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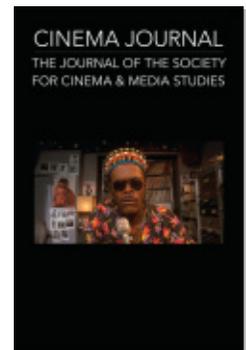
Black Film, New Media Industries, and BAMMs (Black American Media Moguls) in the Digital Media Ecology

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# Black Film, New Media Industries, and BAMMs (Black American Media Moguls) in the Digital Media Ecology

by ANNA EVERETT

It is not news to say that black film in the twenty-first century is alive and successful. The critical acclaim, box-office success, and ratings gold that met such recent black films as *The Best Man Holiday* (Malcolm D. Lee, 2013), *12 Years a Slave* (Steve McQueen, 2013), *Fruitvale Station* (Ryan Coogler, 2013), *Precious* and *The Butler* (both by Lee Daniels 2009, 2013), *Woman Thou Art Loosed* (Michael Schultz, 2004), *Jumping the Broom* (Salim Akil, 2011), *Why Did I Get Married* and *Why Did I Get Married Too* (Tyler Perry, 2007, 2010), as well as cable television movies like *Dark Girls* (Bill Duke and D. Channsin Berry, 2011), among others, attest to this fact. Moreover, this prolific output may seem at once extraordinary and expected in the era of President Obama. However, upon reflection it becomes evident that these texts constitute the latest iteration of a familiar cycle of black film production over time. Clearly, for even casual observers, the elastic category of “black film” and its cyclical manifestations over a historical continuum feature crucial and compelling distinctions that sometimes parallel and sometimes lead dominant Hollywood cinema, independent film, and experimental cinemas.

Neither is it news to say that technological innovation and social change power most of the cyclical changes in black film. We can easily trace these cultural and technological shifts back to the silent-era black independents; the sound-era race films by black indies as well as black-white coproductions, the indie films of the civil rights era; the 1970s blaxploitation films, the LA Rebellion and East Coast indies; the fin-de-siècle 1990s *New Jack* cinema, and the Internet, most notably. Today’s wildly successful crop, then, is long overdue, anticipated, and expected when contextualized within this remarkable and persistent history of twentieth-century black film productions against formidable obstacles.

Black film and television, as portmanteau handles, are characterized by a number of features and expressions that position them astride powerful African diasporic cultural traditions and dominant American mainstream media industrial practices that defy simplistic

or essentialist meanings or definitions. And further, truth be told, epistemologies of black film from its inception in the early 1910s through the end of the twentieth century have been marked consistently by a lack of precision and clarity. Thus, black film and other media continue to be overdetermined by debates and binary thinking. There is an influential compendium of criticism and scholarship about this span of filmic output over the decades—criticism that tends to be as diffuse as the films, filmmakers, and cinematic movements themselves. Of course, this is predicated on the fact that categories are not so clearly delineated in practice as they are for heuristic or teaching purposes. Rather, black films often transcend and overlap neat temporal and categorical frameworks.

What *is* news about black film today is its audacious persistence and the fact that it flourishes despite daunting odds and revolutionary changes in the media industrial complex. As in earlier historical moments, black filmmakers were once again in the vanguard of evolving media industry practices in the new millennium. In particular, the twenty-first century witnessed a powerful cadre of influential black culture agents, both media industry insiders and outsiders, who adroitly leveraged digital media's participatory, interactive technology protocols to advance their entries into the chaotic and uncharted territory of emergent business models that were then being erected around new digital technologies and social media, with legions of tech-savvy gen Xers and millennials in tow. For example, in 1998 Oprah Winfrey established Oprah.com.<sup>1</sup> Following her successful model a decade or so later, Spike Lee, Tyler Perry, Reverend T. D. Jakes, and others took advantage of the Internet and social media's game-changing presence and powerful cultural feedback loops, using them to solidify their own media brands while simultaneously recoding and innovating twenty-first-century black cultural productions, including transmedia narratives and adaptations, for new markets, new fan communities, and expanding multicultural audiences.<sup>2</sup>

Indeed, this is an opportune moment to consider the contours of black film in the new millennium, not only because more than twenty years have passed since the publication of the field's seminal works on the topic (listed here later) but also because the conditions of possibility for sustaining successful black films have evolved radically and demand a new critical and/or theoretical hermeneutics of black film for new digital times, spaces, and places. Now is also an opportune moment to reflect on the status of black film twenty years after the publication of Stuart Hall's essay "What Is This 'Black' in Black Popular Culture?"<sup>3</sup> Hall's work helped establish the academic validity

- 1 See a discussion of how the Oprah.com website was established in Trysh Travis, *The Language of the Heart: A Cultural History of the Recovery Movement from Alcoholics Anonymous to Oprah Winfrey* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2009), 246.
- 2 In 2008 Spike Lee's company, 40 Acres and a Mule Filmworks, set up the 40Acres.com website, and Lee has been active on both Facebook and Twitter. Although it is difficult to say exactly when Perry and Reverend Jakes began their online presences, I hazard a guess that both men began in the first decade of the twenty-first century. For Perry the motivating force was likely building on the success of his first blockbuster film *Diary of a Mad Black Woman* in 2005, and for megachurch superstar Reverend Jakes, whose Potter's House ministry originated in 1996, it is not unreasonable to attribute some of his phenomenal congregational explosion from fifty families to more than thirty thousand members in Dallas, Texas, to the Internet.
- 3 Stuart Hall, "What Is This 'Black' in Black Popular Culture? (Rethinking Race)," *Social Justice* 20, nos. 1–2 (1993): 104–114.

and gravitas of British cultural studies in the US academy. In fact, the 1993 publication of Hall's essay dovetails nicely with an amazing corpus of foundational texts on black film by black scholars, whose works helped solidify black film as a legitimate and valued academic disciplinary pursuit unto itself. Initially, black film studies were, for the most part, located within black studies, Africana studies, or ethnic studies. Some film studies programs, still fighting the battle for their own legitimacy in the academy, welcomed the next generation of scholars working in this evolving field.

Among some of the foundational, fin-de-siècle academic treatises consolidating black film studies were *Framing Blackness*, by Ed Guerrero; *Black American Cinema*, edited by Manthia Diawara; *Redefining Black Film*, by Mark Reid; *White Screens/Black Images*, by James Snead; *Black Looks*, by bell hooks; *Black Women as Cultural Readers*, by Jacqueline Bobo; and too many others to name here.<sup>4</sup> This successful scholarly output, and the ongoing production of black films, engendered a well-received progeny of single-authored books, multi-authored anthologies, peer-reviewed journal articles, and popular texts.

Black film's unheralded arrival in the United States had originally emerged during the silent-film era, and it persisted despite its struggles for survival with the expensive coming of sound technologies, emergent film studio industries, and unionized film workers' racist Jim Crow (racial separation) practices, and subsequently, postwar racial politics in the United States and abroad. Black film production, exhibition, distribution, aesthetics, politics, audiences, and economics over time were difficult either to deny or to fully co-opt or assimilate. This resilience prompts my particular retrospective gaze at Stuart Hall's probing question.

In the first place, I am struck by black film's persistence and longevity, given its coterminous but suspect existence alongside highly revered global and national film cultures, movements, and expressions, from which it has drawn unabashedly. From its early origins in the United States at the dawn of the twentieth century, however, black film as a distinct category has been difficult to distill or delimit in meaningful terms. The complexity of transnational "blackness" writ large in popular culture that Hall articulated twenty years ago still *resonates* in the specific case of black film in the digital age. Consider his insights here: "By definition, black popular culture is a contradictory space. It is a site of strategic contestation. But it can never be simplified or explained in terms of the simple binary oppositions[:] . . . high and low; resistance versus incorporation; authentic versus unauthentic; experiential versus formal; opposition versus homogenization."<sup>5</sup>

In 1993 Hall recognized the need to refuse the binary structuring of cultural space and the idea of privileging an "authentic" versus an "inauthentic" blackness in contemporary society. Hall's particular caution against expecting that somehow black life

4 Ed Guerrero, *Framing Blackness: The African American Image in Film* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1993); Manthia Diawara, *Black American Cinema* (New York: Routledge, 1993); Mark A. Reid, *Redefining Black Film* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993); James Snead, *White Screens/Black Images: Hollywood from the Dark Side* (New York: Routledge, 1994); bell hooks, *Black Looks: Race and Representation* (Cambridge, MA: South End Press, 1992); Jacqueline Bobo, *Black Women as Cultural Readers*, 108; *Jump Cut: A Review of Contemporary Media* 33 (1988): 43–51.

5 Hall, "What Is This 'Black'?"

can be experienced outside of representation is apt. As he put it, “There is no escape from the politics of representation.” Furthermore, Hall, following Roland Barthes, reminds us that popular culture operates in an arena “that is profoundly mythic . . . a theater of popular desires, a theater of popular fantasies.”<sup>6</sup> Black popular culture, he argues, does not escape such representational political economies of opposition and hegemonies; rather, it manifests their complicated dialogic encounters. In other words, the dialogic nature of black popular culture is not characterized by an essentialist either/or African-Western proposition, but arguably is a productive hybrid construct made manifest in such sites as music, dance, and language styles, in addition to the overdetermined black body with its multiple hues and varying skin colors. And Hall’s insights seem even more relevant in light of the advent of digital media tools, social networks and communities of practice, convergence technologies, and transmedia narratives. These contexts concretely bear out Hall’s arguments of “rethinking race” for the present millennium.

This contextual lead-in brings us to BAMMs (black American media moguls) and how digital media technologies, especially the Internet and social media, helped propel them forward. The BAMB auteur Spike Lee led the way for black film and other media makers’ participation in the emerging digital media ecosystem with his controversial film *Bamboozled* (2000). Seeking economic frugality, Lee primarily shot the film only on consumer-grade digital (MiniDV) camcorders. He calculated a trade-off between losing the film’s high production values and the economic benefits of shooting with fifteen cameras at a time, given his modest budget. The financial economies of digital video enabled Lee to spectacularize the crucial “Mantan: The New Millennium Minstrel Show” sequences by shooting only those on 16mm film stock. As one of film’s iconic BAMMs, Lee’s foray into big-time American film industry innovation is at once expected and surprising. With *Bamboozled*, Lee returned to his early mode of “guerilla filmmaking”—a phrase Lee popularized, according to Stuart Hall—and demonstrated early on that digital video and 16mm film technologies could converge and produce a successful vision of old and new media dialogism.<sup>7</sup> Further solidifying his vanguard status and new media bona fides, Lee announced at Time.com that he had reached his fund-raising goal for his next film (not yet named but about people who love blood, and not a new *Blacula*, according to Lee) through the crowdsourcing website Kickstarter.<sup>8</sup> On August 21, 2013, Eliana Dockterman reported that in thirty days on Kickstarter, the director raised \$1.4 million. Lee is quoted as saying, “The truth is I’ve been doing Kickstarter before there was Kickstarter, there was no Internet. Social media was writing letters, making phone calls, beating the bushes.”<sup>9</sup>

While Lee, one of America’s first popular black crossover film directors, was taking black film to the new frontier of digital media film production and financing, community theater impresario and playwright Tyler Perry was cultivating his religious media

6 Ibid., 113.

7 Ibid., 113.

8 Eliana Dockterman, “Spike Lee Film Raises \$1.4 Million on Kickstarter,” *Time*, August 21, 2013, <http://newsfeed.time.com/2013/08/21/spike-lee-film-raises-1-4-million-on-kickstarter/>.

9 Ibid.

audience and developing his unique brand of transmedia storytelling across theater, film, television, and the Internet. And while the 2005 *Diary of a Mad Black Woman* was his breakout film, catapulting him to success in Hollywood, Perry had already amassed a body of work in local theaters that became a deep reservoir for his stage-to-DVD products and his film and television adaptations and more. Inspired by Oprah Winfrey's successes in the late 1980s, Perry took advantage of the Internet as a marketing tool to connect with his growing and loyal fan base of black women. Fatefully, Perry teamed with Winfrey to coproduce *Precious* (based on Sapphire's novel *Push*), which received critical acclaim as well as box-office revenue. The two have continued their partnership on Winfrey's OWN network, propelling it into profitability by the summer of 2013, months ahead of expectations. In 2010 Perry adapted Ntozake Shange's choreopoem *For Colored Girls Who Have Considered Suicide When the Rainbow Is Enuf* to film as *For Colored Girls*.

Perry's outsider status in the Hollywood film industry's inner sanctum served him well, enabling him to accrue huge successes with mainstream and black audiences by the time he blew up overnight, it seems, with *Diary of a Mad Black Woman*. That film secured a place at the table of Hollywood film insiders and generated a national obsession with his drag-queen character, Madea. For Perry, the Internet was his direct line to his loyal fan base and potential collaborators.

Working separately, but simultaneously, black megachurch pastor Thomas Dexter (T. D.) Jakes was creating a brand name of his own, broadcasting his massive church services over the Trinity Broadcasting Network, Black Entertainment Television, and the Miracle Channel in Canada. And like Perry, Jakes began mining his own inspirational writings for popular film texts, such as his 2004 film *Woman Thou Art Loosed*. From there, Jakes went on to produce several other black-themed films.<sup>10</sup>

Director and producer Lee Daniels, whose 2001 film *Monster's Ball* led to Halle Berry's historic Oscar win for best actress; his hugely successful 2009 film *Precious*; and his highly acclaimed 2013 film *The Butler*, which garnered praise from President Obama, position Daniels as a BAMB in the wings. It is his lack of transmedia platforms at this point that qualifies him as a shadow, or emerging, BAMB.

The most successful BAMB and twenty-first-century media powerhouse is Oprah Winfrey. As the personification of a transmedia brand across television (*The Oprah Winfrey Show*, Oxygen Network, OWN Network, *Oprah's Next Chapter* [OWN, 2012–]), print (*O, The Oprah Magazine*), film (*The Color Purple* [Steven Spielberg, 1985]; *Beloved* [Jonathan Demme, 1998], *Precious*), and the Internet (Oprah.com), Winfrey leveraged her enormous crossover Q-score (or likability quotient and brand appeal) with women television viewers of all races, ages, nationalities, and socioeconomic statuses. On her November 20, 2009 *Oprah* show, Winfrey stunned fans and media watchers alike when she announced that she was leaving her ratings-powerhouse syndicated show and starting her own cable network enterprise. Yet this bold move two years later, in

10 One might consider Lee Daniels a BAMB-in-waiting. His visibility stems from his 2001 film *Monster's Ball*, which led to Halle Berry's historic Oscar win; his controversial 2009 film *Precious*; and most recently, his 2013 film *The Butler*, which garnered praise from President Obama. However, he lacks the transmedial presence of the BAMB's discussed here. Given his productive associations with media moguls Oprah Winfrey and Tyler Perry, Daniels may come to produce in other platforms as well.

September 2011, surprises only if one forgets that along with Marcy Carsey and Geraldine Laybourne, Winfrey helped cofound the Oxygen network in 1998. And while the gamble seemed a bad risk initially, Winfrey's OWN (Oprah Winfrey Network) is finally in the black and making profits, which some attribute to her brilliant television partnership with Tyler Perry.<sup>11</sup>



Figure 1. J (Issa Rae) in the episode "The Stop Sign," *The Misadventures of Awkward Black Girl* (Issa Rae Productions, 2011-).

Oprah's transmedia empire that spans cable television, print media, films, and the Internet is remarkable, and her collaborations with Perry, Daniels, and others have produced a BAMM model for the twenty-first century that capitalizes on new media technologies and the new media industry practices that are finally tracking with contemporary media "prosumers" on their own terms. As YouTube, Vimeo, and other social media outlets clearly reveal, media-savvy audiences today consume and produce popular, successful, and globally engaging media texts at will. As for black film's next act, stay tuned to such innovators as Issa Rae, whose *Misadventures of Awkward Black Girl* web episodes on YouTube and other ventures have become a sensation (Figure 1). As new media technologies provide black media producers with new outlets and options for their creative and educational work, our discussions of black film and media may need to be tweaked or rebooted. I anticipate that Shonda Rhimes, one of contemporary television's most prolific showrunners, producers, and owners (ABC's *Grey's Anatomy* [2005-], *The Practice* [1997-2004], and *Scandal* [2012-]) will be beckoned to the big screen someday soon—in the not-too-distant future. I hope so, anyway. \*

11 Perry created two programs for OWN, a soap opera, *The Haves and Have Nots* (one of the few prime-time dramas featuring black story lines), and a sitcom, *Love Thy Neighbor* (2013-).