the last word, 'Sound out,' but even if *he* thinks the movie is over, it continues regardless of what he says" (Smith, in MacDonald, *A Critical Cinema 3*, 303). In fact, nearly the entire film is repeated a second time, along with the man's once again ignored "Sound out."

thought the juxtaposition of the MLK and Malcolm X quotes Lee deploys at the end of DTRT was muddle-headed politically."[87]

While *American Dreams* and *Fade to Black* have much in common formally, there are significant differences, which can be read, at least in part, as a reflection of the racial positions of their makers (and their likely audiences) within American society. Benning's film is more elegant, more rigorously composed. Its means are simple and clear, its pace relentless and patient (and, for some, patience-testing). *American Dreams* does communicate Benning's recognition of his phallocentric approach to filmmaking, but he does not seem to see himself as complicit in racist behavior. In fact, the emphasis of *American Dreams* is on the similarity of his filmmaking to Aaron's quest and even to Bremer's desire to kill Nixon and Wallace (by handwriting the excerpts from Bremer's diary himself, Benning creates a sense, especially early in the film, that this is *his* diary; and even once we recognize that these are Bremer's words, the implication is that Benning too—like so many of us during that era—did fantasize about killing Nixon and/or Wallace).[88] Benning clearly sees himself as a racially progressive member of a certain generation with a particular history that is now, to some substantial degree, the past.

Cokes, on the other hand, at least insofar as we imagine him from *Fade to Black*, is not simply a member of a certain generation but an *African American* member of his generation, coming to terms with a racist cinematic history that has played an important role in determining his self-image and his experience. While *American Dreams* is a contemplative film, made by a loner, Cokes's more collaborative video (his primary collaborator is Trammel, who supplied text, provided voice-over narration, and did graphics for the film) reflects his frustration and anger with how the past has fed,

87. E-mail to the author, August 19, 2007. Cokes explains that he felt the quotations were muddle-headed "in the same way that the 'riot' (led by his Mookie character of all people) that preceded it seemed absurd as an expression of/response to the things happening to people of color all over the NYC metro area during the period. The film's narrative also struck me as producing an uncannily heavy identification with Sal and sons pizza shop as 'victims' of 'irrational black violence' for many critics and white viewers. (When the actual problem to be framed was state and white violence against people of color.) For these viewers Radio Raheem was expendable, or got what he deserved from the police. I thought Lee's construction functioned as a disservice to and misrepresentation of situations like the Michael Stewart case that the film allegedly sought to reference or illuminate."

88. Those who grew up during and immediately after World War II were often asked to consider (asked by the culture in one way or another) whether it wasn't prudent to kill a potentially dangerous tyrant *before* he could develop enough organization and power to, say, exterminate whole ethnic groups. In hindsight, a person who assassinated Hitler would have been a hero.

and continues to feed, into the African American present. And this unresolved frustration and anger are evident in the form of *Fade to Black*, which is less rigorous than *American Dreams*, the product, at least in part, of its maker's refusal of elegance and the detachment elegance might suggest. *Fade to Black* is fundamentally not only a rumination on the past but an attack on the racist present.

In the years since he finished *Fade to Black*, Cokes has become known for series of short video pieces, including most recently what he calls the "*Evil* Series," several of which are, formally at least, even more like *American Dreams* than *Fade to Black*—except in terms of their duration: all the *Evil* videos are brief. One particularly interesting instance is *Evil.8. A Bigger Picture (Unseen)* (2004, 8 minutes). As is true in the Benning film, in *Evil.8* all the visual elements are recycled: they include three texts, presented in two different ways, framed by two quotations: one from George W. Bush ("We don't torture people in / America and people who say / we do simply know nothing / about our country") and another from a U.S. State Department official ("It's like the song by The Who, 'Meet the new boss, / same as the old boss' [actually, "Won't Get Fooled Again"]. That's the widespread perception we have to deal with"). As in *American Dreams*, these various elements are organized in a minimal, and quite elegant, way (this is true, in fact, of all the *Evil* videos).

Two of the three primary texts—a May 5, 2004, editorial from the *New York Times* on the Abu Ghraib torture pictures; and an e-mail sent by Tony Cokes, also about Abu Ghraib, on May 7, 2004—are presented in the middle of the screen, one word at a time, against a vivid color background that changes from red to blue, or blue to red, in a right-to-left wipe, as each individual word is presented. The texts themselves are white, causing the color scheme to be, on one hand, an ironic comment on the conventional American patriotism that was invoked to enlist the American public in the war; and a way of saying that speaking out, questioning the war, *is* the real American patriotism. The third text, "A Tyrant 40 Years in the Making," a *New York Times* story written on the brink of the Iraq war by Roger Morris and published on March 14, 2003, scrolls across the screen, from right to left (white against a black background), above the red, white, and blue texts. Morris details the covert involvement of the Eisenhower and Kennedy administrations in Middle Eastern political events during the 1950s and 1960s, and specifically in the assassination of then Iraqi leader Abdel Karim Kassem, who had gained power by confronting Western interests but was seen as a useful counter to Egypt's Nasser, until he began to build an arsenal comparable to Israel's, to reenergize Iraq's long feud with Kuwait, to threaten West-

ern oil interests, and to work to supplant American power in the region. In the end, the United States (through the CIA), along with coconspirators from Iran and elsewhere, was able to stage a coup, which ended in the execution of Kassem, the establishment of the until-then outlawed Baathists (including Saddam Hussein) as the ruling party, and a bloodbath at the hands of the Baathists of Iraqis who had benefited from Kassem's rule. On the sound track Alias provides electronic music with a repeated lyric that confirms the sad recognition, implicit in the juxtaposition of the main texts, that Bush's Iraq adventure, as horrific as it is, is nothing new.[89]

In *Evil.8*, as in *American Dreams*, the simultaneous presentation of two different texts in two different ways confronts viewers with more information than they can take in.[90] Here, however, the overload takes on a specific implication: that the entire process of this new American involvement in Iraq happened so quickly that most American citizens did not have the time, or the willingness, to consider what was going on or how it related to the past history of our engagement in the region—or, for that matter, how our racist attitude toward Arabs and Muslims might play into activities like those that occurred at Abu Ghraib. The theme of racism in *Evil.8*, however, is expressed rather differently from the way racism is dealt with in *Fade to Black*. In the earlier video, Cokes, as an African American, was in a position of blamelessness; he did not need to consider himself complicit in those aspects of American culture that were/are challenges for African Americans (or, perhaps more accurately, he was in rebellion against the idea that he or his ancestors were complicit in their own victimization). In *Fade to Black*, this blamelessness sometimes becomes a self-righteous anger that "justifies" the slight irregularities (they read as a kind of clutter) in the video's presentation—the inelegance I referred to earlier. The racism implicit in the events at Abu Ghraib is not American white-on-black racism, and as a result, in *Evil.8*, Cokes is able to detach from the issue just enough to be able to take the same sort of total control over his form as Benning does in *American Dreams*. The result is a formal elegance that gives a particular power to this video and to the others in this series.

89. The lyrics of Alias's "Unseen Sights" are "Lights, squares, a detail fakes the whole / catch the abstract all in all / a shift so small / but remembered after all / unseen sights / you're hanging on / catch the abstract all in all / a shift so small / but remembered after all / after all."

90. Another film that uses a related strategy is Paul Sharits's *Word Movie/Fluxfilm* (1967), in which a series of fifty words are shown, one word per frame, in a graphic arrangement that causes the words to "optically-conceptually fuse into one 3¾-minute long word" (Sharits's description in *Film Culture*, nos. 65–66 [1975]: 115), while, on the sound track two speakers alternate one-word-at-a-time readings of two distinct texts.

and George H. W. Bush would aid Saddam Husse

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of challenging the dominance of America in the M

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From Tony Cokes's *Evil.8. A Bigger Picture (Unseen)* (2004). Courtesy Tony Cokes.

. . .

For several decades, those of us involved in film education have agreed that two of the film histories we can talk about and exhibit are African American film history and avant-garde film history, and we have agreed, at least implicitly, that somewhat different kinds of people are interested in these two histories (we have not divided *entirely* along racial lines, but . . .). Of course, our division of the field in this way continues to have its uses. If one explores African American film history (or Chicano video history, or Asian American film history), one has a basic structure within which to pursue an interest, even develop a career. The same is true of avant-garde film: if I want to write an article on Michael Snow or Ernie Gehr or Su Friedrich, I know which journals might consider a piece on an avant-garde filmmaker.

The problem is that our conceptualizing of these particular histories has a tendency to blind us to important dimensions of both: to the formal variety of ethnic cinema and to the ethnic variety of avant-garde cinema, to important cinematic qualities that any number of accomplished works in both histories share, and to fascinating distinctions between works exploring similar issues. In general, our categories have caused us to emphasize the differences in these two histories by suppressing their similarities and complicities. This was evident when Sarah Elder asked her question at the fiftieth Flaherty; *Tongues Untied* had been shown two days earlier, but my guess is that Elder had categorized it as a documentary or an African American film; that it might also be seen as an avant-garde film probably did not occur to her, since she was thinking of avant-garde film as "white."

I am arguing neither for an abandonment of ethnic media histories and of avant-garde film history nor for a mindless combining of them; these historical divisions have been productive of insight and may continue to be useful. What I am arguing for is additional steps, a moving beyond these (and other) historical categories or, better yet, a synergic interchange between them that might allow us to recognize and explore the many issues, approaches, and accomplishments filmmakers share, and in the long run, to help us see each other with more empathy and ourselves more clearly.

Interview with Gina Kim

Gina Kim began as a video diarist, recording her experience as it happened, using a home-video camera. In the earliest of her works to be exhibited publicly, *Empty House* (1999; 24 minutes), Kim began to engage the issue that, more than any other, has informed her video and film work: the obsession of women with their bodies and their desire to come to terms with this obsession. Kim's first major work, the personal epic *Gina Kim's Video Diary* (2002; 157 minutes), is a subtle, often troubling, generally exquisite, surprisingly intimate, sometimes wildly narcissistic coming-of-age story. Focusing on what would normally be seen as minor domestic details, and confined to Kim's small apartment and the seemingly insignificant actions that take place there, *Gina Kim's Video Diary* tracks Kim from her arrival in Los Angeles, with few resources, no friends other than her video camera, and virtually no English, through struggles with loneliness and anorexia, to her acceptance of her physicality and her potential as a visual artist. She also rediscovers the familial heritage she hoped to escape by emigrating to the United States. *Gina Kim's Video Diary* is a major contribution to the history of personal documentary, as remarkable in its way as Su Friedrich's *Sink or Swim* (1992), Ross McElwee's *Time Indefinite* (1993), Alan Berliner's *Nobody's Business* (1996), and Jonathan Caouette's *Tarnation* (2004).

In 2003 Kim completed her first fiction feature, *Invisible Light,* which focuses on two young women living in LA who are indirectly connected through a man. Gah-in (Yoon Sun Choi) is a lover of the man (whom we never see); she is conflicted about the relationship and suffering from bulimia. Do-hee (Sun Jin Lee), the man's wife, is pregnant, though not by her husband; she flies to Korea to create some space for herself in order to decide whether to abort the pregnancy or see it to term. The first half of *Invisible Light* is Gah-in's story, the second half, Do-hee's—though it is clear from the details of the film that both stories are happening simultaneously.

In a sense, both women are running from the physical involvements their desires have led them into: after listening to Do-hee leave a message on her answering machine, Gah-in unhooks the phone, hides in her apartment,