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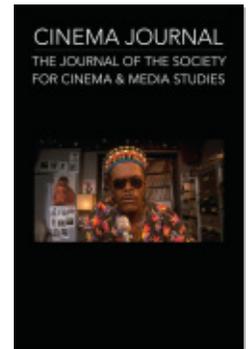
Keeping the Black in Media Production: One L.A. Rebellion
Filmmaker's Notes

Zeinabu Irene Davis

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roles have to become ubiquitous for that wider spectrum to even occur in the first place. When can we lift the burden of representation, as it were, so that we can ask different questions of the black female roles we do see? My extension of the future text offers but one way to explore those questions and to create new ones. Since like me, I bet you are tired of expecting the same of black women on-screen and constantly not getting it.

If we consider Minaj, Washington, and Perry as future texts, and if we also utilize future texts as a reading strategy with which to interrogate black media artifacts, perhaps we can reconsider the ideological underpinnings the three figures manifest. In doing so, we can get beyond hackneyed debates about whether any of their screen images are “helping or hurting” black popular culture, and we can more fully discern the nuances of how black media representations continue to recycle and recirculate the disparities between black male and female subjectivities. Perhaps such a strategy will remind us to put the question of black women back into investigations of black popular culture. *

Keeping the Black in Media Production: One L.A. Rebellion Filmmaker’s Notes

by ZEINABU IRENE DAVIS

I am a member of the L.A. Rebellion group of filmmakers who came out of the UCLA film school with an agenda. We are a small group of critically acclaimed Black filmmakers and media artists who began the first sustained movement in the United States by a collective of minority filmmakers aiming to reimagine the media production processes. Our goal was and is to represent, reflect on, and enrich the day-to-day lives of people in our own communities. Although we are of very diverse origins and conflicting ideas, we share a common desire to create an alternative to the dominant American mode of cinema. Generally speaking, the hope of the group is to realize a cinema of informed, relevant, and unfettered Black expression and the means to bypass the restrictive apparatus of distribution and exhibition to create a viable, alternative delivery system that will sustain the ongoing work of Black cinema artists.

What does the *Black* mean in Black contemporary media production? For me, it means creating and preserving Black life, culture, and history. It means continuing to create and engage in oppositional media practice, but it also means supporting those who choose to make

work within more mainstream models such as American broadcast television and film. As Stuart Hall states, “The point is not simply that, since our racial differences do not constitute all of us, we are always different, negotiating different kinds of differences—of gender, of sexuality, of class. . . . We are always in negotiation, not with a single set of oppositions that place us always in the same relation to others, but with a series of different positionalities.”¹ I am a filmmaker, professor, wife, and mother—all of these “positionalities” influence my choices and decisions, and they inform the “Black” in my life.

My current work-in-progress, a feature-length documentary, *Spirits of Rebellion: Black Cinema at UCLA*, observes the lives and work of the L.A. Rebellion filmmakers. Headlined by Julie Dash, Charles Burnett, Jamaa Fanaka, Haile Gerima, Billy Woodberry,



Figure 1. *Killer of Sheep* (Charles Burnett, 1979).

Barbara McCullough, Ben Caldwell, Carroll Parrott Blue, Alile Sharon Larkin, and Larry Clark, the L.A. Rebellion filmmakers collectively imagined and created a Black cinema against the conventions of Hollywood and blaxploitation films (Figure 1). They did this by attending to the quiet moments of everyday life in their communities and by paying homage to the dignity of their characters.

For the most part, ours is an oppositional cinema that tried to create its own style, approach, and aesthetic—an aesthetic that was informed by a rigorous study of other relevant cinematic approaches. Traditions as divergent as Italian neorealism, Brazilian *cinema nova*, African cinema, Cuban cinema, and various other “third” cinema practices have influenced our media making. Our narrative work might be characterized by a style that privileges the duration of a shot—holding an image long after an action has been completed to inscribe the beauty of the character or moment. Our style can also mean using a group of people as a symbol for an idea, rather than the story of an individual protagonist. Our cinema celebrates African diaspora culture by incorporating pan-African music, clothing, dance, and spiritual practices.

As one of the younger members of the L.A. Rebellion, I know most of the people who came through the program from the late 1970s through 1990. I have always been one of the members who traveled between the filmmaking world and academia fairly easily. In the past ten years, my work has been in documentary—not because that is what I wanted to do, but because it has been what I can get funded. There is hardly any funding for narrative filmmaking now, certainly not the kind that I want

1 Stuart Hall, “What Is This ‘Black’ in Black Popular Culture?,” in *Black Popular Culture: A Project by Michele Wallace*, ed. Gina Dent (Seattle: Bay Press, 1992), 30–31.

to do—the kind that plays with and bends genre: documentary, narrative, and experimental all within the same film. The 1990s were the death knell of most public funding of the arts, especially the cinematic arts. There are no more National Endowment for the Arts regional seed or American Film Institute grants that fund anything other than social issue documentaries. Yet many of us still find ways to make media; we might not be in the mall cinemas, but we are still making work and getting it to audiences via the Internet or through traditional audience screenings in theaters.

The pacing of contemporary Black oppositional cinema, especially that of the L.A. Rebellion filmmakers, is different from mainstream cinema. Generally, the narrative films by the L.A. Rebellion filmmakers have a slower pace and pay more attention to small details, such as the way a person holds a cup, or embracing silences between the characters. Action or quick editing may be limited. That's not what we do best, and that's not how we see the world. Quiet moments need to be discovered and explored.

I trust that my audience is intelligent and will work with me. Thinking about this audience is extremely important to the way I conceive, produce, and distribute my work and that of others. My ideal audience is a concentric circle that constantly expands—first, Black women at its core; then Black people of all generations and gender orientations; and then others.

My primary subject matter will almost always be Black—I see too few representations of Black people who look like myself in mainstream media. Precious few television shows exist with Black families—comedic or dramatic. My husband and I are raising two girls, ages twelve and seven. It would be wonderful to have a Black family show like *The Cosby Show* (NBC, 1984–1992) to watch as a family. Hell, I'd even have us sit and watch reruns of *Everybody Hates Chris* (UPN, 2005–2006; CW, 2006–2009) these days, but these series are not being produced now. Although I am not sorry to see it go, even Tyler Perry's *House of Payne* (TBS, 2006–2012) has completed its run, and his new shows are not quite family comedies.

All I can manage these days are frank and open discussions with my children on why the Black character Zuri from the Disney Channel's *Jessie* (Disney, 2011–) series is not a good character to emulate. Her smart-aleckiness will get you some evil mama stares from me, and if you misbehave like she does, you will be punished by losing privileges or having an intimate date with the belt.

Film is a powerful art form. As a Black filmmaker, I know it can be both entertainment and education. As a filmmaker mom, my children know that we will and must talk about the media we see. We go see movies together when we can. For example, my oldest has seen Lee Daniels's *The Butler* (2013), and we used the film as an opportunity for discussions of civil rights history. It is empowering for her as a young woman to see how young people were the catalysts for much of the change that happened in the movement. But that is not enough. It means explaining to her the history of the Black Panthers and letting her know that *The Butler's* depiction was not quite accurate. Keeping the “Black” in media production and practice means exposing both my children and my students to real people in the movement, reading and watching movies about the unsung heroes and heroines, like the Black Panthers, Ella Baker, Ruby Bridges, and many others who have been ignored or misrepresented in mainstream discourse.

Putting the “Black” in Black popular culture as a mother and professor means explaining and arguing with my children and students about mass media representations of Blackness. For example, I love Bruno Mars, and I let my girls listen to him. But “Gorilla” (2013) works my last nerve. “Ooh I got a body full of liquor / with a cocaine kicker / and I’m feeling like I’m thirty feet tall” are not ideal lyrics for a seven-year-old to belt out. The song also insinuates that making love between humans is the same as sex between gorillas. As much as I wish we were post-racial, many people still construct Black people as savage apes. I do not want young Black men to think that they need to have the savage virility of gorillas! I’m still old school enough to want Otis Redding’s “Try a Little Tenderness” (1966) to be the anthem of relationships in my girls’ lives.

The only way I can address my anger and concern with “Gorilla” is to explain why I have problems with it to the girls. I can no longer monitor what they see and listen to all the time—I’m not with them twenty-four hours a day. For media education to be effective, it has to be employed as a natural, everyday occurrence. What I can do is teach them to be able to stand on their own and explain to their friends why the song is problematic. We also expose them to alternatives. Janelle Monáe performed as the opening act for Bruno Mars a few years ago. Both Mars and Monáe had new albums come out this year. My girls and I will listen to both, but we make comparisons and decide whose music and videos will be more lasting and interesting years from now. Right now, Janelle is winning, hands down!

So we know that style is important to our work in Black media production. Understanding and having a mastery over mainstream conventions is good and important. But for me as a media maker and an artist, I still want to push those conventions a bit and add more. Some pieces might be experimental, as are some of the works of Cauleen Smith: her wonderful and provocative gallery installation videos that push the limits of audio and visuals—*The Grid* and *Remote Viewing* (both 2010); Portia Cobb’s *Don’t Hurry Back* (1996) and her collaborative dance and video-photo piece with Ferne Caulker, *The Sweetgrass Project* (2013); Phillip Mallory Jones’s new and exciting immersive graphic novel *Bronzeville Etudes and Riffs* (2013); and Kevin Everson’s award-winning experimental documentary *Quality Control* (2011).² Other Black media works might be just a little off-center in terms of aesthetics, just because we still want that broad audience.

Black media production has to go beyond merely producing work. It also means using whatever means necessary to get the films, videos, installations, and web episodes to the people. I am a founding member of the Black Film Society of San Diego. We are a small group of film lovers who want to see more films by Black people. It means doing crowdsourcing screenings where we get a large group of people together to see a Black film that didn’t make it to the theaters in San Diego. It is a lot of work, and we only get the film for one night, but it serves as an intervention. And we get to see great films.

2 For more information on the experimental videos and installations of Cauleen Smith, see her work on Vimeo (<http://vimeo.com/kellygabron/videos>). For more information on Portia Cobb’s photography and videos, see her work on Vimeo (<http://vimeo.com/user4431044/videos>). For more information on the work of Philip Mallory Jones, see his website, at <http://www.philipmalloryjones.com>. For more information on the work of Kevin Jerome Everson, see his website (<http://people.virginia.edu/~ke5d/>).

Film-making, as a Black filmmaker, means not just making the films but also doing the important and necessary work of engaging with a live audience whenever possible. It is essential to have a question-and-answer discussion period with an audience. During these sessions we have the opportunity for elders to testify and exchange oral histories. We get to hear possible solutions to problems that the characters faced in the film. We get youth to articulate and tantalize our minds with new possibilities and ways of seeing and creating. We get to talk and engage and not hide behind our computers and phones. As a filmmaker, I get fed from these discussions. I learn, and I try to incorporate what has been said in future work. The audience and I determine, as a collective, what Black means today in all its messy, problematic but yet wonderful ways.

Film or media in a general sense is so important to Black popular culture because it can indeed encompass all those things that Hall suggests are important elements of Black popular culture. Using style, music, and the body as a canvas, Black independent filmmakers play with these three elements in various ways. I am thinking of the wonderfully odd visual compositions of Ava Duvernay's *Venus Vs.* (2013) by our beloved camera wizards Arthur Jafa and Hans Charles. Of music expressed through the form of ragtime by Reginald R. Robinson and African drumming by Atiba Jali in my own feature film *Compensation* (1999). Of the body as a canvas in *Pariah* (2011), by Dee Rees; *Fruitvale Station* (2013), by Ryan Coogler; and most certainly *Mother of George* (2013), by Andrew Dosunmu. Maybe the L.A. Rebellion filmmakers have influenced these filmmakers, or maybe they have not. The important thing to recognize and understand is that a path and a legacy of Black independent film have been laid. Clearly, a Black film legacy lives on in the United States, be it an initial response to racism, to Micheaux's *Within Our Gates* (1920), or even to Madame C. J. Walker's hair products films: these early works, no matter how disparate, both reflected and influenced Black popular culture. We are still doing this today. *