Framing Blackness

The African American Image in Film
In the series

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Framing Blackness

The African American Image in Film

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To my daughters

Nanu and Sascha
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This book is intended as a conversation occurring on many levels, according to the reader's imagination and needs. Certainly that's what cinema has been for me from early days: a kind of an internal dialogue that sometimes involved other people. When I try to pin down the inception of this project, I cannot, for it is the result of a long fascination with cinema and the representation of blackness that began in childhood as soon as I was able to enter not only cinema's fantasy world but also its realm of symbolic, mythical, and political meanings. This probably first occurred on the playground, when I speculated with my friends about the obvious and spiteful racial coding of the "crows" in Walt Disney's cartoon feature *Dumbo* or when we all screamed together at the construction of blackness in *Something of Value* or *King Solomon's Mines*, always implicitly understanding that we were screaming at twisted pictures of ourselves. Over the intervening years, this dialogue has continued to grow more sophisticated as I have worked in film and finally came to study and discuss the ideological, psychoanalytic, and political constructions of race in cinema, media, and literature with my teachers at the University of California in Berkeley, Barbara Christian, Ron Takaki, Michael Rogin, and Elaine Kim, to all of whom I am eternally thankful.

Now I find the study of the cultural politics and ideology of the black cinema and the representation of racial otherness one of the principal focuses of my career, and my dialogue about black cinema has expanded in parallel with the exciting possibilities and new directions of the new black film wave. Consequently, I wish to recognize and thank, along with my teachers, all of those colleagues and friends who have made this dialogue and book not only possible and rigorous but enjoyable. This includes the film scholars and critics mapping and rapping on the discursive frontiers of representational difference and otherness like Rosa Linda Fregoso, Clyde Taylor, Alvina Quintana, Jacque Jones, Manthia Diawara, Houston Baker, Herman Gray, Doug...
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Finally, it is important to recognize that many of the deepest insights about black film come from hanging out in the social, vernacular world of blackness with all of those friends who live their opinions and insights about black cinema representation and cultural production on a daily basis. Among those organic critics, intellectuals, and blues brothers and sisters, I give many thanks to Lawrence McGaugh, Cecil Brown, Spencer Moon, Jessie Rhines, Caroll Peery, Mike Henderson, and Michelle Allison for all of the insurgent, hilarious, and always enlightening hours spent together in spirited conversation going over the ironies, territories, boundaries, intersections, and illuminations of black cinema and its discourse.
Framing Blackness

The African American Image in Film
In the highly symbolic moments in the 1990s black film wave, the intrepid, “tell it like it is” opening of Spike Lee’s epic film Malcolm X (1992) makes two powerful points that resonate with much of the discussion of this book. The first has to do with how brother Spike refuses to let Hollywood off the political hook by preventing his depiction of the meaning of Malcolm’s life from being safely relegated, à la mainstream cinema, to the ghetto of the historical past. Instead, by intercutting slow-motion scenes from the gruesome, videotaped police torture of Rodney King into his opening credits with the voiceover of Malcolm X’s condemnation of the dominant society’s misdeeds against people of color, Lee insists that while his subject is located in the recent past, the issue of African American human rights, so central to Malcolm, is powerfully with us at this moment, socially urgent and ongoing. Lee’s second point has to do with how the national identity is constituted, including the irrepressibility of black demands for emancipation and social justice. The camera frames a full-screen American flag, which suddenly bursts into flames, burning away to reveal the smoldering “X” of black identity and anger always present underneath the nation’s “don’t worry, be happy” ideological surface. Thus, with his most recent outstanding contribution, Spike Lee adds to the efforts of so many talented black directors. By initiating the 1990s black film wave, Lee, Julie Dash, Charles Brunett, Ernest Dickerson, Bill Duke, Charles Lane, Billy Woodberry, Wendell Harris, Euhzan Palcy, Matty Rich, Michael Schultz, Robert Townsend, Reginald and Warrington Hudlin, and Carl Franklin have begun to take responsibility for framing blackness away from the dominant Hollywood apparatus.

Yet, as we know from the dancing jigaboos and accommodating mammyes of Hollywood’s past right up to the neo-Buckwheats of its present, the outlook for a liberated black cinema practice has not always been so promising. As the late film critic James Snead noted,
when the commercial film industry was a young, rising enterprise in the teens of this century, Sergei Eisenstein and Charles Chaplin both speculated that the expansion and universalization of the new medium would forever change and advance the way that human beings would perceive, understand, and communicate with one another. Unfortunately, relations of power, greed, and racism being more stubborn than the visionary hopes of genius, the idealistic projections of these two cinema giants were never to develop fully in proportion to the vast commercial and cultural domination of the film industry. Instead of efforts to construct a truly universal system of communication that builds egalitarian understandings between diverse groups and cultures, what we have seen arise in commercial cinema is a monopolistic, capital-intensive film business. And in spite of some narrative innovation, dissenting artistic exploration, and political countercurrents, the industry has been formula bound and conservative in its vision in order to deliver commodified visual entertainments to the broadest possible consumer market. Instead of inspiring aesthetic, cultural, and political masterworks aimed at liberating the human potential, Hollywood, for the most part, has tended to focus narrowly its increasingly shallow product on escapism, sentiment, glamour, romance, and, more recently, spectacular orgies of violence and sexploitation, all in the service of feeding the dulled cravings and fantasies of the dominant social order. What all this means, specifically, for African Americans (and extrapolated to a wide range of other minorities) is that in almost every instance, the representation of black people on the commercial screen has amounted to one grand, multifaceted illusion. For blacks have been subordinated, marginalized, positioned, and devalued in every possible manner to glorify and relentlessly hold in place the white-dominated symbolic order and racial hierarchy of American society. Fortunately, though, for African Americans and this discussion of the way Hollywood has gone about framing blackness, the ideology of racial domination and difference can never be permanently fixed in place as a complete or static “thing.” Instead, it is a dynamic, shifting “relation” defined and conditioned by social struggle, the demands of the historical moment, and the material imperative of an industry that privileges economics and short-term profit before all other human, aesthetic, or philosophic possibilities or concerns. Because the cine-
matic representation of blackness is the site of perpetual contestation, struggle, and consequently change, Hollywood's unceasing efforts to frame blackness are constantly challenged by the cultural and political self-definitions of African Americans, who as a people have been determined since the inception of commercial cinema to militate against this limiting system of representation. So this book is concerned with African Americans not as mere victims of Hollywood's conjurings. That is, I examine the dialectical push of Hollywood's cultural construction and domination of the black image and the pull of an insistent black social consciousness and political activism that has recently generated waves of black-focused and independent films into commercial cinema's trajectory.

In the broadest sense, then, this project follows the ceaselessly shifting black image in commercial narrative cinema, attending to its insults and injuries, its momentary illuminations and insurgencies, and its rare narratives of black empowerment. What I have attempted to do is examine the representation of black people at five cultural-political moments or junctures that, taken together, range over the historical continuum of Hollywood's production of commercial narrative films, from the starkly racist slander of 1915 and the first feature film to be shown in the White House, The Birth of a Nation, to the hopeful possibilities of an emerging black movie boom with the resurrection of Malcolm X as both culture hero and cultural commodity.

Because slavery is the founding historical relationship between blacks and whites in America and, many would argue, lingers in subterranean forms to this day, I have devoted one entire chapter and part of another to examining the depiction of chattel slavery through the broad output of dominant cinema. The first chapter focuses on slavery and the slave over a seventy-year period from The Birth of a Nation (1915) extending beyond Mandingo (1975); Chapter 2 takes up the contemporary sedimentations of slavery motif in such films as Brother from Another Planet (1984) and The Color Purple (1985), as well as the fantastic depiction of blackness and racial otherness in a broad range of popular science-fiction and horror films such as Gremlins (1984), Little Shop of Horrors (1986), and Alien Nation (1988). Chapter 3 maps the radical shifts in the politics and ideology of black representation brought on by one of the most progressive, insurgent
eras in African American history, the civil rights movement and the Black Power rebellion that followed it. This chapter also discusses the range of films, characters, and actors marking the Blaxploitation period from the collapse of Sidney Poitier’s accommodationist “ebony saint” star image to the rise of the Blaxploitation hero in Sweetback, the sexual rebel of Sweet Sweetback’s Baadasssss Song, or the “super-spade” detective in Shaft (both 1971), on to their supermacho female counterparts Pam Grier and Tamara Dobson in such features as Coffy and Cleopatra Jones (both 1973), and the insipid line of cheap features that inevitably ground the Blaxploitation wave to a dreary halt.

To explain Hollywood’s backlash politics and recuperative strategies arising in the wake of Blaxploitation’s collapse in the mid-1970s, I have devoted Chapter 4 to the stifled, uneven progress of black filmmaking and images in the 1980s, from the recovery and updating of older filmic devaluations of African Americans, as exemplified in the Rocky cycle (1976–82) or The Blues Brothers (1980), to the emergent possibilities of more complex and humane black figures, narratives, and productions on the commercial screen, signaled by the release of Spike Lee’s She’s Gotta Have It (1986) and Robert Townsend’s Hollywood Shuffle (1987). On an expectant and optimistic note, the final chapter discusses the twenty or so films that herald the new black movie boom of the 1990s, and how, in spite of the proscriptions and containments of the dominant film industry, this new wave of films and filmmakers holds out renewed hope for the future of a liberated black cinema. Certainly the appearance of such powerful features as To Sleep with Anger (1990), and Daughters of the Dust, Boyz ’N the Hood and Mississippi Masala (all 1991), Deep Cover and Malcolm X (1992) suggest that a new and vigorous, black-directed wave of films is under way and has a fair chance of sustaining itself over the long haul.

Framing Blackness is not intended to be a complete or linear history of the black presence in the American commercial narrative cinema. Moreover, this discourse tends to focus on the construction of blackness in the most popular, “hit” vehicles of commercial cinema for two reasons. First, Hollywood has played a significant, if colonizing, role in shaping all other narrative cinema languages and formal conventions, and its most successful features are arguably its most influential in this regard. Second, in these films we can most readily see both the indu-
try's ideological power to shape the audience's conceptions of race and its mediation of the audience's racial and social attitudes. At the same time, however, we must pay close attention to those all-important cinematic moments, images, and black independent films that manage to break through the formal veneer of Hollywood's ideology of black subordination and that in important ways declare independent challenges and alternatives to the slick, escapist commodities of the dominant cinema industry.

No Hollywood film of any black image is the result of a single individual's inspiration or effort, but is a collaborative venture in which aesthetics, economics, and politics share (sometimes antagonistically) influences as the print of the flag on Lee's smoldering "X" would signify. So I have attempted to account for the combined effects of sometimes intersecting and indistinct lines of force that shape the black image on the commercial screen, principally Hollywood's ideology of racial domination and difference that constructs black people as other and subordinate, while it naturalizes white privilege as the invisible but sovereign "norm"; Hollywood's fiscal strategies and shifting economic fortunes, which dictate that the production of narrative cinema is a capital-intensive business and, above all else, must return enormous sums of money from the box office; the challenge of a freedom-seeking black social consciousness and political activism, which opposes not only the ways black people are depicted on the screen but also demands a larger role in all aspects of the film industry, from more black directors, technicians, and dramatic roles to more black control in the critical areas of distribution and exhibition. Finally, I attempt to be sensitive to the way that the historical moment favors certain influences and combinations over others.

Insofar as I want to discard the simplistic notion of African Americans as Hollywood's victims, I analyze complex issues of image production and draw from several bodies of theory. Certainly my interpretive strategy draws on those advances in film criticism and theory influenced by such schools of thought as Althusserian readings of culture, Freudian psychoanalysis, narratology, and semiotics. To Louis Althusser I owe the understanding that films as cultural productions are not solely determined by material conditions of the economic base, for feature films arise from a divergent number of causes coming from varied
registers in a given society. Representations of *blackness* in commercial cinema are, in fact, “overdetermined.” So, it is one of the best hopes of black people that, as Althusser asserts, ideology is a process or relation that must always be modified in response to ever-changing social pressures and realities. Instead of being a “false consciousness” rigidly imposed from above on a dominated people, ideology permeates all strata of society and is a people’s “imaginary” relation to their real conditions. Because ideology is constantly negotiated, Hollywood cannot construct a permanent, seamless image of white superiority on the screen, any more than the film industry can completely control or eradicate the oppositional or emergent ideological impulses of African Americans or make black people vanish from the historical scene. The ongoing nature of this renegotiation, the struggle to liberate themselves from the psychic chains of what Amiri Baraka has so poetically called “devilpictures,” is one of the most important in African American culture. In response to the increasingly pluralist nature of the commercial cinema audience, estimated at times to be as much as one-third African American, Hollywood has increasingly attempted to maintain its contested hegemony by co-opting and incorporating emergent and dissonant styles, oppositional images, and resistant films into the framework of its vast commercial enterprise; it doles out to African American directors, actors, and technicians a meager portion of its colossal industry. Black filmmakers, critics, intellectuals, and audiences cannot be distracted by these tokens and must keep the pressure on at all times and increase the ante in the game.

Freud, too, serves this discussion well. For movies are in many ways analogous to dreams; both have a manifest content as well as potent latent meanings. And in much the same way that a dreamer tries to avoid the powerful, repressed currents welling up in his or her dream work by dismissing them as “only a dream,” so, too, the film industry tries to avoid the political and ideological significance of its films with the overworked rationalization that industry movies are “harmless entertainment.” Considering films, then, as the collaborative dreams of the industry in circular collusion with its audience, I have tried to uncover the latent social and political content especially as related to the cinematic construction of black people and racial *otherness* of some of the nation’s most popular features. Also, wherever relevant,
I draw on insights gained from semiotics and narratology by looking on the situations and images of black people in Hollywood films as potent ingredients of a system of social and racial signification. And I have, wherever possible, discussed whole vignettes or kernels of narrative meaning, analyzing them for the manner in which they contain or subordinate blacks or position spectators to view and mark blacks as different or other. As well, this work explores specific examples of narrative endings in dominant cinema practice as special, heightened moments of racial containment and ideological resolution.

In writing this book I hope to contribute to the penetrating, intimate understanding of such cultural phenomena as the recurrence (though in mutated, updated forms) of certain resilient stereotypes and devaluations of African Americans; the confinement of African American talent and energy to the entertainment and sports ghettos that leads to the filmic overrepresentation of blacks as comics, entertainers, athletes, and criminals in disproportion to broader dramatic roles depicting the emotional and intellectual complexity of black life; the manner in which black culture is relentlessly co-opted, emptied of its social meaning, and sold by the entertainment industry as the latest fashion or fad; and the cyclical rise and fall of black film waves or booms under the pressures of the cultural moment and mainstream cinema's economic and social priorities.

Finally, I want to frame this book in terms of the perceptions, illuminations, and explorations of black film critics and intellectuals whose emergent, cultural voices struggle to give critical and theoretical consciousness and shape to this irrepressible, insurgent object of study, black cinema in America. In launching this project, I appropriate the word universal, which is usually reserved for dominant discourses. For I wish this book to be taken as a black document and yet to be of use to all people concerned with blacks finding their full potential and humanity on the big screen, universal in all their soundings, rhythms, resistances, and signifying illuminations.
From ‘Birth’ to Blaxploitation

Hollywood's Inscription of Slavery

The idea of freedom is born, not in the consciousness of the master, but in the reality of the slave's condition. Freedom can mean nothing positive to the master; only control is meaningful. For the slave, freedom begins with the consciousness that real life comes with the negation of his social death.

—Orlando Patterson, Slavery and Social Death

Once many plantations grew cotton; today, some grow movies. But the imperatives remain pretty much the same. As evidence of the incessant need to control black folks' dreams, commercial cinema in the United States, from its inception in Thomas Edison's 1890 "peepshows" to the megabudget entertainment packages of present-day Hollywood, has pretty consistently devalued the image of African Americans and other racial minorities by confining their representations within an ideological web of myths, stereotypes, and caricatures. That this practice exists and prevails can be easily confirmed by a quick
trip to any video store or mall multiplex theater where Indiana Jones
loots the Third World and subdues its people with whip and gun; where
one can view the antiblack, anti-Asian allegory of *Gremlins* (1984) or
the exotic–primitive Mr. T as he grunts and intimidates; or where race
is erased from the lily-white worlds of suburban America in, say, *Rox­
anne* (1987) and *Home Alone* (1990). It is also evident that the workings
of this ideology of racial subordination and difference are not produced
in a formal, aesthetic vacuum devoid of political concerns or historical
influences. Instead, it is part of a broad cultural hegemony structured
into the fabric of dominant cinema at all levels, its production and con­
tent “overdetermined”¹ by Hollywood’s profit-making strategies, the
oppositional pressures of black political consciousness and activism,
and the historical conditions at the moment of a given film’s production.

Nowhere is the cinematic devaluation of African Americans or the
evidence of these overdetermining influences more obvious than in
Hollywood’s plantation genre, spanning approximately sixty years
and depicting slaves and slavery in three broad phases of meaning
and development. The opening phase starts with the original hege­
monic impulse of *The Birth of a Nation* (1915) and extends through
the depression-thirties to the “classic cinema” high moments of *Jezebel*
(1938) and *Gone With the Wind* (1939). Then the fortunes of the cine­
matic slave began to shift; during and after World War II, Hollywood’s
plantation mythology underwent a period of significant revision that
softened some of the genre’s supremacist assumptions about slavery,
as exemplified by such films as *Band of Angels* (1957). Finally, recog­
nizing the postwar pressures of an intensifying black political struggle
for human rights, by the late 1960s a sharp reversal of perspective in
the plantation genre was expressed in such films as *Mandingo* (1975)
and *Drum* (1976).²

By examining the depiction of slaves and slavery over the continuum
of Hollywood’s plantation genre, we confront a number of issues about
the creation and ideological function of these representations, narra­
tives, and images, persistent so long after the abolition of slavery
itself and the collapse of the antebellum South. Central to this discus­
sion of looking at “Old South” epics are questions about the evolution
and nature of the basic slave stereotypes in dominant cinema. How is
slavery, historically affirmed as a labor system based on extreme ex-
exploitation and cruelty and as producing great wealth for white owners, depicted on the big screen? How are the images of whites constructed in terms of class and gender? How is the slavery motif mediated by Hollywood's economic and political needs as a profit-making enterprise? How did these images change in response to black political consciousness and protest, and under what historical conditions?

Opening on February 8, 1915, in Los Angeles and on March 3 at the Liberty Theater in New York City, D. W. Griffith's *The Birth of a Nation*, at twelve reels and almost three hours long, was Hollywood's first feature-length studio production. Because of its antiblack depictions and systematic, overt racism, it remains the most controversial film ever made in America. Although the film was produced, directed, and edited by D. W. Griffith, it reflects the combined work and ideas of three white male southerners living in the North at the end of the nineteenth century. The film emerged out of Griffith's collaboration with Thomas Dixon, whose racist, antiblack novels *The Leopard's Spots* (1902) and *The Clansman* (1905) inform the film's plot. But in addition to writing the screenplay and directing, Griffith shaped the historical background of *Birth* from the interpretation of Reconstruction in fellow southerner Woodrow Wilson's *History of the American People*. Wilson took the view that emancipated blacks were "idlers" who could become "insolent and dangerous"; he wrote of Reconstruction as a policy that "put the white South under the heel of the black South" and that finally provoked the organization and actions of the Ku Klux Klan.

This volatile combination of ideas, energies, and men of the South then generated in *Birth of a Nation* points to an underlying feature of Hollywood's inscription of slaves and slavery: The racism, stereotyping, and romantic mythology of the antebellum plantation South were well established in America's literature, the "plantation school" of novelists and historical commentary, at the turn of the century, long before they were transfigured into screen images by Hollywood. Joel Chandler Harris entertained the nation in the late nineteenth century with stories built around the character he created, the docile, contented slave Uncle Remus, later celebrated on the screen in Walt Disney's *Song of the South* (1946). In his popular novels Thomas Nelson Page depicted free blacks after Emancipation as wretched in comparison to the black servants of the "good old days" of slavery. And even
abolitionist Harriet Beecher Stowe, whose novel *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852) added much fuel to the debate against slavery and became the subject of no less than eight screen versions, depicted blacks as docile victims, totally subservient to whites. Added to these antiblack literary confabulations was the widespread slander of African Americans in the media and popular culture. Northern newspapers and mass media justified southern oppression of African Americans, approved of lynching, and regularly printed racist caricatures of blacks in editorial cartoons, advertisements, and postcards. Reflecting on the poisoned, racist condition of the popular imagination at the end of the nineteenth century, the historian Mary Berry pointedly concluded that “with the possible exception of the Chinese no other ethnic group was more frequently lampooned than blacks were between 1895 and 1900.”

But it is with the novels of Thomas Dixon that the images of African Americans as infantile, lazy, and subservient are supplemented with the radically newer images of blacks as vicious beasts and rapists. The literary critic Addition Gayle attributes the emergence of this new stereotype in the media and popular culture of blacks as vicious criminals to the need of both southern and northern whites to suppress the expansion of black civil rights and political power developed during the progressive interval of Reconstruction (1867-1877) and the determination to reestablish white supremacist social and political domination over the South. Adding a psychological dimension to the issue, the insecurity and economic turmoil rampant throughout the postbellum South had undermined the white southern male’s role as provider for his family; thus he sought to inflate his depreciated sense of manhood by taking up the honorific task of protecting White Womanhood against the newly constructed specter of the “brute Negro.” The historian Joel Williamson notes that Thomas Dixon’s novels and lectures translated this political, psychological background, as well as his own racial pathology, into a fanatical campaign to save White Womanhood by punishing the black incipient rapist. Thus a combination of political, psychic, and material motives shaped the new stereotype deployed by the Klan’s racist thugs to justify their terror, murder, and repression against black people in the South and unite white supremacists, North and South, at the demise of Reconstruction. Commenting on the new stereotypes and the potent sexual paranoia *blackness* and *dif-
ference generated in the minds of racists, Gayle notes that "the darky entertainer and the docile child pale into insignificance alongside the 'brute Negro' who, out of lust and hatred, presents a clear and present danger to the purity and sanctity of white womanhood and civilized America as well."⁶

Only six years old in 1915, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) swiftly responded to The Birth of a Nation's advanced technical rendering of the traditional stereotypes of docile, loyal slaves, glad to be part of a benign, paternal slave system; the film debut of the black as a brute and a vicious rapist of white women; and the story's twisted interpretation of Reconstruction and celebration of Ku Klux Klan terrorism. Even as the NAACP exerted pressure to have Griffith's film censored or banned before its scheduled opening in New York City, Thomas Dixon made an end run two days before Birth was to be reviewed by New York's censors, and it became the first feature film to be shown in the White House. Dixon had taken the film to Washington to get the tacit support and leverage of his graduate school buddy, now President Woodrow Wilson, and had screened it for Wilson and his cabinet and their families. The next night, Dixon showed it to the Supreme Court and members of Congress in the ballroom of the Raleigh Hotel.⁷ This strategy effectively cut the opposition down to some minor legal skirmishing with the NAACP. The Birth of a Nation was allowed to open in New York, uncut, to packed audiences and at a premium price of $2.

The film was immensely popular, influential, and very dangerous. Helping to launch the age of mass media communications and narrative cinema as a popular commodity, Birth, in its first eleven months in New York City had 6,266 showings and was seen by an estimated 3 million people.⁸ One of the film's most obvious dangers arose from the timing of its release; it appeared in the middle of a period, from 1890 to 1920, when Jim Crow segregation was on the rise; lynching was at its height; and in general mob violence, murder, and oppression against African Americans was rampant and intense throughout the land. This bloodthirsty climate, in combination with Birth's romantic depiction and glorification of the Ku Klux Klan, most certainly contributed to the public's tolerance of Klan criminality and its expansion to its greatest membership ever, about 5 million, by 1924.⁹ The film critic Bosley
Crowther commented on the barely veiled terrorist rituals preceding screenings of *Birth*, noting that “a favorite and effective stunt to whip up excitement was to have a troop of horsemen dressed in the white sheets of the Ku Klux Klan ride through towns on their hooded horses in advance of showings of the film.”

We can note further evidence of the film’s broad and vile influence; on Thanksgiving night, 1915, some twenty-five thousand Klansmen marched down Peachtree Avenue in full menacing regalia to celebrate the film’s opening in Atlanta. So, considering the racism, discrimination, and brutality at large in that historical moment, African Americans had every reason to fear that what was depicted on the screen could easily be acted out against them in reality.

Although the legal struggle put up by the NAACP, black intellectuals, and concerned whites failed to stop the film’s general circulation and popularity, the unrelenting protest surrounding *Birth* did have positive, dialectical returns. Because of the controversy activated by black protest, 558 feet of scenes showing black soldiers attacking white women, a Lincoln letter saying that he did not believe in the equality of the races, and a scene posing the deportation of blacks back to Africa as a solution to America’s race problem were cut from the work print.

What is more, the climate of protest and controversy was intense enough to pressure President Wilson into withdrawing his support for *Birth*. Equally important, Griffith’s film became a focal point of black intellectual and social energies organized to protest the codified racism of a powerful, nascent film technology and industry. African Americans and an array of other concerned citizens were challenged to answer these new expressions of racism with new discourses, critiques, and political strategies. Over the ensuing years, this expanding program of critical analysis, protest editorials, and social action would be refined by the NAACP and other civil rights groups to expose, combat, and moderate the biased, antiblack rendering of the plantation South in dominant cinema that continues in many latent expressions to the contemporary moment.

Organized resistance to *The Birth of a Nation* and other films, like the equally vehement but less known *The Nigger* (1915), also had the effect of galvanizing African Americans into forming black independent film projects and production companies to depict through “posi-
tive images” the uplift and progress of the race. One of the most notable efforts in this direction was the black-produced Birth of a Race, released in 1919 and doomed to commercial failure because of its poor technical and narrative qualities as well as the economic problems of confronting an established, white-dominated, and white-monopolized film industry. In retrospect, the popularity of, and intense organized protest against, The Birth of a Nation serves as a good index of the brutal climate that African Americans faced under the Wilson administration, a historical moment marked by frequent lynchings throughout the South, a resegregated federal government, and the rise of a reinvigorated and popular Ku Klux Klan. Equally as important, the struggle over Birth's racist ideology and its public exhibition signaled how deadly serious the new medium, barely twenty years old, had become as a tool to create and shape public opinion and racial perceptions. 13

It was in this role, that of creator and mediator of opinion, that Birth projected itself into the continuum of cinema history. It conceptualized, for all the antebellum “southern romances” that followed, the cinematic paradigm of the plantation myth and its fallacies regarding the depiction of African Americans. Moreover, it expressed this paradigm in the highest innovative and technical standard of the time and in the newest, and potentially most powerful, medium of mass communication and culture ever to stimulate and entertain the social imagination. As frank racial propaganda, The Birth of a Nation is an elaborate construction of stereotypes, ranging from the loyal slave, the mammy, and the dancing bucks in the slave quarters of pre–Civil War days to the insolent, criminal, and free “brute negroes” of Reconstruction. Griffith’s film depicts contented slaves leisurely picking cotton to orchestrated spirituals that sentimentalize their labor, which became a genre cliché, a standard way of masking the exploitation of black labor in the plantocracy. Note the use of this standard scene and music under the credits in the introduction to Gone With the Wind twenty-four years later. Birth also features such staples of antebellum mythology as devoted house servants who prefer slavery to freedom and a strong, loyal mammy who knocks down two Yankee guards to help her white master escape Reconstruction justice. And as she did in romantic fiction and commercial advertising, the cinematic mammy was to endure,
becoming a stock figure in the majority of plantation dramas produced in Hollywood. Working her way into all genres, the mammy became a dominant, if not the dominant, representation of black women on the screen. In fact, this particular devaluation of black womanhood became so resilient that James Baldwin traces her trajectory from The Birth of a Nation to Guess Who’s Coming to Dinner? (1967). Baldwin’s analysis, then, is insightful when he comments that “the inclusion of this figure is absolutely obligatory—compulsive—no matter what the film imagines itself to be saying by means of this inclusion. How many times have we seen her? She is Dilsey, she is Mammy in Gone With the Wind, and in Imitation of Life, and The Member of the Wedding.”

Moreover, we hear her persistent echo today as she smiles at us (in a less caricatured version) from pancake boxes or in such contemporary films as Clara’s Heart. But beyond the stereotypic devotion of black servants, The Birth of a Nation presents a detailed and convincing presentation of everyday life that conforms to ideas about the benevolence of the plantation and slavery already common in literary tradition.

In contrast with Griffith’s depiction of a genteel South and its loyal black slaves, the film counterpoises the chaos of the Reconstruction South and its “insolent” free blacks. With depictions of a totally fantasized black legislature in Reconstruction South Carolina and the “renegade negro” and would-be rapist Gus, Birth offers blunt and unique racial defamations. The incredible mise-en-scène of the Reconstruction legislature is an elaborate and detailed lie showing black members, while in session, eating chicken, sipping whiskey from flasks, ogling white women, and passing a motion that all legislators must wear shoes in the legislative chamber. Playing on the much-incited white fear of interracial sex, Birth claims that the black legislature’s first law is one permitting marriage between blacks and whites. Carrying this anxiety to its white supremacist extreme, the film depicts Colonel Cameron’s little sister jumping off a cliff to preserve her purity, rather than submit to the amorous advances of Gus, who is obviously and ironically played by a white man in blackface.

Gus’s attempted violation and other acts lead to the Klan’s lynching him, publicly displaying his corpse, and massing in a climactic, “heroic” ride to reunite northern and southern whites and reestablish white domination over the South. Nothing like this glorious ride had
ever been shown on the cinema screen. Innovatively detailed, action-packed scenes like this exemplified Griffith’s brilliant directing and editing technique and made him the leading director of the 1920s. And although his depictions of blacks as incompetents and criminals proliferated and are still common across all film genres, Griffith’s sensationalized allusion to the rape or molestation of white women by blacks and his glorification of Klan terrorism were too explicit for most directors of the plantation romances to follow. Here, then, we can infer the overdetermining political pressure of organized and persistent black protest in moving Hollywood (always worried about its box office) toward a certain moderation. On this latter point, however, we can also trace a line of developmental continuity from Birth to that other great classic of the genre, Gone With the Wind (1939). Both epic features focus on the South during and after the Civil War, and both are spectacular, hegemonic masterpieces of antiblack sentiment. The notable difference is that Gone With the Wind avoids the overt inflammatory propaganda and plea of The Birth of a Nation, revealing how much Hollywood had refined the art of suggestion.17

Even if the industry had to learn to pull its ideological punches, Birth, as the first true feature-length film made in America, set the technical and narrative standard for the new industry, and until the end of World War II it specifically influenced the content of all films set in the slave South. During this period, Hollywood’s uniformly devalued African American image (in characters of buffoons, servants, and a variety of subordinates) can be explained in part by economic considerations. As the cost of making a feature film rose astronomically from $20,000 to $300,000 in the short interval between 1914 and 1924,18 Hollywood moguls and producers increasingly tried to reflect conservative middle-class values and the strict racial codes of the times to guarantee profits from their films as well as offset the costs of increased capitalization and consolidation.

Who was responsible for the general antiblack attitude in dominant cinema and the more focused racism of its plantation genre? Most film critics agree, although they argue from somewhat different perspectives, that Hollywood itself was to blame for this persistent cinematic devaluation of blacks. Randall M. Miller takes the position that studio executives wanted to avoid outside control of the content of its prod-
uct while building an expanded, consensus audience. Thus the film industry opted for a strategy of self-regulation resulting in the Hays Office Code, which guided Hollywood during the 1930s. Of the Code’s frankly racist features, Miller observes that “it prohibited scenes and subjects which, however distantly, suggested miscegenation as desirable, thereby building a color barrier in Hollywood’s dream worlds as rigid as the color line in America’s real world. By casting the issue of racial mixing in black and white terms, the Code proclaimed an assimilationist ideal for European ethnic groups and a segregationist ideal for the ‘colored folks.’” The film historian Thomas Cripps rejects the notion that Hollywood feared that a more just representation of blacks on the screen would jeopardize its “southern box office” and regards the industry as completely responsible for the racism in its films. Edward Campbell adds more texture to this overall picture with the insight that Hollywood ignored its own, and the North’s, pervasive discrimination against blacks; it constructed the cinematic Old South as the true and only bastion of racism, allowing the studios and northerners to indulge the comfortable myth that they were somehow not part of the systematic, nationwide oppression of black people.

Beyond codifying racial subordination, the displacement of racial inequality to the South on the screen and the expansion of the industry, moviemaking in general and the plantation genre specifically were greatly changed by two signal events in 1929, the start of the Great Depression and the commercial development of film sound. The Crash of 1929 began a disastrous fall in studio profits that lasted until 1934. As Hollywood began to revive, it realized that its old antagonists, the censors and regulators, had all but vanished in the whirlwind of uncertain times, and in the absence of naysayers, commercial cinema could develop its leading role in mass culture. As Robert Sklar describes this juncture: “Not only did the movies amuse and entertain the nation through its most severe economic and social disorder, holding it together by their capacity to create unifying myths and dreams, but movie culture in the 1930’s became a dominant culture for many Americans, providing new values and social ideals to replace shattered old traditions.” Robert Ray makes the further point that Hollywood deals with America’s crises by either displacing or repressing them and that these strategies were necessarily intensified and refined in
the Great Depression, when commercial cinema was established as predominantly escapist in nature.22

This tendency toward denial and escapism in times of crisis accounted for the plantation melodrama’s national popularity, which resulted in the production and exhibition of more than seventy-five features about the South between 1929 and 1941. In the midst of the depression, the southern plantation film addressed an economically insecure audience’s diverse needs and problems by placing them in the comfortable, opulent milieu of the antebellum past. The grandiose settings of such films as Dixiana (1930) and Mississippi (1935) reassured the spectator that hard times were only a passing moment between more stable periods of economic growth and prosperity.23 Moreover, we can see the functions of escape and reassurance working to contain and structure race relations, perhaps most notably in the interaction between Shirley Temple and the infantilized black servants with whom she cavorted in several antebellum features. In The Little Colonel and The Littlest Rebel (both 1935), Temple’s song-and-dance numbers with Bill “Bojangles” Robinson became dominant cinema classics. But these roles, and similar ones played by Stepin Fetchit and Willie Best, were resented by black spectators and critics as demeaning renditions of the myths and stereotypes inflicted on blacks by an indelible culture of racism. Shirley and her servant’s spontaneous laughter, song, and dance in story worlds that afforded the two actors a childlike equality only confirmed prevailing racial symbolic order in which blacks were looked on as dependents of white paternalism and relegated to the political status of children. As well, her films deploy the standard Hollywood strategy of masking broad social and historical conditions by reducing them to the responsibility of the individual. Temple’s depression-era plantation vehicles suggest to the audience that the daunting economic and social problems of the times could be conquered by maintaining the right personal attitude and an optimistic outlook.24

As for the introduction of “talkies” in 1929, not only did Hollywood find the technological development that enabled it to triumph over the depression but, with cinema sound, it refined and advanced the reproduction of the slavery motif in terms of content, scale, and verisimilitude. The plantation genre’s representation of blacks shifted from the more comical stereotypes, acrobatics, and exaggerated slapstick ges-
tures enhancing the pantomime narrative of silent film into the more subtle and convincing stereotypes of field hands and house servants who sang, danced, and mumbled lines of ungrammatical devotion to their masters. Gone, also, from the Hollywood plantation were the whites, held over from the minstrel and vaudeville stage traditions, who, as in The Birth of a Nation, played black roles in blackface. No matter how demeaning the roles would be, sound created the popular demand for real blacks with black voices. At the same time, the threat of the insurgent free black and the focus on the South's "Negro problem" disappeared from the genre with the coming of sound. With a gradual reduction in lynchings (relative to the peak years of the early 1920s) and the economic expansion of the studio system, the film industry began to conceptualize and produce the "Old South" as an escapist vehicle, a panacea for depression-era anxieties. Thus the studios shifted away from silent film's concern about the threat of black insurgency on the plantation, which seemed to transcode the violent racial atmosphere of the times. Now studio moguls clearly understood that in such a dire economic period, larger audiences and profit margins lay in the direction of escapist fantasies depicting the ease and wealth of the plantation without any hint of the tension and unrest that was a very real possibility outside the theater doors.

The development of film sound also strengthened the connection between slaves and the sentimentalized black "spirituals" and other music of the Old South. During Hollywood's classic period (1930 to 1945), there was hardly a plantation film made that did not contain some sort of sentimentalized musical interlude performed by the devoted slaves on the plantation or the black servants of the postbellum years. The stock figures of singing "darkies" in Dixiana (1930) and the musical comedy starring Bing Crosby, Mississippi (1935), immediately come to mind. And in high plantation style, Bill "Bojangles" Robinson and Shirley Temple danced and cavorted in their two most popular Old South vehicles, The Littlest Rebel and The Little Colonel. Or Hattie McDaniel and Stepin Fetchit, Hollywood's most popular mammy and Sambo figures, performed extensive musical parts in the postbellum Judge Priest (1934). In most of these films, if blacks labored at all, they did so while singing happily; thus music masked or softened the historical reality of black folks' stolen labor, along with the parasitism of
the master class. Plantation life was reproduced in romantic, nostalgic scenes of splendorous wealth, clichés such as white-columned porticos, mint juleps, and white ladies in lavish formal gowns. The planter class in these films spends its time gossiping and flirting at endless parties, balls, and dinners. Nowhere do these slave masters give much attention to what must have been a very demanding business—the punishment, torture, and exploitation involved in the day-to-day affairs of running a slave system. In almost all these films the plantation is depicted as a place of leisure for master as well as slave.

With the production and 1938 release of the enormously popular Jezebel, the mythical Old Plantation South comes to one of its moments of cinematic perfection. Starring Bette Davis, Fay Bainter, and Henry Fonda, representing the planter class, and Eddie “Rochester” Anderson, Lou Payton, Stymie Beard, and Theresa Harris, representing the slave class, the film was such a hit that many critics saw it as limiting the commercial potential of Gone With the Wind, scheduled to be released the following year. Bette Davis and Fay Bainter received Academy Awards for best actress and supporting actress, and Jezebel placed eighth among the year’s ten most popular films.

Set in 1852 New Orleans, the story is about a rebellious “belle,” Miss Julie (Bette Davis), who violates the conventions of her gender and class. Wearing a red gown to a ball where formal white is required, and committing errors of judgment such as provoking two gentlemen in her family circle to duel to the death, she comes to be compared with the biblical Jezebel; but in an act of self-sacrifice and redemption she ends the film by exiling herself to an island for yellow fever victims and lepers to care for her stricken love, Prez (Henry Fonda). While moving through this subtly articulated and romantic plot, the film manages to reproduce a detailed but highly romanticized portrait of mythical antebellum society. Casting slaves and slavery in the standard stereotypes and clichés of the day while privileging the point of view of the planters, the narrative of Jezebel is also structured around masked issues and tensions of race and class. The film focuses on the white aristocracy and its trappings while containing its counterpoint, the black slaves, who represent moments of comic relief and, overall, a suppressed voice or structured absence in the narrative.

One of the film’s most consistent and effective ways for privileging
the planter class and its ideology is its reliance on sheer opulence, its grandeur of costuming and architecture, as well as its extensive deployment of *mise-en-scène*. Moreover, the use of the plantation mansion as metonymy or metaphor for the legitimation of the slave system and the hegemony of the planter class can be traced along a developmental cinematic trajectory. The Camerons’ mansion in *The Birth of a Nation*, which is fairly modest, has no extended yard and is located in town and represents a modicum of historical reality. As the genre developed, Hollywood’s imagined Old South mansion expanded in scale and detail into grand cinematic metaphor, sheltering an exclusive, mythical world of aristocratic power and aesthetic delights. And as the mansion expanded, the overly racist appeals of the narrative, depicted in films like *Birth*, were diminished or softened, seemingly absorbed into the very magnitude and charm of the mansion’s structure. A fantasized paternalism and elegance, not the terror and coercion of the slave system, are the emphasis here. Domestic slaves are pacified and docile, concerned with their functions in this epic setting; the more frank, sullen, and less pacified field hands hardly ever make it into the frame. Thus the “Big House,” as slaves called it, becomes screen metonymy for aristocratic elegance and power. Playing counterpoint to the deprivations of the Great Depression, the size, scale, and importance of the cinematic antebellum mansion inflates, starting with such productions as *Di x i a na* (1930), whose sets alone cost $500,000. Then, in a series of Old South fantasy vehicles, comes the typical setting of *Mississippi* (1935), the “Magnolia Plantation,” described by the film critic Campbell as “magnificent, dominated by an eight-columned portico. Flowers were everywhere, and young maidens strolled quietly through the garden. The home’s interior was no less appealing; crystal chandeliers highlighted the decor’s splendor.”28 But it is at the end of the 1930s, with the great filmic mansions of “Twelve Oaks” in *Gone With the Wind*, and “Halcyon” in *Jezebel*, that the metaphor swells to a sort of exaggerated Hollywood perfection.

The planters of *Jezebel* act out the story in a cinematic architectural space and scale that is the envy of any royal personage residing in historical reality. In the film, Miss Julie (Davis) owns two enormous, richly appointed, and perfectly maintained mansions, one in New Orleans and the other outside town on her plantation estate “Hal-
cyon." About half the film takes place in the grand interior of "Halcyon" mansion, where every narrative kernel is played out in its own room and correspondingly grand mise-en-scène. With the use of extensive tracking shots that were not technically possible during the production of Birth, the camera follows the actors as they glide up and down monumental staircases and through a maze of huge doorways, halls, and gigantic rooms. Thus the depression audience is admitted to the exclusive inner world of the aristocracy and, by implication, into their worldview as only a handful of immigrant Hollywood directors could imagine it. Supplementing this inner world and depicting the only slave labor in the film, uniformed house servants glide silently about their tasks, maintaining the material and cultural space as well as order of the plantocracy. As the architecture and scale of palaces and public buildings have been used to legitimate the domination, and often terror, of autocratic ruling classes throughout history, so here the mansion and its grounds are used to legitimate the rule, and masked terror, of the plantation system in the cinematic Old South.

To sustain the grand illusion of the setting and the sharp race-class contrasts between aristocratic whites and their black servants, the film virtually omits whites other than the aristocrats, with a few negative exceptions. One is an interesting scene in which a white worker shoots another in the back as he tries to run a quarantine boundary imposed because of an outbreak of yellow fever in New Orleans. As the white worker is shot, he stumbles and dies quite rudely, on camera, in the driveway of the "Big House," as its refined occupants look on. To draw out the scene's class implications, we must contrast it with the duel that immediately precedes it. Two aristocratic gentlemen, armed with pistols, elegantly pace off in opposite directions until they pass beyond the frame. Off screen, they turn at the referee's signal and fire; the violence of the duel is signified by two pistol reports and puffs of smoke entering the frame from opposite sides. The violence of poor whites is brutal and graphic, while that of aristocratic gentlemen is aestheticized by a code of honor that regulates dueling, and it is displaced, for reasons of suspense as well as romance and class, off the screen.

This narrowing and distortion of class representations differs from the way social classes are depicted in the genre's founding impulse, The
Birth of a Nation, in which Griffith sympathetically depicts all classes of whites, from worker, soldier, and craftsman to planter aristocrat. A craftsman, Billy the blacksmith, plays a key heroic role in capturing Gus, the “renegade negro.” It was necessary to Griffith’s racist appeal for all whites, regardless of class or occupational differences, to unite along the barrier of race against the insurgent free blacks. Griffith also depicted a broader class spectrum of blacks than did later plantation films, but the devoted servants of the Camerons, the “renegades” and free blacks of the Reconstruction legislature, and, at the top of the black class hierarchy, the nefarious mulatto politician Sylas Lynch are all stereotypes or negative images.

As the character and dimension of the planter’s mansion shifts, the representation of social classes also seems to flatten out, to narrow. Lower-class whites recede or disappear entirely from the screen as Hollywood’s romantic gaze falls exclusively on the travails of the planter class and the congenial paternalism of the master–slave relationship. This tendency quickly hardens into genre formula and structures a number of productions. In this regard, Jezebel best renders the cinematically imagined, hermetically enclosed world of planter aristocrats. Yet Hollywood gave its domestic slaves a kind of class consciousness that surfaces in their gestures toward working-class whites; they seem to imply that their condition as servants of the master class was preferable to the freedom of poor whites. Note the continual references to “po’ white trash” uttered by Mammy and the O’Haras in Gone With the Wind.

This absence of class diversity highlights the interdependency of white and black, master and slave, and the tension between these structural antipodes in the naturalized racial order and romantic fantasy of Jezebel. All the black parts in the film are time-honored stereotypes that legitimate the slave system and serve as devalued or comic counterpoints to white roles. These are not so much dramatic roles as structured spaces. In the film and in the historical slave system blacks are considered utilitarian commodities. They stand silently fanning or waiting on the master class, with no thoughts or articulations of their own, their actions and lines coming entirely in response to white commands. In this respect, these cinematic constructions are perfect slaves, as only they could be in classic Hollywood cinema. Jezebel opens
with a black coachman responding to the orders of his passengers, two white ladies, with a series of unconscious and reflex “yessums” that continues after his passengers have left the scene, thus comically signifying his “thingness,” that he is an automaton.

Uncle Cato (Lou Payton), the kindly and completely devoted head of the house servants, is such a meek Uncle Tom figure that the mere mention of the word “haunted” by Prez (Henry Fonda) at the dining table stereotypically provokes him into near-panic. In another scene highlighting the paternalism of the plantocracy, the gentleman Prez offers to drink a mint julep with Uncle Cato, who declines, considering it a violation of convention between master and slave. In contrast to the weak Uncle Tom type, Hattie McDaniel, plays a similar scene with Clark Gable in Gone With the Wind. McDaniel, being the strong, assertive mammy (the only standard black image missing from Jezebel), quickly downs the first drink offered and accepts another two while casually discussing the politics of the plantation with Gable. In contrast, Bette Davis’s maid, played by Theresa Harris (who found little work in the film industry after this part because she was “too dark”), is cast in more inferior terms than McDaniel’s portrayal of Mammy, as she is Davis’s moral, intellectual, and racial contrast and counterpoint.

When Miss Julie brings home the red dress that her peers call “vulgar” and that later causes her downfall, the maid openly covets it and expresses ungrammatical, childlike delight when Davis promises to give it to her after the ball. Thus the black maid is irresistibly attracted to the sign of the vulgar, and by implication the film marks Davis as a “Jezebel” for liking a vulgar and whorish thing her black maid would admire. But the black-white binary runs deeper than a lapse of judgment, as is underscored by Miss Julie’s willful, articulate character, in contrast to her maid’s subservience and simplemindedness.

One of the most revealing and striking moments in the film occurs when the slaves come up from “the quarters” to sing for the mistress and guests of the “Big House.” What would otherwise be a sentimental, musical interlude turns complex when Davis tries to entertain her guests and distract their attention from the impending duel that she has just instigated. The critic Donald Bogle, provides us with the insight that in many 1930s movies black servants and subordinates are used as the source of comfort and sympathy for an abandoned master.
or mistress. And while this need for black approval and reassurance motivates Davis in the scene, the formula does not work this time. What is striking about the scene is its uncontainable, subversive excesses, which erupt when the slaves rush gleefully across the lawn to gather, dancing, on the steps of the portico. At this moment a sort of visual break or gap occurs in the film's ideological continuity, and there is a hint of the vast collective of black slavery. In such numbers and dressed in such a manner, they can only be field hands and their families, not the uniformed house servants who occupy the middle ground of the film. For a brief moment, we catch sight of what is usually cinematically repressed—the dimensions of the slave labor system and the captive population required to produce the vast wealth of “Halcyon.” And against the backdrop of wealth, we glimpse the slaves' wanting condition. But this moment of dialectical insight is brief, and the field hands are quickly reabsorbed into the fantasy of the narrative as the camera moves to a close-up of Davis conducting the singing. The scene turns ironic when the anguish over the coming duel shows on Davis's face and is contrasted with the sound of innocent black laughter and delight as the song ends.

With the release of Jezebel and Gone With the Wind, the plantation genre peaked in appeal and popularity. By 1939, over 7 million copies of the novel Gone With the Wind had been sold, and its author, Margaret Mitchell, had won the Pulitzer Prize for 1937. Although the movie was released in 1939, it was the top moneymaking film of its decade and today ranks eleventh in “The 200 Moneymaking Films of All Time.” But even as this zenith was being reached, a process of ideological revision of the slavery motif had begun. During the production of Gone With the Wind, blacks stirred in protest against its depiction of slaves and slavery, and the NAACP was able to pressure producer David O. Selznick into cutting some of its more offensive scenes (drawn from the novel). And after its long anticipated premiere, pressure was kept up against the film, with limited results, by the National Negro Congress, various black newspapers, and sympathetic left groups including the Communist party. These rumblings of black protest and political consciousness would have increasingly sharper implications for the plantation genre over the next two decades as African Americans started to
focus on Hollywood’s racism as part of a broad offensive against white cultural–political hegemony and black inequality across the land.

Also contributing to the revision of the plantation genre and the myth of the Old South was the mounting pressure of historical conditions. When *Gone With the Wind* was released, the American audience was acutely aware that war was ravaging Europe. This national uneasiness actually bolstered the film’s popularity, for Hollywood followed a strategy of displacing contemporary anxieties into the distant past of the Civil War. But the coming of war meant not only new priorities in film production but also a new national ideology, and the plantation genre rapidly declined. With the rise of fascism and its rabid “Master Race” ideology in Europe, America’s entry into the war seemed inevitable. The U.S. government had to appeal to national unity, find a way to motivate the 1 million blacks it had drafted to fight, and face its ubiquitous racist ideology at home. Hollywood was increasingly aware that its sizable black audience was on the brink of taking action against the glaring contradictions in Uncle Sam’s stance on racism and the demeaning black depictions by commercial cinema. When the NAACP met in Los Angeles in 1942, Walter White challenged Hollywood, in the light of the fight against fascism and racism overseas, to clean up its racist screen images of blacks here at home. White’s challenge had weight behind it, for not only was NAACP Special Counsel Wendell Wilkie chairman of 20th Century-Fox, but the NAACP was rapidly becoming a mass organization, growing in membership from 40,000 in 1940 to 450,000 by 1946. In view of the genre’s ideological obsolescence and the likelihood of black protest, Hollywood dropped the inscription of slavery and the plantation myth for themes more likely to turn a profit for the duration of the war.

By 1945, Hollywood’s “classic period” had peaked in influence and profit, and the film industry’s decline had begun with postwar changes in Hollywood and among its vast consumer audience. In 1945, average weekly theater attendance hit an all-time high of 90 million moviegoers, with box-office receipts almost of $1.7 billion for the year. By 1980, average weekly attendance had slipped to a dismal 19 million people. In the interim, technological change and shifting audience loyalty laid the industry low. In 1946 there were 8,000 television
sets in America; a scant ten years later, the number of television sets had soared to 35 million; concurrently, the moviegoing audience decreased by 43 percent. The reversal of Hollywood’s fortunes was also significantly related to the fragmentation of its traditional audience. Surveys revealed that the postwar audience was younger, more liberal, and more educated; furthermore, this audience perceived film as an art form as much as escapist entertainment. Instead of accepting the “classic” strategies of displacing political-social problems into the remote past or adult fantasies, these moviegoers, flushed with optimism following victory in World War II, wanted pictures that looked squarely at America’s problems and confronted the social issues of the day.

In the years immediately following World War II, Hollywood seemed undecided about how to interpret the Old South experience in the plantation genre, which was making a limited but feeble comeback. Walt Disney’s *Song of the South* (1946) and the cinematic interpretation of black novelist Frank Yerby’s work in *The Foxes of Harrow* (1947) offered two models for possible development. *Song*, starring James Baskett as Uncle Remus and Hattie McDaniel in her usual role as the joyful mammy, was supposed to be set in the 1870s South, but African Americans found the portrayals so tainted with nostalgia and servility that they condemned the film as an implicit and biased inscription of slavery. In an editorial that was unusually frank for the middle-class-oriented *Ebony*, the magazine reviled the film’s stereotypes and called for open protest. In fact, *Song of the South* became the film most protested by blacks since *The Birth of a Nation*.

In contrast, two scenes in *The Foxes of Harrow* held out the promise of a revisionist trajectory. The first depicts slaves practicing a voodoo ceremony, thus suggesting an undercurrent of African retention and cultural resistance to slavery and Christianity. In the second scene this resistance becomes overt when a black mother throws herself and her baby son into a river rather than go on living in slavery, thus presenting the commercial movie audience with a rare moment of dialectical shock and revelation about the brutality of slavery. By the end of the 1940s, protest increasingly sensitized Hollywood to the African American perspective on slavery, and settings in the postbellum South and broader class perspectives began showing up in film.
Edward Campbell, commenting on this shift, notes that “such innocent films with their nostalgic views of the South were becoming scarcer. The majority of movies presented a postwar South populated by pitifully poor farmers, unrepentant bigots, sadistic rednecks, sex objects, and greedy, ambitious members of a corrupt upper class.”

In this period of Hollywood’s uncertainty and changes in its audience profile, African Americans were experiencing a rising sense of political consciousness and activism that would irrevocably alter their relationship to America, as well as alter America itself. From the late 1940s through the 1960s, with a strategy of mass protest that later exploded into open rebellion, blacks affected changes in all areas of American society. Black political activity achieved an unprecedented national prominence, starting with the Congress of Racial Equality’s (CORE’s) first Freedom Rides in 1947 and continuing with the Montgomery bus boycott in 1956, the March on Washington in 1963, the Watts rebellion in 1965, and the 1968 assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., which left 160 U.S. cities burning. In daring mass actions and in the negotiations of ordinary lives, black folk created a political and cultural atmosphere in which the issues of race and freedom could not be ignored. Consequently, it would no longer be possible to produce biased epics with the blissfully ignorant attitudes of So Red the Rose (1935), or Gone With the Wind. With the rise of the civil rights movement, black protest became increasingly focused on the film industry. The NAACP, especially through its Hollywood branch, and CORE kept continuous pressure on the industry throughout the 1960s to upgrade the cinematic image of blacks and to employ more blacks in all capacities within the film industry. These lines of social and political pressure began subtly to influence first the revision and then the reversal of the portrayal of slaves and slavery in the movies.

The outright reversal of the cinematic mythology of slavery was accomplished by means of several intersecting political and cultural shifts. Among them, the Watts rebellion in 1965 serves as a dramatic historical marker, a critical juncture in black political action and consciousness. But, most certainly, by the mid- to late 1960s, African Americans had become disillusioned with the integrationist focus of the civil rights movement, which they felt was limited to dealing with the specific oppression of institutional and cultural apartheid in the
South and did not address black economic, political, and spiritual survival in the nation as a whole or, especially, in America’s impoverished inner-city ghettos of the North. Consequently, the late 1960s saw a broadening and dramatic rise in black militant political activism and cultural consciousness. From 1965 on, African Americans found their sharpened perspective on American racism and their political expectations more relevantly addressed by a resurgence of black nationalism, the conceptualization and articulation of Black Power, the founding of the Black Panther party, and a range of organizations specifically devoted to the goal of “black liberation” in America.

As an integral part of the resurgence of a broadly based, black nationalist political consciousness, there also arose the Black Arts movement, which in many ways rivaled the energy, expression, and cultural production of the Harlem Renaissance of the 1920s. One of the foremost examples of this new black energy was found in the work of the Black Arts Theatre and School, started in Harlem in 1965 by LeRoi Jones (now Amiri Baraka). Within this framework of cultural renewal, black writers, artists, and intellectuals started to articulate and elaborate on their position on slavery, emphasizing the system’s utter cruelty and black resistance to it, identifying slavery as the formative black experience in America and as an experience that many whites would rather leave repressed or romanticized. LeRoi Jones’s plays *The Slave* and *The Dutchman* explored the theme dramatically. Angela Davis, in “Reflection on the Black Woman’s Role in the Community of Slaves,” gendered slavery. William Grier and Price Cobbs, in *Black Rage*, argued that de facto slavery was the fundamental, ongoing, material, and psychic relationship blacks suffer from in contemporary America. And Harold Cruse, in *The Crisis of the Black Intellectual*, argued that blacks had to break the ties of the master-slave relationship and repudiate its “intellectual paternalism.” To this day, the continued importance of slavery to African Americans is signified by the endless reworking of the motif in contemporary black novels, such as David Bradley’s *The Chaneysville Incident*, Shirley Anne Williams’s *Dessa Rose*, Gayl Jones’s *Corregidora*, Charles Johnson’s *Oxherding Tale* and *The Middle Passage*, and Toni Morrison’s *Beloved* (for which she won the Pulitzer Prize in 1988).

And so it was in an atmosphere of expansive mid-1960s political and
cultural revolution, a continuing industrywide slump in profits, and the rise of the Blaxploitation\(^4\) genre, launched partly in response to black protest but mostly to generate much-needed capital, that Hollywood’s perspective on slaves and slavery began to slide from revision into actual reversal. Just as the “frontier myth,” and the Western in general, as a Hollywood strategy for depicting Indians, showed signs of collapse with the release of *Little Big Man* and *Soldier Blue* (both 1970), so did the “plantation myth” as a way of depicting black people further collapse and reverse its ideological direction with the release of such films as *Slaves* (1969) and *Mandingo* (1975). But the production of a whole series of films that reversed the filmic perspective on slavery and the Old South, including *The Quadroon* (1971), *Drum* (1976), and *Passion Plantation* (1978), also was part of an overall Hollywood strategy to recover from economic crisis by producing the Blaxploitation genre for inner-city audiences, where blacks dominated ticket sales.\(^4\) In fact, what Hollywood found itself doing by the early 1970s was mediating two distinct currents of social thought on race, for two separate audiences. Films like *Shaft* (1971), *Superfly*, and *Sounder* (both 1972), and *Black Caesar* (1973), with their thematic emphasis on black confrontation with, or victory over, white oppression, played well in the inner cities, while *Tom Sawyer* (1973) and *Shampoo* (1974) or the vigilante films *Dirty Harry* (1971) and *Death Wish* (1974) signaled a split market and in white suburban audiences a deepening resistance to any further economic and political gains on the part of African Americans. It was in this Blaxploitation context that Dino De Laurentiis produced *Mandingo* (1975), which, notably, ranked eighteenth among the most lucrative productions of the year.\(^4\) On the surface, the film’s plot is simple yet sensational enough. Set in antebellum Louisiana on a crumbling, decadent plantation, the film portrays the “buck” Mandingo (the renowned heavyweight boxer Ken Norton), bought in a slave market, who fights profitably for his masters, played by James Mason and Perry King. Complications arise when King’s wife (Susan George) seduces the Mandingo, who as the result of their sexual adventure is caught and consequently boiled alive by his owners. Beyond *Mandingo’s* exploitation of Hollywood’s commercial strategies of interracial sex and violence, the film is worthwhile for its reversed point of view on slavery, as well as for scenes and details that unmask
or counter the ideological stance taken in such films as *The Birth of a Nation* and *Jezebel*.

Even as the title rolls up on the screen, *Mandingo* signals the audience that they are entering a reversed or new ideological terrain. Instead of something predictable, like the sentimental “Swanee River” of *The Birth of a Nation*, sung in the style of a black spiritual, or the orchestrated slow waltz that opens *Jezebel*, *Mandingo* begins with a funky protest blues, with the refrain “I was born in this time, to never be free,” sung Delta style by eminent bluesman Muddy Waters. By overlaying the film with a music track that is a contemporary black expression of southern music, the film breaks the connection between the devoted slaves of the nostalgic Old South and the music that was so entertaining to historical slave masters and contemporary white audiences. This recontextualization continues as the camera pulls up the road to reveal a crumbling mansion, centered on the unkept grounds of a swampy plantation. Here, from the beginning, the antebellum mansion is established as the icon of evil and decay, more the “terrible house” of horror films than the splendid “Big Houses” of productions like *Dixiana* and *Gone With the Wind*, which legitimate and even celebrate the crimes of the planter class.

Opening scenes often are used to express an ideological frame or orientation through which the spectator consumes the narrative; the openings of both *The Birth of a Nation* and *Jezebel* establish the relationship between white and black as a “natural” one between superior and inferior. *The Birth of a Nation* contrasts a ramshackle slave wagon with an elegant planter’s carriage, while *Jezebel* entertains with comic contrasts between masters and slaves. In a graphic scene of shock and reversal of perspective, the first revelation of *Mandingo* is the obvious, but usually repressed, essence of the master-slave relationship, which is one of coercion, production, and the ownership of black people as commodities from which labor, sport, and sex are extracted. Much in the way that the literary genre of slave narratives argued against slavery by graphically inscribing a catalogue of its brutalities and horrors, this first scene in *Mandingo* turns dominant cinema’s representational strategy on its head by depicting the ugly commercial transaction so central to the slave system: the buying and selling of human beings. A suitably calloused slave trader care-
fully goes over a line of twenty slaves, examining them closely for such
detractions from their market value as rotten teeth, stiff joints, and
even hemorrhoids, while trying to bargain down their master (James
Mason). It is revealed in the conversation that the average price for
a slave was about $700, and life expectancy in the cane fields for an
adult male averaged six years. The ideological reversals established
in this scene are further reinforced with depictions of a slave market
and its transactions, a scene in which a slave is brutally whipped for
teaching others to read, and a scene of great emotion in which black
families cry and say a final good-bye to each other as they are “sold
apart.” All of Mandingo’s scenes are clearly shot from a point of view
sympathetic to the African American perspective, depicting whites as
cruel, degenerate slave masters and not, as in dominant cinema’s past,
as aristocratic ladies and gentlemen of leisure distanced from the bru­
tality of slave ownership or the labor system of the plantation.

Correspondingly, Mandingo reverses the myth of the slave’s devo­
tion to the master class as well as the slave’s mythical disdain for
freedom, so commonly expressed by Hollywood throughout the planta­
tion genre. While nothing as resistant, organized, or historically accu­
rate as the Underground Railroad, which helped thousands of African
Americans escape to the North, is depicted in Mandingo, blacks are
shown running away, rebelling against whites, and having conscious,
politicized discussions about their rights as human beings and the pos­sibility of their eventual emancipation. Moreover, Mandingo echoes
with other insurgent voices and influences, for the film’s dialogue ex­
pressly mediates the militant thinking, language, and aspirations of
the Black Power movement that arose out of black frustration with
the limited gains of the civil rights era. The film’s most powerful and
politicized sequence erupts when Cicero (Ji-Tu Cumbuka), after kill­
ing his white masters and escaping, is captured by the Mandingo (Nor­
ton) and a posse of slave catchers. Cicero accuses the Mandingo of be­
traying black solidarity, telling him in the masculine terms of the late
1960s Black Power generation, “If you see me hang you goin know . . .
you goin know you killed a black brother!” This scene is followed by
Cicero’s electrifying gallows speech, which continues to resonate with
the insurgent rhetorical style and consciousness of the film’s moment of
production. After being set on the back of a wagon with a rope around
his neck, Cicero addresses the mob of planters and their attendant 
slaves, pointing out the contradictions of the slave system, as well as 
the predicament of being black in America. Never before articulated 
in the plantation genre, these were powerful statements that exhila­
rated the black moviegoing audience and that pertain to this day. As 
Cicero so bitterly puts it in his Foucauldian gallows speech:

I ain’t goin’ give no lifetime of misery and sweat to these pecker­
woods. I’d rather die than be a slave! You, peckerwoods, that’s right! 
You peckerwoods was oppressed in your own land. We was free and 
you brought us here, in chains. But now, we here. And you just 
better know, this is much our land as it is your’n. . . . And after you 
hang me, kiss my ass!

The only scenes in the whole plantation genre, before the revisionist 
late 1940s, that even come close to admitting that African Americans 
hated and resisted slavery occur with Griffith’s insolent “renegade 
negroes” in Birth, and in So Red the Rose (1935), where Clarence Muse 
leads a revolt of hundreds of slaves that is fantastical stopped by a 
slap from the master’s adolescent daughter.

Yet another startling reversal of perspective occurs in Mandingo’s 
explicit interracial sex scenes between Ken Norton and Susan George. 
These scenes directly challenge the white supremacist notion of the 
“purity and sanctity of white womanhood” so specifically idealized in 
the plantation genre but also strictly upheld in all American films until 
it was first transcended by such stars as Jim Brown and Raquel Welch 
in the late 1960s. Revealing the long, ironic trajectory of miscegena­
tion in dominant cinema, Susan George’s character in Mandingo is the 
sexual antithesis of roles played by Lillian Gish and Mae Marsh in The 
Birth of a Nation sixty years earlier. Whereas Mae Marsh jumps off 
a cliff and dies to avoid being defiled by the “black brute” Gus, Susan 
George is killed by her husband when he discovers that she has seduced 
the stereotypically sexually potent “black buck,” Mandingo. This final 
reversal of the taboo on interracial sex was as much informed by Holly­
wood’s “sexploitation” strategy of depicting scenes that could not be 
shown on television to regain some of its audience lost to that medium 
as it was by its Blaxploitation strategy and the general pressure of a 
ten-year political struggle of feminism in the nation that was work-
ing hard to overthrow the patriarchal, oppressive cult of “true white womanhood.”

Breaking this final taboo against interracial sex, along with depicting slavery as a brutal, evil system, signaled the collapse of the inscription of the slavery and plantation genre in all its phases, hegemonic, revised, and reversed. The television release of *Roots* (1977) and its becoming the most watched program ever, the release of “sexploitative” *Passion Plantation* (1978), the airing of and protest against *Beulah Land* (1980), and the airing of *North and South* (1985) are, for the present, weakening signals of a genre flickering into extinction. Nevertheless, because of the politically conservative nature of the moment and the film industry’s economic need to probe the imagination, fashions, and tastes of an ever-shifting market, in the future Hollywood will surely make periodic attempts to resuscitate some of the broader, less contested, configurations of the genre. This is certainly what is happening with the much anticipated sequel to *Gone With the Wind* and with the comic return to the contemporary southern plantation, such as the setting of Chevy Chase’s *Fletch Lives* (1989).

Moreover, it has become increasingly clear that while *Mandingo* represents a complete reversal in perspective from that of *The Birth of a Nation*, and while it depicts many dialectically shocking scenes exposing the barbaric nature of the slave system, much more needs to be done to sharpen and deepen the reversed, or ideologically unmasking, perspective on slavery. Problematically, both views of slavery, the original white hegemonic impulse and the reversed black perspective, are, for the most part, one-dimensional, with all characters turning into oppositional cutouts produced according to Hollywood’s economic needs and representational strategies at a particular political and cultural moment. What would be desirable in future cinematic inscriptions of slavery would be the production of black and other independent features that artfully historicize and politicize the issue in a way that not only reveals slavery’s past but at the same time, by allegory, allusion, or otherwise, communicates its relevance to all Americans today. Perhaps only an “other” or independent cinema is capable of producing the kind of alternative or “emergent” content that is not, for the most part, determined by the absolute need to turn a short-term profit at the box office. *Solomon Northup’s Odyssey* (1984), directed
From The Birth of a Nation (1915), courtesy of Museum of Modern Art Film Stills Archive.
From Gone With the Wind (1939), courtesy of Museum of Modern Art Film Stills Archive.
From Mandingo (1975), courtesy of Museum of Modern Art Film Stills Archive.
From Mandingo (1975), courtesy of Museum of Modern Art Film Stills Archive.
by Gordon Parks and drawn from an actual slave narrative, seems to move in the direction of deepening and refining the reversed perspective on slavery. But the cancellation of a cinematic interpretation of Shirley Anne Williams's novel, *Dessa Rose*, to have been directed by Bertrand Tavernier, signals that the film industry and the consumer imagination are not ready for any cinematic tale of slavery that strays too far from the framing confines of Hollywood's crude fantasies and exploitative strategies, be they hegemonic, revised, or reversed.

While the slavery motif and the plantation genre have ended in most of their outright inscriptions, fragments of the motif still resonate as sedimented themes, metaphors, and icons in the content of many contemporary films. Thus we can observe in popular narrative cinema the continued surfacing of slavery's repressed bits and pieces in a broad range of films, such as *Blade Runner* and *The Toy* (both 1982), *The Brother from Another Planet* (1984), *The Color Purple* and *Def Con 4* (both 1985), *One False Move* (1992), and many other industry features. In the next chapter I have more to say about these sedimented fragments of slavery and their resonating echoes on the American screen.
Certainly race is one of the most emotionally and politically charged subjects in the American social psyche and media imagination. The social and political meanings of “race,” of course, are not fixed but are matters of ongoing construction and contestation; whether in volatile debate or subtle transactions, the negotiation of racial images, boundaries, and hierarchies has been part of our national life from its beginning. The turbulent power of race is evinced by the variety of ways in which the images and historical experiences of African Americans and other people of color are symbolically figured in commercial cinema. These images of racial otherness range from the ideologically obvious (what else is Willie Horton but the political progeny of “Gus,” the black rapist of The Birth of a Nation?) to cinematic eruptions of socially repressed forces of sexuality that carry the threat of a dreaded primordial “blackness.” Certainly the same principle threatens an innocent white reality in King Kong’s fatal, obsessive encounter with pure white womanhood, or in the climactic moment of the sci-fi thriller The Fly (1958), when the scientist emerges from an experiment with a monstrous Sambo-like, black fly’s head,
his compound eyes bulging and his erect, black, phallic arm jerking as he advances toward his screaming, white-clad wife. Or consider the figuration of racial otherness and slavery in the ecologically exhausted world of the science-fiction detective adventure *Blade Runner* (1982). Set in Los Angeles's dystopian future, humanoid robots, “skin jobs” in bigoted parlance, revolt against their bleak designation as expendable slave laborers. *Blade Runner*’s powerful, latent issues of otherness culminate in the film’s concluding fight scene, when the cyborg Roy (Rutger Hauer) slowly breaks the fingers of bounty hunter Deckard (Harrison Ford) while educating him in the politics of slavery and freedom. Roy declares succinctly to Deckard, “Quite an experience to live in fear, isn’t it? That’s what it is to be a slave.”

The psychic residue of slavery continues to taint subtly all black-white social relations and transactions, if for no other reason than the fact that African Americans still find white domination a persistent condition and black folk more disadvantaged and marginalized than any other group or social collectivity in the society. As scholar Arnold Rampersad notes: “Admitting and exploring the reality of slavery is necessarily painful for a black American, but only by doing so can he or she begin to understand himself or herself and American and Afro-American culture in general. . . . Only by grappling with the meaning and legacy of slavery can the imagination, recognizing finally the temporality of the institution, begin to transcend it.” Yet, this observation has another side, for the nightmare of slavery is also an indelible, if fearfully avoided, part of white America’s history and must be “admitted” and “transcended” by whites as well. I have already argued in this text that when slavery is rendered in cinematic terms, it is presented from a dominant, usually evasive, sentimentalized, or nostalgic perspective that counters African Americans’ rendering of it in their folktales, ruminations, narratives, songs, and novelistic reconstructions.

This polarized, partially repressed recounting, from blacks’ basically elided or untold history to whites’ largely euphemistic evasion, gives the representation of slavery its ideological utility and psychic energy. Yet, as noted, the act of denying or repressing the full horror of such far-reaching, powerful history prevents Americans from
accurately or completely understanding the national character. This need for evasion feeds the same dynamic that Robin Wood and Michael Rogin say defines and animates the horrific in sci-fi and horror movies. For the “monster” always constitutes the return of the socially or politically repressed fears of a society, those energies, memories, and issues that a society refuses to deal openly with. In just this manner, although involving a broader range of images and expressions, slavery continues to return, popping up in the most unexpected forms and moments throughout Hollywood’s output of feature films.

Because slavery, and resistance to it, is such a central and formative historical experience deeply rooted in the social imagination of all Americans, cinematic expressions of slavery have become sedimented into a range of contemporary film narratives and genres, and, specifically, into the symbolic or latent content of many films depicting African Americans. These sedimentations can be as obviously and coherently expressed as the parody of the plantation genre in Fletch Lives (1989), starring Chevy Chase, or The Toy (1982), starring Richard Pryor as a present-day department store clerk bought by a rich southern politician (Jackie Gleason) as a “toy” for his son; or, as in the Planet of the Apes quintet (1968–73), where the struggles and reversals between futuristic apes and humans form a sustained allegory not only for slavery but also the burdens of racial exploitation, the civil rights movement, and the black rebellion that followed it. Moreover, slavery’s sedimentations can be as momentary and fleeting as a sentence or a musical refrain threaded into a film’s soundtrack. A comment makes the point in My Dinner with André (1981), when the effete André observes that his relationship to the doorman of his apartment building is still really that of master to slave. The allusion is musical in the “post nuke” sci-fi film Def Con 4 (1985), when a bunch of white Georgia survivalists capture a group of the scientific elite held universally responsible for nuclear disaster, tie their hands behind their backs, line them up single file with ropes around their necks, and trot them down a highway. Filling in the scene’s sedimented meaning is the sound of African marimbas as the technocrats are led off into captivity. Or the slave’s repressed presence surfaces in the machine with superhuman intellect. In this instance, we can hear the slave’s voice in
a megacomputer named Proteus, in the science-fiction gothic *Demon Seed* (1977), when Proteus continually and resentfully refers to his inventors as "these men who own me."

While considering the endless range of possible manifestations of sedimented slavery in popular narrative cinema, two recent films, *The Brother from Another Planet* (1984) and *The Color Purple* (1985), emerge as important not only for their contemplations of the slavery motif but also because they were popularly received commercial productions that articulate black story lines played by black casts for consumption by a broad mass media audience. But since these films were made about black people and not necessarily by them (African Americans having little institutional control over the production of their screen images), our discussion will also locate these sedimentations in the broader context of popular cinema's culturally dominant ideology, which at minimum tends to fragment and individualize the African American impulse for justice and social equality and usually, explicitly or implicitly, constructs a textual norm that privileges a white male perspective on the screen.

Coming in a decade that saw fewer than a dozen black-cast productions, *The Brother from Another Planet* (1985), starring Joe Morton and produced and directed by John Sayles, emerges as a noteworthy, if rare, effort at making a film for commercial distribution that privileges elements of the African American aesthetic, lifestyle, and political perspective on the United States. Made as an allegory for the historical situation of the runaway slave, set in contemporary New York City, and produced in the loose framework of the science-fiction genre, the film cannot be accurately explained as the typical mainstream commercial feature reflexively pumped out by Hollywood. Instead, *Brother* fits more into the filmic style, language, and tradition tagged as the "American Art Film," that is, a film made for consumption by an intellectual, countercultural, or "art house" audience. A typical art film is marked by its experimental cinematic language and codes of representation, its temporal disruptions and fragmentations of the "classic" linear narrative, and a countercultural but individualist authorial stamp that, while structured with the drama of social problems, rarely resolves them with collective action or any real possibility of social change.⁶
Brother, then, is an amalgam of displacements and sedimentations of slavery thematics figured into a unified allegory expressed in the American art-film style. And in a number of ways Brother goes beyond merely reversing the older hegemonic Hollywood perspective on slavery, as do the films of Blaxploitation (1970s), which depict, as in Drum (1976), revolt, reversal, and revenge in the relations between slave and master. Brother is timely and politically relevant because its sedimented slavery motif is set in contemporary New York City, thus connecting the oppression and injustice of the antebellum past with that of the contemporary inner-city ghetto. Moreover, because the film’s narrative unfolds outside the South (slavery and the antebellum South being displaced to “another planet”), the film focuses on the trials and adventures of a “runaway” in the North and his resistance to slavery and slave catchers. Because few films articulate the perspective of the runaway slave facing an uncertain and problematic future in the North, Brother broadens the filmic contemplation of slavery into significant new political dimensions and narrative terrain.

The film is about a “Brother” (Joe Morton) who escapes slavery on another, more technologically advanced, planet and takes refuge in Harlem with the active support of its black, Latino, and welfare white inhabitants. While the Brother, who is mute but has miraculous and psychic powers, goes through a series of adventures and interactions with various residents of Harlem and the surrounding city, slave catchers, sent from his planet, track him, interrogate his friends, and attempt to recapture him. Here we find an important refinement of the reversed perspective on slavery in the film’s narrative: The film goes beyond merely exposing the evil nature of the slave system to show resistance to it in some detail, both on organized cultural and political levels. Brother’s interplanetary flight and the refuge he finds in New York are analogous to the activities of the historical Underground Railroad, the abolitionist apparatus that helped tens of thousands of African Americans escape across the Mason-Dixon Line to one of its most popular “stations,” New York City. Brother makes this connection literal when he views an African American historical exhibit celebrating the resistance and exploits of runaways and enthusiastically gestures to a young boy with him that he, too, knows the plight of the runaway slave.
Audience identification with Brother is built by depicting the slave catchers as the faceless, sinister Orwellian agents that we have come to recognize with apprehension in all genres of our cinema. The ground is well prepared for the film’s parody of such thought police by the “conspiracy” films of the 1970s, *Serpico* (1973), *The Parallax View*, and *The Conversation* (both 1974), which reflect the nation’s cumulative concern about extralegal corporate or government activities. Consequently, the black men in Odell’s bar, responding to the standard “Have you seen this man?” routine, instantly understand the slave catchers as a form of police authority, interplanetary or otherwise, and activate the African American cultural code of silent or evasive resistance in the face of such persons and institutions. Yet, obviously, blacks are not the only collectivity with moves to deal with such situations. A white woman clerk at a welfare office deploys a bureaucratic strategy, giving the slave catchers a stack of meaningless, confusing forms to fill out, thus avoiding their questions. Filtering the situation through his social experience, the Puerto Rican who works with the Brother at a video arcade reads the slave catchers as *migra*, immigration agents, and dissembles by refusing to understand English. In all these scenes, Brother’s tight allegory works with complex, multivalent perfection, depicting the relentless pursuit by the slave catchers and at the same time portraying them with the impersonality of outer-space aliens as well as authoritarian agents in awkward disguise. Here the film is aesthetically and politically effective in translating the experience of the runaway slave into the terms and gestures of contemporary urban culture.

If the location of slavery is displaced onto another planet, it is also transfigured and existent here on earth, in contemporary New York City. The setting and visual terrain of the film make it clear that the black inner city that the Brother must negotiate is at least as unfree, socially and racially stratified, and dangerous as any plantation located in outer space or the antebellum South. Brother is mugged and slashed by young junkies in a tenement hallway. And New York’s air of *de facto* apartheid is rendered with subtle irony in a scene where a white kid on the subway tells Brother that he can perform a magic trick and make all the white people disappear. The train then makes its last stop before heading uptown into Harlem; all the whites get off,
and the blacks, headed home from work downtown, get on. As well, Brother makes a profound observation about the new and different forms slavery can take in this new and confusing urban world, which the film fittingly refers to as “Babylon.” On his planet, the displaced Old South, slavery takes its traditional form of beings owned as commodities from which labor, sex, and sport are extracted. Conversely, here in the ghetto, where black labor has been rendered obsolete, as clearly shown by the unemployed black men roaming the streets and hanging out in Odell’s bar, neoslavery takes the form of commodity consumption: the ultimate and most compelling commodity in this milieu being heroin. Thus the film constructs a casual chain of exploitation, which is revealed by Brother’s psychic detective work, tracking the line of profit from an overdosed junkie kid found dead on a trash heap through the street pushers and up to the ultimate dope dealer, a white corporate businessman directing the drug traffic from his plush office suite atop a Manhattan skyscraper. Here, consonant with the billboards in urban black communities voicing the same theme, Brother’s political argument is dialectically sharp, revealing drug addiction as the insidious new slavery and the corporate businessman, hidden behind a chain of transactions, as the new slave master. 8

In other ways, however, the film’s political argument is proscribed, if only because it is trapped as a commodity in the system of domination it seeks to unmask or critique. One of Brother’s subtle limitations has to do with the unconscious way the film plays into dominant cultural perceptions of slaves’ alleged silence or inability to speak or make their case in history. While Brother’s muteness is an essential narrative device that allows several of the characters to play revealing soliloquies off him, it also creates a “structuring absence” 9 in the text that reveals ideological boundaries the director and writers are unable to transcend. In this sense, Brother’s voice and the possibility of his vocalizing claims for self-representation, justice, and freedom are eradicated, and he comes across as the silent, exotic other, 10 a common figure in the movie industry. Two examples of the sci-fi slave’s silence come to mind here. In Planet of the Apes (1968), the master class (the apes) refuses to believe that the slave class, the humans they have captured, can use language, the silence of the slave being one of their main rationalizations for maintaining a slave system. In Enemy Mine (1985),
alien being Lou Gossett, Jr. yet another “brother from another planet” who has experienced slavery, cannot speak directly to the audience because of the barrier of his exotic language. Significantly, these cinematic examples are symbolic of the actual situation, until recently, in American slave historiography. As Charles T. Davis and Henry Louis Gates, Jr., point out, until the research of John McCade in 1935, L. D. Reddick in 1937, and Richard Hofstadter in 1944 challenged convention, most historians attempted “to re-create an image of slavery primarily from the records of the planters, the masters.” And, as Davis and Gates go on to note, depending on which side of the argument one stood, this erasure of the slave’s voice was taken either as an indication of the absolute brutality of the system or, more commonly as I would argue, as proof of the inherent mental inferiority of the slave.11

Another important, latent meaning of Brother’s narrative mediates national concern about nonwhite immigration, for the film begins with Brother’s spaceship splashing down at Ellis Island, a key historical entry point of nineteenth- and early twentieth-century immigrants coming to the United States seeking new lives and opportunities. So, the Brother’s construction is multivalent, as an alien from outer space, a runaway slave, and a West Indian immigrant. The last of these identities is signified by the soundtrack of Caribbean steel drums, reggae music, Brother’s dreadlocks, as well as his journey through the hell of “Babylon” (New York at night) with his Jamaican “dub poet” guide “Virgil,” an obvious allusion to Dante’s Inferno. But the problem with his immigrant identity resides in the fact that with it Brother subtly takes on the neoconservative political emblem of “model minority.” As the right-wing argument goes, “model minorities” (immigrant Asians, West Indians, etc.) have succeeded in America with personal initiative and self-discipline, whereas African Americans, Indians, and Chicanos, lacking this “human capital,” have not.12 Of course, this argument conveniently overlooks the hundreds of years of organized genocide, exploitation, forced underdevelopment, and racism that all nonwhite minorities have had to endure in this country.

But the film also presents the audience with a complicated double message on black solidarity. In the main, the film definitely suggests a Pan African (even galactic) unity in the struggle against oppression, as signified in the name the protagonist is given, “Brother,” and the
support of the blacks who so eagerly take him in. Yet Brother is also markedly different from the earthlings who shelter him. The eradication of his voice denies him the solidarity and identification of communicating in the African American or West Indian idiom or participating in the all-important bonding of the black oral tradition. Brother’s psychic powers and feet with three toes, as well as his talent for psychically fixing electrical appliances, are interesting expressions of the science-fiction genre, but they also symbolize the “human capital” that allows him to succeed as a model minority. He is able to use these psychic abilities to find work instantly and become the exception, the immigrant “model” among the multitude of unemployed blacks and Latinos trapped in the streets and bars of Harlem. Moreover, these contrasts are heightened when the blacks at Odell’s bar and Brother and other interplanetary runaways resist the slave catchers as separate, uncoordinated groups, and with different levels of effectiveness.

The film’s closure builds when the slave catchers trap Brother at Odell’s bar, and the black patrons are able to resist long enough to allow Brother a chance to run for it. Later, Brother is apprehended, but he manages to escape again, down an alley with the slave catchers in hot pursuit. Here Brother encounters the “Underground” of runaways from his planet that has been subtly hinted at throughout the film, and together they make a stand, surrounding the slave catchers. Shocked into immobility by the sight of dozens of interplanetary ex-slaves gathered in collective resistance, the slave catchers pause in bewildered contemplation of their situation and then self-destruct by vaporizing themselves. This resolution clearly privileges the value of collective organization and resistance to systematic oppression, and it has an allusive validity of the collective resistance of African Americans, abolitionists, and others to historical slavery. Brother’s merger into the black community is ultimately signaled by his taking the “A” train back up to Harlem and a shift in the soundtrack from steel drums, his musical marker throughout the film, to the African American spiritual “Promised Land.” Nevertheless, this last scene seems to suggest a tangle of unresolved ideological tensions and ironies as it reveals Brother, alone, smiling and looking through a chain-link fence across an empty schoolyard at a drab institutional building with a banner “Harlem Plays the Best Ball in the World” hung on its facade. This final
shot frames Brother as an isolated individual seemingly released from slavery as well as the social unity necessitated by resistance, free to pursue the vicissitudes of the American Dream. Conversely, though, this final mise-en-scène also confronts and entraps him. The barrier of the chain-link fence and the dreary school building with its ironic message (Harlem has always played the “best ball,” but it is quality education that determines a people’s future) all seem to signal Brother’s absorption into a society where the opportunities and rights of blacks are uncertain and ambiguous at best. Despite a thematic emphasis on the social collectivity throughout the film, Brother standing alone, at the film’s end, in a stark, spatial, and social emptiness, seems partially to recoup Hollywood’s narrative strategy of ultimately resolving social and political problems in individual terms.13

Unlike Brother, which is aesthetically and politically innovative in the trajectory of American commercial cinema, The Color Purple (1985) comes at the end of a long line of Hollywood studio productions based on all-black casts and themes. And somewhat predictably in many ways, Purple shares a number of similarities and flaws with these films. While Brother sediments slavery into its narrative as a unified allegory, in The Color Purple the slave motif surfaces intermittently as fragments that subtly invert the historical meaning of slavery as well as the onus for the crime. And though the film avoids one of Hollywood’s most important codes of domination, the female body as an object of voyeuristic sexual pleasure, Purple fits easily into the cinematic “metagenre” that Fredric Jameson has tagged “the cult of the glossy image,” those slick, wide-screen, color-saturated, dehistoricized commodities that can only misrepresent the past as a sort of imagistic nostalgia. But the film’s production values also concur with many of the Gettino/Solonas “First Cinema” criteria. From their perspective, First Cinema productions are Hollywood or Hollywood-derived films that offer the consumer–spectator a cinematic commodity that depicts a seamless, illusory world that is complete, where no social change is possible or necessary. And, again, First Cinema vehicles almost always solve social or political problems with the isolated actions of the individual and from the individual’s point of view.14

Thus I would argue that The Color Purple can be best understood when considered as part of a long line of Hollywood all-black spectacles.
that locate their narratives in the rural black South in a romantic, historical void that occurs somewhere between World Wars I and II. So, in this frame, *Color Purple*'s resemblances to *Hallelujah* and *Hearts in Dixie* (both 1929), and *Cabin in the Sky* (1943) are instructive. Consider, first, that all these films locate the black community in naive or idyllic rural settings removed from the unrelenting containment and oppression of the surrounding, hostile white community. Further, all these productions construct black folk as simple country beings without the slightest inkling of a political consciousness or recognition of their precarious historical situation. But reluctantly engaging an increased awareness of race relations that dominant cinema since the 1960s can no longer entirely repress, *Purple* does make some concessions on these latter points in that it tries, no matter how superficially, to acknowledge the social reality of racism in the confrontation between Sophia (Oprah Winfrey) and the town’s white mayor and his wife.

All these black-focused mainstream cinema spectacles, however, have in common entertaining, folksy, musical interludes woven into their narratives. And in *Hallelujah*, *Cabin in the Sky*, and *The Color Purple*, black music is inaccurately polarized as “good” or “bad,” thus articulating an imposed sense of Western, Platonic–Puritan, aesthetic binaries. Though contrary to dominant cinema fantasy, the black sensibility by far transcends such stiff dualisms, for its aim is to express integration and the continuity of black life. That is, black music works to represent life in all its paradoxical, contradictory (w)holeness and complexity. Conversely, in these films, Gospel or church music occupies the realm of absolute good, while the pervasive black popular idioms of jazz and blues are depicted as a seductive evil. For instance, in a clever scene of comic fantasy in *Cabin in the Sky*, Louis Armstrong performs masterfully as a devil, playing jazz in hell, while Duke Ellington’s music is depicted as sinful temptation set in a saloon, a gambling-house milieu as opposed to the virtuous and nondescript music sung in a country church.

In *The Color Purple* this same tired juke-joint–church polarity is repeated, only this time with patriarchal affirmations that are especially puzzling, since Alice Walker’s novel, above all, articulates and celebrates the eventual triumph and independence of black “womanist”
values. Shug (Margaret Avery), who is a blues singer, yearns throughout the film for a reconciliation with her preacher father. This comes about in a curious manner in a scene that is one of the film’s climactic, ideological resolutions. Shug is depicted singing at the local juke joint, a short distance from her father’s church, where the lead vocalist and the choir are simultaneously singing to the congregation. By cross-cutting between scenes of the two singers and their audiences, a musical and ideological contest builds between the secular world of the saloon and the realm of the church. As clever editing shapes an accelerating montage, Shug, leading the patrons of the blues, starts walking toward the church. And as they walk their music subtly shifts to that of the church. The final reconciliation between Shug and her preacher father, between blues and Gospel audiences, occurs on unequal ground, in the church in front of the altar, with everyone singing spirituals and Shug throwing herself uncritically back into the arms of her father, the prime signifier of institutional Christian patriarchy, which has meant nothing but intolerance and oppression to her. Here the ideological meaning and intent of Walker’s book on the point of white, hegemonic, patriarchal religion is entirely subverted. In the novel, Shug breaks with her father and the church because God, as interpreted by the church, is a “he” and a white man’s God. Suffice it to say that this scene is unique to the film as Hollywood blatantly recoups the very values that Walker, through Shug, rejects.

Another way in which the dominant ideology is built into the film’s musical “apparatus” can be best explored by posing a critical question: If The Color Purple, as has been so widely publicized, is really about black life and culture and depicts, no matter how ineptly, in its narrative content both blues and Gospel music, why can’t the film use black music in its extradiegetic soundtrack? While the musical content of the film is blues and Gospel, as heard in many scenes, the film’s musical frame, its musical soundtrack, is the same tired, Eurocentric movie music heard in most Hollywood products, functioning on a commentative level, jerking tears from the spectators-consumers, cuing them as to when to laugh, whom to hate, and with whom to sympathize. This is all the more curious when we consider that the renowned black composer Quincy Jones is responsible for this music. In contrast to Purple’s tired soundtrack, note the articulation of the black musical
idiom in the soundtracks of Jones's *In the Heat of the Night* (1967), Taj Mahal's *Sounder* (1972), or Muddy Waters's brilliant interpretation of *Mandingo* (1975). In fact, the strongest component of many of the films of Blaxploitation's high cultural moment were the soundtracks composed by African Americans in African American musical idioms.\(^{17}\)

So, in *Purple*, one ideology contains and dominates another, as director Steven Spielberg contains and reverses the meanings of novelist Walker, and the Eurocentric soundtrack contains or packages African American music for popular consumption. In conjunction with *Purple*'s musical operations a chain of fleeting images and gestures occurs that subtly shifts the historical onus for the crime of slavery from the white planter class onto one of dominant society's most popular scapegoats, the black male. Interestingly enough, one can sense in these historical revisions, reversals, and sedimentations an attempt at the unconscious recovery of some of the ideological terrain lost in commercial cinema with the disappearance of the plantation genre after the rise in black political and media consciousness precipitated by the civil rights movement and the sustained rebellions in America's ghettos that followed it. Moreover, Hollywood's strategy of revising history to favor the hegemonic point of view, or inverting historical relationships between the dominant society and people of color, constitutes an ongoing practice. For one example out of many, consider how the war movie *The Deer Hunter* (1978) depicts Americans as blameless victims of Vietnamese aggression. If the movie consumer is to believe the implied messages of this film, the Vietnamese were not being slaughtered by American military technology and overkill; instead, they were inherently suicidal. Fantastically, this is accomplished by depicting Russian roulette as the Vietnamese national obsession and spectator sport. But also consider that the most common paradigm in one of Hollywood's unique genres, the Western, is that of peace-loving settlers surrounded on their land by intruding, bloodthirsty Indians, when in historical fact the situation was exactly the other way around.\(^{18}\)

Consistent with this strategy of historical revision, then, in *The Color Purple* a number of images and moments occur that implicate Mister as "Master" in his isolated little domain. First, we see Mister's house, which has two facades to it. The one most commonly revealed to the camera is that of a well-to-do farmhouse. The other, which flashes
on the screen suggesting the deeper implications of the narrative, is
the white-columned facade of the Old South mansion, the architectural
and cinematic icon of slavery, thus signifying that Mister’s farm is
also a plantation. Other visual fragments further reinforce this notion.
Mister, wearing a planter’s straw hat, sits on a horse in the field over­
seeing the work, a black parody of the white planter managing his field
hands. The visual contradiction in this scene surfaces when we con­sider
that the universal beast of burden of blacks in the agrarian South
and the animal that African Americans have celebrated and identified
with in their literature, poetry, and music is the mule.

Added to these visual fragments are actions in the narrative that are
further latent expressions of the slavery motif. Celie’s assumed father
(another inferred slave master) rapes her and then sells the resulting
child, reframing the exploitation of black women’s labor, sexuality,
and reproductive capacity under the domination of the white planter
class in historical slavery. When Mister comes on his horse to Celie’s
father’s door looking for a new wife, he and the father bargain for a
moment and then Celie is called out to display herself in a gesture
that marks her as chattel on the auction block. As well, in true planta­
tion tradition, Mister sexually abuses, overworks, and beats the black
women who live on his land. He also keeps Shug, his concubine, in the
same house as his wife and discourages his chattel from reading and
writing. These are the daily tortures and practices that were inflicted
on African Americans by the white planter class to ensure the smooth
working of the slave system. But in The Color Purple, the meaning of
slavery, worked into the text as latent fragments, is twisted and stood
on its head. In the alchemy of dominant cinema, the white planter class
has been transformed into that mysterious substance that absorbs all
blame: black men. The historical crimes and burdens of the slave mas­
ter are displaced onto Mister, and the implications of the film’s sedi­
mented subtext are that blacks, and black men in particular, are re­sponsible for slavery. By this miraculous transformation, all African
Ameri cans dwell in a timeless state of auto-oppression.

These explorations of Purple resonate with the most obvious Afri­
can American criticism of it, which is that the film, made by a white
male director, constructs a gender-divided reading of the oppression
of African Americans, even on its narrative surface, with black men
in their usual dominant cinema role as villains and as the predominant oppressors of black women. Black men are depicted as brutes, as mean, without any reference to the historical and social conditions that may have made some of them that way. The film privileges sexism over racism, scapegoats black men, and unconsciously or otherwise, fragments the African American struggle for political, economic, and human rights. This is not to say that readers did not have many good reasons for liking Walker’s novel or that African Americans do not have any gender problems or that the film does not render black women in “positive” images after so many years of Hollywood devaluation. But we must ask a variation of the time-honored rhetorical question posed by black film critics: Why is it that the only big-budget studio production of that year that had a black theme and foregrounded black women is flawed in such a way that it contains so many crude distortions and reifications of African American culture and devalues black men?

But other issues in the film go beyond layered plantation thematics and seem to emphasize the careless contempt with which Hollywood still degrades the cultures and images of people of color. In one scene Celie is, justifiably, tempted to cut Mister’s throat while shaving him. As she pauses with razor in hand, the scene cross-cuts back and forth between her, with razor poised, and the ritual scarification of children taking place in Africa. By juxtaposing an initiation ceremony with Celie’s murderous impulse, serious African religious-cultural practices are depicted as “savage” or “primitive,” and African standards of beauty are ridiculed. This scene is purely a cinematic invention that occurs nowhere in the novel and expresses commercial cinema’s dominant cultural values.

Another prime example of the white male-dominated film industry’s ideological power to contain insurgent discourses occurs in the way that *Purple* packages Shug and Celie’s lesbianism. Except for one timid scene, their sexual relationship is elided in Spielberg’s film, whereas it is central to the narrative and meaning of Walker’s novel. Moreover, when the issue is raised, dominant cinema’s taboo against depicting homosexuality with any degree of acceptance or normality overrides the possibility of the audience’s understanding the scene’s sexual importance, as it is completely trivialized. Shug and Celie sit on a bed, engulfed in a *mise-en-scène* of nostalgic, diaphanous light that
Spielberg is so famous for. The two women touch, kiss briefly, almost as sisters, all to the strains of Jones's canned soundtrack, and “That’s all, folks.” Here it is certainly true that one can read a text for its omissions and discern the director’s and film’s ideological limitations as the commodity system demands the containment or co-optation of all issues served up for popular consumption.21

Finally, the film’s resolution completely contradicts Walker’s ending, if not the entire spirit of the novel. In the novel’s conclusion, Mister sits on the porch, smokes, talks, and helps Celie sew pants for her business. The point is that Mister has grown emotionally and has become more caring; to a large extent he has been humanized in the course of the narrative. Equally important, Walker, through this scene, argues for the necessity of reconciliation and healing within the black family and community. But, conversely, the film opts for a dissonant ending communicated by the spatial isolation of the characters and genders in the final scene. Purple fragments black unity by closing with Celie, Nettie, the children, and the women of the family gathered in front of the house with a contrite and reflective Mister alone, far out in the field. Again, the manipulations of the dominant cinema apparatus override the possibility of reconciliation and unity suggested at the end of Walker’s novel.

Given the ample evidence of its varied expressions, we must expect the sedimented thematics of slavery to continue to surface in commercial cinema. Whether slavery is constructed as a unified subtext in the form of allegory or sustained parody or is displaced into other historical periods, fantastic worlds, and different genres, or whether it surfaces in fleeting images or moments, the dynamic of slavery’s repression and return is too much a part of popular cinema and its codes and images to disappear completely from American cinema. Insofar as popular cinema is an integral part of the commodity system itself, vulnerable to economic ups and downs and the twists of right and left cycles, we should also expect the intermittent recuperation of some of the cruder hegemonic manipulations and stereotypes depicted in the older films of the plantation genre.

So the social construction and representation of race, otherness, and nonwhiteness is an ongoing process, working itself out in many symbolic, cinematic forms of expression, but particularly in the abundant
racialized metaphors and allegories of the fantasy, sci-fi, and horror genres. This practice can be explained by several mutually reinforcing factors including these genres’ dependence on difference or otherness in the form of the monster in order to drive or energize their narratives; the now vast technological possibilities of imagining and rendering of all kinds of simulae for aliens, monsters, mutant outcasts, and the like; and the infinite, fantastic narrative horizons and story worlds possible in these productions. Taken together, these themes and techniques give free associative range and symbolic play to the pent-up energies of society’s repressed racial discourse. Because the representational and narrative conventions of sci-fi, fantasy, and horror films almost always defy or transcend dominant cinema’s illusionist, linear style of depicting a naturalized “realism,” the genre is open to subversive politics. Set in fantastic, often future worlds, these films can project the outcomes of failed institutional policies, nuclear wars, or exhausted ecosystems, and many of them offer quite sharp countercultural critiques of the dominant social policies and values of the present. In this regard, recall Jack Nicholson’s portrayal of the Joker in Batman (1989) as he ridicules bourgeois aesthetics and trashes the “Fluggenhiem” Museum, or the bleak, dystopian vistas of Soylent Green (1973) and Escape from New York (1981), or both Terminator films (1984, 1991). These genres, then, hold great possibility for imagining difference and transcoding present-day social anxieties and are potentially powerful vehicles for doing so because they are so popular, accounting for over a third of Hollywood’s box-office income during the 1980s.22

In the film that dictated the intense, gory style of the new wave of horror movies, George Romero’s cult classic Night of the Living Dead (1968), the protagonist Ben, because his blackness is so understated and yet so obvious, well illustrates the power and complexity of racial imaging in the peak year of the turbulent 1960s. In Night, the black protagonist battles a multitude of white zombies that, in contrast to his energetic, heroic struggle for survival, signify an infectious, suffocating sense of culturally dead whiteness. At the film’s ironic close, Ben, who has survived the zombies, is gunned down by a sheriff’s posse of good ol’ boys in a scene that is powerfully multivalent, alluding to the “search and destroy” operations of Vietnam as well as the violence of the civil rights years and racist lynch mobs of the nation’s recent past.
Moreover, this thematic contrast of black as “living,” as opposed to the white “dead,” is socially relevant and potent enough for Romero to extend its exploration in the other two films of the *Dead* trilogy, *Dawn of the Dead* (1978) and *Day of the Dead* (1985), with their respective black protagonists Peter and John. In inscribing racial difference in another manner, Steven Spielberg’s endearing alien character of *E.T. The Extraterrestrial* (1982) represents the ideal immigrant, the model minority from the dominant cultural perspective. Despite E.T.’s hairlessness, brown skin, and grotesque humanoid form, he has the compensations of being from an advanced technological civilization and of having blue eyes, signifying sensitivity, intelligence, and a spark of biological “whiteness.” But best of all, unlike Brother in *The Brother from Another Planet*, E.T. arrived alone, cannot reproduce, and has no intention of seeking citizenship; the film’s plot is driven by E.T.’s desire to return home. Conversely, in the sci-fi, cop-buddy thriller *Alien Nation* (1988), images of racial otherness and a sustained allegory for nonwhite immigration with a clear mention of slavery are as obvious as they are socially urgent. In the near-future 1990s, a giant flying saucer, a rebellious slave ship in fact, lands off a Los Angeles beach and disembarks a community of runaway slave–aliens that quickly grows into a huge population inhabiting its own vast *barrio* in Los Angeles. Signifying our culture’s reflex suspicion and contempt for racial otherness, as well as its need for clearly marked categories and boundaries so intrinsic to hegemonic racial order, the extraterrestrial new arrivals are quickly labeled “Slags” and their community “Slagtown.” Thus the film’s setting and historical moment, combined with the rapid growth of its newcomer population, their containment in a ghetto, and their begrudging acceptance on the urban scene, form a specific and complex mediation of the social tensions and concerns over undocumented and uncontrolled Latino immigration into Los Angeles.

These same persistent anxieties over race and immigration are inflected in a more comic vein in *Little Shop of Horrors* (1986), specifically in the imaging of Audrey II, the flesh-eating giant green plant from outer space with huge red lips and the black, bass soul voice of Levi Stubbs of the Four Tops. Audrey II’s growth from a seedling to a twelve-foot-high avaricious monster suckled on human blood and sing-
ing “I’m a mean, green mother from outer space and I’m bad!” plays on white suburbanite and neoconservative anxieties that expanding nonwhite immigrant populations will become as large, demanding, and assertive as indigenous blacks are already perceived to be. Enacting these concerns, Audrey II’s main refrain throughout the film is “Feed me!” as it continues to grow bigger, hungrier, and more threatening. The resonant, distinctly black voice of Levi Stubbs, who executes his role with the cunning and wit of a street-smart hustler, images Audrey II as dangerous but simultaneously entertaining and likeable. Thus the audience comes to perceive Audrey II with the same ambivalence that the dominant culture in all its racialized projections has historically framed the presence of black people in America, extending back to such traditional, stereotypical dichotomies of blacks as the child or savage, Sambo or brute.

While Little Shop ends happily, in a conventional, dominant cinema resolution, with Audrey II destroyed and the boy (Rick Moranis) getting the girl (Ellen Greene) and moving to a house in the suburbs, the film’s final scene shrewdly acknowledges the intractable nature of the social-political problems that it so brilliantly casts in comic metaphor. For if, as argued, the monster in the horror, sci-fi, and fantasy genres is the incessant return of those repressed fears and problems that society cannot articulate or cope with openly, and if the film’s symbolized issues—race, immigration, and the unchecked growth of nonwhite populations—are as yet unresolved, one would expect some sign of tension or dissonance at the film’s end. Additionally, such an ending would be consonant with the multitude of apocalyptic, pessimistic endings prevailing in sci-fi and horror films such as Planet of the Apes (1969), The Omen (1976), and both remakes of Invasion of the Body Snatchers (1978) and The Thing (1982), all of which seem to be unable to envision a survivable, optimistic future for humankind or contemporary society. Thus, outside the cartoonish little suburban house, unnoticed in the flower bed, there grows a new insurgent seedling generation of floral invaders. Little Shop of Horrors closes with the realization of its ultimate social threat. The “mean green mother from outer space” not only manages to immigrate but has taken root and will proliferate.

Of all the recent films constructing fantastic images of racial anxiety, perhaps Joe Dante’s Gremlins (1984) and Gremlins 2: The New Batch
(1990) stand out most for their sustained allegorical exploration of the themes of racial difference, proliferation, and transformation in America. The original feature, in all its complex, layered meanings, definitely caught the imagination and patronage of a broad popular audience. Made for a mere $11 million and grossing more than $148 million in receipts its first year, *Gremlins* was the third-most-popular film at the box office in 1984. Set in small-town America, in clear allusion to the locales of such 1950s sci-fi horror movies as *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* (1956), *Invaders from Mars* (1953), and *The Blob* (1958), *Gremlins* evokes the well-worked paradigm of “small town USA” invaded or subverted by monsters or extraterrestrial aliens symbolizing contemporary threats to traditional American cultural values. Yet because the director is removed by a couple of generations from the politically paranoid monster movies of the 1950s, Joe Dante’s view of traditional small-town values as representative of the American norm is at best ironic or askance and more akin to that of David Lynch’s kinky rendering of 1950s small-town life in the gothic *Blue Velvet* (1986). In one of the film’s many comic moments, *Gremlins* illustrates its distance from a more innocent 1950s outlook when the protagonist’s girlfriend, Kate, explains that she does not like the holiday season because her father was discovered dead, wedged halfway down a chimney, on Christmas day.

Falling into the standard formula of the horror narrative, the film tells of a small, exotic creature, a “mogwai” named Gizmo, procured in an urban Chinatown and brought home as a gift for the prototypical American family at that most traditional and sentimental time of year, Christmas. The disruption of this idyllic setting and season arises when the three critical rules for the care and feeding of mogwais (don’t expose to light, don’t expose to water, and never feed after midnight) are predictably violated. Moreover, the creature’s cinematic, horrific power and appeal are the result of its mode of exponential reproduction along with its ability to metamorphose from a domestic pet into a more mischievous and finally dangerous category of monster. Contrariwise, communal order is restored in the narrative with the systematic, violent eradication of the little demons, and the return of the original mogwai, the lovable Gizmo, to Chinatown.

Clearly established in *Gremlins*’ opening, with little distance be-
tween metaphor and its social reference, the fantasy creature, the
mogwai, is framed by its filmic context and the social concerns at its
historical moment of production as an Asian immigrant. The mogwai
is kept in a Chinatown shop stocked with other imported curiosities
of the “Orient” by a grossly stereotypical old Chinese sage with a
milky glass eye who spouts Charlie Chan aphorisms but who, none­
theless, is circumspect about letting the creature fall into the hands
of an ignorant Westerner. Commenting on the generational erosion of
even Chinese traditional values, however, the shopkeeper’s grandson,
operating on a cash-and-carry basis, secretly sells the mogwai to the
film’s bumbling father figure (Hoyt Axton) for a few hundred dollars.
Once situated in the American family context as an entertaining pet,
Gizmo, very much like E.T., becomes yet another figuration of the
model minority. Marking its powerlessness in the hierarchy of domi­
nation, Gizmo is isolated, passive, diminutive, and aims to entertain
and please the family with strains of song and dance from the reper­
toire of its exotic, imported culture. Gizmo’s only leverage in its new
context is derived from its cuteness and obedience, attributes that the
creature diligently strives to perfect.

Predictably, all is not as it appears. For the real threat and latent
power of the mogwai, as metaphor for Asian immigrant, is the poten­
tial menace of all monsters, carrying varied social meanings, in a range
of sci-fi movies from Them! (1954) to The Thing (1982) and Aliens
(1986). This threat comes down to the power and politics of demo­
graphics, of reproducing one’s own kind, expanding one’s numbers and
influence, which when considered in the political frame of a “one man,
one vote” system, is possibly the most accessible route to political
leverage for all marginalized collectivities, be they racial, class based,
sexual, gendered, or just plain fantastic, multiplying monsters. So,
when water is accidentally spilled on Gizmo, violating the first of the
three prohibitions, the creature reproduces by popping several mog­
wai hatchlings out of its back. While this new breed resembles Gizmo,
because of the strength and security in numbers, they are far more
assertive and mischievous. And although Gizmo remains faithful to
the narrative’s small-town family and its normative values throughout
the film, creating a distinct subject position for dominant sensibilities
planted among the insurgents, this new generation takes on a self-
focused, political consciousness analogous to the sort of political development that all second-generation immigrant groups experience in some form or another. Consequently, this new generation of mogwais is not "grateful" to the film’s normative whites and has no need for Gizmo’s subservient, accommodationist outlook.

What is more, if Gizmo represents a sort of groveling “Uncle Tom” attitude toward the relations of domination, as marked by its pet status within the all-American family, then the oppositional dynamic of Gremlins’ racial, political allegory is filled in with the appearance of the creature’s alter ego in the figuration of the new generation’s militant leader, Stripe. Replete with a distinctive skunk’s stripe down the middle of its head, emblematic of a sort of punk rocker’s rejection of social norms, Stripe is definitely not an accommodationist or anyone’s pet. Once hatched, he very quickly communicates his militant consciousness by biting the protagonist Billy’s hand, bullying Gizmo into submission, and leading the new wave on a mischievous rampage throughout the house. At this point Gremlins turns from kiddie fantasy entertainment toward the menace of an all-out horror movie, when, in violation of rule 3, the mogwai are accidentally fed after midnight. This induces a total metamorphosis in the mogwais as they retreat into the ominous, slime-covered pods or cocoons reminiscent of the pod or nest scenes in Alien (1979) and Aliens (1986).

With this shift into a more horrific mood, Gremlins’ racial allegory also starts to congeal and intensify in its social implications. For, significantly, a fundamental racial metamorphosis has occurred with the emergence from these primeval cocoons of a batch of small, scaly, reptilian gargoyles with upright, anthropomorphic postures and a coloration ranging from dark brown to the distinctly threatening, militant blackness of their leader, Stripe. Thus the mogwais come to represent a series of political, generational, and racial changes ranging from the submissive Asian immigrant model minority, Gizmo, to an assertive, politically conscious second generation of Asians organized around the militant leadership of Stripe, to a violent, insurgent mob of black and brown monsters, signifying indigenous populations of African-Americans and Latinos, that fully realize the label of the film’s title, Gremlins.32

Complications and intensifications of horror and allegory arise with
this last phase of the creatures' metamorphosis when Stripe survives being destroyed at the Pheltzers' house only to escape and wind up falling into the swimming pool at the town YMCA. In one of the movie's most brilliant sequences, the pool steams, boils, and bubbles as the monster reproduces exponentially, thus quantifying the menace and horror of its social reference. For if Stripe is the dangerous issue of the passive Gizmo, then the resultant offspring from Stripe's "dip at the Y" represent a violence of fantastic, geometric proportions. The pool sequence ends with thousands of Gremlins surging down nighttime Main Street USA in a horrific parody of the swarming youth gang scenes that were so impressive in The Warriors (1979). In a more historicized frame, this scene is reminiscent of the "roving bands of Negro youth," the worn description so often deployed by a nervous news media during the black urban rebellions of the late 1960s.

The exponential proliferation of the Gremlins results in murder, mayhem, and chaos for this small town at the height of the Christmas season, as the ultimate import of the film's racial allegory surfaces in all its complex referents, icons, and symbols in a series of distinctive scenes. The most noteworthy of these scenes occurs when the creatures invade the town bar and commence to party. The Gremlins drink themselves silly, swing from the overhead fan, fight, and generally carouse and riot, totally wrecking the establishment in the process. This rowdy saloon sequence proves to be a fertile setting for the images and cultural emblems of a threatening, inner-city, racial otherness, which are explored in a full range of grotesque caricatures. In a series of intricately worked tableaus and cameos, Gremlins parody inner-city youth break-dancing, depict urban black males playing cards, singing the blues, or as they are rendered in cool portraiture, sullenly hunched over drinks, decorated in sunglasses and stingy-brim hats. But the dramatic focus of the whole barroom sequence crystallizes when the film's heroine, Kate (Phoebe Cates), becomes trapped in the midst of this chaos and is forced to serve drinks, accommodating the Gremlins as a barmaid.

Besides a phantasmagorical display of racial puppetry, the sequence also deploys the mechanics of both the rescue paradigm and the rape motif by evoking the specter of the vulnerable white woman alone, surrounded and threatened by the monstrosity of black otherness. This
Manichaean conflict between the antipodes of light and dark, usually
most intensely expressed as a sexual threat, goes back to the begin­
nings of narrative cinema à la The Birth of a Nation and extends to
its latest manifestation in the horror film Candyman (1992). For the
white woman as the essence of whiteness, the most prized possession
of the white man and the object of desire of all other races, is a power­
ful representational current running through Western literature and
cinema and is one of the generic sources of race imagery in this cen­
tury. It is the threat of the white woman’s rape by the monstrous, black
other that gives white-black contrasts much of their social charge and
meaning. The unconscious, driving power of this trope is made all too
clear in the barroom sequence’s climaxing image, when the ultimate
menace of urban blackness erupts in the image of a ski-masked Grem­
lin that threatens Kate with a “Saturday night special.”

The other large-scale mise-en-scène of intricate racial spectacle is
set in the town movie theater, which, predictably, becomes infested
with rampaging Gremlins in an obvious parody of the out-of-control
Saturday kiddie matinee. The point here is more subtle but holds
equally revealing import. In a clever irony, as the feature comes on and
the Gremlins settle down, they are captivated by Walt Disney’s Snow
White and the Seven Dwarfs (1937). Thus the Gremlins, themselves
constructions of racial fantasy, sit transfixed by their binary contrast
in the symbolic racial order, the perfect icon of whiteness and beauty,
Snow White. But because in dominant cinema ideology “beauty and
whiteness” cannot be articulated without reference to “grotesqueness
and blackness,” the Gremlins also share a subject position, within the
text, with the figures of the seven dwarfs, as well as the “blackness” of
the wicked queen. Thus in total identification with their spectator posi­
tion in the film, the Gremlins sing “Heigh-ho, heigh-ho, it’s off to work
we go” along with the dwarfs. Equally revealing, this total scene of
contemporary racial fantasy figures of the present viewing those of the
past tells us something about the tenacity of such racist iconography
in the popular mind and the temporal distance over which this whole
system of racial constructions has traveled. So, much like Gremlins in
terms of popular box-office appeal, in its own historical moment Snow
White and the Seven Dwarfs was a film of vast influence, being the
second-top moneymaking film of the 1930s and falling between those
other two great signifiers of race and otherness, *Gone With the Wind* (1939) in first place and *King Kong* (1933) in third. This riotous parody of the kiddie matinee gone berserk ends with genocidal clarity as Billy and Kate fill the theater with gas and blow the little demons up.

Following on the success of the first production, Gizmo returns in *Gremlins 2: The New Batch* (1990) to recast repressed social fears and, again, multiply uncontrollably. While the basic representations and social allusions remain in place, the allegorical impulse is not so sustained, and the story world has shifted from small-town USA to New York City. This time, director Joe Dante explores the issues of race and difference through fragmented moments of parody within the overall frame of a satire spoofing the business culture of a megacorporation headed by Daniel Clamp, an obvious amalgam of Donald Trump and Ted Turner. Because the social tensions that the movie transcodes are still with us, however, the overriding metaphor of Gremlins as nonwhite or Asian immigrants generally persists. Only this time the film’s socially repressed fears have to do with nonwhite minorities gaining political power, as *Gremlins 2* satirizes the political subtleties of an increasingly influential “minority discourse” in contemporary American life more than it plays upon latent anxieties over racial otherness. This, in part, explains the shift in *Gremlins 2*’s mix of genres more toward comedy and away from the final emphasis on horror in the original feature. After multiplying and rampaging through the giant Clamp office tower, the Gremlins manage to develop a collective, politicized minority consciousness, replete with an intellectual spokesperson (voiced brilliantly by Tony Randall) to articulate the goals and aspirations of their “ethnic group” on a television talk show. Ultimately, the Gremlins’ goal is assimilation, to compete in the bustling urban culture of Manhattan, which is quintessentially an immigrant city. This is best revealed in the film’s climactic resolution when the whole horde of Gremlins meet in the lobby of the building to do the city’s theme song, “New York, New York,” led by their intellectual leader in horn-rimmed glasses and cosmopolitan dress, before being let out on the streets, where they wish to “make it there” as the song suggests.

As in the first film, *Gremlins 2* predictably ends with the little monsters destroyed by the light of day. Also as in the first film, the en-
From The Brother from Another Planet (1984), courtesy of Jump Cut.

From Gremlins 2: The New Batch (1990), courtesy of Museum of Modern Art Film Stills Archive.

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From Star Wars (1977), courtesy of Jump Cut.
dearing pet Gizmo survives, thus leaving open the opportunity for yet another sequel, as well as signifying the uncontainable persistence of those issues and anxieties that both films fantastically engage.

Certainly, because of a brilliant, ever-advancing studio technology, now able to render our most fantastic conceptualizations into the most convincing simulacra, we find ourselves, cinematically at least, in the same position as Dr. Morbius and the Krel in the sci-fi masterpiece *Forbidden Planet* (1956), who through their high technology were able to materialize anything that they could conceptualize. One hopes we will not meet an end analogous to theirs, that is, being destroyed by Id monsters emergent from our own racist, cinematic psyches. But it is fair to say that as national cultural life further diversifies and that unstable dominant social construct known as “whiteness” increasingly shrinks under the pressure of the multicultural wave, to become one minority among many by the year 2000, the idea and place of “the norm” in cinema will further erode, thus inspiring a more radical understanding and complex explorations of difference(s). As for the genres of fantasy, science fiction, and horror, I believe that something like this shift, which started as a minuscule, dialectical countercurrent to the majority wave of politically paranoid monster movies of the 1950s, has long been under way and has been gaining momentum. This is evinced by a long trajectory of films containing sympathetic figures of social and psychic otherness at the repressed core of alien monstrosity, from *The Boy with Green Hair* (1948) and *The Day the Earth Stood Still* (1951) to *Close Encounters of the Third Kind* (1977), *E.T. The Extraterrestrial* and *Swamp Thing* (both 1982), *Edward Scissorhands* (1990), and *The Applegates* and *People under the Stairs* (both 1991).
The Rise and Fall of Blaxploitation

More than a bit of irony figures in the term Blaxploitation. The epithet is usually associated with the production of the sixty or so Hollywood films that centered on black narratives, featured black casts playing out various action-adventures in the ghetto, and were released roughly between 1969 and 1974. But Blaxploitation might as easily and accurately describe the cruel injustice of slavery or, for that matter, much of the historical sojourn of black folk in America. Nevertheless, in this chapter I confine the rubric to its narrowest contemporary understanding, which arises from the film industry’s targeting the black audience with a specific product line of cheaply made, black-cast films shaped with the “exploitation” strategies Hollywood routinely uses to make the majority of its films. These concoctions were marketed to a basically inner-city, black youth audience in anticipation of substantial box office profits. The guiding argument of my discussion is that the Blaxploitation genre emerged out of the dialectical interactions of three broad, overdetermining conditions of possibility. First and most obvious to observers of the late 1960s scene is that these films were made possible by the rising political and social consciousness of black people (taking the form of a broadly expressed black nationalist impulse at the end of the civil rights movement), which translated into a large black audience thirsting to see their full humanity depicted on the commercial cinema screen. This surge in African American identity politics led also to an outspoken, criti-
cal dissatisfaction with Hollywood's persistent degradation of African Americans in films among black leaders, entertainers, and intellectuals. Ultimately, the mounting pressure of these conditions coincided with the near economic collapse of the film industry at the end of the 1960s. In turn, this forced Hollywood to respond to the rising expectations of African Americans by making black-oriented features in order to solve the film industry's political and financial problems.

It is true that mainstream commercial cinema's representation of African Americans changed significantly in response to these pressures, with older stereotypes and subordinations of blacks jettisoned in favor of more assertive and multidimensional black characters, as well as black-focused themes and narratives; but throughout the Blaxploitation period, Hollywood developed more subtle and masked forms of devaluing African Americans on the screen. And when Hollywood no longer needed its cheap, black product line for its economic survival, it reverted to traditional and openly stereotypical modes of representation, as the industry eagerly set about unplugging this brief but creatively insurgent black movie boom. It is also interesting to note that reversals and shifts in the same fluid mix of enabling conditions that came into play at the rise of Blaxploitation also influenced its undoing. For as black critical reaction to the violent, drug-dealing pimps and gangsters of Blaxploitation formula sharpened, and Hollywood became less economically dependent on the genre for short-term profit, Blaxploitation came to a speedy demise.

The complex body of work making up the Blaxploitation boom consisted of broad, overlapping frames or developmental phases. Largely predicated on shifts in black consciousness, politics, and the rising expectations of the black audience, each of these phases contained countercurrents and tensions that led to the formation of its successor and that finally culminated in the exhaustion and collapse of the entire genre. Broadly taking into account the range of Hollywood productions that generated Blaxploitation and then reabsorbed it, we can loosely sketch these phases as beginning in 1967, with black dissatisfaction with the Sidney Poitier "star" image and its attendant integrationist film narrative, which gave way to the rise of the more assertive, macho black athlete film heroes such as Jim Brown and Fred Williamson and black-focused narratives like Cotton Comes to Harlem and
Watermelon Man (both 1970). Then came Blaxploitation’s high moment, its most sharply defined and prolific phase, marked by the 1971 premiere of Sweet Sweetback’s Baadasssss Song and the crystallization of the Blaxploitation formula in Shaft and Superfly (both 1972), which was followed by more than fifty cheap imitative productions. Finally, Blaxploitation’s collapse was precipitated by black critical reaction to the increasingly degrading themes of the genre in combination with Hollywood’s recovery from one of its worst fiscal crises. In order to hold its black audience Hollywood produced more “crossover” films and focused on the careers of a few isolated black celebrities who fit into the traditional, white-dominated “star system.” In considering what at times is a tangled web of influences and overlapping phases, this chapter discusses the most aesthetically and politically influential and popular films of the genre.

Black intellectuals have often observed that all African American political strategy has been a slow, historical oscillation between two polarities: the impulse to integrate with the system and the urge to separate from it.\(^2\) And by 1967 it was clear that the popular shift was definitely moving toward separation and cultural nationalism. For the social history of black folk, as well as the issue of their cinematic representation, 1967 and 1968 were years of violent struggle, contradiction, tension, and dramatic turning points. A steady wave of urban riots, rebellions, and insurrections started in Watts in 1965, marking the decline of the civil rights movement and black people’s frustration with a system that granted them legal-political rights but allowed them only the most marginal place in the American economy. The violence peaked between 1967 and 1968 with 384 uprisings in 298 cities, notably the massive rebellions in Detroit and Newark.\(^3\) Conditioned by this building sense of insurrection and cultural separation (as well as by an overall sense of rebellion in emergent collectivities of Chicanos, Hippies, women, antiwar groups, and the rest), blacks and black intellectuals in particular were becoming increasingly dissatisfied with the demeaning portrayals of African American life that Hollywood was still putting on the screen.

In confirmation of the surging new sense of black identity and the instability of blacks’ conflicted position, 1967 through 1968 were years of triumph and contradiction for Sidney Poitier. In 1967, Poitier was
clearly the biggest box-office star of the year with *In the Heat of the Night, To Sir with Love, and Guess Who's Coming to Dinner?* in the theaters. At the height of his star power, however, Poitier's "ebony saint" image was increasingly wearing thin for African Americans; it did not speak to the aspirations or anger of the new black social consciousness that was emerging. Equally significant, black and white critics alike, reading the import and pressures of the historical moment, were becoming ever bolder in their negative assessments of Poitier's image, portrayals, and narratives. In 1967, Thomas Cripps observed in *Phylon* that social change had forced on Hollywood a certain degree of sensitivity to the way it represented African Americans on the screen, with the cruder "Rastus" stereotypes disappearing. In the "middle-brow" films of the 1960s, black characters had changed into their dialectical opposites, shifting from Donald Bogle's typology, "toms, coons, mulattos, mammies and bucks," into sterile paragons of virtue completely devoid of mature characterization or of any political or social reality. The "problem pictures" had produced a series of inverted positive stereotypes in many ways as one-dimensional and destructive as the old "Rastus." Critics, as well as the audience at large, were beginning to laugh at the shallow implausible characters making up the Poitier star persona. Even worse, they began to perceive the neutered or counterfeit sexuality of Poitier's roles as obsolete and insulting, especially when contrasted with rising black nationalist calls for a new, liberated black sense of manhood and self. Sadly, Poitier's castration by the film industry during the 1960s had become routine, as in the "buddy" movie *The Defiant Ones* (1958), where Tony Curtis interacts with the female, or in *The Bedford Incident* (1965) and *Duel at Diablo* (1966), where the genre conventions of the war story and the Western isolate Poitier from romantic encounters. But perhaps the most ridiculous and humiliating narrative contrivance, designed to uphold the protocols of white masculinity through Hollywood's erasure of Poitier's sexuality, occurs in *The Long Ships* (1964), where even though Poitier stars as a Moorish prince with an extensive harem of beautiful women of all races at his call, he is celibate.

While articles from this period abound, criticizing Poitier and his roles, the sharpest and most broadly disseminated of them appeared in the *New York Times* in November 1967. In his critical essay "Why
Does White America Love Sidney Poitier So?" the black dramatist Clifford Mason voiced opinions clearly resonant with the thinking of black intellectuals and culture critics that was starting to surface at the time. Mason opens his attack by implying that Poitier is a hypocrite for regretting his insipid roles in *Porgy and Bess* (1959) and *The Long Ships* (1963), while he has no misgivings about the powerless, assimilationist, sexless roles he portrays in such movies as *Lilies of the Field* (1963), *A Patch of Blue* (1965), and *To Sir with Love* (1967). Clearly understanding the frustrated mood of African Americans, Mason sums up the quality of Poitier’s films and portrayals with the stinging comment: “In essence, they are merely contrivances, completely lacking in any real artistic merit. In all of these films he has been a showcase nigger, who is given a clean suit and a complete purity of motivation so that like a mistreated puppy, he has all the sympathy on his side and all those mean whites are just so many Simon Legrees.” Mason goes on to argue that *Guess Who’s Coming to Dinner?* does not refute his stance, for its prime concern is the “manipulation of black and white bodies before the camera.” As for the characters in the sum of Poitier’s narratives, Mason concurs with Cripps as he describes the widely recognized “Sidney Poitier syndrome,” revealing “a good boy in a totally white world, with no wife, no sweetheart, no woman to love or kiss, helping the white man solve the white man’s problem.” Mason acidly concludes his article by speculating that Poitier will forever be condemned on the screen to reassuring white people of their innocence and superiority, “good nigger that he is.”

Set against the rising tide of black anger and militancy, agreeing with Mason’s argument, the prominent black nationalist and culture critic Larry Neal pressed the criticism of Poitier, expanding it to include a satirical analysis of Hollywood’s ideology of black representation in his important *New York Times* review “Beware of the Tar Baby.” Here, Neal cleverly analogizes black people as much like Brer Rabbit in the African American folktale in relation to the Tar Baby, the sticky, devaluing ideology of dominant cinema, which is constructed by the Fox (i.e., Hollywood). For Neal, then, blacks have gotten themselves immersed in the “tar baby” of dominant cinema ideology, “locked into such a prison of distorted symbols and images that the very attempt to extricate ourselves only leads to more confusion.”
Moreover, the “blackness” of the tar in Neal’s analogy symbolizes a co-opted, ersatz black culture that is commodified and sold back to black people at the box office. Ultimately, the most confused “Hollywood bunny” of all turns out to be Sidney Poitier, whom Neal ridicules and dismisses as “a million-dollar shoe shine boy.” The criticism of Poitier’s star persona, however, while it mediated the popular mood, was not unanimous. As evidence of a tension and split in the black community along class lines over the values of Poitier’s cinematic contribution, we must contrast these critiques with the consistent position of celebration and support for Poitier and his roles articulated in the principal organ of the black bourgeoisie, *Ebony*.

Acknowledging the criticisms as well as the overdetermining power of the rising black social consciousness that inspired them, James Baldwin takes a broader, more inclusive perspective on Poitier in an insightful 1968 essay in *Look*. Baldwin recognizes the demeaning nature of the roles Poitier has played, as well as his lack of relevance to the changing times. Yet he maintains that “the isolation that menaces all American artists is multiplied a thousand times, and becomes absolutely crucial and dangerous for all black artists.” Baldwin rightfully insists that Poitier’s roles and identity as an artist must be considered within the context of American race relations, racial injustice, and the entertainment industry’s ideology of racial subordination, that is to say, Neal’s “tar baby.” Baldwin condemns, not Poitier for the roles he has been forced to play, but the country’s and industry’s racism for so relentlessly prefiguring them. He describes Poitier, and for that matter all black actors, as trapped in essentially the same dilemma:

The industry is compelled, given the way it is built, to present to the American people a self-perpetuating fantasy of American life. . . . And the black face, truthfully reflected, is not only no part of this dream, it is antithetical to it. And this puts the black performer in a rather grim bind. He knows, on the one hand, that if the reality of a black man’s life were on that screen, it would destroy the fantasy totally. And on the other hand, he really has no right not to appear, not only because he must work, but also for all those people who need to see him. By the use of his own person, he must smuggle in a reality that he knows is not in the script.
But the actor’s bind, as Baldwin describes it here, is not beyond the comprehension of Mason’s and Neal’s position. Their point was that the rising consciousness of the times, as exemplified by the emerging philosophy of the Black Arts movement, demanded that the dilemma be eradicated or transcended. Perhaps the most insightful comment in Baldwin’s article, and the one that resolves the seeming conflict between the two perspectives on Poitier, is Baldwin’s recognition of the contradictory, socially urgent demands of the historical moment, when he writes that “white Americans appear to be under the compulsion to dream, whereas black Americans are under the compulsion to awaken.”

Regardless of the controversy over his portrayals and superstar image, Poitier found himself at the height of his career in 1968, with his fee per film rising from $300,000 to $700,000 in a few years. Thus, playing the one-dimensional, saintly black man to the specifications of Hollywood’s liberal fantasies had its rewards, for Poitier grossed more than $9 million in 1968 alone. Perhaps the one film that most epitomizes Poitier’s problems with his screen persona, the fading era of black filmic subordinations, and the critics and community’s demands for a more politicized and complex representation of black reality on the screen, was the 1967 release Guess Who’s Coming to Dinner? From the perspective of Hollywood and the marketplace, the film was definitely a hit. It placed second in the top moneymaking films of 1968 and in the top ten moneymaking films of the 1960s. Additionally, by 1982, Dinner ranked 79 in the top 200 moneymaking films of all time. The film also won critical acclaim for the industry; at the 1967 Academy Awards, it won two Oscars and five other nominations. The Oscar for Best Actress went to Katharine Hepburn, and Best Story and Screenplay went to William Rose; Bea Richards was nominated for Best Supporting Actress. Reflecting Hollywood’s growing sensitivity to the racial crisis in the country, it is significant that Poitier’s other hit of the year, In the Heat of the Night, took five Oscars, including Best Picture and Best Actor for Rod Steiger. Even on Paris Radio, on the morning of April 11, 1968, the top news item was the fact that two films dealing with America’s “racial question” had swept so many Oscars, the newscaster commenting that this was a great advance for liberal and progressive trends in American film opinion.
But however successful the film was, *Guess Who’s Coming to Dinner?* represented a turning point in Poitier’s career and for Hollywood’s depiction of blacks as well. During this time, Poitier was clearly stressed by the conflictual tensions of his celebrity and professional acclaim, in painful contrast to the rejection and negative assessments of his screen persona and narratives, while *Dinner* was swamped by a flood of negative articles by both black and white critics in the trade journals, popular magazines, and newspapers. These crushing reviews and black ridicule of the film’s shallowness marked a representational juncture, the very obvious need for a transformation of the black cinematic image in general and Poitier’s image and roles in particular. Moreover, it has been suggested that his roles after *Dinner* were all compensatory, self-conscious, though not completely successful, attempts on his part to adjust to the demands of the black audience for more militant, politicized heroes. By now, America and the world were going through a massive contest and an upheaval of cultural and political values, much of which was inspired by the domestic civil rights movement and the ensuing Black Power revolution. In keeping with the political climate of the historical moment, critical and audience expectations had shifted since the inception of Hollywood’s liberal interventions. Now *Dinner* was considered, at best, an irrelevant anachronism and, at worst, as the black critic Maxine Hall Elliston forthrightly put it, “warmed over white shit.” Thus the revolution in black consciousness very quickly rendered Poitier’s saintly roles as laughably out of touch with the rising demand for assertive, realistic black images on the screen.

*Guess Who’s Coming to Dinner?’s narrative epitomizes the standard Hollywood “problem picture” formula, rendered in the production values of the slick 1940s, big-studio style associated with its principal white stars, Katharine Hepburn and Spencer Tracy. Problem pictures usually present the audience with a communal “problem,” completely stripped of its social or political context, reduced to a conflict between individuals, sentimentalized and happily resolved at the picture’s end. Ultimately aimed at box-office profits by shaping films into standardized consumer products, this narrative formula was distilled from a long-established strategy of ideological containment that allowed Hollywood to stay current, keeping abreast of the contem-
porary social and political climate and simultaneously upholding the status quo and containing all insurgent political impulses. By introducing topical political issues into stable, easily recognized and consumed genres, narratives, and plot structures, Hollywood's conservative ideology was no more challenged by its superficial explorations of social problems than the symbolic racial order, on or off screen, was challenged by the insurgent style of Hattie McDaniel as Mammy or the educated, rational appeals of Poitier's "model Negroes." 18

The specifics of Dinner's plot are those of a gifted and famous thirty-seven-year-old black doctor, head of the World Health Organization, who falls in love with the twenty-three-year-old daughter of millionaire white liberals (Spencer Tracy and Katharine Hepburn). The integrated couple returns to San Francisco from a romantic interlude in Hawaii to confront the girl's parents with an ultimatum: either consent to the marriage by nightfall or the girl will be permanently alienated from her parents, and the doctor, the ebony saint that Poitier always portrays, out of personal dignity will break off the relationship and leave. Katharine Hepburn, although under much stress, soon comes around, and after an investigation and pondering of Poitier's credentials, Spencer Tracy accepts the situation. In a dominant cinema maneuver of displacement, however, the problem of prejudice arises not so much with the girl's white parents but with Poitier's parents (Bea Richards and Cecil Kellaway), who, somewhat justifiably, cannot get used to the idea that whites can accept them as equals. The problem of racial conflict and intermarriage becomes further confused when it is sublimated into a generational conflict between black father and son. Nevertheless, after some bickering and sentimentalized soul searching, the "problem" is worked out among individuals, and the miscegenous couple lives happily ever after.

By making the black man an eminently qualified and desirable suitor at the top of a professional class to which only the smallest minority of blacks could possibly belong, and by locating the narrative in the exclusive domain of the wealthiest stratum of white society, the film reduces the social dimensions of racial conflict to that of mere contrasts of skin color while completely avoiding the historical, cultural, and economic legacy of what it means to be black in America. So, because Poitier portrays a black who diligently strives to be white, and because there
is no representation whatsoever of the black world in the film, *Dinner* makes no connection with the contemporaneous struggle raging on a grand social and political scale outside the theater. What conflict there is in the film is transposed from race into a conflict between black generations, reflective of the surrounding "generation gap," as Poitier tells his father that he will not submit to the self-limiting boundaries of his father's generation. In a reversed, contrasting gesture that frames the dominant white perspective as the solution to the race problem, Spencer Tracy works out his conflict with his daughter and lapses into platitudes about love conquering all, thus leading the film to a standard sentimental, romantic conclusion. By limiting the range of emotional experiences to simple expressions of sentiment worked out by the use of predictable narrative conventions, Hollywood restricted its political vision and masked its conservative assumptions about race, passing them off as consensus. This narrative formula has served the studios well beyond this specific film, which amounted to Hollywood's last attempt to explore an integrationist theme within the frame of its status quo politics.

At the same moment when Poitier's screen persona began to slip into irrelevance and, generally, the "star system" of which he was now a prime representative showed signs of crumbling, there arose a number of black athletes (most of whom were football players) in leading roles in a series of low-budget Hollywood action flicks. These "macho men" were the forerunners of the formulaic Blaxploitation superheroes that were soon to appear. In 1969, Woody Strode, who had a minor acting career spanning twenty years, got a substantial part in *Che!*; Bernie Casey supported Jim Brown in *Tick, Tick, Tick* (1970), and Dick Bass backed Jim Brown in *The Grasshopper* (1970). Fred Williamson turned up in *M*A*S*H* (1972). But preeminent among the ex-athletes was Jim Brown, who had made nine films by 1969, and who was now able to command a fee of $150,000 per picture. The essence of Brown's screen persona seemed to reflect an emergent assertive, sometimes violent, black manhood, and to exude a sexual expressiveness long denied blacks on the screen.

In a symbolic gesture that provided the black audience retribution against an organized racist ideology, Jim Brown's climactic run in the top moneymaker of 1967, *The Dirty Dozen*, dropping grenades down...
ventilators on elite Nazi Germans, was also applauded by a mixed New York audience because, as the critic Renata Adler explains it, spectators were anxious to see more of blacks "involved with whites in some fairly credible way." Brown's celebrity status as a top football player also bolstered his film career, for he was often cast as a member of a coordinated team, the integrationist paradigm that finds expression in every American media enterprise from professional sports to the biracial buddy flick and television news teams. Thus Brown fit well in The Dirty Dozen as part of yet another skilled American team, this time commandos on a wartime mission. Moreover, Brown's interracial sex scenes with Raquel Welch (somewhat less controversial because she was cast as Mexican) in 100 Rifles (1969) paid off for the studio as a sexploitation strategy, making the picture moderately successful in urban areas.

In both films, Brown was able to do what Poitier was denied in his career to that point, to act in a violent assertive manner and express his sexuality openly and beyond dominant cinema's sexual taboos. Brown's breakthrough success in articulating the Hollywood moneymaking codes of sex and violence placed him, and all the athlete heroes, in emergent dialectical opposition to everything that Sidney Poitier had stood for on the screen. And if we can believe the tabloids, we can see that this antimony carried over into the actors' contrasting private lives. Off screen, Poitier was reserved and well mannered, thus sticking closely to his screen persona; Jim Brown was a turbulent personality who entangled himself in off-screen sexual escapades, fist fights, and rancorous feuds on and off the set.

This did not mean, however, that the newly emergent black macho images portrayed by the ex-athletes were able to escape the "tar baby," Hollywood's subtle, entangling system of racial devaluation. For the racial ideology and stereotypes that are but part of dominant cinema's work are not fixed or static. Instead, they are a set of dynamic, lived relations and social transactions; the filmic conventions and codes of racial subordination are continually being reworked, shifting under the pressure of material, aesthetic, and social conditions. For all the new potent force, sexuality, and assertiveness expressed in the images, bodies, and portrayals of the macho men, their strength was almost always either at the service, or under the control, of white institutional power and authority. For instance, in Che! (1969), ideological contain-
ment is literal, and the possibility of a black man expressing himself through political revolution is immediately extinguished by a narrative that opens with Woody Strode reminiscing about a failed guerrilla adventure through the bars of his jail cell. In *The Dirty Dozen*, Jim Brown starts off as an incorrigible convict but ends up enthusiastically serving America's war effort. And exemplifying dominant cinema's reworking of older, imperial narratives and codes of subordination, in the British-made *Dark of the Sun* (1968), Jim Brown is aligned with white mercenaries in suppressing black freedom fighters in an African country. By the end of the film, Brown sacrifices himself, à la Gunga Din, for his white comrades. So, while shifting its images to mediate and co-opt the new black militancy and self-awareness, Hollywood did concede some ground in its representation of black manhood. Nevertheless, the "football heroes" offered only superficial variations of older codes and themes, and the black film critic Donald Bogle goes so far as to call Brown's characters "nothing more than the black buck of old." 25

This is not to say that there were not some significant shifts in the filmic representation of blackness in this interim period between the collapse of the integrationist problem picture and the rise of Blaxploitation. Hollywood was beginning to respond to the building pressures of the black cultural and political revolution, and to a deepening fiscal crisis that was on the verge of scuttling the film industry in 1968. This led to the increasing recognition that purchasing power at the black box office could contribute significantly to the resolution of the industry's pressing economic problems. Consequently, a number of projects were either inspired by black novels, had black writers or directors, or attempted to tell stories from current black perspectives; they revealed some industry innovation and change at the narrative level and signified possible directions open to Hollywood in representing blacks. Sidney Poitier, eager to update and revive his image, starred in *The Lost Man* (1969) as a revolutionary executing an armed robbery to finance the black takeover of Philadelphia. But, alas, the film was a formula remake of *Odd Man Out* (1947), and Poitier had trouble making the transition from saint to militant. This derivative approach was again deployed in the making of Jules Dassin's *Up Tight* (1968), about the assassination of a ghetto informer, a clear remake of John Ford's classic *The Informer* (1935). Revealing Hollywood's depen-
dence on traditional narrative strategies (like the remake), both films tried to recycle older themes about the Irish revolution by simply overlaying them with a contemporary black social template. Needless to say, both films failed at the box office, signaling Hollywood’s difficulty in transcending traditional genre narrative conventions in order to generate new material that told a story from a black point of view.

In the commercial realm of mainstream cinema, however, two films that pointed in the direction of an honest depiction of blacks, of a black point of view, and of the black world were soon to come with the release of *The Learning Tree* (1969), and *Cotton Comes to Harlem* (1970). Their validity as depictions of black culture and consciousness was rewarded by the only index that Hollywood truly respects, commercial success at the box office. In order to start shaping a successful black product, and as if to signal reluctant concessions to a new black energy and talent forcing its way over the barricades of the studio system, Hollywood constructed both projects around the narratives of black novels, Gordon Parks’s autobiographical *Learning Tree* and Chester Himes’s *Cotton Comes to Harlem*. Furthermore, both films employed black directors, Gordon Parks and Ossie Davis, respectively. The significant thing about the Parks film, depicting his childhood in Kansas in the 1920s, was that it expanded the possibilities of black filmmaking by defying the limitations of Hollywood genre classification and employing a black crew at all levels of production. Parks would use the experience gained on this film to put together one of the most developed and influential films of the Blaxploitation period, *Shaft* (1971).

*Cotton Comes to Harlem* was the first of the new black films to articulate a sense of the emerging mainstream cinema “black style.” Being about a black detective, Coffin Ed Johnson, and set in Harlem, the film influenced the pacing and the formal visual–musical elements that would go into the construction of the crime–action–ghetto Blaxploitation features to follow. *Cotton* paid off at the box office, grossing $15.4 million on an initial production cost of $2.2 million, thus inspiring producer Samuel Goldwyn, Jr., to follow up with a film pictorializing another of Himes’s novels, *The Heat Is On*, resulting in *Come Back Charleston Blue* (1972). The characteristic that all these new black films shared was their attunement to the ways that blacks uniquely understood their world and the persistent racial confrontation that
has, in part, historically defined it. More broadly, all these emergent black-focused productions fit comfortably into Hollywood's end-of-the-decade shift toward more politicized films, reflecting America's uncertainty about its direction and values. Films such as *The Graduate* and *Bonnie and Clyde* (both 1967), *The Planet of the Apes* (1968), and *Easy Rider* (1969) all tried to articulate the social values of the 1960s college protest generation and keep up with a box office that was growing ever younger.\(^\text{28}\)

Significantly, the accelerating appearance of black-oriented pictures (yearly production tripling from six features in 1969 to eighteen in 1971)\(^\text{29}\) was largely fueled by the overdetermining pressures of a disastrous downturn in studio profits and the steadily rising tide of black political activism. Hollywood's consequent shift toward a more black-oriented product created the boom of the Blaxploitation genre, beginning in 1972. As noted in Chapter 2, since the end of the 1940s, Hollywood's once unified audience had been declining and fragmenting—with the rise of television, younger, better-educated, and liberal filmgoers, and the incursion of post-World War II foreign films into Hollywood's once-sovereign domestic market. Moreover, by the mid-1960s, Hollywood had become increasingly dependent on television leases of their films as a secondary market, the average film going for $150,000, to be shown twice over a three-year period. By 1968, the stakes in the leasing game had risen considerably, with Hollywood getting up to $800,000 per lease; with rates so high and a glut of already leased films jamming the system, television networks suddenly stopped buying.\(^\text{30}\) About this time, studio executives, who since the 1950s had been committed to making hugely expensive "blockbusters" as fiscal strategy, were seeing five out of six films fail to turn a profit. Suddenly the moguls were caught with a backup of big-budget monsters, which worked their way through the distribution system, accumulating calamitous losses.\(^\text{31}\)

Under the mounting pressure of economic disaster, Hollywood nearly collapsed, with the majors losing between $15 and $145 million and Columbia and Fox tottering on the edge of bankruptcy. Even MCA's film operation lost money, and MGM, once Hollywood's most prestigious studio, had to cut back its production and distribution activities drastically.\(^\text{32}\) Moreover, the banks and conglomerates that had
extended large loans to the industry or had acquired the studios outright decided that because they were so financially committed, rather than send their holdings into receivership, they would restructure the industry. Weeded out first was what was left of the “old guard” moguls, who were replaced with younger, outside management. Notable among the many victims, Jack Warner sold his interest in the industry in 1967, and Darryl Zanuck was retired in 1971. Most important overall, and specifically contributing to the rise of Blaxploitation, the new management decided to stop making blockbuster pictures and concentrate their assets and control in distribution.\textsuperscript{33} Thus, as the industry’s focus shifted to contracting to distribute independently produced features, opportunities opened up for a range of fresh perspectives and aspiring young filmmakers, such as Francis Ford Coppola and Peter Bogdanovich, as well as Gordon Parks, Jr. and Sr., Melvin Van Peebles, and Michael Schultz.

Presenting itself as a partial solution to the economic crisis in the film industry, there emerged yet another of Blaxploitation’s enabling conditions, Hollywood’s belated recognition of the consumer power of the black audience. As a significant index of the 1968 through 1972 crisis, the film industry had watched its average weekly box office sink to the lowest mark ever, $15.8 million in 1971, compared to a post–World War II high of $90 million.\textsuperscript{34} But at the beginning of the crisis the film industry’s trade journal, \textit{Variety}, estimated that while blacks made up 10 to 15 percent of the population, they made up more than 30 percent of the audience in first-run, major-city theaters. The same article pointed out that \textit{Ebony} readers alone spent $450,000 weekly on movie admissions.\textsuperscript{35} And a companion article, “Negroes and the Boxoffice,” in the same issue of \textit{Variety}, admitted that Hollywood’s awareness of a significant black audience went back at least fifteen years. Additionally, this rise and recognition of the black box office can be attributed to a combination of varied factors that have their beginnings in the two waves of African American migration to northern cities after World Wars I and II. During postwar years, blacks found themselves increasingly pushed into the core-area ghettos of the urban North, where a system of de facto \textit{apartheid} was stabilized and rigidly maintained. In 1967, however, after years of urban riots and rebellions, shifting demographics accelerated as racial boundaries eroded, and most American
cities found whites heading for the suburbs, abandoning city centers and their movie houses to inner-city blacks. Blacks, moreover, are statistically a younger population than whites and therefore are disproportionately represented in the youth market that was coming to dominate industry concerns. Further contributing to the power of the black box office, suburban, middle-class blacks would come to theaters in city center for a night out, thus making urban centers like Chicago's Loop and Atlanta's downtown predominantly black entertainment centers.

Adding to the mix of conditions was the continually mounting political activism and pressure from the civil rights movement and the following Black Power rebellion, which in effect laid siege to the film industry. The new black political activism called not only for more human and complex representation of blacks on the screen but also for a fair share of jobs and training in the film industry on all levels. To back up their demands, black activists and their civil rights allies were well aware of the increasing influence of the black moviegoing audience on Hollywood decision making. Foremost in their arsenal of incentives to compel industry change was their threatened power to boycott Hollywood's product. As early as 1963, the NAACP launched a "massive attack" on racism and discrimination in the industry that was coordinated with the Hollywood branch of the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) and supported by such prominent stars as Marlon Brando, Paul Newman, Burt Lancaster, and James Whitmore. That same year the prominent film critic Vincent Canby, in a lead story in Variety, charted Hollywood's reaction to the "Negro News," which was to release during "this 1963 summer of discontent" six independent features dealing with some aspect of the crisis in race relations. Among the notable films Canby reviewed in the article were Black Like Me and Cool World.

This political push was met with some diversionary token progress masking a uniform wall of resistance put up by the film industry and its craft unions. On July 2, 1965, the Federal Fair Employment Act became the law of the land, and three weeks later the widely acclaimed Hollywood/Beverly Hills branch of the NAACP announced its dissatisfaction, following a two-year watch-and-wait attitude, with the effort the film industry had made so far. The NAACP threatened "drastic
The entertainment industry began to feel even more pressure when, at the federal level in October 1969, the Justice Department announced plans to sue six film studios and two television networks for discriminating against blacks in their hiring policies. Overall, though, by the end of the decade, Hollywood's cat-and-mouse strategy with its activist adversaries seems to have worked, for besides the suggestion of change and the vague hint of new directions represented by the few aforementioned black-oriented films, the industry's discriminatory policies on and off the screen were still intact and widely in practice. In response to this frustrating situation, Gordon Parks was among the many to speak up, complaining that progress was "painfully slow." And as one of the many confirmations of this stalemated situation, the membership of blacks in craft unions stood at a paltry 6 percent at the end of the 1960s.

The important point about this frustrating chronology of fluctuating industry racism is that Hollywood is a system entirely motivated by short-term profit. Because of this, the industry is conservative and changes only when forced to do so by the combined pressures of multiple influences, no matter how just or important any single condition may be. Richard Maltby makes this point clearly in discussing moments in the system's history when political or social pressure and economic crisis interacted to force Hollywood into real concession and change. Coupled with periods of economic instability, the 1934 Legion of Decency crisis resulted in the adoption of the Hays Office Code and the 1947–52 House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC) hearings and anticommunist witch hunt resulted in the repressive disaster of blacklisting. And, as explored earlier, the argument of multiple determinations forcing industry change applies as well to the disappearance of the plantation genre during and after World War II. So, by the end of the 1960s, the film industry had been aware of the consumer potential of blacks for years and had made empty promises to civil rights activists for years as well. Only when Hollywood found itself confronted with the familiar, menacing conjunction of multiple political and economic forces did it begin to act. This was, again, to be true from 1968 to 1972, as mounting political pressure combined with the film industry's threatened economic position. Thus political and economic conditions, along with the allure and profitability of a rising
black box office, proved irresistible. In 1971, with the megahit success of the independent Melvin Van Peebles's *Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song*, followed within a few months by Gordon Parks's nearly as successful mainstream hit *Shaft*, the Blaxploitation boom took off, and Hollywood's formula for the "new" filmic representation of blacks began to crystallize.

In terms of Hollywood production economics and its narrative strategies for representing blacks, *Sweet Sweetback* was a maverick breakthrough movie. Melvin Van Peebles, who had just written and directed a moderately successful black-focused comedy, *Watermelon Man* (1970), financed his new project through various independent sources outside industry channels, including $100,000 of his own money and $50,000 from Bill Cosby. Van Peebles was able to reduce production costs further by leasing the film to a small distributor, Cinemation Industries, that specialized in low-budget exploitation films. And by pretending to be making a porno flick, Van Peebles was able to vary his crew and further economize by using black and nonunion personnel. Van Peebles wrote and directed the film, scored the music, and played the leading role, all of which reduced total costs for salaries. The end result of his innovative efforts was a feature-length film shot in less than three weeks and costing $500,000. Initially, *Sweetback* was played cautiously, opening in two theaters to survey black audience reaction, but by the end of the year the film was a nationwide smash hit that had grossed $10 million.

As Van Peebles puts it, the film tells the story of a "bad nigger" who challenges the oppressive white system and wins, thus articulating the main feature of the Blaxploitation formula. The hero of the film works as a stud, performing in sex shows in a South-Central Los Angeles whorehouse where he has grown up, and where at the age of ten he earned the name "Sweetback" from an appreciative prostitute who seduced him. One night, two uniformed policemen bargain with the cathouse owner for Sweetback to stand in as a "suspect" for a couple of days to quiet public uproar over a murder case that has caught the media's attention. On the way to the station house, the police pick up a local black revolutionary named Moo Moo, take him to an isolated spot, and brutalize him in Sweetback's presence. This is too much for Sweetback to take; he has a sudden leap in consciousness, turns on
the police, and hacks them nearly to death with a pair of handcuffs. From this central act, the film narrates, with montages, fast-paced and jump cutting, the flight of Sweetback through the crumbling cityscape of the black community, with children, preachers, gamblers, pimps, and whores in the community aiding Sweetback's filmic journey. Among his adventures, while fleeing a massive police manhunt, superhero Sweetback uses his cocksmanship to outfornicate the white female leader of a motorcycle gang. He also evades the police by raping a black woman at knifepoint at a rock concert, spears a cop with a pool cue, kills a number of dogs tracking him, heals himself with his own urine, and bites off the head of a lizard before escaping across the Mexican border into the desert. As Sweetback runs off into the sunset in the last frame, the film concludes with the warning message: "A BAADASSSSS NIGGER IS COMING TO COLLECT SOME DUES."

Although Sweet Sweetback was enormously popular, it also precipitated a storm of controversy, setting off a discursive, wide-ranging debate over its aesthetic value and social utility to the freedom struggle of the black community. Sweetback brought to the surface of African American discourse the subtle fissures and cracks of class tension, ideological conflict, and aesthetic arguments that had been simmering in the black social formation since the winding down of the civil rights movement. Community division over the film came to its sharpest expression in two opposite and signal publications that between them encompassed the range of criticisms and affirmations of the now-rising Blaxploitation genre. On the one hand, Huey P. Newton, who devoted an entire issue of the Black Panther party newspaper to the film, celebrated and welcomed Sweet Sweetback as "the first truly revolutionary Black film made . . . presented to us by a Black man." A few months later, Lerone Bennett responded with an astute and sharply critical essay on the film in Ebony, in which he broadly discusses the "black aesthetic" and concludes that Sweetback is neither revolutionary nor black.

Newton's essay, "He Won't Bleed Me: A Revolutionary Analysis of 'Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song,'" is an extensive review of the film, reflecting the ideological position of the Black Panther party and the insurgent mood of much of the inner-city black community that propelled the film to megahit status. Among the arguments that
Newton makes for *Sweetback* are that it “presents the need for unity among all the members and institutions within the community of victims.” Newton contends that this is evidenced by the opening credits proclaiming that the film stars a collective protagonist, “THE BLACK COMMUNITY,” engaged in various acts of community solidarity that aid Sweetback in escaping. Newton further argues that “the film demonstrates the importance of unity and love between Black men and women,” as demonstrated “in the scene where the woman makes love to the young boy but in fact baptizes him into his true manhood.”

Newton’s article also broadly agrees with Van Peebles’s intentions in making the film as stated in various published interviews and articles. Van Peebles informs us in his promotional book on *Sweetback*: “I wanted a victorious film, a film where niggers could walk out standing tall instead of avoiding each other’s eyes, looking once again like they’d had it.” And in *Life*, Van Peebles echoes Newton, proclaiming that he has made America’s “first black revolutionary film.”

Many critics have disputed Van Peebles’s and Newton’s claims. Most notable and articulate, Lerone Bennett’s seminal 1971 *Ebony* essay, “The Emancipation Orgasm: Sweetback in Wonderland,” takes *Sweet Sweetback* apart, and by implication, almost point by point, Newton’s review. Equally important, Bennett’s essay, on many issues, sets the intellectual criteria for a rising black discursive resistance to the newly emergent genre, as well as raising the need for a more clearly defined “black aesthetic.” For Bennett, the hustling, inner-city characters and impoverished milieu of *Sweet Sweetback* comes down to Van Peebles merely defining blacks in reaction to the black bourgeois ideal of the ever-striving, upright Negro, an image that in itself is an overcompensation for the racist stereotypes inflicted on blacks. As Bennett illuminates the situation, before the 1965 Watts rebellion, middle-class “Negroes” tried to become the opposite of what whites stereotyped them as. Thus the black bourgeoisie aspired to a conformist, striving image of the “noble Negro” that mimicked the values of middle-class whites and presumed to leave behind the deeper blues roots and expressiveness of a much broader based lower-class African American culture for the assimilation and seeming progress of life in the suburbs and the illusory embrace of the dominant culture.
lent historical moment, Sidney Poitier’s characters were the signature mediation of the black middle-class perspective. After Watts, however, the great mass of urban lower-class blacks, awakening to their own agenda, started to define themselves as “counter-counter-contrast conceptions, as the opposite, in short, of what Negroes said Negroes were.” Clearly, beyond the mid-1960s, lower-class blacks were increasingly dissatisfied with the exhausted black bourgeois paradigm of upward mobility through assimilation and started to identify the black experience with the defiant images and culture of the “ghetto” and its hustling street life.

In describing the dialectical zigzag of black image formation that inevitably leads to what Bennett calls black “image confusion,” he goes on to argue that Sweet Sweetback romanticizes the poverty and misery of the ghetto and that “some men foolishly identify the black aesthetic with empty bellies and big bottomed prostitutes.” For Bennett, the film is “neither revolutionary nor black” because it presents the spectator with sterile daydreams and a superhero who is ahistorical, selfishly individualist with no revolutionary program, who acts out of panic and desperation. To illustrate his point, Bennett supports his analysis with an insightful filmic contrast: the image of Sweetback with that of the pimp-hustler turned revolutionary hero in Gillo Pontecorvo’s Battle of Algiers (1965). For Bennett, Sweetback is a static figure subject to all the flaws and forces discussed; Moo Moo, the revolutionary who Sweetback declares is the black people’s future, is ambiguously drawn, inarticulate, and meets a grim and violent death, thus squashing any hopeful speculation about the future of the revolution. In contrast to this situation, Bennett points out that “there is no such ambiguity in Battle of Algiers. The male hustler in that movie turns himself inside out, like a glove, like Malcolm, in fact. And, like Malcolm, he confronts his former companions with the errors of their way.” Bennett saves his most incisive criticism for the construction of Sweetback’s sexuality and the gender problems it entails. Completely disagreeing with Van Peebles and Newton, Bennett views Sweetback’s sexual initiation at ten years old, not as an “act of love” between a black man and woman, but as the “rape of a child by a 40-year-old prostitute.” He goes on to describe the other instances when Sweetback saves himself
through the use of his sexual prowess as "emancipation orgasms" and concludes his essay on a wry, cutting note, writing that

it is necessary to say frankly that nobody ever f***ed his way to freedom. And it is mischievous and reactionary finally for anyone to suggest to black people in 1971 that they are going to be able to sc**w their way across the Red Sea. F***ing will not set you free. If f***ing freed, black people would have celebrated the millennium 400 years ago.50

Other black intellectuals and critics generally agreed with Bennett's assessment of the film; most specifically, they focused on the exploitative construction of its hero, Sweetback. The black nationalist poet and author Haki R. Madhubuti (Don L. Lee) concurs with Bennett, writing that the film is not revolutionary and that blacks must not make the mistake of equating manhood with being able to "screw well." Madhubuti also criticizes Sweetback's nonidentification with Moo Moo, and writer-director Van Peebles's morbid, distorted view of the black community. Madhubuti concludes that "in the final analysis, Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song is a limited, money-making, autobiographical fantasy of the odyssey of one Melvin Van Peebles through what he considered to be the Black community. . . ."51 The New York Times critic Clayton Riley views the film more favorably, commenting on its aesthetic innovation. But still he says of Sweetback that he "is the ultimate sexualist in whose seemingly vacant eyes and unrevealing mouth are written the protocols of American domestic colonialism." And in another review Riley explains that "Sweetback, the profane sexual athlete and fugitive, is based on a reality that is Black. We may not want him to exist but he does."52 Reaching for a more balanced position on the film, critics Donald Bogle and Charles Peavy explain the construction of Sweetback's sexuality as firmly located in the contextual pantheon of black folkloric heroes. Bogle states in a New York Times interview that the film in some ways met the black audience's compensatory needs after years of desexed Poitier characters and that they wanted a "viable, sexual, assertive, arrogant black male hero."53 Peavy also rebuts Bennett and Madhubuti directly on the point of Sweetback's supersexuality, noting that "it should be remembered, however, that a supermasculinity is often characteristic of the arche-
typal hero of both African and Afro-American folk traditions as well as recent avatars of the white pop culture heroes, such as James Bond."

Yet another interesting point about the discursive struggle that arose around *Sweet Sweetback* was the significant absence of any black feminist criticism of the film at that time. And while male critics, notably Bennett and Madhubuti, did mention the film’s distortion of the black male–female relationship, and Newton reductively romanticized it, none of them really addressed the fact that beyond their crude sexual objectification, the film contained no complex female portrayals. Nor did anyone deal with the implications of Sweetback raping a woman at knifepoint out of “revolutionary” expediency. This structured absence of black women’s perspectives on *Sweet Sweetback* can be explained, at least in part, by scholars and critics who point out that a politicized black women’s agenda was generally submerged under a male-focused black nationalist discourse aimed at rediscovering and articulating the mystique of a liberated “black manhood” during the late 1960s and into the early 1970s. Most certainly we can discern this fixation on an insurgent sense of black manhood surfacing in the fantasy construction of Blaxploitation’s macho heroes to come. Consonant with this analysis, it is illuminating to hear Van Peebles’s own words on gender-related matters. When asked by an underground newspaper how a black revolutionary would go about raising the capital to make an independent film, Van Peebles replied, “Put a couple of chicks on the block, raise the money and make a film.” So the Sweetback mentality has a definite place among Van Peebles’s “revolutionary” filmmaking strategies. And it inspired the fashioning of, as Bennett puts it, many “Sons of Sweetback” on the cinematic horizon, where the devaluation of black women in Blaxploitation was definitely aided, with few exceptions, by the figure of the sexploitative pimp, hustler hero of the then-rising genre.

By Van Peebles’s own accounting, *Sweetback* was so successful at articulating a new formula “of the black winning and being triumphant” that there was a stampede in Hollywood to make more such films. As a result, the script for *Shaft* was changed to accommodate a black audience. According to Van Peebles, “Originally, the script of *Shaft* was written for a white actor, but they changed to a black. They threw in a couple ’motherfuckers’ and that became a black film.”
Shaft (1971), which was directed by Gordon Parks, starred Richard Roundtree for a paltry $13,000, and won an Oscar for Isaac Hayes’s soundtrack, confirmed the industry’s discovery of a hungry black audience that would wait in lines around the block to see black heroes victorious on the screen. For Shaft was definitely a triumph for the studio system, being produced by MGM at a cost of $1.2 million and earning over $10.8 million in its first year of distribution.57

On the one hand, because of Sweet Sweetback’s independent financing and a radical visual style, Van Peebles at least suggested the possibility of an emergent independent black cinema that could be commercially popular. For the film deployed everything from printed editorial statements to split-screen editing, multiple-exposure scenes, jump cuts, and the almost continual montage of Sweetback’s rambling escape cut to the black musical arrangements of the group Earth Wind and Fire and spurts of Van Peebles’s poetry in place of narrative. By contrast, Gordon Parks’s Shaft (1971) was strictly an industry-backed, moneymaking venture that refined and standardized the conventions of the “superspade” protagonist first articulated in Sweet Sweetback. Because it was made well within the expectations of Hollywood’s ideology of “harmless entertainment,” Shaft played it much safer and came across as less stridently antiwhite than Sweet Sweetback. Although the film was carried to smash-hit status by black audiences, it was able to cross over and play well with whites also.58 Reflecting its essence as a commercial vehicle, Shaft tells the story of private eye John Shaft, who, unlike Sweetback, is able successfully to negotiate the tensions of functioning in a white-dominated world while still portraying the sexploitative, aggressive, black macho image served up for consumption by young, urban black audiences.

Shaft’s middleman strategy is best shown by his positioning at three sites in the narrative. Shaft’s first negotiation of a complex urban racial hierarchy is expressed in geographical terms. For John Shaft is pointedly black, hip, and macho. His New York City townhouse is located downtown in the Village, while his office is midtown on Times Square; and he keeps track of all the happenings uptown on his prime turf, Harlem. Second, Shaft mediates a gang war between black and white criminal organizations when he is retained by a black uptown mobster, Bumpy Jonas (Moses Gunn), to rescue Bumpy’s daughter, who
is being held for ransom by the downtown white Mafia. Shaft's final mediation is political, for while he is acquainted with black militants, whom he hires to help him rescue the damsel in distress, and is in return retained by black gangsters, his position in the narrative is maintained as distinctly individualist, in keeping with Hollywood's ongoing repression or containment of the collective. This individualist stance, free from any political taint while manipulating the superficial trappings and signs of black militancy, is also revealed in the construction of Shaft's sexuality. While he has a black girl friend, which would satisfy the expectations of cultural nationalism, he is not above sleeping around and having random sex with attractive white women. Predictably, the film ends with a spectacular gunfight and rescue.

Because of the film's positioning securely within the parameters of industry standards, Shaft was generally applauded by the critics, both black and white, as being a breakthrough production in terms of expanding black representation in commercial cinema. Gordon Parks himself reveals the film's intent when he says that he made the movie as a "fun film," which people could attend on Saturday night and see a black guy winning. An interesting exception to the critical applause Shaft received was the response of Clayton Riley, who along with Lerone Bennett was one of the first critics to begin discerning the weaknesses and dangers of the developing genre and to voice some well-considered concerns about it. In his New York Times review "Shaft Can Do Everything—I Can Do Nothing," Riley perceptively raises the issue of Shaft's narrative containment of black social or political aspirations. And citing a flood of Blaxploitation productions that followed, such as Top of the Heap, Superfly, The Man, and Shaft's Big Score, he asserts that all the new black films work "to insure the well being of the American spirit by offering Black life as an exercise in passive unreality." Equally important, Riley points out that the narratives about, and images of, blacks in these new films are no more than thematic templates reworked with black casts and updated stereotypes that reconfirm white expectations of blacks and serve to repress and delay the awakening of any real political consciousness.

After Shaft in 1971, there came a flood of productions, extending through 1974, that while they crudely tried to emulate the success of Shaft and Sweetback, repeated, filled in, or exaggerated the ingredi-
ents of the Blaxploitation formula, which usually consisted of a pimp, gangster, or their baleful female counterparts, violently acting out a revenge or retribution motif against corrupt whites in the romanticized confines of the ghetto or inner city. These elements were fortified with liberal doses of gratuitous sex and drugs and the representation of whites as the very inscription of evil. And all this was rendered in the alluring visuals and aggrandized sartorial fashions of the black underworld and to the accompaniment of black musical scores that were usually of better quality than the films they energized.

Yet it must be noted that, while the endless replication of this insipid formula was a calculated profit-making enterprise mostly concocted by the white-monopolized film industry, the pimp–hustler hero and his urban milieu have enjoyed a long, colorful history in black literature, folklore, and oral tradition, where the sly victories of the gangster or trickster persona were one of the few ways that African Americans could turn the tables on an unjust racist society. Thus the cool, counterwhite, underworld perspective of the black gangster or outsider has enjoyed much attention in African American popular literature, most notably in the novels of Robert Beck (a.k.a. Ice Berg Slim), as well as the more polished literary works of Chester Himes and Donald Goines, all of whose novels inspired many film scripts. In an additional twist, as the popularity and influence of Blaxploitation began to explode, black intellectuals, community leaders, and film critics became increasingly uneasy and came to see the cinematic production and celebration of these unsavory inner-city heroes and narratives as, at least in part, the responsibility of black film artists, actors, and directors in collaboration with Hollywood.

Other factors contributing to the success of the Blaxploitation formula were the mid-1960s collapse of Hollywood’s Production Code (replaced by a less strict industry-controlled rating system), along with the Supreme Court’s liberalization of obscenity laws, all of which mediated a popular and rising tolerance for the depiction of explicit sex, violence, and graphic language on the screen. Thus Hollywood was able to combine its traditional moneymaking ingredients of violence and sexploitation, wrap them in the distorted and grotesque signs and imagery of the urban black underworld, and at the same time keep the insurgent black political thought and cultural expressions of the times
to a minimum. The resulting product was racially targeted for the huge black audience eager to see a broader representation of its humanity and aspirations validated on the commercial screen. Hollywood was able to play on black people's new-found identification with its increasingly politicized and militant underclass, while shifting the industry's black imagery and stereotypes, in the words of the critic Daniel Leab, "from Sambo to Superspade." The most notable and purest examples in a deluge of these formulaic productions were such films as *Black Jesus* (1971), *Black Gunn*, *Malinda*, *Cool Breeze*, *The Final Come-down* (all in 1972), *Cleopatra Jones*, *The Mack*, *Gordon's War*, *Trick Baby*, *Black Caesar*, *Book of Numbers* (all in 1973), and *The Black Godfather*, *Willie Dynamite*, *The Take*, and *Foxy Brown* (all in 1974). The black film boom from 1970 through 1973 accounted for ninety-one productions, of which forty-seven can be considered models of the Blaxploitation formula.65

Quickly following the success of *Shaft*, one of the most popular, highly controversial, and purest formulaic expressions of the new genre was *Superfly* (1972), which was directed by Gordon Parks, Jr. Independently financed by Sig Shore and a group of black businessmen and distributed by Warner Bros., *Superfly* was made for less than $500,000, did an astounding $1 million gross in its first week in two New York City theaters alone, and grossed more than $11 million in its first two months of business.66 Set in Harlem, *Superfly*’s narrative is about a handsome dope pusher, Youngblood Priest (Ron O’Neal), who grows weary of the hustling life and decides that he wants to make one last big coke deal and retire. The film follows Priest through a series of drug deals and violent encounters with stereotypical ghetto junkies, crap shooters, and corrupt white, top-level police officials. Also of note is the, by now, obligatory explicit sex scene, which was one of Gordon Parks, Jr.’s most stylish directorial moments, and which came to be recognized as one of the finer expressions of black sexuality from the period. This time it is sex in a bubble bath surrounded with mirrors, between Priest and his comely black girl friend. Yet, emblematic of his interstitial sexual options, Priest also takes on one mandatory, eager white girl, who is part of his coke distribution network downtown. Also, by this time predictable in the industry’s narrative containment of insurgent black political aspirations, Priest backs down and ridi-
cules a group of neighborhood black activists in a scene full of typical Blaxploitation bravado.

Beyond the refinement of the formula that would soon be exhausted by the wave of cheap imitations to follow, however, what was interesting about Superfly was its perfected visual and audio style, as well as the political ramifications of that alluring style for black inner-city cultural expression, and more specifically, black youth. The film not only managed subtly and convincingly to visualize the space of the inner-city black world from the decaying, junkie-infested tenements to Priest’s tacky “penthouse,” but the musical score by Curtis Mayfield turned out to be brilliant and absolutely relevant; it added deep commentary, texture, and mood to the production. Also contributing to Superfly’s magnetic appeal was the film’s exaggerated but polished costuming as Youngblood Priest traipsed through the story world in long, narrow-waisted overcoats with leather trim and high collars offset with big-brimmed hats and a gaudy, customized Cadillac El Dorado to match. Further suggestive of the film’s politics, Superfly featured at its center a four-minute photo montage (ironically cut to Curtis Mayfield’s hit tune “Pusher Man”) depicting people of all races and orientations pleasurably consuming cocaine as a popular recreational drug, presumably supplied by Youngblood Priest. Yet, what all these images, signs, and emblems added up to was the cinematic inscription and glorification of the parasitic, hustling milieu of the black urban underworld so poetically described by its inhabitants, and by Donald Goines in his novels, as “the life.”

It was not long before, in combination with its predecessors Sweet Sweetback and Shaft, Superfly’s allure was made manifest in the idioms and fashions of the inner-city black community. Black youth taken with the superstud persona were observed exiting theaters doing the “Sweetback saunter.” And as ironic evidence of Sweet Sweetback’s reactionary, sexploitative nature, countering Van Peebles’s claim that the film was revolutionary, Bennett argues that the nickname “Sweetback” quickly became popular in the black community, not to mark a brother’s revolutionary consciousness, but as the emblem of his sexual bravado.67 It was additionally noticed in the community that among the youth, Afro hairdos and dashikis were soon replaced by the long, chemically straightened locks and wide sideburns of the Superfly coif-
fure, along with the film’s gaudy clothes and customized Cadillacs. Even more alluring and dangerous, Superfly was widely recognized for making fashionable the gold necklace with attached coke spoon, and, as critics have noted, for contributing to the dramatic increase in cocaine use among inner-city black youth. Overall, these shifts in black cultural style and expression seem to underscore Hollywood’s insistence on stunting the development of a black political voice and emancipated consciousness in its Blaxploitation movies. As well, these changes trace dominant cinema’s implicit contribution to a destructive shift in the black community away from collective political struggle of the 1960s and toward such individualist, self-indulgent activities as drug consumption and the single-minded pursuit of material gain.

Moreover, the process of transcoding ghetto fantasies depicted on the big screen into other popular cultural forms and expressions was intensified by a merchandising industry quick to capitalize on the surging Blaxploitation wave with a flood of commodity “spinoffs.” Van Peebles suggested the marketing paradigm by releasing Sweet Sweetback as a total package, including a book and soundtrack album, which both did quite well. Within weeks of Shaft’s release, the soundtrack album by Isaac Hayes earned $2 million and went to platinum. The Shaft theme became so popular that it was heard everywhere, from nightclubs to halftime at football games. Furthermore, blacks spent their money on an endless list of spinoff trinkets identified with the film, such as “Shaft suits, watches, belts and sunglasses, leather coats, decals, sweatshirts and night shirts, beach towels, posters, after shave lotion and cologne.” Following the same market trajectory, Curtis Mayfield’s album of the soundtrack for Superfly went to platinum with over a million units sold in 1972. And Mayfield’s hit single from the soundtrack, “Pusher Man,” is still relevant today, having been redone by contemporary rapper Ice-T into a hit single deploring the cocaine problem that has now grown to nightmare proportions in the black community.

In a parallel development indicative of the way the industry perceived black women, the gender limitations of the emergent genre, as well as the cultural politics of the times, there also arose a number of black female superheroines configured along the macho lines of the black action-fantasy heroes. Between 1973 and 1975, Tamara Dob-
and Pam Grier bolted into Blaxploitation stardom as they cranked out a series of cheap ghetto action adventures that on almost every count replicated the values, visual style, and exaggerated sex and violence of their male-focused counterparts. Written and co-produced by blaxploitationer Max Julien (the glorified pimp of The Mack), Cleopatra Jones (1973) was a widely successful venture, demonstrating that the components of Blaxploitation that worked so well in the masculine mode could be readily transposed into feminine expressions. Cleopatra Jones grossed over $3.25 million in commercial release, produced a soundtrack album arranged by J. J. Johnson that sold more than half a million copies, and launched the film career of six-foot-two fashion model Tamara Dobson. As the telltale marker of the genre, the plot is structured around the, by now, standard good/black versus white/evil allegory, this time with Dobson as a CIA agent trying to rid the black community of drugs while doing battle with her white nemesis, the lesbian drug boss Mommy (Shelley Winters). After a violent action tour of all social strata in Los Angeles's black community, Cleopatra Jones predictably climaxes with a battle between superwoman Jones (Dobson) and her powerful female adversary, Mommy. Notably, in a strategy to maximize the film's box-office take, sex and violence were toned down just enough to keep the film within the limits of a PG rating.

Also released in 1973 was Pam Grier's much more violent, supermacho hit feature Coffy, which was made for $500,000 and grossed more than $2 million. In Coffy, Pam Grier plays a nurse of the same name who takes revenge on a drug network that has turned her eleven-year-old sister into a junkie. In an incredibly violent series of murders, fights, seductions, and double-crosses, Grier manages to disrobe and parade her shapely body before the cameras on multiple occasions, thus perfecting the particular mix of black action and sexploitation that made her the queen of Blaxploitation with its predominantly black, inner-city, adolescent male audience. But perhaps the scene that sums up Grier's filmic style that is most remembered by audiences and critics alike occurs in the sequel to Coffy, the relatively more complex Foxy Brown (1974), which grossed a respectable $2.46 million in domestic film rentals. In this flick, Grier as Foxy Brown takes revenge on yet another white drug organization that has killed her lover and
her brother. In the course of the action, after being tortured, then drugged and raped by two white sadists in a sequence that pointedly evokes memories of the black woman’s plight under slavery, replete with a soundtrack of country banjo music and Foxy being lashed with a bullwhip, Foxy manages to escape and persuade a group of black militant brothers to join her fight. In a moment and mise-en-scène fairly rare for Blaxploitation, but consonant with the black political mood of the times, Foxy argues, against a backdrop of George Jackson posters, that her cause is not personal revenge but justice for all black people. Then, in a concluding sequence that comically seems to overlap with the conventions of the horror movie, Foxy and her militant crew capture the film’s chief white gangster and castrate him, after which Foxy personally delivers his private parts in a pickle jar to his girl friend, the head of the organization.

The fact that Dobson and Grier were the only women to rise to the heights of Blaxploitation celebrity did not spare them, or their films, from the critical scorn that was building against the genre. Donald Bogle is right to point out that black women could find little in their adolescent-male-fantasy-oriented roles to identify with. Moreover, critical resistance to the genre, and its decline, led both women to attempt to change their star personas and roles in subtle ways. As an indication of a shift of Blaxploitation’s youth audience toward Kung-Fu action movies, in Dobson’s sequel Cleopatra Jones and the Casino of Gold (1975), Cleopatra Jones (Dobson) travels to Hong Kong to team up with Mi Ling (Tammy) and share much of the camera and action with her Chinese superwoman counterpart. Similarly, in Friday Foster (1975), Pam Grier’s overall image, hair, fashions, and language are softened as she shifts her persona in an attempt to extend her career beyond the rapidly approaching demise of the genre. Moreover, critical reaction to the violent, gory hyperbole of Coffy and Foxy Brown caused Grier to declare, somewhat belatedly, in a 1976 Sepia interview that she had made a conscious decision to stop playing such roles. Both women’s talents were pretty much confined to articulating the sex-violence-action scenarios of cheap Blaxploitation vehicles, and when the studios unplugged the genre, both were unceremoniously dumped, their fates in this sense paralleling those of so many black women with talent and high expectations before and after them.
in Hollywood’s long discriminatory history. Like the vast majority of enthusiastic actors who rose to recognition during Blaxploitation’s high moment of cultural influence, Grier and Dobson had all but disappeared from the commercial screen by the end of the decade.

Their erasure was not entirely their fault, for Blaxploitation’s undoing had begun long before. Critical perspective on the genre, as well as a sharpening discourse among black intellectuals, writers, and social activists, had been building since Blaxploitation’s emergence with *Sweet Sweetback* and *Shaft*. Then, with the release of *Superfly*, the level of community concern and protest became vehement. By early in the summer of 1972, dissatisfaction with the genre was already in full cry, and on July 29, in Chicago, the week before the release of *Superfly*, the Reverend Jesse Jackson held the first conference of his newly formed organization, People United to Save Humanity (PUSH). Jackson told the conference that his organization would challenge the nation’s major corporations on their responsibilities to blacks. Specifically, Jackson targeted the film industry with a “program of full blown confrontation” and studio raids over two issues: the exploitation of black images and themes in commercial cinema and the lack of jobs for African Americans in all aspects of the film industry.77 Fed up with the “vulgarity, violence and vanity” of Blaxploitation and well aware that Hollywood listened to threats against its box office, Jackson, borrowing from civil rights movement’s rhetoric and strategy, went on to say:

> Since we’re organized in 30 key cities, the language we will use, if we are not heard, will not be obscenity and vulgarity. It will be at the box offices of the major theaters in those cities. Picket and boycott will be one form of protest. When and if we strike, it will not be a secret. We are prepared to move on major studios with black films in production, those with films in the planning stages, and, if necessary, those already in distribution.78

During this same period, many black film artists who had benefited from the general black film boom now began to add their voices to the pervasive dissatisfaction and started to take a stand against Blaxploitation. Bea Richards, of *Guess Who’s Coming to Dinner?* fame, referred to the new wave of Blaxploitation films as a “skin game.” And Cicely Tyson of *Sounder* denounced the wave of cheaply made black
films as “totally unreal” and was especially worried about the effects of the genre’s negative images on children. Veteran actor Moses Gunn, who played the gangster “Bumpy Jonas” in the two Shaft films, felt compelled to dismiss them as “fantasyland,” adding that if they turned out to be the only type of film to depict black society, they would amount to “euphemistic racism.” Also reflecting misgivings about the new genre, the much acclaimed black playwright and screenwriter Lonnie Elder III (Ceremonies in Dark Old Men) organized an early August Hollywood symposium consisting of black directors Ossie Davis and Hugh A. Roberts and actresses Denise Nicholas and Judyann Elder, among others, to discuss the theme “The Emergence of The Black Film; A Blessing or Curse?”

In August, following the release of Superfly, black civic dissatisfaction with the genre and that film in particular reached a crescendo and contributed to the formation in Los Angeles of the Coalition against Blaxploitation (CAB), made up of several civil rights and black community groups, the most prominent of which were the NAACP, CORE, and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC). As many civic groups and coalitions coming from different perspectives have done intermittently throughout Hollywood’s long and contentious social history, CAB proposed a film ratings system, this time to classify black movies ranging from “superior” to “thoroughly objectionable.” Junius Griffin, former president of the Beverly Hills/Hollywood branch of the NAACP (influential in media matters), articulated the coalition’s objections and delivered a succinct, pithy analysis of the evolution of the film industry’s representation of blacks on the screen when he pointedly told a press conference that

we will not tolerate the continued warping of our black children’s minds with the filth, violence and cultural lies that are all pervasive in current productions of so called black movies. The transformation from the stereotyped Stepin’ Fetchit to Super Nigger on the screen is just another form of cultural genocide. The black community should deal with this problem by whatever means necessary.

Thus, by the end of the summer, for a varied array of groups and individuals, Superfly came to be the main target of a collective fury and the prime example of degenerate black images on film. The Reverend
Jesse Jackson of PUSH argued that the film, along with others, was an unthinking commercial for the consumption of dangerous drugs, when other media were prevented from such advertising. Marion Barry, then president of the Washington, D.C. School Board, labeled Superfly “mind genocide,” organized Blacks against Narcotics and Genocide (BANG), and threatened to use sound trucks and forty thousand leaflets to launch a boycott against the film. Moreover, blacks were not the only ones outraged by the movie. The National Catholic Office “C” rated, that is, “condemned,” Superfly for its celebration of dope pushing, its overall “offense” to decent standards, and its depiction of a majority of the black inner-city community as criminals.

Perhaps the most intelligent, if self-serving, rejoinder to the rising chorus of protest and indignation was voiced by singer-composer Curtis Mayfield, who employed the argument that the film was only depicting social reality, saying that black films would deal with drugs and the underside of ghetto life as long as those conditions existed. “I don’t see why people are complaining about the subject of these films,” contended Mayfield. “The way you clean up the film is by cleaning up the streets. The music and movies of today are about conditions that exist. You change the music and movies by changing the conditions.” Adding a further dimension to the debate, Mayfield, who, incidentally, would not disclose how much he had made from the film and spinoff album, praised the Blaxploitation boom for “giving black actors, writers and crew members an opportunity to fall on in and take their share of the entertainment industry.” Director Gordon Parks, Jr., employed a more standard Hollywood defense for such situations by saying he was giving the black audience what it wanted, entertainment. He observed that “people who come down from Harlem and plunk down their three dollars don’t want to see drip ’n’ drab. They want to be entertained. And if they see superheroes with fast cars and fancy clothes, well, that’s the American dream—everyone’s American dream.” In another interview, Parks argued that the film was not exploitative “because Superfly wants to get out of the dope business,” a defense that conveniently overlooks the fact that Superfly does this at the expense and suffering of the black community. For Superfly’s retirement deal funnels $1 million worth of cocaine into the community.
But the brashest defense of *Superfly* came from the star of the film, Ron O’Neal, when he said of black activists and intellectuals who criticized the film, “They’re saying that they know better than the black people themselves what they should look at, that they’re going to be the moral interpreters for the destiny of black people. I’m so tired of handkerchief-head Negroes moralizing on the poor black man.”

Also appearing on the commercial cinema horizon of the early to mid-1970s, amid the economic instability of the film industry and the rise of Blaxploitation, was a complex web of cinematic countercurrents that influenced a sprinkling of African American and white productions alike. These films were at least in part dialectically conditioned by, or a critical response to, the rise of Blaxploitation and its audience. For within the now relatively expanding opportunities and parameters of the commercial film business, a number of established black filmmakers managed to produce a handful of movies that offered viable black alternatives to Hollywood’s problematic depiction of black life and its reigning Blaxploitation formula. In 1971, Bill Cosby produced *Man and Boy* about the complex relationship between a black father and son in the old West. In 1972, Sidney Poitier directed a black Western, *Buck and the Preacher*, starring Poitier, Harry Belafonte, and Ruby Dee, which did well at the box office. That same year, *Black Girl* was released. Directed by Ossie Davis and starring Ruby Dee, Brock Peters, and Leslie Uggams, the film was notable for its gender focus, depicting the struggles in a family of three generations of black women. In 1973, transcending the boundaries of formula and dominant ideology to explore black revolutionary impulses, Ivan Dixon and Sam Greenlee produced *The Spook Who Sat by the Door* from Greenlee’s novel of the same name. But the film that was most often held up by critics as best expressing a subtle vision of black humanity and reality reaching beyond studio formula was *Sounder* (1972). Written by Lonnie Elder III, starring Paul Winfield and Cicely Tyson, and with a soundtrack by Taj Mahal, the film depicted black sharecropper family life in the depths of the Great Depression in a rural parish in Louisiana.

On its release, *Sounder* was uniformly praised as a welcome, if rare, contrast to the Blaxploitation genre. And, in fact, both Tyson and Winfield, in a series of promotional pieces, interviews, and articles,
made a conscious effort to position the film, and themselves, in a dialectically alternative relation to the Blaxploitation wave. Furthermore, Jet pointed out as proof of the assertion that one did not have to make violent, degrading movies to draw black audiences the fact that Sounder did very well at the box office, grossing $11 million in its first nine months of business. Considered in broader perspective, however, the disappointing truth was that in an eleven-year period, starting with Nothing but a Man in 1964 and continuing through Cooley High in 1975, the only other commercially successful films that articulated the complex humanity of black people beyond the industry's exploitative formulas and stereotypes were The Learning Tree, Black Girl, and Sounder. This paucity of commercially viable films representing black life in depth and detail, or the presence of an independent black cinema with its own styles, languages, and narratives and the support of a popular audience, is in large part explained by the traditional economic function of productions that the dominant industry labeled "B" movies. Beyond being a training pool for aspiring directors and actors, one of the primary functions of the low-budget "B" movie was to fill up theater booking time, thus preventing audience exposure to alternative cinema or visions that could possibly challenge Hollywood's domination of the film business and its markets. The flood of cheap, black-oriented, industry-produced formula films functioned in exactly this manner between 1972 and 1974. As important, these films had the added effect of setting audience tastes and expectations to a uniformly low standard. Thus Blaxploitation movies marginalized any effort by independent black filmmakers to portray African American life in socially or politically relevant or human terms.

Yet we must include in this same cinematic countercurrent the white "vigilante" films of the early 1970s, which seemed, directly or indirectly, to comment on or challenge the narrative assumptions of Blaxploitation movies (black victory over white evil) and suggest that the black-focused cycle would soon exhaust itself. Films like the low-budget Joe (1970), Dirty Harry (1971), starring Clint Eastwood, Walking Tall, and Charles Bronson's Death Wish (both 1974)—all seemed to transcode a large, conservative white audience's early 1970s desire to, at least on the screen, suppress the black revolt in all its manifesta-
tions and the white liberal–left social and cultural agenda built during the 1960s with the violent mechanisms of vigilant action and an ag­gressive criminal justice apparatus. Another signal of the dominant cinema’s shifting mood, the nation’s black–white confronta­tion was played out on a grand allegorical scale when Roger Moore, as James Bond, battled a black master criminal, played by Yaphet Kotto, and his sophisticated black organization in Live and Let Die (1973).

Another factor that contributed directly to the demise of Blaxploitation was Hollywood’s perception, near the end of 1973, that black audiences were tiring of the industry’s cheap, endless reworkings of the crime–action–ghetto Blaxploitation formula and that in black films that consistently did well, such as Sounder and Lady Sings the Blues, the black–white social confrontation was toned down enough to attract white audiences. Accordingly, the film industry realized that it did not need an exclusively black vehicle to draw the large black audiences that had saved it from financial disaster. This important point was underscored when surveys showed that as much as 35 percent of the audience for the megahits The Godfather (1972) and The Exorcist (1973) was black. Thus, Hollywood reasoned, if it could market films that would capture the lucrative black audience and at the same time attract whites, it could shift from making Blaxploitation films, which were coming under increasing criticism anyway, and possibly double its earnings at the box office. Added to these considerations and further accelerating the collapse of the genre was the displacement of audience attention and co-optation of black talent into thematically black television programs. So, by January 1974, Jet magazine made note of a sharp decline in black-oriented films between August and December 1973, and Variety’s weekly survey of the top fifty films declared the black film explosion “a thing of the past.” Citing the advice of Bill Cosby and Billy Dee Williams, Jet went on to predict that while future films might depict experiences unique to blacks, “the underlying story must be universal,” that is, geared to white expectations.

Thus there arose the economic and cultural logic of “crossover” films, which can be most simply defined as productions that would attract whites not normally inclined to attend a movie about blacks. Imbuing a feature with crossover power was accomplished on a narrative level
From Sweetback's Baadassss Song (1971). This and the following stills are from the author's collection.

From Shaft (1971)
From Superfly (1972)

From The Mack (1973)
From A Piece of the Action (1977)

From Cleopatra Jones (1973)
From Coffy (1973)

From Black Caesar (1973)  Copyrighted Material
by constructing black stories to accommodate white sensibilities and values, and most certainly by eliding the central narrative ingredients of the Blaxploitation formula: violent expressions of black manhood or womanhood, and a black-white confrontation that ends with the oppressed black coming out spectacularly victorious. Crossover films recouped commercial cinema's star system by relying on a few, isolated, big-name black stars for their box-office draw, rather than filling productions with casts of dozens of black actors looking for a break, eager to show their talents while working under the rubric of Blaxploitation. So, after a diversionary period of violent "superspade" caricatures masquerading as progress on the issue of black filmic representation, Hollywood's shift to crossover productions signaled the start of a gradual return to the traditional, if subtly and insidiously drawn, stereotypes and narrative subordinations of African Americans on the screen. Reinforcing this paradigm shift, Hollywood narrowed the dramatic range of its black themes, as narratives and stars moved from productions centered on action and drama to comedies. Marking both the reduction in quantity and the shift in theme, by 1978 the only major production with any kind of black focus was the musical _The Wiz_. By way of example, we can map these broad cinematic shifts in theme, mood, and casting in the career trajectory of comic Richard Pryor, who rose to prominence brilliantly articulating the irony and anger of black social reality, the social tensions of racism, and the black-white confrontation in his dazzling nightclub routines. But in marked contrast, Pryor's film roles revealed a funny, but entirely meek, subdued persona as he ascended to isolated stardom. 

By mid-1973, at the apex of the Blaxploitation boom, a little more than a year before its demise, the dialectical countercurrent was set in motion with Hollywood easing out of its fiscal crisis, black folks' increasingly vocalized awareness of the "mind genocide" of the genre, and the first inklings of the crossover and vigilante films to come. Starting with Diana Ross and Richard Pryor in _Lady Sings the Blues_ (1972) and Richard Pryor in _Car Wash_ (1976) and _Which Way Is Up?_ (1977), Hollywood's construction of blackness was concentrated by the end of the decade on one comic "superstar," Richard Pryor, as even the featured black actors of the boom years found themselves in bit parts and increasingly shuttled into oblivion by the film industry. By
the end of 1978, *Essence* writer Bonnie Allen was appropriately alluding to concepts in both literature and politics, using Ralph Ellison's metaphor of "invisibility" and the Nixon–Moynihan policy of "benign neglect" to describe Hollywood's treatment of all things black in the film industry.⁹⁰
Recuperation,
Representation,
and Resistance

Black Cinema through the 1980s

As Blaxploitation slipped into oblivion, the “right cycle”\(^1\) countercurrents that had formed with the vigilante films of the mid-1970s gained momentum as the decade closed. The two top moneymakers of 1977 were *Rocky* (1976), which featured an implied racial contest and the triumph of the ethnic white working class, and *Star Wars* (1977), with a white versus black allegory that celebrated the recovery of patriarchy and a technological militarism and ascended to the position of top moneymaker of all time by the start of the 1980s. A new wave of films, rife with “backlash” sentiment, engaged white America’s deep social fears and yearnings. The rise of this ideologically conservative cycle of production came to be known as the “cinema of recuperation.”\(^2\) In the beginning of the 1980s and under the political impulse of Reaganism, blacks on the screen, in front of and behind the camera, found themselves confronted with the “recuperation” of many of the subordinations and inequalities they had struggled so hard to eradicate during the years of the civil rights movement and the emergence of Black Power consciousness that followed it. Thus the caricatures and stereotypes of Hollywood’s openly racist past proved to be resilient de-
mons as they were subtly refashioned and resurfaced in a broad range of films. Concurrently, the 1980s saw a steady reduction of films with black narratives and leading roles as black actors found themselves increasingly pushed into the margins or background of the cinematic frame. Even as the thinnest pretense of equality was abandoned, discrimination against black employment and job training intensified in all aspects of the film industry. Yet the 1980s were a paradoxical moment for the black cinema image, for as the decade progressed, "superstar" Eddie Murphy emerged as Hollywood's most popular box-office draw. In further tactical compensation for Hollywood and the nation's "rollback" strategy on racial equality, blacks were permitted to realize and bring to the screen a sprinkling of broadly popular feature films that articulated black themes and points of view usually suppressed or ignored by Hollywood's mainstream. One of the isolated benefits of these films was their ability to draw a large enough black audience as well as "crossover" support to keep alive the dim hope of another black movie boom somewhere over the production horizon.

In order to understand the African American cinematic experience from the late 1970s through the 1980s it is necessary to look at how the period was shaped by a number of issues and forces informed by the ideological, aesthetic, and material conditions emanating both from society and the film industry. First, we must focus on and interpret those most popular, megahit films that best articulated the recuperative project of the period and captured such a vast segment of the audience's imagination and pocketbook. Correspondingly, it is important to consider how Hollywood's "cinema of recuperation" fits into broader attempts to restore America's optimistic, hegemonic ideology, which has its historical origins in the country's self-confident, expansionist past. Central to this project, we must discuss how the cinema of recuperation works into its ideological program (now in altered, updated, and insidious forms) the resubordination of the black image, not to mention the devalued representations of nonwhite minorities, women, and those with different sexual orientations. So, in a broad sense, we must look at dominant cinema's narrative formulas, images, and strategies of containment, the various ways by which African Americans were cinematically represented and devalued in the 1980s. Finally, with expectation and hope, this chapter attempts to gain some insight into the
workings of “alternative” or resistant cinema practices of black independent filmmakers and the various strategies they have deployed in an effort to “recode” black images, articulate black points of view on the screen, and decolonize the imaginations of the American movie-going public, both black and white.

Sometime in the late 1970s, after a fifteen-year period of experimentation and creative auteurship, in the work of such maverick Hollywood directors as Robert Altman, Stanley Kubrick, and Arthur Penn, the film industry returned to producing big-budget films that re-established with a vengeance a thematically and formally conservative, linear, illusionist style called “the cinema of recuperation.” This return was intensified by the production of films with a politically conservative ideology and the glossy, color-saturated slickness of an ever-improving and imposing technology. Contributing to Hollywood’s political shift to the right, by the beginning of the 1980s the major studios were no longer independent, self-contained industries. Most of the former giants had been absorbed into megamedia conglomerates with diversified media interests that, more than ever, tended to look on filmmaking as an investment in a polished, highly rendered product fashioned to service a media-integrated, global, mass entertainment market. In effect, narrative feature films had become formulaic visual and acoustic commodities from which corporations could extract profit at every point of distribution and exhibition—from movie theaters, network and cable television, and video rentals, as well as an array of commercial spinoffs such as albums, books, toys, and even theme parks. The days when the mainstream industry tolerated a wide margin of experimentation, countercultural expression, and creative dissonance as a way of invigorating the market with new ideas, images, and product were over. Now, every film was massively over-determined, prepackaged, and regularized to accommodate an array of corporate needs and diverse media markets. Accordingly, the transformed film industry more than ever came to treat the moviegoing audience as passive spectators of their flattened-out, escapist entertainments.3

The cinema of recuperation and reassurance rising in the Reaganite 1980s did not concern itself with challenging the spectator-consumer to address issues of social inequality, race, gender, and most cer-
tainly not the possibility of social transformation in American life. In the wake of the eruption of black cultural nationalism and the insurgent claims of other marginalized social formations, including women and gays, America’s catastrophic defeat in Vietnam, the loss of hegemony over Iran and Nicaragua, the paranoia of Watergate, the Arab oil shocks, and the late 1970s spiral of inflation, the widespread public perception at the end of the Carter presidency was that America was in an overall decline. Mainstream commercial cinema of the 1980s concentrated on manipulating the audience’s response and assent to its reassuring mediations of dominant social and political values. The energy with which Hollywood went about its recuperative project stood as a direct index to the intensity and depth of the apprehensive national mood. Reagan in the political sphere and Hollywood on the screen sought to recuperate in the realm of the imaginary all that had been damaged or lost in reality.4

Because of their tremendous popularity, the films making up the Rocky cycle (1976, 1979, 1982, 1985, 1990) mark one of the starting points in the film industry’s shift into a rightist cycle of production. Four out of the five Rocky films follow the sentimentalized struggles of a white ethnic working-class hero and underdog, Rocky Balboa (Sylvester Stallone), who contends for, or defends, the world heavyweight boxing championship against a series of black and foreign others. Most politically defined and significant among Rocky’s adversaries is the filmic proxy for articulate black nationalist and world boxing champion Mohammad Ali, represented by Apollo Creed (Carl Weathers), who is both defeated by, and reconciled to, white yearnings for a “great white hope” and a nostalgic return to a bygone racial order in the first three Rocky films.5 As added ideological bonuses, Clubber Lang (Mr. T) is brought into the cycle, thus raising the villainy and threat of the “brute negro” in Rocky III (1982). In Rocky IV (1985), Stallone wins the Cold War singlehandedly through direct physical confrontation in the ring. But off screen, reality persists beyond the imaginary escapist moment. And the persistent reality of a black champion appears as a social tension that cannot be completely repressed in filmic narrative and is implicitly conceded in the final scene of Rocky III. Having been Rocky’s interracial buddy and Mohammad Ali’s co-opted proxy, Apollo Creed squares off against Rocky for the
last time in a deserted gym. Rocky shoots a left, and Apollo counters with a right as the frame freezes, symbolically visualizing the reality of ongoing unresolved racial contestation in America. Moreover, since this is Apollo’s final wish, the audience, at some level, unconscious or otherwise, must recognize that as long as there are African Americans in this country, they will challenge the dominant social order to realize their rights and aspirations.

Released the year after *Rocky*, George Lucas’s *Star Wars* (1977) quickly emerged as a megahit that won wide critical acclaim and established itself as one of the ten most popular films of all time. It is also one of the best examples of Hollywood’s ideological reconstruction of an older, nostalgically perceived racial and gender order and of the belief in military victory and domination through individual heroic action combined with advanced technology. By displacing the film’s story world and latent social issues into a romanticized science-fiction past “a long time ago” in a distant galaxy “far, far away,” Lucas and Hollywood are able, fantastically, to either erase or resolve the many economic anxieties, social contradictions, and imperial defeats weighing heavily on Americans at the end of the 1970s. Locating *Star Wars* in the sci-fi past clearly assuages the dissatisfactions of the troubled historical moment variously marked in the American media as “post-Watergate” or “post-Vietnam.” Or, as the critic Dan Rubey puts it, by reversing the film’s epigram and thus unmasking its ideological workings, it is “Not So Long Ago, Not So Far Away.”

By applying this interpretive frame, one realizes that the film’s construction of race relations arises out of tensions and contestations located in the social here and now. Although Billy Dee Williams appears as an isolated token black in the second film of the cycle, in the first *Star Wars*, the initial rendering of the ancient and distant galaxy of Lucas’s “space opera,” black or any other nonwhite humanity simply does not exist. It is also interesting to note this structured absence of racial diversity in *Logan’s Run* (1976), which depicts a technologically-dominated, dystopian society of the sci-fi future in which people of color are curiously missing. But the stark realization of the possibility of a “final solution” to earth’s color problem is emphasized in *Star Wars*, in that white people, particularly white males, are constructed as the sole and sovereign human norm, contrasted to “Wookies” and an
assorted myriad of exotic creatures and humanoids, especially as depicted in the film’s memorable bar scene. Enhancing the film’s hierarchical subordination of racial types, *Star Wars* utilizes the mechanism of displacement to recruit and transpose into robots and nonhuman Wokies the friendly “colored” sidekicks, the Tontos, Birmingham Browns, and Nigger Jims of the action-adventure thrillers and novels of America’s filmic and literary past. And in much the same way that these sidekicks have always provided emotional comfort in all of the dominant cinema’s genres, these alien, exotic, noncompetitive, desexualized contrasts to the reigning “norm” of whiteness continue to be understanding nonwhite “buddies” in times of sharply politicized racial discourse.

Race figures in *Star Wars* as Manichaean allegory, with the construction of whiteness as good and most specifically associated with Princess Leia in her flowing white gown, as contrasted with evil, symbolically concentrated in the black armor of the nefarious Darth Vader and his black space station, the Death Star. Underscoring the racial quality of this polarity, not only is Darth Vader’s armor black, but so is his menacing, sonorous voice, provided by James Earl Jones. The light–dark conflict expressed as a sexual threat to the purity and sanctity of the white woman is refigured yet again as white-clad, and white, Princess Leia is captured by the intensely black Darth Vader, who wields a phallic needle and threatens to penetrate her mind.

The enormous appeal of *Star Wars* also has to do with the film’s subordination of women, the worship of military technology as a solution to contemporary decline, and a militarism based on the actions of the centralized heroic individual. Princess Leia’s status as most desired object is clear, and in this capacity she is the prize to be won in the film’s narrative deployment of its adolescent “rescue fantasy.” In accordance with this motif, commonplace in “B” action-adventure movies of the 1930s and 1940s, and in comic books, Princess Leia constitutes the largely passive object that inspires male action, conflict, and adventure. Her construction, along with the nostalgic depiction of Rocky Balboa’s passive, traditional girl friend (later promoted to wife), marks the first signs of a wave of antifeminist films, such as *Kramer vs. Kramer* (1979), *Ordinary People* (1980), and *Fatal Attraction* (1987), which would become significant in undermining the issues
and concerns of the women's movement in the popular imagination. For the nostalgic return to patriarchy is a central concern of Hollywood's overall project of ideological recuperation. But it is the triumph of the individual male hero, through direct physical or military action, that reveals the intensity of the real-time doubts and fears, historical blunders, and defeats that are the subliminal energies driving Hollywood's recuperative cycle. With the 1976 televised fall of Saigon, and films that expressed outright antiwar sentiments or strong doubts about the war, such as *Coming Home* (1978) and *Apocalypse Now* (1979), popular and credible in the social imagination, the moment was still too early for a literal cinematic revision of the Vietnam war or a direct appeal for the revival of a discredited militarism. Cruder recoveries of militarism or revisions of recent history, such films as *An Officer and a Gentleman*, *Uncommon Valor* (both 1982), *Red Dawn* (1984), and *Rambo II* (1985), would have to wait for the more openly conservative political climate attending the first election of Ronald Reagan. Consider the military trappings of *Star Wars*: its slick technological surfaces and environments, its highly visualized and kinetic dogfights that allude to World War II, its romanticized scenes of individual combat, and the military pomp of Luke and Han Solo's triumphant march between rows of armored soldiers (compare *Triumph of the Will*) to close out the film's narrative. All these moments testify to the film's ideological power to revitalize the audience's emotional enchantment with military values while refraining from pointing to any recent historical defeat or embarrassment. And, of course, the film's celebration of high-energy military technology carries an implicit appeal for the nation's rearmament that was recognized and applied by the politicians, for Reagan supporters and critics were soon to adopt "Star Wars" as the name for the high-tech militarization of the upper atmosphere.

The turn of the 1980s toward cinematic and political conservatism had other direct consequences for the manner in which blacks were represented on the commercial screen and in the film industry in general. Throughout the decade, black social activists, journalists, actors, and screenwriters persistently decried the stagnation and reversal of black gains in the film industry. In 1980, 2 percent of the membership of the Directors' Guild of America was black; by 1988, that figure had
hardly changed, rising to 2.25 percent. Moreover, black writers found themselves in an even more ridiculous situation, with their representation in the Writers' Guild of America remaining virtually stagnant over the same eight years, at less than 2 percent.\textsuperscript{14} We can also see the industry's marginalization of blacks in a steady decline in black-focused product released since the heyday of the black movie boom. In 1972, Hollywood produced over 229 films; only 39 were black, including 16 from the majors. In 1974, the industry produced 295 films, of which 45 were black focused, with 21 coming from major distributors. In comparison, 1977 was a bust: Out of the 311 films produced, 4 were black focused; and 1981 found 6 black-focused productions out of 240 releases.\textsuperscript{15} The situation bottomed out as the decade wore on, with Hollywood averaging about 6 or 7 black-focused productions of varying sizes and budgets a year.

This decline in black representation and black-oriented films becomes all the more interesting when we consider that African American political awareness and protest applied steady pressure on the film industry during this period. The 1980s saw a number of ad hoc committees and permanent civil rights organizations continue to fight, with mixed results, a wide range of discriminatory and racist situations in film and television. For example, in 1980, the Los Angeles based ad hoc Coalition Against the Airing of Beulah Land joined with the NAACP in a broadly based protest against an NBC miniseries that depicted the revisionist view of slavery in the Old South. Moreover, the NAACP's position paper against the series makes the insightful and important point that black people must be continually on guard against any resurfacing of history and older stereotypes.\textsuperscript{16} In a sustained effort during the first part of 1982, the executive director of the NAACP and a former Federal Communications Commission (FCC) commissioner, Benjamin L. Hooks, held more than thirty-six meetings and informal sessions with various studio heads and Jack Valenti, head of the Motion Picture Association of America. All efforts led to negative results, and by midsummer, at the NAACP's seventy-third annual convention, Hooks and the organization passed a resolution threatening "direct action" in the form of selective boycotting of the films of a major studio if industry conditions did not improve.\textsuperscript{17} Suffice it to say,
the boycott never materialized as talks dragged on, and the racist, discriminatory conditions in the industry remained in place.

A few cheerless events stand out from the many that testify to the stagnant and frustrating situation for African Americans and other minorities prevailing in Hollywood in this period. Out of the hundreds of films produced in 1982, only eight had blacks in starring roles, with three of them Richard Pryor vehicles. Equally depressing and revealing, there were no roles for black women in this paltry offering. By April 1983, frustration had built to the point that the two black members on the Screen Actors’ Guild Wages and Working Conditions Committee quit in protest of the guild’s refusal even to consider a minority hiring system based on fixed numerical goals. And by 1984, an organized group of minority film and video editors denounced the heads of major production studios in no uncertain terms, calling them a “strong racist clique” and “George Wallaces standing in front of the doors of fair and equal opportunity.”

In 1986, a report released by one of the industry’s committees, the Ethnic Equal Opportunities Committee of the Screen Actors Guild and the American Federation of Television and Radio Artists, revealed that all racial minorities combined got less than 10 percent of the leading roles in television, film, and commercials and that women of color made up less than 5 percent of all women in film and television.

Taking a cue from the political strategies tried and tested during the civil rights and Black Power movements, minority audiences of all races and persuasions were also broadly challenging their devalued representation on the hegemonic screen. Among these collective actions: In 1980, blacks and Puerto Ricans energetically protested against Fort Apache, The Bronx; gays protested the release of Cruising; Native Americans spoke up against their distorted depiction in Hanta Yo; Asian American protest in 1983 was strong enough to stop production in San Francisco of a new Charlie Chan film, Curse of the Dragon Queen; and in 1985, Asian Americans hotly protested the release of Michael Cimino’s Year of the Dragon. Why all this sustained protest and political activity did not produce broader and more positive results has to do with Hollywood’s astute reading of the politically conservative nature of the times. Thus the industry decided that its most
profitable course lay in ignoring the demands of minorities for fair representation and rebuilding its older practices and paradigms. Moreover, considering that by the mid-1980s the average cost of a feature film was between $12 and $15 million, and three times that amount had to be recovered to make a profit, the industry reasoned that these were not the material conditions encouraging to a cinema concerned with social justice or the sensitive depiction of marginalized communities.20

Once Hollywood was able to relieve the pressures of its financial crisis and an organized black political protest movement that depended on a sympathetic public, the industry reverted to its nasty, but profitable, habits. The images of blacks that momentarily shifted away from the liberal, accommodationist Sidney Poitier roles of the late 1960s and toward a psychologically and socially broader range of black portrayals, including the “superspade” icons of Blaxploitation’s heyday—all proved to be Hollywood sleight-of-hand, no more than a manipulation of images to meet the pressures of the social and economic moment. None of these shifts of attention and image did anything to alter the film industry’s political–economic underpinnings or its dominant ideology in long-term favor of African Americans. Consequently, the start of the 1980s saw a disturbing resurfacing of images from Hollywood’s pre–civil rights past, amounting to a cinematic style of appropriation and representation of African Americans that might be best described as “neominstrelsy.”21

Among the crude stereotypes returning from a state of repression in Hollywood’s filmic unconscious arose such throwbacks as a black security guard in Caddyshack (1980), who, in an otherwise all-white comedy, pouts his lips and pops and rolls his eyeballs in the time-honored gestures of fright. In Weird Science (1985), a white adolescent does a crass, racist impersonation of an elderly urban bluesman; in its degrading references to women, this bit of parody far surpasses in vulgarity the minstrel shows of the nation’s racist past. Neominstrelsy also surfaces in two “buddy” vehicles, carried to box office success by the presence of Richard Pryor. In a now-famous scene in Silver Streak (1976), Gene Wilder dons blackface and follows Pryor’s instructions on how to act stereotypically black in order to evade pursuing villains. A version of this scene is replayed in Stir Crazy (1980), when Pryor shows Wilder how to avoid mistreatment in prison by acting “bad,” which turns out
to be a comic interpretation of black urban “cool” and toughness. One could not imagine either of these scenes surviving without objection if it were not for the mediating presence of Pryor in them. Both films caught the shifting mood of the times and were box-office hits.

Two of the most sustained articulations of 1980s neominstrelsy were the 1980 production *The Blues Brothers*, starring John Belushi and Dan Aykroyd, and the much-protested and in some ways more complex *Soul Man* (1986). Significantly, Hollywood’s last big-budget black musical, *The Wiz*, starring Michael Jackson, Diana Ross, and Richard Pryor, was produced by Universal in 1978. At that time studio heads speculated that if the film flopped at the box office, the industry would never attempt another black musical. And coming in the doldrums following the black movie boom, the film did fail. Yet the industry found no problem with continuing to appropriate black culture and music and using them as energizing motifs in such white-focused vehicles as *The Cotton Club* (1984), which uses African Americans and jazz as historicized cultural symbols and exotic *mise-en-scène* for what is essentially a white gangster movie. In a similar spirit, *The Blues Brothers* (1980) totally appropriates and trivializes the “blues idiom” by locating two white comedy stars at the center of a narrative that uses black music and culture as the setting for their transgressive, slapstick adventures.

Dan Aykroyd and John Belushi, clad in black suits, shades, and stingy-brim hats—the trappings of urban bluesmen—and performing antics, all add up to a sort of an updated symbolic blackface of the 1980s, neominstrelsy. Significantly, the protagonists’ identification with blackness and the film’s premise that blackness subverts and comically disrupts the rigid, neurotic order of white society allude to commonly held reductive notions of a binary opposition between essential black and white qualities that have long resided in the literary and popular imagination. According to this way of thinking, spontaneity, naturalness, a sense of rhythm, emotion, and sensuality predominate over intellect as essentially black characteristics. Opposed to these, and essentially white qualities, are self-control, civilization building, a sense of structure, reason and intellect predominating over emotion and sensuality. Aykroyd’s and Belushi’s performances in *The Blues Brothers* definitely draw on the “black” pole of this series of opposi-
tions. Moreover, the film's construction of two white hipsters living on the margins of white society and identifying with the blues idiom directly evokes Norman Mailer's grotesque view of African American culture expressed in his influential essay “The White Negro.” Here Mailer argues that hipsters, as “white Negroes,” are outsiders to dominant society and draw much of their style and inspiration from what he sees as basically the “moral wildernesses”—drug addiction, promiscuity, and jazz—of black life. Mailer stresses the point that the vital “pathological” underworld of African American life challenges, and is preferable to, a dead heaven that he likens to the sterility of white middle-class suburbia. Thus the Blues Brothers represent updated “white Negroes,” neominstrels, acting out the myths and devaluations ascribed to fantasized black people long resident in the social memory of dominant culture.

The idea of the “white Negro” also resonates in Soul Man (1984), which plays on a reversal of black-white relations and perceptions when a white college student passes for black in order to steal a scholarship to Harvard Law School intended for a deserving black student. Black people definitely did not find Soul Man funny, and it was energetically protested by a diverse range of groups across the black community. Blackface in the film becomes literal as the white protagonist overdoses on sun-tanning pills in a narrative whose closest referents are the more sensitive gender-focused Tootsie (1982) and the more politically and racially compassionate Black Like Me (1964). The film does have one interesting moment, when the blackface protagonist (C. Thomas Howell) comes to have a small inkling of what it means to live with the constant pressure and complexity of racism in this society. This is accomplished in an interesting allusion to a powerful scene in Ralph Ellison’s classic novel The Invisible Man (1952). A montage in the film shows the protagonist alone in his room, dejectedly contemplating his condition to the voiceover of Louis Armstrong singing his brilliantly ironic blues, “What Did I Do to Be So Black and Blue?”

Nevertheless, as Willis Edwards, president of the ever watchful and active Beverly Hills/Hollywood chapter of the NAACP, points out, the most racially deprecating aspect of Soul Man involves its premise that in the whole of the metropolitan area of Los Angeles, with literally hundreds of thousands of African Americans, not one of them is aca-
demically qualified for a black scholarship to law school.\textsuperscript{28} Also in its narrative resolution, when the white male protagonist wins the black female (Rae Dawn Chong), the film makes a liberal argument for interracial relationships. But this gesture comes off as at best transparent, for the film's rendering of miscegenation merely perpetuates dominant social, and cinema, values. Realize that when Hollywood explores interracial love relationships, it is almost always from the perspective of the white male with an exotic woman of color, not the other way around.\textsuperscript{29} *Year of the Dragon* (1985) and *Rambo: First Blood II* (1985) well illustrate this principle. It is instructive to note, however, that the thinly disguised revival of the minstrel and blackface traditions, especially in the case of *Soul Man*, was considered risky by the film industry, and for a combination of reasons, both *The Blues Brothers* and *Soul Man* were box-office duds. Their failure is reassuring because it seems to affirm that even when blacks and other minorities lack the leverage of the broad-based political consciousness of past times, they can be effective if organized and vigilant about their filmic representation. And Hollywood is fully aware that focused protest and political pressure can kill or render unprofitable an expensive production; as a result, the industry has been forced to formulate new strategies of racial representation and has proceeded with (however minimal) caution in recovering its older racial and sexual subordinations.

Besides the resurfacing of crude and obvious stereotypes and the somewhat veiled minstrel tradition, mainstream cinema has deployed a number of varied narrative and visual "strategies of containment"\textsuperscript{30} to resubordinate the black image, assigning it to a position of subservience or marginality in a given film and thus, symbolically or otherwise, upholding society's traditional racial hierarchy and relations of power. Just as Laura Mulvey argues that dominant cinema positions and displays the female body as the sexual object of "the look" for the visual pleasure of the male spectator, so it can be argued that dominant cinema constructs and positions the black image for "the look" of the norm, for the visual and narrative pleasure of the white spectator-consumer.\textsuperscript{31} Two classic examples of racial looking relations come immediately to mind. One involves the spectator's first look at the Eddie Murphy character Reggie Hammond in *48 Hrs.* (1982), as he sits, a convict in the gloomy depths of a prison, with a silly grin on his face,
singing with complete abandon to the soul music coming over a set of Walkman headphones. Here, at the beginning of the narrative, the white middle-class spectator is positioned to see someone they can reflexively feel superior to, a black convict and an impulsive fool who is literally contained by society's walls and bars. Another example involves Richard Pryor's overall positioning as "second banana," comic foil and subservient train porter in his first buddy film, Silver Streak (1976). Both of these portrayals treat the white audience to the filmic pleasure of blacks positioned as funny, subordinate, and useful tools in the narrative. And although streetwise, impulsive, and somewhat assertive, Murphy and Pryor have no real self-interest in these narratives, nor do they question or threaten the power relations of the dominant social order.

Additionally, though, we must consider other effective strategies for containing blacks, such as the all-too-commonplace industry practice of giving an African American top billing in a film in which he or she is completely isolated from other blacks or any reference to the black world. Black culture is therefore embodied in the black star's persona and actions, surrounded and appropriated by a white context and narrative for the entertainment of a dominant or crossover audience. Whoopi Goldberg's two comedy-action vehicles, Jumpin' Jack Flash (1986) and Burglar (1987), serve as good examples of this strategy. In Flash, Goldberg does a brilliant parody of one of The Supremes and, overall, carries this otherwise brain-dead film. In Burglar, she does an equally brilliant interpretation of a dissembling black maid in the opening and most interesting moment of the film. In both vignettes, fragments of black life or culture are enacted by the star and rendered funny and safe for consumption by the mainstream audience.32 One reason for the contextual isolation of a black star or co-star is not hard to discern, simply because many of these vehicles were originally written for white stars, as was Burglar for Bruce Willis, Beverly Hills Cop for Sylvester Stallone, and Lethal Weapon for Nick Nolte. A further implication of the narrative isolation of the black star involves the fact that they are packaged the way Hollywood has always packaged stars, as supreme icons and incarnations of the rootless, decultured "individual" in industrial consumer society. Specifically, in the case of black stars, this amounts to dominant cinema's effective erasure of...
the star’s identification with a black collective consciousness and sense of politics. Other important strategies of representation to be kept in mind are Hollywood’s largely limiting black stars and black-focused narratives to comedies. Without dismissing their untapped dramatic potentialities, the rise of Richard Pryor, Bill Cosby, and Eddie Murphy to the heights of superstardom, in contrast to the stark absence of a black dramatic star of similar stature during the 1980s, illustrates this point well. Finally, we must consider the way in which black sexuality in the 1980s was either constructed as something entirely perverse or, more often, absent in mainstream cinema. Eddie Murphy’s exaggerated sexual cravings in 48 Hrs., the construction of the black men of Spielberg’s The Color Purple as sexual brutes, the black woman throughout dominant cinema as the sign of the whore, or even the sexually indeterminate construction of Whoopi Goldberg’s characters all make this point well.

In this tangled apparatus of domination, blacks appear on the screen in the 1980s predominantly in the biracial “buddy formula,” which reveals all the strategies by which the industry contains and controls the black filmic image and conforms it to white expectations. While the buddy movie has been a Hollywood staple for some time and has produced a trajectory of biracial statements—from Judge Priest (1934) to The Defiant Ones (1958) and In the Heat of the Night (1967)—a 1970s cycle of white buddy movies was launched in 1969 with the release of Easy Rider, Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid, and Midnight Cowboy. At that time, many critics were quick to observe that the 1970s white male buddy cycle was most obviously a reaction to the rising power and influence of the women’s movement. According to Robin Wood, these films engaged a number of tropes that were repeated in most of the buddy films that followed in the 1970s. Besides the marginalization or absence of women, most important among the guiding principles of these films is an absence of home and the narrative articulation of a journey. Wood goes on to say that although buddy films were commercially successful in the 1970s, they had “virtually disappeared” in the 1980s.

This last observation is only partially correct, in that what virtually disappeared was the “white male” buddy film, for it was transposed into the biracial buddy film of the 1980s. As a result of this racial
transposition of the buddy formula, we must add another determining principle that in the 1980s seems to extend Wood's previous insights. It seems that with the biracial buddy formula Hollywood put the black filmic presence in the protective custody, so to speak, of a white lead or co-star and therefore in conformity with white sensibilities and expectations of what blacks, essentially, should be. Perhaps black filmmaker Robert Townsend best identifies the film industry's perception of African Americans in the 1980s when he observes that "Hollywood is afraid that if you have more than one black person in a movie you have a black movie." Because it wants to bring in the broadest box office possible with the installation of crossover thematics and a few token black stars—Richard Pryor in the 1970s and Eddie Murphy since the middle part of the 1980s—Hollywood has been reluctant to cast black stars without a white "buddy" as ideological chaperone to ensure its box office. Moreover, in too many instances the buddy formula has pushed blacks into the background or reduced them to subordinate, updated "loyal sidekick" roles that subtly reinscribe the cinematic racial hierarchies of old. Because of his superstar status, the notable exception to this problem is Eddie Murphy, although too often he remains stuck with white buddies as backups and isolated in white milieus.

Cinematic attempts at depicting the psychological depth and social complexity of the black world as told from a black point of view, few as they were, quickly became casualties of the project of ideological reassurance and the implementation of the biracial buddy formula. As Bogle has observed, the biracial buddy films of the 1980s presented the audience with escapist fantasy resolutions, which in many instances took on allegorical dimensions to America's very real and intractable racial problems. So we can read the popularity and number of these films as a mediation of rising racial tensions in the society, as exemplified by the Howard Beach and Bensonhurst killings or the murder of Vincent Chin. But obviously, for the film industry, the great appeal of the biracial buddy movie is profit. These films are able to attract the demographically broadest possible audience while presenting, containing, and in some instances fantastically resolving the socially charged and vexed issue of race relations on the screen.

We can discern the results and pressures of crossover demographics and the buddy formula in the contradictions in Richard Pryor's work.
Comic or not, the black-oriented films in which he is the main protagonist, such as *Which Way Is Up?* (1977) and *Blue Collar* (1978) were box-office flops. In contrast, his buddy films—*Silver Streak* (1976), *Stir Crazy* (1980), *Brewster’s Millions* (1987), and, to an extent, *The Toy* (1982)—were either hits or held their own at the box office. Except for his two successful concert films, the usual consumer-spectator refused to accept Pryor on his own self-defined cinematic terms, which always involved an exploration and sharp articulation of the bittersweet ironies of racial injustice and black life in America. The market audience supported only Pryor’s roles as a comic foil or scene stealer, cast in films with a white lead. It has been noted that by the end of the 1980s, Pryor’s formulaic comedies had become ever more ossified and clichéd, reflecting “an almost obsessive yet futile desire to please the white movie going public.” The same pattern emerged in the 1980s work of Eddie Murphy. His foreign comedy-adventure *The Golden Child* (1986) and his black-focused comedies *Coming to America* (1987) and *Harlem Nights* (1989) situated Murphy in either a Third World or black environment and supported him with nonwhite or black casts. Significantly, these films were box-office or critical failures compared to the megahits *48 Hrs.*, *Trading Places*, and *Beverly Hills Cop I* and *II*, all of which isolated Murphy in white environments and narratives and, with the exception of *Cop I*, were biracial buddy films.

We can further discern Hollywood’s and the audience’s desire to prescribe black potential in mostly comic roles and narratives and the benign buddy formulas by contrasting the box-office performances of *Ragtime* (1981), starring Howard E. Rollins, Jr., which was a box-office flop, and *48 Hrs.* (1982), starring Eddie Murphy and Nick Nolte, which was a tremendous hit. From its U.S. theater showings alone, *48 Hrs.* earned more than $77 million and ranked fifth among “top grossing films” of 1983. *Ragtime*, adapted from E. L. Doctorow’s best-selling novel, is a dramatic and panoramic exploration of American culture and race relations at the turn of the century. At the center of the narrative is the Rollins character, Coalhouse Walker, Jr., who in his search for dignity and justice from white America resorts to armed action, threatening to blow up the opulent Morgan Library in New York City. The film ends honestly, on a sharply dissonant and pessimistic note that is completely out of sync with the fantasy resolutions
of America's racial problems depicted in the formulaic productions of the 1980s. After promising Walker his day in court, the police commissioner (James Cagney) whispers to a police sniper to kill Walker as he surrenders. In deploying the Hollywood strategy of displacing contemporary tensions and concerns into narratives focused on historical times, Ragtime argues that white society and institutions would kill rather than consider African American claims for justice, however they are expressed.39

The film's ideological stance, like that of Warren Beatty's Reds (1981), constitutes an anomalous countercurrent in the then-surfing tide of recuperation. Even though Rollins's talent was recognized with an Academy Award nomination for his work in Ragtime, the industry seemed to signal its lack of interest in building the career of a black dramatic star whose screen persona most resembles that of Sidney Poitier fourteen years earlier; Rollins did not receive a major script for another two years, until his role as Lieutenant Davenport, another Poitier-suited character, in the successful A Soldier's Story (1984). In contrast, the immense success of the cop–action–comedy 48 Hrs. articulated consumer demand and the industry's formula as to how blacks should be depicted. Along with Eddie Murphy's other buddy vehicle, Trading Places (1983), co-starring Dan Aykroyd, 48 Hrs. launched Murphy's film career; by the summer of 1984, a MGM–United Artists–HBO audience poll voted Murphy the top entertainer in America. For the rest of the decade, Murphy consistently came in as either the first or second "top money making star" in the country.40

48 Hrs. literalizes the aforementioned metaphor of the black image being in the "protective custody" of white authority as Murphy plays a convict who is temporarily paroled into the custody of a tough inner-city cop (Nick Nolte) to assist in solving a series of crimes. Similar to the relationship between Sidney Poitier and Rod Steiger in In the Heat of the Night (1967), Murphy and Nolte are trapped in circumstances that force them to form an uneasy alliance to resolve a problematic criminal situation for the benefit of the dominant social order. In the process, the white cop and the black convict predictably come to respect one another. Interestingly, in one narrative detail 48 Hrs. echoes Defiant Ones: Murphy does not escape when he has the chance, but stays to uphold the values of the dominant society, which has pun-
ished him. All three films can be read as allegory for their specific moment of American race relations. Blacks and whites are caught in situations they did not create and can resolve only when they recognize their interdependence and their need to work together. Of course, the idea of racial cooperation is limited by Hollywood’s eradication of the black point of view in these narratives; in all these films, the black makes a sacrifice to solve problems the white man defines.

By far the most analyzed and instructive scene in *48 Hrs.* occurs when Murphy, as a convict impersonating a cop, violently crashes and interrogates the entire clientele of a “redneck” country and western bar. The scene alludes to Gene Hackman’s memorable and similar rousting of a ghetto bar in *The French Connection* (1971). Murphy’s scene is deceptive; it seems to depict a reversal of black–white power relations and to contradict the racial order of the film, which inscribes whites in the superordinate position. But the scene actually makes the argument that if blacks were to attain institutional authority, and by implication social equality, they would behave as brutally to whites as they have been historically treated by them. Thus, in the logic of dominant cinema, the scene offers a sort of masochistic, titillating pleasure for the white spectator, that of seeing his or her worst nightmares played out and simultaneously distanced and contained in the illusionist zone of the screen. By the same paranoid logic, the scene demonstrates why blackness is to be feared and must be relentlessly contained. Noting the visual mechanism of black subordination in the bar scene, the critic Manthia Diawara points out that both white females and black males are objects of spectacle and the look. The sequence of shots starts out with the look focused on a near-naked Go-Go dancer who performs for the visual pleasure of the patrons in the bar and the movie audience. In mid-sequence, the look is abruptly transferred to the black man, Eddie Murphy, as he makes a center-frame spectacle of himself. Finally, to complete the circuit of white female and black male as objects under the dominant gaze, the Go-Go dancer returns to center frame.41

Murphy was able to guarantee his position as one of the 1980s top box-office commodities with the outstanding financial successes of *Beverly Hills Cop I* and *II* (1984 and 1987), both of which were top-grossing films in their respective years. As further evidence of his
popularity, Murphy's films earned over $685 million for Paramount by the mid-1980s, and he signed an exclusive six-picture contract with the studio that will yield him $25 million. Moreover, because of his tremendous “crossover” appeal, established with the success of *48 Hrs.*, Murphy, like Poitier and Cosby, has been able to transcend to a degree the terms and conventions of black cinematic containment. In *Beverly Hills Cop*, which earned $64.5 million in its first twenty-three days of release and is ranked ninth among the top fifty moneymaking films of all time, earning $108 million overall, Murphy was able to renegotiate the terms of the buddy formula, making it his exclusive star vehicle. And in *Cop II* the lead is exclusively Murphy's, though he still uses two white supporting buddies as props and foils for his gags. As the name of both films clearly implies, however, once he leaves Detroit, Murphy is situated in an all-white locale with all-white situations to resolve for the pleasure of the spectator-consumer.

Probably the most central gag or comic motif played to endless variation in both *Beverly Hills Cop* films centers on Murphy as the black streetwise cop, dressed casually in a high school letterman's jacket for undercover work, dissembling and using various ruses to penetrate the exclusive, all-white socialite dominions and clubs of Beverly Hills. Both films are driven by the disruptive effects of Murphy's irreverent, cocky interpretations of blackness on the dominant white social order. The source of energy and tension in all of Murphy's movies is race, and to a lesser degree class, deriving from Murphy's blackness as a challenge to white exclusion (but not domination or privilege) as he crashes bars, parties (most notably Hugh Hefner 's), and private supper clubs, or appropriates cars, mansions, and the like. Yet, much like Poitier’s color problem in *Guess Who’s Coming to Dinner?* the challenge of such a one-dimensional blackness is reduced to the confrontation of an isolated black individual utterly contained by a white environment. And while Murphy gets the upper hand in almost all situations, the ultimate result of such a challenge is integration and acceptance on white terms in the films' resolutions. After winning the acceptance of a white street cop at the end of *48 Hrs.*, Murphy returns to prison. In *Trading Places* he is integrated into the capitalist class, and by the film's close he has fully internalized their values. In the two *Beverly Hills Cop* movies Murphy leaves his responsibilities in Detroit to solve the
lems of a city whose very name is emblematic for ostentatious displays of wealth and privilege and its racial-social exclusivity.\textsuperscript{44}

Further underscoring the workings of dominant cinema’s mechanisms and values in Murphy’s films is the fact that much of Murphy’s humor comes at the expense of other marginalized groups. In \textit{Beverly Hills Cop I}, he dissembles as a stereotypical, overbearing gay diagnosed with “Herpes 10” in order to penetrate the confines of a country club. And confirming one of Robin Wood’s main principles in buddy movies, many of Murphy’s characters and films voice a barely disguised contempt for women. In an awkwardly vulgar gag in \textit{Beverly Hills Cop II}, a “bimbo” is introduced to Murphy as being able to “suck a golf ball through a garden hose.” Moreover, Murphy’s performances reveal more than a hint at his struggle to sublimate his own deep, conflicted feelings about black devaluation. For in certain instances Murphy’s great gift of impersonation leads him into regurgitating the putrid stereotypes of Hollywood’s openly racist past. His “Buckwheat” caricature, held over from “Saturday Night Live,” finally became a sufficiently touchy issue that in his \textit{Raw} concert film he had to break his comic routine and offer a brief, defensive explanation for it. In \textit{Beverly Hills Cop II} Murphy’s answering machine impersonation for the entertainment of a white cop friend of “George Kingfish Stevens” from the much protested “Amos ’n’ Andy” series uncomfortably echoes the deprecation and insult of the original show. To say all this is not to dismiss Murphy’s work entirely. For the power and appeal of his comedy lie as much in his paradoxical positioning at the top of the ever-shifting entertainment business while raising the contradictions of America’s ongoing, mostly repressed, discourse on race. And, as mentioned, by the end of the 1980s Murphy was using his star power to try to break out of Hollywood’s formulas. Through his association with the “Black Pack,” he has used his considerable leverage to place more black independent filmmakers in production situations in the industry.\textsuperscript{45}

Besides the enormously successful Murphy features, a range of crossover-aimed, biracial buddy films has proliferated and worked endless variations on the theme. \textit{Crossroads} (1986), starring Ralph Macchio of biracial \textit{Karate Kid} fame and Joe Seneca as an old bluesman, explored and appropriated the blues while bringing to the screen the legend that Robert Johnson had sold his soul to the Devil to become
a master blues guitarist. As he apprenticed himself to Pat Morita to master karate for a final contest, so too Macchio, playing a student of classical guitar, apprentices himself to a black bluesman, played by Joe Seneca, to prepare for a final blues guitar contest with the Devil at the "crossroads." Director Walter Hill (48 Hrs.) does well enough with the cultural ambience of the blues idiom; however, the moment at which black culture is subordinated and, so to speak, put in its place, arrives in the film's narrative resolution. In the final musical confrontation, the Devil and Macchio trade riffs and runs in an up-tempo blues, and they are evenly matched. Tension builds. Finally, in the solo that defeats the Devil, Macchio takes off on a long run of blues riffs that, at its most powerful moment, is co-opted into a classical flamenco guitar solo that then vanquishes Satan! Thus black music is appropriated for the purpose of exotic adventure, but in the final instance it is subordinated as guitarist Macchio returns to the "classical" tradition to win the victory. As an obvious example of domination added to the classical framing of black music, we must consider that the crossover formula demands that the adolescent disciple in both the karate and blues traditions be the white Macchio instead of an Asian American or African American kid.

Two dramatic attempts to vary the buddy formula and construct black and white characters in somewhat more equal terms than is usual for the industry are Lethal Weapon (1987), starring Mel Gibson and Danny Glover, and Gardens of Stone (1987), starring James Caan and James Earl Jones. Lethal Weapon proves interesting in that it contrasts the wise restraint of an older black cop, Glover, with the risk-taking, violent actions of his younger white partner, Gibson. Moreover, in a rare move for any buddy film, Lethal Weapon extensively explores the black cop's relationship with his family. Thus his character is broadened and humanized beyond Hollywood conventions, which is something that Glover says initially attracted him to the script. Unfortunately, the initial gains made at humanizing the Glover character are for the most part lost in the sequels (II and III). In contrast, Gardens of Stone, which is about two career army sergeants, Caan and Jones, who are attached to a "stateside" ceremonial burial detail at the height of the Vietnam war, depicts the buddies' interracial social life with a degree of normalcy usually absent from commercial productions. As with Reds and Ragtime, the film's ideological spin runs counter to
that of Reaganite cinema, for the steady stream of military funerals the sergeants conduct visually render the painful costs of the Vietnam war. James Earl Jones’s portrayal of Caan’s black buddy is psychologically complex and is further humanized by depicting him and his black girl friend socially interacting with Caan and his white girl friend.

Conversely, the workings of recuperation and domination are subtly crafted in Norman Jewison’s *A Soldier’s Story* (1984), which is transposed from black playwright Charles Fuller’s Pulitzer Prize–winning drama. The film is one of the notable and few black-focused dramas of the decade, but its revelations about black life and American racism are disarmed and rendered stale. As so often happens in the industry, the burden of race is contained in the historical past. Set in the year 1944 at a rabidly racist Louisiana army camp, the film depicts a murder investigation conducted by one Lieutenant Davenport (Howard Rollins). The investigation eventually comes to be focused on an all-black platoon whose sergeant (Adolph Caesar) is the murder victim. What is significant and recuperative about *A Soldier’s Story* is that the varied personalities and social outlooks of the platoon members construct a contest of black ideologies that leads to the sergeant’s death and the eventual exposure and capture of his killer. The self-hatred and segregationism espoused by the dictatorial Sergeant Waters, also a black parody of Hitler, conflicts with his platoon’s expressions of a range of black philosophical and political perspectives from a rural, survivalist blues ideology to the militant black activism of Private First Class Peterson (Denzel Washington).

But the moral center of the film and final victor of its ideological struggle is the Rollins character, Lieutenant Davenport, who represents the upwardly mobile expectations and integrationism of the newly emergent, World War II black bourgeoisie. Rollins’s portrayal finds its closest references in the integrationist characters played by Sidney Poitier in the mid- to late 1960s. Accordingly, what is most problematic and instructive in *A Soldier’s Story* is the way in which the black characters are ideologically positioned in the narrative to foreground and valorize mainstream cinema’s perspective on black people, their politics and race relations in general. We observe this most clearly in the film’s revelation of the killer, who turns out to be, not surprisingly, the militant black activist. Played by Denzel Wash-
ington in wire-rimmed spectacles, Private Peterson bears a striking resemblance to Malcolm X both in looks and philosophy. Relevant in this regard, one of Washington’s first breaks came playing Malcolm X in the Negro Ensemble Company’s 1981 off-Broadway hit *When the Chickens Come Home to Roost*. Moreover, Peterson is positioned in sharp contrast to Lieutenant Davenport, who, in the film’s resolution, rebukes him with the implied philosophy of Dr. Martin Luther King as Peterson is led off to prison. 

Finally, *A Soldier’s Story*’s denouement privileges the striving, upwardly mobile black professional over the interests of a black collectivity, as the officer Rollins, fixed in the slavishly grateful gaze of black enlisted men, makes a strutting exit to military music, which in itself functions as a profound mechanism of containment. Throughout the film, Herbie Hancock’s soundtrack brilliantly interprets various dramatic moods with the range of styles and expressions of black music. As well, the ever-present, resistant influence of black musical culture is reinforced in the narrative with a convincingly done blues club sequence, or when subversive jazz riffs erupt in a Gospel tune at choir practice. Yet, when it comes to Hollywood’s nostalgic, near-propagandist resolution, with Lieutenant Davenport riding in a jeep doing an obvious and insipid black Douglas MacArthur parody after having papered over the cracks of racial inequality and having motivated black enlisted men to fight for “democracy,” the score shifts from the sublime jazz arrangements that have reverberated throughout the film to a corny, brassy military march. Thus, black experience is musically framed and served up to cue the audience and to meet the institutional needs of dominant cinema and society. Even more obvious and disturbing, the film’s closure attempts to fragment black social unity by polarizing the beliefs of Dr. King and Malcolm X. An interesting contrast to this type of dominant ending occurs in *Do the Right Thing* (1989), where Spike Lee goes to great political and aesthetic lengths to resolve the artificial differences inflicted on the two martyrs by closing with the famous picture of the two men shaking hands as the film ends with a quote from each of them. Lee’s point here is that the survival of African Americans in the contemporary situation will depend on grasping and synthesizing the political and strategic truths of Martin and Malcolm. On the other hand, the film critic Carol Cooper
sees deeply into the subordinations and manipulations built into *A Soldier's Story* and dominant cinema in general when she perceptively comments that "no collective unconscious in the world has been as comprehensively shat upon as that of the black American." 49

While recognizing such containment and contradictions, we must not fail to recognize that all the gains and lessons learned from the awakened social consciousness and political activism of the 1960s through the early 1970s have not been totally reversed or eradicated. Despite the shrinking of a broad political base of support, protests centered on specific films and issues continue to challenge Hollywood on its blatantly racist, sexist, and homophobic practices. And, if it did nothing else, the Blaxploitation boom, so to speak, let the black audience out of the bag, by helping shape a politically self-conscious, critical black audience aware of its commercial power and hungry for new cinematic representations of a diverse range of African American subjects and issues on the big screen. Moreover, the "black independent cinema movement" inspired by the films of university-trained black filmmakers of the 1970s laid a clear political, philosophical, and aesthetic foundation for an ongoing cinematic practice that challenges Hollywood's hegemony over the black image. The films of Charles Burnett, *Killer of Sheep* (1977) and *To Sleep with Anger* (1990), Julie Dash's *Illusions* (1983) and *Daughters of the Dust* (1991), Bill Woodberry's *Bless Their Little Hearts* (1984), and Haile Gerima's *Bush Mama* (1976), to name only a few, have all contributed to creating an emergent, decolonizing, antiracist cinema that in its images, sounds, aesthetics, and modes of production has attempted to reconstruct the world on the screen from black points of view cast in liberating images and new paradigms. 50

An accompanying critical discourse has also emerged in dialectical response to, and encouragement of, the new black cinema wave. New critics and scholars of black cinema, such as Clyde Taylor, Wahneema Lubiano, Jacquie Jones, and Manthia Diawara, call for a range of production and discursive strategies and practices to intensify the struggle for the liberation of the black image from Hollywood's almost exclusive domination and control. Clyde Taylor calls for decolonizing the black image and the rejection of Western aesthetic categories by further developing those tropes most distinguished in black indepen-
dent cinema, such as the oral tradition, the complex integration of black music into both soundtrack and narrative, and the expression of a black social reality that transcends or shatters Hollywood fantasy. The late James Snead calls for a “recoding” of the image by “revising visual codes of black skin on screen and in the public realm.” Making a complementary argument, Gladstone Yearwood calls for a “cinema of transformation and demystification” that gives rise to new black heroes and heroines who are mythical but at the same time demystify the Hollywood star fantasy. Gerima points out the need to create a “third cinema” practice that integrates audience and community, filmmaker and storyteller, activist and critic. Moreover, Diawara calls for a black independent cinema that builds black spectator resistance to the dominant images of black devaluation on the commercial screen. Finally, filmmaker Spike Lee calls for a “guerrilla cinema” that realistically depicts black people at the same time it challenges domination at the level of material practice with innovative strategies of capitalization and financing.51

Perhaps the two productions in the mid- to late 1980s that have best realized the projections and hopes of black critics, filmmakers, and audience alike are Robert Townsend’s Hollywood Shuffle (1987) and Spike Lee’s She’s Gotta Have It (1986). The fact that Townsend, like Lee, had to deploy the strategies and tactics of “guerrilla cinema” financing in order to produce an alternative to Hollywood’s construction of blackness underscores the obvious point that if black people want to control the images that define their lives, they are going to have to grapple with and in some way come to terms with the “mode of production” in order to make more of their own movies. Black filmmakers are going to have to build material support and popular acceptance for their films, specifically among a black audience, but also among those whites who have come to appreciate black films. For it is clear that Hollywood has been persistently reluctant to risk capital or jobs on productions that stray from their proven formulas of profit and ideological containment into a deeper exploration of racial themes from a black point of view.52

Demonstrating an innate understanding of the material challenge facing black filmmakers, Townsend was able to finance Hollywood Shuffle with $60,000 of his own money earned from bit parts in A Sol-
Dier's *Story* and American *Flyers* (1985) and his work as a stand-up comedian, in addition to $40,000 raised with credit cards to produce his movie on the “guerrilla” budget of $100,000. As vindication of his efforts at reconceptualizing the problems of both the mode of production and the audience, after Samuel Goldwyn, Jr., distributed the film, it grossed more than $5 million in its first ten months of release.  

*Hollywood Shuffle* is an episodic comedy that deals with the struggles of a young black actor, Bobby Taylor (Townsend), who aspires to work in the industry while still maintaining his dignity and sense of cultural identity. The film's satirical vignettes are drawn from Townsend's experiences as an actor, and as he relates, there is plenty of work in Hollywood if one wishes to play “slaves, pimps, muggers and rapists.” Out of this frustration, Townsend created a film that in purpose is very much like the turn-of-the-century black protest novel in that it seeks to “educate” white America to the wrongs done to black people by its attitudes and institutions, specifically in this case the crude stereotyping of blacks by the commercial film industry.

The unique appeal of Townsend's film lies in his intimate understanding of the workings of the movie cliche and racial stereotype, as well as the applied politics of representation. Accordingly, in his penetrating skits Townsend manages to satirize everything from the self-importance of television buddy-movie critics, with a black parody about two subaltern “real brothers” who critique films they have sneaked into, to the casting limitations that blacks face, as hilariously depicted when Bobby Taylor goes to a casting interview only to find the waiting room full of blacks fine tuning their Eddie Murphy imitations. Also, Townsend digs sharply at what he considers to be white expectations of black portrayal in a satirical television commercial for an acting school, where blacks can learn from white instructors how to play criminals, dope addicts, mammies, and pimps to meet film industry demand. Suffice it to say that the film does not have a Hollywood fantasy resolution, for when Bobby's big break finally comes, in the role of a stereotypical street hoodlum, because of his conscience he rebels and refuses to play the role. Interestingly, the film bears a relationship to the unsuccessful *Soul Man* in that both films, through a series of brilliant scenes of parody, attempt to explore the grotesque fantasy image of blacks held in white minds. The difference between
the two films, and their reception by black audiences especially, lies in the fact that *Hollywood Shuffle* is self-reflexive in its humor and counterhegemonic in its conception and production, for it came completely from outside industry structures.

Spike Lee, who popularized the term “guerrilla cinema,” was able to make *She's Gotta Have It* with a cast of friends, on a total budget of $175,000 and a shooting schedule of twelve days on a location limited to a few blocks of a Brooklyn neighborhood. Moreover, the success of his project underscored what Hollywood has either conveniently ignored or forgotten over the past dozen years—black films can make money and blacks, as well as whites, will support them. Lee’s film clearly demonstrated this potential by grossing over $7 million in its first year and a half of distribution.56 Shot in black and white, *She's Gotta Have It* turns on a “polyphonic”57 voicing of different points of view, in the *Rashomon* style, of the sexual adventures of its female center, Nola Darling (Tracy Camila Johns). And while Lee states that he did not want to make a feminist film, he does take what can be considered to be a typically male situation and turn it around to some extent in terms of gendered power relations. In a reversal of a male-focused plot, the protagonist, Nola Darling, lives her life as if she had the sexual choices of a man, by having simultaneous, multiple, male love interests. In a gesture that would, perhaps, be atypical of a man, however, and that activates the film’s narrative, Nola informs all her male lovers of their mutual situation. Finally, Nola realizes that none of these men has anything that is worth surrendering her body and mind for, and by the film’s end she dumps them all.58

Without setting out self-consciously or didactically to do so, *She's Gotta Have It* counters many of the devaluations and one-dimensional constructions of blackness in mainstream cinema practice so far discussed. In this sense, then, the film’s power and value derive from the rich complexity and comedy of a narrative that depicts a range of black male and female characters with diverse social interests and philosophical outlooks, pursuing their desires within the space of the black world. Contrary to Hollywood cutouts, these characters are realistically portrayed as multidimensional human beings working out the tangles of subtle, complicated relationships with one another. Two innovative moments that reveal the range of Lee’s directorial talent
and his ability to bring a deep reading of the subtleties of black culture to the screen are his now famous “dog sequence” and Nola’s dream. Nola relates how weary she gets of the corny lines black men give her in order to attract her when the film jump-cuts to a long montage of black men framed in frontal medium shots, mugging for the camera and delivering lines as predictable and stale as they are hilarious: “Baby I’d drink a tub of your bath water.” The political point is clear, as a kind of reflex, one-dimensional black male chauvinism is ridiculed. The montage also introduces the audience to a polyphonic, satirical voicing of black male types and desires from a range of backgrounds and social orientations. On the other hand, the subtle tensions, social proscriptions, and consequences of Nola’s wanting what all men want, that is, both sex and freedom, are brilliantly articulated when, after making love, Nola falls asleep. She is abruptly awakened by the girl friends of her three lovers, who accuse her of being a home wrecker and then pass sentence on her: “Let’s set the bitch on fire!” The audience, along with Nola, realizes that it is a dream when she wakes up screaming. But we also realize the subtle psychic and political costs of the position she has taken against the values of her community as the repressed judgment and wrath of other black women returns in a nightmare.

A large part of the film’s appeal resides in the complex, intimate construction of Nola and her three black male lovers; individualized, they also represent different class desires and outlooks, attitudes toward women, and cultural styles within the same urban black community. Jamie Overstreet (Tommy Redmond Hicks) is the most traditional and economically stable of Nola’s lovers; he represents the established, urban black middle class and its cultural perspective. Jamie considers himself to be Nola’s soulmate; the Zora Neale Hurston quotation about ships passing but never relating, which opens the film, seems to apply most to Jamie and Nola. It is Jamie whom Nola most favors. Jamie’s activities open and close the film’s narrative, and for all these reasons his story is foregrounded in the film’s polyphonic structure. But Jamie’s relationship with Nola is encumbered by the expectations of the staid black bourgeois tradition he embodies. Jamie wants a monogamous, stable relationship with Nola that will eventually lead to marriage, a house, and a family. Conversely, the film’s politics subtly undermines Jamie’s class and gender expectations with various strategies, includ-
ing constructing Nola as too outspoken, aesthetic, and independent to be caught up in Jamie’s middle-class expectations. Instead, Nola is interested in an open, spontaneous relationship (mediated by art and ritual, such as lighting candles during lovemaking) that satisfies the emotional and physical needs of the moment.

Because of Jamie’s frustration with his inability to control their “on again, off again” relationship, he explodes in anger and sexually humiliates Nola in a graphic rape scene that has drawn criticism from many women. As frank and brutal as this scene is, however, it cannot be read literally, solely, as a crude celebration of black male chauvinism. Instead, because of its frankness and position in independent cinema discourse, the scene works against the staid Hollywood convention of depicting rape à la Straw Dogs (1971) as officially bad and simultaneously a titillating spectacle for male enjoyment. Opposed to the dominant “look,” the scene comes off as dialectically shocking, discomforting because of the issues it raises for the entire audience. Moreover, it works in the narrative to discredit Jamie and his black bourgeois patriarchal values by revealing his inability to accept Nola as an independent woman, free of his masculine projections and class expectations. Thus the rape scene shatters the illusory spell of middle-class patriarchy at the center of the narrative and signals the final deterioration of Nola and Jamie’s relationship. The inclusion of this act finally poisons the portrayal of Jamie and makes the Nola–Jamie breakup all the more plausible. Spike Lee well understands that the complexities of his situations and characters stand as counterhegemonic challenges to Hollywood’s simplistic representations of sexuality, blacks, and black men in particular, when he observes that

this film should be the antidote to how the black male is perceived in The Color Purple. See, nobody is saying that black men haven’t done some terrible things, and what Jamie does to Nola at the end of the film is a horrible act. But Jamie is a full-bodied character, unlike Mister in The Color Purple and the rest of that film’s black men, who are just one-dimensional animals. 59

Nola’s second lover, Greer Childs (John Canada Terrell), models for Gentleman’s Quarterly and comes across as a materialistic, narcissistic, upwardly mobile black urban professional, that is to say, a
“Buppie.” As such, the character is a comical, stinging criticism of the philosophy of “Buppie” assimilationism. Greer has completely internalized white mainstream values, as demonstrated by his abiding faith in psychoanalysis to solve any challenges to his manhood. Reacting to Nola’s having more than one lover, he suggests that there is something pathological about her sexual behavior and leads her to see a psychologist. But when Nola, in a clever maneuver that turns the tables on Greer, admits that she might possibly be “having too much sex” and the first person she is going to cut off is him, Greer’s panic reveals him as a complete hypocrite as he tells her not to be too hasty. Further, She’s Gotta ridicules Greer’s anal retentive narcissism and materialism in a hilarious scene when, before making love with Nola, he kills the spontaneous passion of the moment by compulsively folding every article of his clothing as he takes it off. Finally, Greer’s assimilation and subliminal contempt for black culture and black women openly surfaces when Nola breaks up with him, and he yells bitterly after her that he is going to replace her with a white woman.

Mars Blackmon (Spike Lee) completes the triad of Nola’s lovers. And as the name Blackmon signifies, with this character Lee means to represent in more complex human terms than the usual for Hollywood the perspective of the economically marginalized urban black youth. Mars makes his position clear, declaring at Nola’s Thanksgiving dinner: “Fifty dollar sneakers and I gots no job!” Yet, of all Nola’s lovers, Mars is the most sympathetically portrayed as she shares both sex and moments of humor with him and engages in the intimate cultural ritual of greasing his scalp with Sulphur 8 hair ointment. Moreover, Nola’s parting with Mars is the most amiable of all her men. And Mars comes up with the final insight that Nola’s three male lovers were but the components of one romantic sexual trajectory. As he puts it, “We let her create a three-headed, six-armed, six-legged, three-penis monster.” Of course, the upshot of the film is that Nola outgrows all three lovers, who, by contrast, at the end of the film remain static and caught up in their isolated, chauvinist perspectives. Alone and contemplative in her bed, Nola closes the narrative with the liberatory insight, “It’s about control. My body. My mind. Whose gonna own it, them or me?” Thus, from the perspective of a black male director, She’s Gotta Have It holds out the fragile but emergent promise of deeper explorations of black
female–male relations in black filmmaking. Yet it is also obvious that 
this exploration can hardly develop without the voices of black women 
directors, a lack that is glaring in the popular cinema of the moment.

Related to issues embodied in *She's Gotta Have It* and *Hollywood Shuffle* is the consistent complaint raised by a range of critics, specifically by Lee and Townsend, that scenes depicting black romance or sexuality have been structurally absent from dominant cinema since the collapse of Blaxploitation.61 And looking back, perhaps the most redeeming moment in all of *Superfly* is the tender, erotic lovemaking between Priest and his girl friend in a luxurious sunken bubble bath, surrounded by mirrors. Related to this, as discussed earlier, the paradoxical power and limitation of Sweetback's rebellion dwells in its sexual nature, which draws on deeper folkloric traditions in the black community. Both *Sweetback* and *Superfly* broke with the sexual norm while holding out the promise of a full cinematic exploration of black sexuality in future black productions that had yet to materialize fully. Accordingly, the 1980s presented us with an abundance of evidence of Hollywood's consistent reluctance to deal honestly with black romance or sexuality, especially when it is interracial. With Whoopi Goldberg, the situation got to the point where she openly protested MGM's racism for cutting a love scene between her and white Sam Elliot in her detective vehicle, *Fatal Beauty* (1987). With a clear understanding that black women are traditionally marked as "fallen" or prostitutes by mainstream cinema and society, Goldberg insightfully told *Jet* that "if Sam Elliot had put some money on the table after the love-making scene, it would still have been in there."62 Similarly, the torrid love scene between Lisa Bonet (of "The Cosby Show" fame) and Mickey Rourke in *Angel Heart* caused a protracted struggle between Tri-Star and the Motion Picture Association of America (MPAA), which gave the picture an "X" rating until Tri-Star recut the scene.63

Because of the overall marginality of blacks in the industry during the 1980s, black filmmaking's responses to Hollywood's repression of black romance and intimacy were few and far between, although by the end of the decade most blacks with "star" recognition were pressing for change. Thus one could discern a gradual thaw in Hollywood's freeze on black sexual expression, at least for male black actors. Eddie Murphy has love interests in all of his black- or Third World-focused
vehicles: *The Golden Child* (1986), *Coming to America* (1988), and *Harlem Nights* (1989). Gregory Hines has love scenes in *The Cotton Club* (1984), *Running Scared* (1986), and *Tap* (1989), although he and Lonette McKee had to demand that the scenes of black romance be retained in *The Cotton Club*. And working to alter his saintly persona, even Sidney Poitier has a love scene in *Little Nikita* (1988). But it has been the cutting edge of the black “guerrilla” filmmakers who emerged in the 1980s that has most consciously recognized that the depiction of black romance and sexuality is essential to recoding black humanity on the screen; it is a key box office ingredient. Thus they have shaped their projects accordingly. Robert Townsend deliberately structured a romantic angle into *Hollywood Shuffle*, casting Anne Marie Johnson of the television show “What’s Happening Now” as his love interest. Sar­donically commenting on the problem, Townsend quipped that when the film was released in 1987, “This year I’ll be the only black man who kisses a black woman on a screen. That’s deep.”

The broadened representation and exploration of black romance and sexuality are such focused concerns for Spike Lee that not only are variations on the themes central to *She’s Gotta Have It* but Lee devised a detailed sexual survey of fifty very personal questions that he circulated among women friends. Lee claims that the results of this poll are the basis for the film. Predictably, Lee, like other African Americans who have tried to humanize the representation of black sexuality, had his problems getting his film past dominant cinema’s censorship apparatus. The Motion Picture Association of America, on three occasions, “X” rated *She’s Gotta Have It*, thus forcing time-consuming re-edits. While denying that the MPAA’s actions are “out-and-out racist,” Lee is insightful in his cinematic knowledge of the double standard applied to his film and the depiction of black romance and sexuality in general:

The film portrays blacks outside stereotypical roles, and they don’t know what to do with blacks in films. They never have any love interests. Nick Nolte is the one who has a relationship in *48 Hours*. And when it comes to black sexuality, they especially don’t know how to deal with it. They feel uncomfortable. There are films with more gratuitous sex and even violence. *9½ Weeks* got an “R.” And look at *Body Double.*
Clearly, the film industry and the emergent black filmmakers have a long way to go before this socially charged issue that has always smoldered at the psychic core of race relations in America is resolved to any satisfaction.

Finally, the 1980s were to close on a note of promise for aspiring black filmmakers and take a new direction with the release of one signal film that frankly explores the great unspeakable, repressed topic of American cultural life: race and racism. Predictably, dedicating a narrative to the nation’s most sensitive subject generated a storm of publicity and acclaim for *Do the Right Thing* and its director unmatched by all the black-focused productions of the previous decade put together. As a small sampling of the media attention generated at the time of the film’s release around June 1989, dozens of reviews and articles appeared in national newspapers, including the *New York Times* and the *Village Voice*, and Lee made the covers of *American Film: The Magazine of the Film and Television Arts*, the *National Review*, and *Newsweek*. As well, “Nightline” and “The Oprah Winfrey Show” devoted entire programs to the impact the film was projected to have on race relations. Financed by Universal and made, according to Lee, for a mere $6.5 million, *Do the Right Thing* made three times its production costs in its first twelve weeks of release. Moreover, the film placed a respectable 45th out of a listing of 124 titles in *Variety’s* end-of-the-year “Big Rental Films of 1989.”

*Do the Right Thing*, appearing with so much promise and power at the cusp of the new decade, is important and simultaneously paradoxical because of the multivalent issues it raises about the future of black cinema production. First, there can be no doubt that the popular reception and box-office power of *Do the Right Thing* opened the door for the new rush of black films to come in the 1990s. In this sense, Lee has improved on the pioneering production formula set forth by Melvin Van Peebles, who demonstrated with his 1971 smash hit, *Sweet Sweetback’s Baadasssss Song*, that there is a critical mass of black people eager to see heroic images of themselves rendered from a black point of view and that through a series of hustles, maneuvers, and creative financing, independent money can be raised to make such films. Van Peebles’s efforts, however, provided only a partial answer to the tangle of obstacles facing black filmmaking, and, for him, a rapid series of
feature films working, reworking, and extending his vision was not to follow. On this latter point, Lee’s work improves on Van Peebles’s breakthrough. Lee has managed to express his own version of auteurism and continually roll over enough money, talent, and resources to make a rapid, brilliant series of diverse feature films exploring his commitment to the African American experience. So far, Lee has been shrewd in the way he has worked all aspects of the dominant studio system. He has managed to garner increasingly larger budgets and “mainstream” audiences for his films while, as much as he can, avoiding the dilution of “crossover” formulas and resuscitating the notion of the auteur lost to blacks since Oscar Micheaux and Spencer Williams. Lee has been able almost singlehandedly to make films about black life, rendered from a black point of view, that are popular with a general audience. Thus he has opened vast opportunities, new audiences, and markets to black films and black filmmakers.

Yet it is exactly at this point that the paradox of Lee’s work arises, for in his continuing shift from “guerrilla” to studio financing, bigger production venues, and broader-based consumer markets, Lee must confront his most elusive and dangerous demon. Put simply, the real adversary of Lee’s creativity and eroding guerrilla stance arises out of the subtle, co-opting currents and crossover pressures of the studio system. Hollywood is quite adept at deploying a multiple bag of tricks against outsiders or other filmmakers and their insurgent visions, ranging from marginalization and exclusion to inclusion and co-optation as the fluid economics and political strategies of the times demand. While expressed in a number of aspects and issues in his films, like his problematic vision of women and gays in such films as School Daze (1988) and Mo' Better Blues (1990), this drift toward a contained, mainstream sensibility is best revealed in the refinement and articulation of Lee’s cinematic language over the trajectory of his work leading up to, and beyond, Do the Right Thing.

Certainly here we must factor in the argument that as an African American who has been traditionally kept outside the studio system, Lee has every right to all the toys and slick techniques the industry can provide. But this is beside the point; the issue is that the shift toward, and refinement of, Lee’s big-screen, glossy images, starting with the cumbersome School Daze (1988), subtly but effectively betray the in-
surgent possibility of rendering the nuances of black life in a fresh cinematic language that seemed so promising and emergent in his earlier projects, films such as *Joe’s Bed-Stuy Barbershop: We Cut Heads* (1983) and *She’s Gotta Have It* (1986). At this juncture, the distinct possibility exists that Lee could be betrayed in much the same way that Fellini was betrayed by the sheer opulence and technological excess with which Hollywood diluted and smothered his creativity. Does this mean that the argument here is, à la Espinoza, for some static, pious state of Third World “imperfection” as the sole means of rendering a viable African American vision on the screen? I would say not. Yet we cannot avoid the fact that the technology of cinema production and exhibition with its incessant, ever-expanding advances in verisimilitude, cameras, film stocks, projection techniques, screens, and so on is political and ideological in its very nature, and not just a transparent conduit of ideology. Correspondingly, what is revealed in the ever-grander and slicker promenade of images in the trajectory of Lee’s films is that, unlike Antonioni, Jim Jarmusch, or Charles Brunett, Lee is diligently struggling to learn the conventions and clichés of market cinema language, instead of struggling to change the dominant system by creating a visionary language of his own. This, in part, accounts for the glossy, wide-screen, poster-bright colors, sanitized streets, overworked theatrical settings, and up-to-the-moment fashions that constitute so much of the visual style of *Do the Right Thing*. In contrasting irony, it is the film’s alleged sense of “authenticity” and “realness” that some critics have praised. But the film’s slick, color-saturated look has the effect of idealizing or making nostalgic the present, rather than dramatizing any deep sense of social or political urgency.

*Do the Right Thing*, which covers a twenty-four-hour period on the hottest day of the year in a predominantly black lower-class Brooklyn neighborhood, depicts a broad, polyphonic, social landscape of varied characters, subplots, political outlooks, and racial groupings, all contending and coexisting in the racially tense, stagnant atmosphere at the end of New York Mayor Ed Koch’s administration. The protagonist, Mookie (Spike Lee), works at the neighborhood’s main eatery, Sal’s Famous Pizza, and from his position as delivery boy he acts as a mediator between the various strained factions in the neighborhood.
The principal conflict in the narrative turns on a dispute between the film's hyperventilated black politico, Buggin Out (Giancarlo Esposito) and the Italian American patriarch of the community pizzeria, Sal (Danny Aiello). The contested issue is whether or not the pizzeria, which is supported by a mostly black clientele, should have African American celebrities on its exclusively Italian American "wall of fame." Buggin Out unsuccessfully tries to organize a boycott against Sal's, and by day's end, he storms the pizzeria with his equally disturbed cohort, Radio Raheem (Bill Nunn), who gets into a fight with Sal and is subsequently strangled to death by the New York police. Raheem's death at the hands of the police ignites a riot and Sal's is torched by a neighborhood crowd.

As potentially racial and politically relevant as this synopsis would seem on the narrative's formal surface, the political values the film articulates are far more accommodating and consistent with Hollywood's standard strategies for containing any issue it deems volatile, including that all-powerful American signifier, race. In fact, by constructing Buggin Out and Radio Raheem as supercilious and unreasonable characters, advocating the most effective social action instrument of the civil rights movement, the economic boycott, and then having the possibility of social action dismissed by the neighborhood youth for the temporary pleasures of a good slice of pizza, the film trivializes any understanding of contemporary black political struggle, as well as the recent history of social movements in this country. This dismissal of collective action is further accented by contrasting Buggin Out and Raheem with the character of Mookie, the film's calculating middleman, positioned between Sal and the community. For it is through Mookie's aloof, individualist perspective that much of the film is rendered.

Thus, Lee inadvertently gives way to dominant cinema's reflex strategy of containment, that of depicting complex social conflicts as disputes between individuals, where deliberated collective action is either impossible or unnecessary. One telling scene that spectacularly articulates this strategy is Lee's montage of individuals from various collectivities—Puerto Ricans, Koreans, African Americans, white cops, and so on—all assembled in a long sequence shouting racial in-
From The Blues Brothers (1980)

From Hollywood Shuffle (1987)
From She's Gotta Have It (1986), courtesy of Black Film Review.
From Clara’s Heart (1988), courtesy of Jump Cut.

From Do the Right Thing (1989), courtesy of Black Film Review.
vectives at whatever oppositional group happens to be the immediate focus of their rage. Rendered here is the *how* of personal bigotry, while the much more powerful and hidden institutional and collective *why* of racism is left unexplored. But again, the futility of political action is underscored by the mob that, after Mookie throws the trash can through Sal’s window, mindlessly and spontaneously reacts by burning the pizzeria and then, the next day, all but disappears with no collective, organized follow-through. Meanwhile, that morning in the film’s resolution, Mookie explains the ultimate power and flexibility of “the system” to absorb such fleeting eruptions of social discontent. Consistent with Mookie’s entrepreneurial middleman stance, he gets paid in the process. As Mookie tells it, Sal will make out on the insurance and has the option to rebuild. So relations of domination remain exactly the same, while neighborhood consciousness remains unelevated, unchanged by the night’s events. Thus any possibility of interrogating the *causes* of the racism and violence that vex the community is safely contained and reduced to merely depicting the *spectacle* of racism and violence.

Yet, with its resolution of the King-Malcolm X dichotomy, as well as its depiction of the spectacle of race, *Do the Right Thing* confronts us with a paradoxical blend, a mix of politics, African American culture and aesthetics, and the hope of future production opportunities for more blacks. In an overarching sense, Lee’s talent and energy must be affirmed, for his strongest point comes down to his thorough understanding and the working of his specific venue, fixed on the broad, heterogeneous map of African America. This is what makes Spike Lee an African American filmic *griot* and storyteller of considerable ability. Within the multicultural frame of a Brooklyn neighborhood, Lee innately visualized the complexity and power of the African American oral tradition and its attendant matrix of musical forms and idioms. Through a series of interfacing vignettes and subplots, the film surveyed the ups and downs of a black extended-family neighborhood spanning all generations from De Mayor (Ossie Davis) to the child he saves from being hit by a car. Most important, this informal family is socially constructed and has overlapping, heterogeneous borders, as demonstrated by Mookie’s girl friend Tina (Rosie Perez), who is Puerto Rican, and by the Korean grocery store owner coming to de-
clare that he also is "black," belatedly, at the moment his store is about to be burned. Yet the bigger question of what specific configurations and directions Lee's work will ultimately take, and in a broader sense, what the boundaries and sensibilities of the 1990s black movie boom will be, are just beginning to emerge.
The biting comment of a black Los Angeles gang member in the grimy mise-en-scène of Dennis Hopper’s cop-buddy, action-fantasy Colors (1988) perhaps best summarized the frustrating predicament facing blacks seeking entry to the Hollywood system at the turn of the 1990s. Asked why he did not leave the gang life and try something more productive, homeboy (Grand Bush) replies, “Yeah, I could quit the gangs . . . . Maybe I’ll go to Hollywood and be Eddie Murphy.” Then he poses a question that sardonically conveys the point understood by all people of color: “You think America is ready to love two niggers at the same time?” This bit of subversive dialogue recalls James Baldwin’s notion of the black actor’s “smuggled in reality”; homeboy recognizes that dominant cinema cannot entirely hide the fundamental sense of inequality and marginalization that is persistently all too real for African Americans. At the same time, however, a countervailing sense of expectation grew in that cultural moment, as Hollywood began to show signs of opening up to black creativity and energy again. Gradually, all aspects of black filmmaking and filmic representation began to gain momentum after almost fifteen years
of stagnation and subordination that for the most part had confined black cinematic talent and expression to a few major “stars.” These were largely featured in one-dimensional roles or biracial “buddy” vehicles fashioned to accommodate the broadest crossover market (e.g., *Clara’s Heart* [1988], *Driving Miss Daisy* [1989], *Lethal Weapon II* [1989]). Starting in the last years of the 1980s and swelling in the 1990s, the new black film wave was heralded by the release of over seven black-directed features in 1990, including such pivotal productions as *To Sleep with Anger* by Charles Burnett, Spike Lee’s *Mo’ Better Blues*, and *Daughters of the Dust* by Julie Dash.

In 1991, the black movie boom continued to expand with the release of twelve films directed by African Americans, along with over twenty other productions that starred or had significant roles for black actors. In many ways, 1991 was a prolific turning-point year that brought to the commercial screen a range of significant and diverse black feature films, such as *A Rage in Harlem*, directed by Bill Duke, John Singleton’s hit *Boyz N the Hood*, *The Five Heartbeats*, directed by Robert Townsend, and the rereleased *Chameleon Street*, directed by Wendell B. Harris. Also that same year, Whoopi Goldberg won an Oscar for her “buddy” role as a spirit medium in the mainstream hit *Ghost* (1990), making her only the second black woman ever so honored by the Hollywood system. Serving as a contrasting index of the severity of the drought between the two black movie booms, production in 1990 and 1991 alone easily surpassed the total production of all black-focused films released since the retreat of the Blaxploitation wave in the mid-1970s.

The boom of the 1990s has emerged out of conditions that are comparable to those that fostered the Blaxploitation period, but they also stand in ironic counterpoint to them. The social contexts of the two black film waves differ significantly, as one would expect, because of the increasingly soured and polarized negotiation of black–white “race relations” in the intervening years. We have noted that, along with other empowering conditions, the Blaxploitation boom emerged from a period of militant political activism fueled by the rising identity consciousness and social expectations of African Americans at the end of the civil rights movement. These forces inspired black intellectuals, artists, writers, and politicians to demand an end to Hollywood’s
pervasive and fundamental subordination of blacks on the screen. Hollywood's strategic response to this combination of black social and intellectual pressure was to produce a wave of cheaply made black action-adventures set in the “ghetto” that were, with a few notable exceptions, cranked out by white directors and garnered tremendous profits for the mainstream commercial system but also subordinated black talent and creativity to the needs of that system at all levels.

In contrast, the black movie boom of the 1990s has materialized out of a climate of long-muted black frustration and anger over the worsening political and economic conditions that African Americans continue to endure in the nation's decaying urban centers. Ironically, the social character of this anger is the dialectical opposite of the passion that helped overdetermine the inception of the Blaxploitation boom at a historical moment when hundreds of American cities burst into flames as urban blacks, frustrated when “civil rights” gains did not translate into real economic progress for the majority of blacks trapped in northern ghettos in the mid-1960s, and they increasingly took to the streets in a series of urban rebellions. Conversely, from the mid-1980s onward, we have witnessed the rise of an insidious, socially fragmenting violence driven by the availability of cheap guns and crack cocaine in the nation's partitioned inner cities. For the most part, black rage has lost its political focus in this violent apartheid environment; it has become an internalized form of self-destruction expressed as gang and drug warfare. If such a situation can be said to have positive effects, we can see this rage as an energizing element in much of the new black cultural production, finding expression in a rearticulated criticism of white racism and a resurgent interest in black nationalism among the urban youth inspired by the rap lyrics of Public Enemy, N.W.A., Sister Souljah, and Ice-T, or resonant in the films of Bill Duke, Spike Lee, Matty Rich, and John Singleton.

Black anger has not been confined to the urban poor. Black middle-class children who came of age in time to reap the benefits of the civil rights movement are finding out that, like the dissatisfied, upwardly mobile “Buppies” that populate Jungle Fever (1991), Livin' Large (1991), and Strictly Business (1991), professional positions and success have not delivered them from the insults and isolation of a persistent and growing racism that poisons all societal transactions.
Adding complexity to the social frame, the 1990s are also a moment of expanding black heterogeneity and “difference,” with such emergent groups within the community finding voice as gays and women, as manifest in the work of Marlon Riggs and Isaac Julien, the continued popularity of black women’s novels, and the increasing call for more films by black women directors to translate these potent narratives. Yet the black community is not without its divisions and tensions, as is evident in the increasing isolation and distance of the black middle class from the problems of the black inner city.

Certainly these expansive, diversifying shifts in black social consciousness have resulted, in part, from the progressive efforts focused on raising the black standard of living and improving race relations unleashed at the end of the 1960s. And these shifts must be recognized as evidence of the positive growth of the black social formation. But distrust is also pervasive. A 1990 opinion poll of black New Yorkers conducted by the New York Times/CBS found that 64 percent of black respondents felt that drugs and urban violence were part of a white conspiracy to eliminate blacks; in the same poll, 32 percent of those queried suspected that AIDS was invented by scientists with the same purposes in mind. These beliefs filter into cinema; the implicit premise of Bill Duke’s *Deep Cover* (1991) is that the slow destruction of blacks is accomplished through the organized importation of cocaine. Director John Singleton’s character Furious Styles (Larry Fishburne) voices similar suspicions in *Boyz N the Hood* when he gives a street-corner speech about how “they” funnel liquor, drugs, and guns into the black community in hopes that “we will kill each other off.” Under scoring this position in real-time media, Singleton followed up on this train of thought on a popular television talk show, reasserting that AIDS was an invented disease and part of a genocidal plot against blacks. For African Americans, then, the last decade of the century reveals a renewed sense of racial oppression and foreclosure, pessimism, and sinking social expectations. And when compared to the sense of social unity and purpose forged out of the sharp struggles of the 1960s, African Americans are now going through an intense period of nihilism, fragmentation, and self-doubt, as they wonder where the next wave of collective struggle for social change will come from.

No matter how bleak these perceptions may be, one cannot naively
dismiss African American understandings of the times as collective paranoia. Black public opinion and political consciousness have been alarmed by a sharpening climate of deteriorating race relations, polarization, and outright racial conflict made depressingly tangible in a steady stream of newscasts and nightmare media images over the turn of the decade. The deaths of Michael Griffith and Yusef Hawkins at the hands of racist lynch mobs in Howard Beach and Bensonhurst (New York) and the barbaric spectacle, broadcast on global television, of Rodney King being beaten by white police officers in Los Angeles have left no doubt in the black social psyche that America is still a racist society and that white America is persistently attempting to turn back the clock on whatever racial progress was made during the programs of “The Great Society” and the turbulent 1960s. Accordingly, Spike Lee’s invocation in *Do the Right Thing* of the names of the martyred Michael Stewart and Eleanor Bumpers as victims of police murder, and his dedication of *Jungle Fever* (1991) to Yusef Hawkins, and his use of the Rodney King tape in the opening of *Malcolm X* (1992)—all have struck deep harmonic feelings across the entire range of the African American community. Further compounding black feelings of alarm and despair, such sensationalized media events as the Anita Hill—Clarence Thomas Senate hearings, Magic Johnson’s retirement, the Mike Tyson rape trial, and the social pathology of a white Boston “Yuppie” murdering his pregnant wife and blaming the crime on the mythical black scapegoat and thus provoking a reflex wave of police terror in the black community only confirm African American feelings that they have been made the major source of lurid spectacle for an image-information driven society unwilling to recognize their humanity.

Equally important, one must note that the present atmosphere of racial scapegoating and intolerance, as well as an overall acceptance of the “new” racism, has not erupted out of the murky depths of the most ignorant strata of the white social hierarchy. In great part, the national mood has been engineered and encouraged by the intensifying racist tone of mainstream political rhetoric and discourse rooted in the backlash politics of the Reagan years. This most recent wave of “nativism” started with the evocation of Cadillac-driving, parasitic welfare queens during Ronald Reagan’s 1980 bid for the presidency; continued through the successful exploitation of white fear focused on two black
men, Willie Horton and Jessie Jackson, during George Bush’s 1988 presidential campaign; and the 1990 Senate race of Jesse Helms, who made a crude appeal for white votes to defeat his African American opponent by blatantly advertising that “you needed that job, and you were the best qualified, but it had to go to a minority because of a racial quota.” In the same year, a former Klansman–Nazi, David Duke, called himself a Republican and won 44 percent of the vote in his 1990 bid for a Senate seat in Louisiana. On the national stage, Pat Buchanan picked up Duke’s themes and code words, winning a substantial white “protest vote” against George Bush in the early 1992 presidential primaries and the applause of delegates at the Republican National Convention. 5

Given this kind of establishment legitimation of playing the “race card,” one can hardly wonder that in Los Angeles the pent-up frustrations of disenfranchised people, sparked by a long series of brutalities and injustices culminating in the racist verdict in the Rodney King police brutality trial, exploded in spring 1992 into the worst civil rebellion the nation has experienced in this century. Very much in the same way that the 1950s lynching of Emmett Till or the 1960s assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., marked defining moments in African America’s ongoing struggle for racial justice, the stark videotape, the acquittal of the four white police officers, and the uprising that followed it marked a consciousness-shaping moment for a whole new generation of Americans. 6

Gauging the temperament of the market, creating trends, or staying in sync with the popular mood of its various audience segments and fusing them into a dominant consumer consciousness is work that occupies a large slice of the film industry’s business talent, research, and capital. Hollywood traces an intricate path over the course of this restless, racially tense cultural period. While the mainstream production system is willing to admit a few black directors and black-focused films to its exclusive club for obvious reasons of profit, the industry has also been quick to co-opt these new shifts in racial politics and attitude among whites and African Americans. Following trends set in the 1980s, the commercial cinema system has continued to stock its productions with themes and formulas dealing with black issues and characters that are reassuring to the sensibilities and expectations of an uneasy white audience. These filmic images tend to mediate the
dysfunctions and delusions of a society unable to deal honestly with its inequalities and racial conflicts, a society that operates in a profound state of racial denial on a daily basis. Thus images are polarized into celebrations of “Buppie” success and consumer-driven individualism that are consonant with a sense of black political quietism, tokenism, and accommodation, or condemnations of violent ghetto criminals, gangsters, and drug lords. These figurations can hardly be perceived as accidental at this cultural moment. Indeed, one of the most revealing and subtle instances symbolizing Hollywood’s sharpened, carefully maintained racial hegemony occurs in the most profitable comedy ever made, *Home Alone* (1990). In the film, an abandoned eight-year-old (Macaulay Culkin) seeks to fool two burglars into thinking his house is occupied by rigging a life-sized photo cutout of Michael Jordan to run around on a toy train track. Given the film’s astounding commercial success and broad audience influence, this scene is unsettling not only because its reification of Jordan represents the extent of black participation in the movie, and by implication in the exclusive, upper-class, suburban white domain of the narrative, but also because it implies one of the primary ways African Americans are constructed in the popular imagination: as one-dimensional, cardboard celebrity cutouts. Moreover, the co-optation and exploitation of black images and culture pervades the media industry in general. This trend is especially marked by the commercial success and consumption of urban rap and hip-hop culture among a vast, crossover, white youth population that has come to identify openly its milder suburban discontents with black anger and rebellion. But perhaps the revelation of the multivalent complexity of black images and the media uses of these are best contrasted by the juxtaposition of the opulent, soothing image of a black professional class rendered on “The Cosby Show” in contrast to the stark, real-time, genocidal slaughter of urban blacks on the nightly eleven o’clock news. It is little wonder that by the beginning of the 1990s, blacks felt that they existed in the dominant social imagination as media-constructed “stars” and fantasy figures or as criminals, while according to almost every social–material index, the quality of black life in this country steadily declined. Or cinematically, as Spike Lee insightfully transcodes these perceptions in a dialogue about race between the bigoted Pino (John Turturro) and Mookie (Lee) of *Do the
"Right Thing," in Pino's words, Prince, Magic Johnson, Eddie Murphy, et al. are “different,” the media-worshipped exceptions, and the rest are just “niggers.”

Considering these vast political and social changes centered on race relations in the past two decades, one irony is that the Blaxploitation boom was a series of movies made for black audiences mostly by white directors, while the 1990s wave has been made by black directors for black audiences with the broader range of crossover consumption in mind. The similarities between the facilitating economic backgrounds of both movie booms demand discussion in response to a set of central concerns or questions most often arising among the new black critics and directors: Is the new black movie boom a cyclic or periodic phenomenon trapped within the context of Hollywood economics? And will this new boom signal a real and permanent opening for blacks at all levels in the industry?

Both black film waves arose during periods of economic crisis and downturn in film industry earnings. In the present instance, Hollywood, after a peak box office year in 1989, followed by the second-best summer ever in 1990, was encouraged to expand production, with the result that six or seven major studios pumped out almost two hundred films. But the turning point for studio profits started with the 1990 Christmas season and the chilling effects of the Persian Gulf War on the entertainment business in general, when box office receipts started to soften. In the opening months of 1991, Hollywood found itself overinvested in a series of lackluster, expensive blockbusters, which combined disastrously with a glut of films already chasing shrinking box office profits. Once more, the commercial film industry was to find itself on the downside of the profit curve and sliding into one of its periodic economic crises. In the words of Variety reporter A. D. Murphy, the domestic box office “hit a speed bump” in April 1991, as profits continued to fall through May to a deflated box office intake of $82 million for the first week of June, compared to $111 million a year before, a 26 percent drop in revenues. Added to the bite of a cruel spring and further complicated by a deepening national recession, the summer of 1991, the period that accounts for 40 percent of studio earnings, proved to be equally disappointing, with the box office down by 7 to 10 percent and industry profits in general estimated to be off by as much
as 15 percent. As a further indication of the pervasive seriousness of the situation, the slump at the box office and the anemic condition of the film industry were paralleled by a crash in video rentals, which by October 1991 had fallen off by 25 percent. Overall, the recessionary slide continued with big independents going under, majors like MGM foundering, and all studios backlogged with expensive flops and trying to cut expenses. By the start of the anxious 1992 summer season, ticket sales were at a fifteen-year low.12

Within this bleak economic context, Hollywood, and the media industry in general, once again turned its attention to the size and consumer power of the mythical, ever-shifting black movie audience, variously estimated at 25 to 30 percent (overrepresenting its 13 percent portion of the population).13 The fact that Hollywood has known about the disproportionately large black moviegoing audience since the early 1950s gives further credence to the argument that the movie industry routinely ignores black filmic aspirations and marginalizes black box office power until it can be called on, as a sort of reserve audience, to make up sinking profit margins at any given moment of economic crisis. Accordingly, then, two of these moments of crisis were the studio profit slumps that coincided with the rise of black film production waves in the late 1960s to early 1970s and again in the late 1980s into the 1990s.

This argument is further supported when we look back on the abrupt manner in which Hollywood curtailed the earlier Blaxploitation wave, despite the fact that black-focused and black-cast films continued to make money as late as 1976, as evidenced by the hit directed by Michael Schultz and starring Richard Pryor, *Car Wash*. At that moment, the industry reasoned that blacks would attend crossover and blockbuster movies with the formulaic ingredients of sex, violence, and action in the same numbers as they would more black-focused films. Therefore, once Hollywood found its way out of the economic doldrums and returned to making blockbusters, epitomized by the tremendously successful *The Godfather* (1972) and *The Exorcist* (1973), which drew 35 percent black audiences, the industry saw no need to continue a specifically black-focused product line. Moreover, for the past two decades Hollywood has increasingly employed the short-term profit strategy of making “small” films in short “cycles” organized around various
themes and genres aimed at specific audiences. Thus much of the evidence tends to support the argument that expanded waves of black movie production occur in short cycles (four years or so) in an inverse relationship to the overall prosperity of the dominant film industry.

One cannot say whether or not this particular black movie boom of the early 1990s will end as arbitrarily and suddenly as its predecessor, but this wave’s expansion and survival beyond its short-term economic utility to the commercial film industry will largely depend on how quickly Hollywood realizes that the ongoing racial diversification of its future audience is permanent and irreversible, arising out of the often-stated fact that the sovereign collectivity of “whiteness” will be just another large minority beyond the year 2000. Or, stressing the connection between shifting racial demographics and box office profits, as marketeer Warrington Hudlin puts it: “If, within the next 30 years, America is going to be predominantly a nation of people of color, then white studio executives had better begin to understand who their consumer is going to be.” Moreover, Hudlin has been quick to apply this insight to his own film output with the success of the formula comedy House Party (1990), which cost $2.5 million to make and earned more than $25 million.

Besides the tendency of black films to come in “waves,” one must consider the abiding film industry principle that, perhaps more than any other, enforces the economic limits of black narrative features. Studio executives figure that black-focused films are a lucrative venture as long as they are cheaply made. The current production cost for bringing in a “small film” is anywhere from $1.5 to $10 million, and the top end of this range is about a third of what the average commercial film costs. Thus Hollywood makes these modestly budgeted black features with the expectation of recovering the capital invested and turning a profit from the black audience alone. An added appeal of such low-budget features is the industry gamble that it will occasionally hit the jackpot with a big success, as it did with New Jack City (1991), which cost $8.5 million and earned over $47 million, or the top-grossing black film Boyz N the Hood (1991), which was made for a modest $6 million and, so far, has earned over $60 million. Obviously both films are exceptional, for they not only did well with black audiences, but they have successfully crossed over into broader consumer
markets. Among other things, because of its rap soundtrack and the presence of Ice-T, *New Jack City* was not only a hit with its targeted black youth population but attracted a large, young white audience. And doing even better with Ice Cube, *Boyz* was a hit with the domestic black and white audience and is garnering a huge business overseas.

Crossover power or, more properly, the lack of it, is exactly the factor that marks out the budgetary limits of the black feature film. For as these usually cheaply produced vehicles approach the studio-imposed $30 million “glass ceiling” on production costs, these films must rely on drawing the white or foreign audience, or both, to meet the high profit ratios Hollywood demands of them. From the industry perspective, when the production costs of a black film approach this budgetary limit, one of two things must happen. Either the film does not get financed (and therefore is not made) or during the long tangled course of production its black point of view, politics, or narrative gets co-opted or in some other way altered to accommodate broader (white) audience sensibilities to guarantee the profit margins demanded by studio executives. Certainly these are the kinds of concerns and pressures that dogged the production of *Malcolm X*, with Spike Lee’s protracted struggles with Warner Bros. and the Completion Bond Co. over financing. In *Boomerang* we see these same pressures overdetermining yet another result. Here, even a benign black-cast, dominant cinema romantic comedy with the star power of Eddie Murphy came up a commercial flop because, among other things, it was not successful enough at crossing over to offset its $40 million-plus costs.

The dominant film industry’s de facto budget ceiling and its adoration for the much-publicized success of a few recent black films and black directors notwithstanding, the scope and direction of the 1990s black movie boom cannot entirely be reduced to the crass business of merely turning a profit as its sole motivating force. In an often overlapping, complex manner, the diverse sources of inspiration, financial strategies, and production circumstances of the new black cinema wave tend to bifurcate, with black films and filmmakers moving into subtly different perspectives. We can distinguish these different outlooks, calling them black “independent” cinema and the “mainstream” employment of black creativity in the dominant cinema system, but these labels overstate the case somewhat. The line of feature films
spanning the work of Micheaux in the 1930s; Van Peebles, Parks, and Poitier in the 1970s; Woodberry and Burnett in the early '80s; and Lee, Singleton, Duke, Dash, and Paley, among many others, in the 1990s is more tangled than such terms imply. And while these two outlooks have always had their debates, the surge of new black feature films coming into circulation combined with the ongoing demand for more black-focused vehicles seems to have lessened some of the more pronounced distinctions between them.

Another reason for black filmmaking's sense of overall cohesion derives from the fact that out of social and economic necessity, black independent and mainstream impulses are both forced to struggle with a fundamental paradox, a corollary to Hollywood's budget ceiling, that subtly influences all black cinema production in this country. Whatever its orientation, black cinematic expression, as much of black culture, has nearly always been proscribed, marginalized, exploited, and often ignored. Thus black filmmakers of both persuasions are constantly called on to create out of an uncompromised, forthright perspective that recovers the long-suppressed sensibilities, aspirations, and narratives of the black world and struggles to bring them to the cinema screen. At the same time, because moviemaking is such a capital-intensive business and is so largely dependent on mass markets, consumer trends, and fashions, these same filmmakers must appeal to a broad enough commercial audience to earn sufficient revenues at the box office to ensure that their candid visions of the black world will be successful. And, what is equally important, that their work will be sustained in a succession of feature films. In other words, the black filmmaker must struggle to depict the truth about black life in America while being inextricably tied to the commercialized sensibilities of a mass audience that is for the most part struggling to deny or avoid the full meaning of that truth.

It is interesting, then, to look at the new wave of black films and directors, noting that the "independent" directors are usually ahead of, in search of, or aim at building a new audience for black cinema. Or these directors aim at transforming social relations, reflecting a particular set of problems or crises vexing the black collectivity, say, like Charles Burnett's To Sleep with Anger (1990), which in its intricate narrative seems to articulate all these issues. Or their films speak
for the consciousness of newly formed subjectivities, barely emergent from the vast social continuity of blackness, say, for groups or subcultures like black women or gays, or for the unassimilated Third World within the United States, or even for those politicized or intellectual blacks who demand more narrative depth, character development, and political clarity than is usually provided by formula entertainment and mainstream commodities. Productions such as Daughters of the Dust (1990), Looking for Langston (1989), Sidewalk Stories (1989), and Chameleon Street (1989) all exemplify films that struggle to render forthright, nuanced interpretations of black life against the co-opting, homogenizing pressures of the commercial cinema system.

Another important distinguishing facet of the independent impulse has to do with the way these films articulate fresh cinematic styles and visions. Such directors as Julie Dash, Wendell Harris, and Charles Burnett are struggling, à la Antonioni, Buñuel, Godard, Altman, or, more recently, Wayne Wang and Jim Jarmusch, to create insurgent, new cinematic languages, images, and narratives. These would be capable of decentering or opposing the staid filmic conventions of the sovereign Hollywood “norm” with its technological verisimilitude of violence, glossy, color-saturated surfaces, continuity editing, “invisible style,” and avoidance of political or social engagement that suggests the possibility of social change. Thus, through their experimental languages, black independent films often defy the standardization of the dominant cinema product, as well as the dulled expectations of its consumer audience, in order to tell the stories of emergent subjectivities in radically new ways. Certainly the acidic, voiceover monologue of the masquerading protagonist in Chameleon Street, the “magic real” manipulations of space–time in Daughters of the Dust, and the black and white pantomimic construction of Sidewalk Stories all aim not only at speaking in stylistically new ways but also through new formulations of identity and subjecthood.

One director who has come to epitomize the black independent impulse and its aspirations is Charles Burnett, who was schooled at UCLA and reared in the 1970s black film environment known as the “L.A. rebellion,” which also produced Billy Woodberry, Julie Dash, Haile Gerima, and Larry Clark. Always true to the sense of political and aesthetic autonomy bred of those insurgent times, Burnett has
persistently refined his vision over the past several years with such films as his masterpiece feature *Killer of Sheep* (1977), as well as *My Brother's Wedding* (1984) and the screenplay for Billy Woodberry's *Bless Their Little Hearts* (1984). As part of the new wave, Burnett's feature *To Sleep with Anger* (1990) was greeted with buoyant, critical expectations and the hope that this black movie boom would be more broadly representative of black filmic styles, life, and culture than its Blaxploitation predecessor. Yet, in many ways, *To Sleep with Anger*, which was produced by popular black star Danny Glover for under $1.5 million, provided by S.V.C., a subsidiary of SONY, and distributed by Samuel Goldwyn, has come to represent the frustrating intersection of independent and mainstream issues debated among black filmmakers. Added to this are the overdetermining, paradoxical problems of winning broad distribution and popular box office support for a film that in its vision and style runs far beyond the colonized appetites of the sex–violence–action trained consumer audience, be it black or white.17

*To Sleep with Anger*, which features Danny Glover as the interloping trickster, Harry, is an understated, enigmatic exploration of the cracks and tensions of black family life in the middle-class environs of contemporary Los Angeles. The film's power and appeal reside in the way the filmmaker turns his gaze inward on the stable black community, as microcosmically rendered in the intricate conflicts and tangles of three generations of an extended black family. The arrival of the superstitious throwback Harry, with his “down home” manners and divisive machinations, stirs tensions between the latent values of the rural South and those of contemporary black urban culture; between the generation of the parents, Gideon (Paul Butler) and Suzie (Mary Alice), and their two sons, Junior (Carl Lumbly) and the “Buppie” Babe Brother (Richard Brooks), and their families.

Harry, the complexly drawn, simultaneously comic and devilish trickster, comes to symbolize much that is wrong with this middle-class black community. Burnett drew his inspiration for the character from stories his grandmother told him about life in rural Mississippi, and he says of Harry, “He's a character that comes to steal your soul, and you have to out-trick him”18 Exploiting the codes of southern hospitality and manners to set up operations in Gideon and Suzie’s household, Harry plays on weakness as he divides all against all. His charm
and trickery work a subtle, malignant spell that contributes to Gideon's having a stroke, exploits the sibling rivalry between the two sons, causes Babe Bro and his wife to split up, subordinates the women of the family to the backward patriarchy of the sharecropping South, and finally establishes a junta of southern cronies in the house determined to party away the family's resources. *To Sleep* climaxes when, on a full-moon Friday night, the two brothers almost kill each other and are prevented from doing so only by the women of the family, led by the mother, Suzie, who stops a potentially fatal knife thrust with her hand. Later, at the emergency room, Burnett's camera pulls back to articulate the social dimension of the problem as the audience realizes that this family is just one of a vast urban terrain of similarly troubled families there to patch up their quarrels and physical wounds.

Order and hope are restored to the narrative when, in an act of poetic justice, the oldest and youngest collide. Harry slips and falls on marbles, spilled by Gideon's grandson, and dies of a heart attack on the kitchen floor, thus fulfilling the symbolic promise of a scene that opens the film. For when Harry first arrives, the grandson touches his shoes with a broom, which Harry reads, according to southern folklore, as a magical threat and a foreshadowing. It is only fitting, then, that the innocent actions of the young child should eliminate the calculated evil and corruption of the devilish Harry. Burnett ends his film on a clever dramatic irony that involves a form of symbolic pollution, when the family cannot get the city to remove Harry's corpse in a timely manner. Thus the irony of the overbearing house guest who overstays his welcome is comically literalized when, even in death, Harry cannot be gotten rid of. But Harry's corpse also obstructs and pollutes the space where the family meets, where its food is prepared and eaten.

Beyond the perfection of Burnett's dense, mysterious, tragicomic narrative, perhaps the subtle expression of style that most distinguishes *To Sleep with Anger* is the way that Burnett deploys his disciplined sense of cultural introspection throughout the film. Burnett has turned his gaze away from the surrounding white world inward to construct a black subjectivity that replaces the flat stereotypical dominant cinema with a sense of multidimensional, black typicality. As with all of Burnett's films, *To Sleep* draws its power from the shared sense of values and cultural vision of the African American insider who cre-
ates his story world unselfconsciously, with few concessions to market or crossover sensibilities. This ability to specify cultural vision is perhaps best demonstrated in the subtle way that black music, especially the blues motif, weaves its way throughout the narrative. The film opens with a stirring Gospel solo; at various moments, one can hear the boy next door haltingly practicing the trumpet; Harry typifies the nomadic blues lifestyle and survivalist rural culture as depicted when bluesman Jimmy Witherspoon (playing himself) shows up to sing at a party given in Harry’s honor. Moreover, the blues as an index of the soul’s progress is brilliantly revealed in the scene when Suzie finally asks Harry to leave. Harry accepts his fate without rancor or protest. Then, in a moment of illumination, as if to explain himself, Harry likens his soul to the crude, unfinished sound of the boy’s trumpet next door, heard as a dim background refrain throughout the film. Harry completes the analogy by saying that one must put up with the soul’s practice and noise to appreciate how its music finally turns out. And consistent with Burnett’s enigmatic but socially redemptive style, To Sleep understands and symbolically forgives its trickster. For as the end credits roll up, we hear the boy’s music improve.

Despite the film’s narrative depth and subtle dramatic force, as well as some of the season’s most favorable reviews, it is disappointing but somewhat predictable to note that To Sleep with Anger has fallen into the trap of the paradox proscribing much of black film, the conflict between rendering an honest black perspective on the big screen while being forced to measure a film’s survival and importance solely on its profitability at the box office. In spite of the film’s recognition by black community institutions as a significant work, with the Beverly Hills/Hollywood branch of the NAACP going so far as to campaign to bring out the black audience, To Sleep was largely perceived and handled by its distributor, Samuel Goldwyn, as an “art house” vehicle. Moreover, Burnett, among others, claims that scant attention was paid to how the film was marketed in the black community. The film’s box-office problems were further compounded by the persistent fact that much of the black audience is a youth market and as such is action-adventure oriented. Consequently, the film did poorly overall at the box office, accumulating a meager $348,285 after its first five weeks of release.
In an added irony that illustrates the film’s complex fusion of qualities as both black film and art film, To Sleep performed five times as well with white audiences as black, thus inspiring one critic to tag it “an all-black film (except for the audience).” But the last word on the black filmmaker’s dilemma should go to Burnett himself, who perceptively observed well before the film’s release that “the situation is such that one is always asked to compromise one’s integrity, and if the socially oriented film is finally made, its showing will generally be limited and the very ones that it is made for and about will probably never see it.”

This persistent problem of a black dramatic film rendered in experimental, non-Hollywood language coming into conflict with the demands of the commodity system has vexed the popular circulation of at least two other important black independent features, Chameleon Street (1989), and Daughters of the Dust (1990). In Wendell B. Harris’s Chameleon Street, which won the $5,000 Grand Jury Prize at the Sundance United States Film Festival in 1990, we find another promising black feature that, because of its unique narrative and visual construction, has found itself a poor fit in popular consumer markets and relegated to the purgatory of the obscure art house, university, and museum circuit. The epitome of black independent vision, Harris’s film, which he wrote, directed, and stars in, was financed and made for around $1 million, largely through his efforts at persuading friends, professionals, and community members to invest in the project.

Beyond the determined ingenuity of the production’s “guerrilla financing,” Chameleon Street’s cinematic authority dwells in the unique, disturbing view that the film affords the spectator into an African American psyche and that psyche’s calculated interactions with a surrounding, dominant white society. On its formal surface, Chameleon Street tells the true story of William Douglas Street, a brilliant but unstable Michigan black man who, through a series of impersonations, successfully infiltrated the white professional world. Street as chameleon and con man moves from scam to scam, from becoming a physician with a Harvard degree who performs a series of deft hysterectomies to a Yale graduate student to a corporate lawyer and so on. At each juncture, Street is found out, prosecuted, and occasionally imprisoned, only to move on by assuming another guise. Thus, part of
the film’s unsettling effect comes from our realization of how thin and transparent these much-admired professional castes are to an ambitious, cunning intelligence.

Yet, black or white, by mid-film the spectator’s discomfort grows with the dawning realization that the protagonist of Chameleon Street’s most frightening role is permanent and ubiquitous. For William Douglas Street, as revealed by the way the director Wendell Harris marks the Street character with his own persona, is a black everyman sentenced to a life of dissembling in a society completely obsessed with designations of “race” and maintaining racial hierarchies. Street’s fantasy life, as signaled by his attending a masquerade party as the Beast from Jean Cocteau’s Beauty and the Beast (1946), his frustrated ambition and intelligence, his dissembling in the face of a white professional class so eager to disavow its reflex feelings of racial superiority that it uncritically accepts him, all culminate in a dialectically shocking metaphor for the double consciousness, masked anger, and constant pretending that all blacks, to some degree, must deploy to live in a persistently racist society. And, of course, here resides the dark, troubled core of the film. Embellished by Harris’s arty, avant-garde style and sardonic voiceover monologue, this is the unspoken and unspeakable truth that will forever keep Chameleon Street out of dominant cinema’s mass entertainment markets. As the critic Armond White has rightfully observed, the film’s social and aesthetic declaration joins a continuum testimony voiced by African American subterraneans so disturbingly inscribed in Ralph Ellison’s Invisible Man, Richard Wright’s The Man Who Lived Underground, and Ishmael Reed’s Reckless Eyeballing, all characters who refuse to be domesticated to America’s racist agenda.22

If the situation for black male independent filmmakers has proven difficult, then it has been almost impossible for black women. Compared to black men, there are few black women filmmakers and, in most cases, they must negotiate the “triple oppression” of their work predicated on independent vision, race, and gender. This layering of barriers is starkly borne out by the simplest industry statistics. At the moment of this writing, the mainstream industry has produced and distributed one film by a black woman director, A Dry White Season (1989), by the foreign-born Euzhan Palcy. And demonstrating a struc-
ture increasingly prohibitive with the imposition of each new category of difference, of the more than 450 commercial films released in 1991, white women directed 5 percent, or approximately 23 of them. Black men produced more black films in 1991 than in the entire 1980s, while black women produced no films whatsoever. Against these daunting odds and obstacles, we must contextualize and critique the only African American women’s film to come even close to posing an alternative to Hollywood’s near-absolute race and gender hegemony, Daughters of the Dust (1991), written, produced, and directed by Julie Dash.

This feature, centered on a black woman, is the result of a ten-year vision, produced for around $1 million, made up of $650,000 in grant money from the public broadcast “American Playhouse” series, $150,000 from the Corporation for Public Broadcasting, with the remaining capital coming from independent, “guerrilla” financing. Much like the novels of black women that started to emerge in the 1970s, Daughters of the Dust pointedly sets out to reconstruct, to recover a sense of black women’s history, and to affirm their cultural and political space in the expanding arena of black cinema production. The narrative encompasses a long summer day in 1902, set at Ebo Landing in the Sea Islands off the South Carolina coast, a relatively isolated historical location that allowed the survival of African cultural beliefs and practices that are so important to Dash’s text. Daughters depicts a seashore picnic held by the extended Peazant family, which has convened, with a photographer, to bid farewell to the family’s ancestral island home and confront the psychic stresses and religious and political debates centered on moving to the North toward jobs, assimilation, and upward mobility into a nascent black middle class.

Uniquely, and against the grain of commercial cinema expectations, black women, speaking in “Geechee” dialect and ornately costumed in a variety of white tropical Victorian dresses, for one of the few times in commercial cinema history occupy the visual, spiritual, and moral center of the screen. The narrative, which is rendered in a nonlinear style structured with dislocations in time and space, flashbacks, and forwards, depicts a complex ideological debate carried on by three generations of the family’s women who are roughly split among at least three interpretations of “progress”, that is, the move North and all that it portends. The family matriarch, Grandma Nana
(Cora Lee Day), wants to ensure the survival of African mystical traditions, ancestor worship, ritual magic, and a deep generational sense of extended-family unity that has enabled them to survive the long ordeal of slavery. Opposed to Nana are her daughters and in-laws, represented by Viola (Cherly Lynn Bruce) and Haagar (Kaycee Moore), who have no use for the past, who dismiss all African retention as superstition or, as Haagar derisively puts it, as “hoodoo.” To varied degrees, the family embraces a black interpretation of Christianity and the move North toward what they argue to be the social and material advancement of a developing black middle class. Daughters’ mixture and contestation of black worldviews is further complicated by the return from the North of the outcast prostitute daughter, Yellow Mary (Barbara-O), accompanied by her lesbian lover, both of whom symbolize an emergent independent womanhood not inhibited by penetrating the male realm of “business” or advocating liberalized forms of sexual choice and expression. But, as her name implies, Yellow Mary also articulates the family’s subtle sense of color consciousness.

As with much of the best of the independent impulse, Daughters of the Dust represents an uncommon, one-of-a-kind challenge to the cinematic containment of expressions of race and gender. The film aspires to counter the erasure of black women and their stories, not only because of the ambitious focus of its director but also through the resourceful, avant-garde manner in which Daughters constructs its story. As director Dash relates it: “The media have helped create the whole aura of invisibility around black women film makers. . . . In my film, I’m asking the audience to sit down for two hours and listen to what black women are talking about.” What these women are talking about, however, the continuation of the African past into the syncretic African American present and future, is revealed through a narrative structure that can, in a sense, be approximated by the Latin American literary term “magic realism.”

By relying on a cultural heirloom, the African oral tradition shaded with the narrative sensibilities of the griot, or storyteller, as Dash says, she wants to disrupt the spectators’ blunted, consumer imaginations and plunge them into the “world of the new,” thus constructing the tale in “the way an old relative would retell it, not linear but always coming back around.” Or as Nana so poetically explains her percep-
tion of continuity, “The womb and the tomb are the same place.” Moreover, this sense of “magic real” circularity, as well as the subversion of dominant cinema’s regime of time and space, guides the slow revelation of the tale, as, for example, in the way it is told as a prenatal flashback of Nana’s unborn granddaughter, who runs in accelerated motion through various scenes and tableau, a returning ancestor yet to arrive and eager to be reborn. We also catch fleeting gestures and expressions of Islam, African animist magic, and Christianity, all of which suggest the syncretic mix of rituals, ideas, beliefs that will become the African American future.

Yet, in spite of Daughters’ imaginative force, its resistant self-imaging, its insistence in speaking for, and to, new emergent constituencies, or simply because of these things, the film had trouble finding a distributor. Even with an impressive premiere at the 1991 Sundance Film Festival, Daughters languished for a year without a distribution deal until Dash signed with Keno International. Exemplifying the way that the film industry and its organs perceive projects, issues, or cultural perspectives that are not easily packaged, commodified, or subordinated to the demands of colonized, ready-made markets, Daughters was dismissed in a Variety review as “an investigation into a very little known African-American culture” that played “like a two-hour Laura Ashley commercial.” Conversely, Dash has not been naive about the challenges of producing an antihegemonic text, for she voices the wry counterpoint to her previous observation, saying that “most white men don’t want to be a black woman for two hours,” though there is no doubt that, ultimately, over time, her film will get the popular reception it demands. This will come about simply because Daughters of the Dust is engaged in the long, slow process of opening up new, liberated zones in the social imagination. For as the film connects with, or builds, the consciousness of its audience, its circulation and earning power will grow. Also, Daughters’ public television showings and distribution in secondary video markets will inevitably contribute to this process.

Among other black-oriented projects that achieve a subtle mix of independent and mainstream qualities, in that they were either independently or alternatively financed or offer fresh cinematic approaches to the representation of black life and race relations while gaining broad popular distribution in both theater and videotape markets, are Matty
Rich's *Straight Out of Brooklyn* (1991), Joseph Vasquez's *Hanging with the Homeboys* (1991), and Mira Nair's *Mississippi Masala* (1991). Perhaps most recently, no other director of the 1990s wave epitomizes the values and determination of the independent stance more than Matty Rich, from the Red Hook area of Brooklyn, who at age eighteen has become the youngest person ever to make a film for U.S. commercial release. Rich credits much of his drive to a mix of the anger he felt about the subhuman conditions he experienced in the housing projects of his childhood, and what he feels is the urgent necessity of depicting that oppressed community's daily reality through the medium of narrative cinema. Set in the grim *apartheid* of Red Hook's public housing environment, *Straight Out of Brooklyn* depicts an obvious, ingenuous, but somewhat technically uneven tale of one family's slow destruction under the pressures of ghetto life. Perhaps the most telling moment in the film occurs when, in a flash of insight, one of the young homeboys, Dennis (Lawrence Gilliard, Jr.), weighs the systematic institutional forces that keep him trapped, ghettoized, as he declares to his girl friend that "there is no 'right' way to get out of Brooklyn!"

More successfully than any of his basically doomed characters, young black filmmaker Matty Rich has been able to implement this advice by plotting his own escape trajectory. Applying the classic guerrilla financing strategy, mapped out by Van Peebles, Townsend, and Lee before him, Rich drew $16,000 on his mother's and sister's credit cards, which was enough to shoot an eight-minute fund-raiser. Rich then went on Brooklyn's black radio station, WLIB, and made a direct appeal for community support of the project, from which he got $77,000, invested by black folks ranging from garbage collectors to lawyers. To this enterprising start was added supplementary funds from the PBS "American Playhouse" series, as well as a timely boost of recognition from a special jury prize at the 1991 Sundance Film Festival. Samuel Goldwyn then picked up the film's distribution, and Rich was on his way to what, by Hollywood standards, was a sizable hit, grossing $2.7 million on an initial production cost of $300,000.28 Besides its material success, and in spite of its uneven, beginner's quality, *Straight Out of Brooklyn*’s socially urgent tone and uncompromising revelation of the conditions of ghetto life mark the film as an eminent example of all that the independent impulse aspires to accomplish.
Joseph Vasquez’s *Hanging with the Homeboys*, and Mira Nair’s *Mississippi Masala*, with their intimate looks at the workings of the nonwhite world, fit comfortably into the perimeters of the new black wave, if for no other reason than the new and brilliant ways that both these filmmakers of color explore intimate social relations between African Americans and the nation’s other unassimilated Third World people. As with much about race relations that cannot be instantly explained or packaged, the filmic self-representation of America’s large nonwhite population is a pressing social reality that Hollywood has basically ignored, just as the media, serving its own ideological ends, usually narrowly frames the nation’s complex racial situation as a black-white confrontation *solamente*. So it comes as a distinct innovation when Vasquez focuses his dramatic comedy, which was made by New Line Cinema for a modest $2 million, on this cinematic void or repressed zone. Much like *Chameleon Street* or John Sayles’s *City of Hope* (1991), the powerful undercurrents of Vasquez’s film turn on the subtle conditioning and proscribing powers of race, as four homeboys, two black and two Puerto Rican, go out on the town on a comic Manhattan adventure in what turns out to be their last time together at the end of what has been, for all of them, a prolonged adolescence.

Exploring thematic concerns significantly absent from commercial cinema, Mira Nair’s second feature film, *Mississippi Masala* (1991), takes on the tangled issue of interracial romance between lovers who meet in the terrain of social overlap between two nonwhite cultures. Thus the film challenges the boundaries of the staid Hollywood convention that almost always renders miscegenation as undesirable and depicts it from the hegemonic perspective of the white male coupled with a nonwhite (usually Asian) female. Nair’s film tells the story of a masala (meaning a “spicy dish”) romance between an African American man (Denzel Washington) and an Indian woman (Sarita Choudhury). In the process, *Mississippi Masala*, produced for a mere $5 million, manages to explore the tangled “in house” issues of color difference and hierarchy, the problems of living in exile, the stereotypes held among nonwhite groups, as well as the optimistic possibilities of Asians and African Americans interacting romantically. Overall, the subtle appeal of the film resides in the way it depicts interracialism and social intimacy between nonwhite groups, while making the point
that romantic mixing is the natural, if sometimes problematic, result of cultures sharing the same social space.

In contrast to the way that dominant cinema, say, in *Mississippi Burning* (1988), *Dances with Wolves* (1991), and *City of Joy* (1992), manages to set its dramas in nonwhite locales or themes while steadfastly keeping whites at the center of the narrative, Nair succeeds in maintaining the black independent focus on exploring nonwhite realities and worlds while moving the people who inhabit these worlds from the margins to the center of the screen. For this reason, Nair says that “whites are powerfully absent in the film.”31 As important, though, *Mississippi Masala* provides popular black actor Denzel Washington with a rare opportunity (as *To Sleep with Anger* did for Danny Glover) to break out of the rigid commodifying mold of the studio system’s one-dimensional “star” roles and formulas, most of which narrowly confine black talent to the genres of comedy, the biracial buddy film, or the male-oriented ghetto action-adventure. *Mississippi Masala* subverts the white “norm” by constructing Washington as a sexually attractive black male romantic lead, matched with Sarita Choudhury as a nonwhite immigrant woman who is not stereotypically infatuated with the assimilationist fantasy of falling in love with the prototypical white American male. Moreover, by depicting an irrepressible dynamic heterogeneity as an alternative to stale notions of a homogeneous separatism, *Mississippi Masala* plays an engaging counterpoint to the proscriptive musings of Spike Lee’s *Jungle Fever* (1991). In fact, with *Mississippi Masala* and *Hanging with the Homeboys* depicting racial overlap and hybridism as normal social interactions, as well as depicting nonwhites coping with similar environments and limitations, both films play with a broadened definition of “blackness” concurrent with that deployed in Britain. According to the British usage, the category “black” is much more expansive and political, encompassing all nonwhite immigrants in the society facing similar discriminations and oppressions.32

If black independent filmmakers tend directly to resist or oppose cultural and political domination through their avant-garde languages, forms, socially urgent narratives, and insider depictions of the black world, then those black directors who work within the “mainstream” tend to be more concerned with learning and perfecting the conven-
tions of dominant cinema language and addressing their projects to the colonized desires of the vast consumer audience encompassing blacks, other nonwhite minorities, and extended à la crossover marketing to whites. Most of the black directors who have had commercial successes argue that they work within the studio system in order to expand the definitions and possibilities of being black and to subvert the dominant norm by marketing a "black sensibility" to as broad an audience as possible. Or, as director John Singleton personalizes it: "The more of a hand I can deal in the media, the more power I have against a system that's trying to dehumanize my family." Notably, strategies for dealing with the cultural and economic domination confronting all black filmmakers, independents and mainstreamers alike, tend to fall into the spectrum of black culturally resistant practices conceptualized by the writer and critic Houston Baker. Extrapolating Baker's analysis to film, then, independent black filmmakers tend to practice the "deformation of mastery" by which they deform the master's formal conventions, language, conceptions of time and space, and so on, in order to create oppositional or culturally resistant productions. At the other end of this strategic continuum resides what Baker calls "the mastery of form." In this instance, black directors working within the studio system strive to learn the master's forms, dominant cinema's language, formulas, images, and so on, in hopes of filling those forms with a new, insurgent content. They want to change or subvert the dominant cultural norm from within the formal confines of the system.

While appreciating the merits and arguments of both approaches, it is important to think of black cinema as a continuum of connected stratagems, practices, and perspectives. Over the course of their careers, black filmmakers tend to employ a mixed bag of tricks. Many of them follow a developmental trajectory from guerrilla financing and bold independent visions to broad audiences and popular acclaim, commercial hits, on to hassling with the miseries of domination and co-optation, much like any director trapped within the demands of the Hollywood system. Thus, at this developmental point in black cinema, we have to be cautious as to which strategy or mix of options will ultimately prevail and prove most useful to furthering the emancipatory aspirations of black people on the big screen. Obviously, though, both approaches have limitations that lead us with persistent circu-
larity back to the original black cinema paradox. For narrative cinema is a capital-intensive, mass-audience-driven social practice. Consequently, one can create the most liberating filmic vision ever articulated in the diaspora, but if it does not find an audience, it will have little social impact. Yet we must also note that Hollywood also employs a mixed bag of tricks and strategies to contain any challenge to its cinematic regime, according to its needs at a given historical moment. Thus the studio system is quite adept at containing insurgent impulses of difference, usually by excluding or ignoring them, but also in times of economic insecurity or shifting cultural relations by the more pervasive strategy of co-opting resistant images and narratives into the vast metamorphosing body of its cinematic hegemony. Thus a black director may make the most popular film ever or successfully work a very lucrative genre only to find that the studio system has co-opted the form of blackness while emptying it of its emancipatory content and cultural impact.

The pitfalls and manipulations confronting all black filmmakers notwithstanding, the industry category (besides comedy) that has come to dominate the new wave of black studio productions and register some of the biggest moneymaking hits is the male-focused, “ghettocentric,” action-crime-adventure vehicle. In terms of black sensibility of message articulated through mastering “the master’s form,” this loosely defined genre has produced a number of varied features, including the neo-Blaxploitative crime adventure New Jack City (1991), the tense urban drama Juice (1992), the formulaic Ricochet (1991), and the powerful tale about coming of age in South Central Los Angeles, Boyz N the Hood (1991), which is considered by many to be the commercial feature that best represents the success and potential of the new black movie boom. Because of its compelling, original script, social context, and adept marketing strategies, as well as its timely arrival at a turning point in the nation’s volatile racial predicament, Boyz N the Hood has proven to be an extraordinary African American vision, taking up the racial discourse where Do the Right Thing left off.

As noted earlier, foremost and from the perspective of mainstream commercial cinema, Singleton’s film has fulfilled Hollywood’s low-budget, high-profit black production formula beyond the industry’s wildest expectations, becoming the most commercially successful black
film ever. Yet, at Boyz' premiere, anything but the movie's impressive commercial success was foreshadowed. Theater violence among the genre's predominantly youthful urban audiences had already appeared with the preceding March release of New Jack City. Now, on a Friday night in July, at this premiere, violence spread across the nation's theaters in an explosion of gang-related fights and shootings that left two people dead and more than thirty wounded. While Columbia supported Singleton's film from its inception, even going as far as offering to pay for security to those venues that requested it, more than a few theaters pulled the print, and there was widespread talk among theater owners, reported in the media, in favor of withdrawing the film from circulation. Some critics were quick to assert that Boyz raised the expectation of violence among its volatile youth audience, pointing out that the advertising trailer managed to include every instance of gunplay in the film, rather than emphasize its antiviolence message or the father-son relationship at the film's moral center.

Director John Singleton was quick to defend his vision and in a series of press conferences and interviews put the controversy into perspective. Responding in a Rolling Stone interview to criticism of the film's marketing, and especially the trailer, which he helped edit, Singleton remarks on the double standard applied to his work, saying of the trailer that "it got motherfuckers into the theater" and "that's the bottom line. If the trailer for Terminator 2 showed the part where he agreed not to kill anyone, nobody would have gone to see it." At a swiftly arranged press conference, Singleton noted that he "didn't create the conditions under which people shoot each other." And keeping Boyz' theme in mind, Singleton further pointed out that this kind of violence "happens because there's a whole generation of people who are disenfranchised" and that to suppress the film would be an act of "artistic racism." In the light of the clear ways that the film argues against gang violence, for instance opening with the grim statistic that "one in every twenty-two black males will be murdered" and ending with the inscription "Increase the Peace," Singleton's remarks underscore the fact that the violence surrounding the film is symptomatic of the deep injustices and inequalities festering in the society. Singleton thus finds himself in the proverbial trap of the messenger bearing the bad news of society's oppressions. To suppress or proscribe Boyz be-
cause it deals forthrightly with the results of the economic and social conditions inflicted on black people would, at minimum, come off as an act of outright censorship and hypocrisy.

In terms of its narrative, stunted, wasted lives are what *Boyz* is all about. The film depicts three adolescents—Tre (Cuba Gooding), Doughboy (Ice Cube), and Ricky (Morris Chestnut)—as they struggle to survive to adulthood and escape the menace of the tight social space to which they have been relegated. The feeling of confinement and limitation of opportunity that shapes all black life in Los Angeles' sprawling ghetto opens the film with a full-frame shot of a STOP sign as a fleet, silver airliner flies overhead and beyond the 'hood to distant lands and vastly broader social horizons. *Boyz'* opening image marks the influence of contemporary black urban music on Singleton's work in that it pays homage to the rapper Too Short, who employed the same metaphor in his potent music video "The Ghetto." Moreover, the transcendent airplane flying high above the problems of the black world is a thematic refrain in black cultural production. The metaphor goes back to a revealing opening moment in Richard Wright's classic novel *Native Son* (1940), when Bigger Thomas looks up from the confines of Chicago's South Side ghetto at a sky-writing airplane overhead to the bitter realization that anything to do with flight—mechanical, imaginative, or otherwise—is for "white boys" and far beyond his reach.

Improvising on the time-honored theme of the fatal juggernaut that the political system and power structure has prepared for black adolescents like Wright's Bigger Thomas, director Singleton explores at least three ideological paths for young black men, as represented in the dispositions and fates of his three principal *Boyz*. Doughboy opts for a life of gang banging and dope dealing in rejection of the unattainable status and toys of the white middle-class world. His docile half-brother Ricky chooses athletics as a route of escape, hoping to get a football scholarship to the nearby University of Southern California. In a strategy that embodies historical black notions of self-help and the Du Boisian idea of the "talented tenth," Tre and his girlfriend, Brandi (Nina Long), choose academic achievement, commitment to a future marriage, and the possibility of going away to college together as their path out of the ghetto.

Singleton's tale makes it clear, however, that in occupied territory
all paths are closely intertwined, for black people are not seen for what they aspire to; rather, what they are suspected of. And the odds against any particular vision of survival or escape succeeding are daunting. This abiding truth of ghetto life is made chillingly real in perhaps the film's most compelling scene when a rabid, self-hating black cop arbitrarily terrorizes the 'hood's best and brightest, Tre, by holding a gun to his throat. Moreover, the film's subtle weave of aspirations, frustrations, and violent outbursts adds complexity and occasional contradiction to the director's antiviolence message, simply because Boyz draws its dramatic visual force from the film's insider depiction of gang culture. This holds true right down to the details of Doughboy's blue color coding as a "Crip" or his subtle macho gestures with a handgun when facing down a red-coded "Blood" on Crenshaw Boulevard. Consequently, Ice Cube's performance occupies the visual, dramatic center of the film, defining the attitude and actions so essential to drawing commercial cinema's targeted youth audience, in contrast to Cuba Gooding, who dutifully shoulders the burden of Boyz' moral message. Yet, overall, the film's diverse points of view as rendered by its characters, the social compression of so many different outlooks and aspirations under the stresses of ghetto life, move Boyz beyond the inept essentializing of films exploiting the same locale and culture, for example, Dennis Hopper's cop's-eye view of the 'hood, Colors.

For Singleton, all these young men's futures turn on the absence or presence of fathers. Beside the senseless communal violence that eventually claims both Ricky and Doughboy and that, according to Tre's father, only facilitates dominant society's laissez-faire genocide of blacks, the guiding theme of Boyz has to do with black fathers taking responsibility for raising their sons into politicized, enterprising black men. Tre's father, Furious Styles (Larry Fishburne), explicitly exemplifies the urgency of this corrective to the very real, overwhelming problems facing black boys. Often didactic, Furious gives advice on everything from the necessity of blacks controlling their capital and real estate to how a sexually adventurous young man keeps his "dick from falling off." And while this latter bit of fatherly wisdom is ingenuous when contrasted with the self-serving "dick thing" rationalizations of Mo' Better Blues (1990), Boyz tends to deliver its message in binary terms by offsetting the image of the "good" single-parent father with
a number of images of "bad" single-parent mothers. This, in part, has led the critic Jacquie Jones to note that the women in Boyz occupy only two flattened-out categories, "bitches and ho's."  

Furthermore, in spite of its socially complex roles and its intimate depiction of a world inhabited exclusively by blacks, or more because of its position in mainstream cinema discourse, Boyz reveals more than a trace of dominant narrative convention in its melodramatic devotion to the cult of the enterprising individual (à la Horatio Alger), as home-boys are rewarded or punished by the end of the film for choices and paths consonant with, or in conflict with, dominant values. For we are informed in the epilogue, Doughboy is murdered while Tre and Brandi move up and out of the 'hood to attend Spelman and Morehouse Colleges respectively. Beyond the social urgency of Boyz' insider cultural verisimilitude, perhaps the closest thing to a high political moment comes when Doughboy, after burying Ricky and taking vengeance on his assassins, makes a final speech, recapitulating Furious's street-corner oration, on calculated white indifference to the plight of the 'hood. While Doughboy's closing remarks are for the most part contained by the dominant melodramatic form, thus becoming the raw material of consumer voyeurism, Boyz N the Hood's politics cannot be separated from its place in the volatile, ever-shifting historical moment. For the stakes in the nation's ongoing racial confrontation were raised dramatically with the Los Angeles rebellion at the end of April 1992. Responding to escalating tensions, California Governor Pete Wilson came to appreciate the film's social import and felt compelled to recommend that all citizens see Boyz N the Hood.  

Another notable demonstration of box office drawing power arising out of Hollywood's eager embrace of the new black directors and the industry's astute application of the ghettocentric, crime-action formula appeared with the release of director Mario Van Peebles's commercial success New Jack City (1991). Made by Warner Bros. for a mere $8.7 million, New Jack City once again proved the efficacy of Hollywood's low-budget strategy for black films by returning five and a half times its production costs, over $47 million in gross profits. Yet, other than the theater violence that accompanied the film's premiere, the use of a rap artist in a starring role, and its "ghettocentricity," New Jack City differs from Boyz in many important respects. Whereas we can argue
that to a large extent *Boyz N the Hood* resists or overrides industry
convention with its strong nationalistic message and streetwise veri-
similitude, *New Jack City* comes off as pure dominant cinema, action-
entertainment formula. Alongside Bill Dukes’s *A Rage in Harlem*
(1991), *New Jack City* has surfaced as one of the first black gangster
movies since the wane of Blaxploitation in the mid-1970s. Neverthe-
less, from its biracial buddy cops to its gratuitous spectacle of violence
to its alluring depiction of the luxurious lifestyles of ghetto drug lords,*
*New Jack City* comes off as a crude assemblage of entertainment cli-
chés engineered to attract the broadest spectrum of the youth market,
from the black inner city to the white suburbs.

In an ironic inversion of perspective, perhaps signaling entrepre-
neurial lessons grasped in the twenty-year interval between the two
black booms or waves, Mario Van Peebles, the son of the renowned
independent Melvin Van Peebles, has reversed his father’s stance on
guerrilla financing to work entirely within the conventions and ex-
pectations of the studio system. As well, the younger Van Peebles’s
*New Jack* ideological outlook on ghetto heroism and black community
politics has turned the dialectical corner on his father’s perspective.
Whereas the legendary Sweet Sweetback is a sexualized rebel and out-
law fighting the injustices of police occupation of the black community,
the biracial buddy cops (Ice-T and Judd Nelson) of *New Jack City* are
depicted as the violent, institutionally sanctioned, extralegal solution
to the black community’s drug and crime ills. In a further ideological
convolution, the rapper Ice-T, cast as an undercover cop, plays entirely
against the grain of his “original gangsta” persona, especially when
we consider that all his output, including the controversial song “Cop
Killer,” pointedly articulates his disapproval of the oppressive role that
the police play in marginalized communities. Aside from *New Jack
City*’s commercial success, perhaps the film’s most innovative contribu-
tion to the growing wave of black-cast and black-focused productions
has to do with the way the film effectively integrates rap music into
its *mise-en-scène*. In much the same manner that the socially focused
music of Ice-T adds political and cultural dimension to an otherwise
shallow, exploitative buddy-cop-gang flick such as *Colors*, an ongoing
rap mix provided by Ice-T and other artists inflects *New Jack City*
with a slightly dissident or subversive edge that works against the
cop-buddy clichés of this neo-Blaxploitative production. Noting *New Jack*’s many, sometimes obvious, allusions to the immigrant gangster movie, the critic Jacquie Jones best sums up *New Jack City* by writing that “ultimately, it looms as little more than a Blackface *Scarface.*”

In contrast, Earnest Dickerson’s *Juice* (1992) better negotiates the tricky space of political and aesthetic challenges and compromises situated between the ideologies of independent and mainstream production, between the possibilities of insurgent liberating vision and generic moneymaking formula. Shot in shadow and darkness, alleys and bleak inner-city settings, punctuated with contrasting lighting and flashes of primal colors, and a deft hip-hop sound mix, in style and values *Juice* alludes to the corrupt, violent world of the *film noir* of the early 1950s. The narrative follows the slow destruction of four adolescent friends living under the honorific code of the streets and the tyrannical rule of the gun while concurrently trapped by the stunted options of ghetto life. After a robbery has gone bad and has turned to murder, the most violent of the crew, Bishop (Tupac Shakur), degenerates into a paranoid psychotic who moves to eliminate his homeboys one by one. In an escalating chase-and-struggle narrative that takes the spectator on a violent sojourn through the hip-hop underground and black urban youth culture, only the strongest of the boys, Q (Omar Epps), survives unscathed.

Evincing Dickerson’s cinematic skills honed as director of photography on five of Spike Lee’s productions, *Juice*’s visual style and pacing sustain the film’s drama and render a compelling panorama of the devastation wrought on black youth culture and aspirations by the malign neglect of almost a decade of Reaganomics. And if the film’s lack of “positive images,” as critiqued in the *Amsterdam News*, communicates an overall sense of foreclosure or doom, it must be argued that the film’s politics are not to be found exclusively in any one action or “positive” statement. Instead they subtly imbue its overall *mise-en-scène*, which carries *Juice* beyond the binary discourse of “negative” versus “positive” messages or images or mere neo-Blaxploitation box-office formula. As painful as it might be to some, *Juice*’s overriding insight does not concern redemption. Instead, like the best of Lee’s work, with social diagnosis in this instance, the film confronts the audience with the alarming situation facing a large segment of black
urban youth today. Yet, in some ways the film also makes concessions to dominant narrative convention, particularly by attributing Bishop’s violent rage to individual pathology, rather than connecting it to the collective determinants of discrimination and social injustice inflicted on an oppressed community. Underscoring Bishop’s mental instability, director Dickerson makes a point of Bishop’s father’s mental problems and Bishop’s admiration for the psychotic criminal Cody Jarrett (James Cagney) in the gangster classic White Heat (1949). Consonant with Hollywood formula, then, Juice tends to reduce pressing collective issues to the drama of individual weaknesses and victimization.

Yet, all these black, ghetto-centered action flicks must necessarily differ in subtle ways from the standard studio product. While they all adhere to the images, editing, and sounds of action formula, they also implicitly undermine Hollywood’s inherent tendency to repress or co-opt resistant or oppositional social perspectives in its films. All three of these features are inextricably caught up in the aspirations and communal problems of the social worlds they depict. In James Baldwin’s words, they all unavoidably must bear the black artist’s “burden of representation,” the burden of always being viewed as, and reduced to, the voice and sign of the black community resident in the popular imagination. Thus, even if the issues that broadly define blackness were to be exclusively “positively” depicted in these films, most black-focused narratives would articulate tensions and perspectives that cannot be completely subsumed by the dominant ideology of “entertainment only.” Whether neo-Blaxploitation action flick or ghettocentric gang epic, in some manner these films must inevitably historicize the cultural, political, and economic issues of the resistant communities they represent. Underscoring this linkage in the most blunt and depressing manner, on their premiere nights, no matter what ideological attitude these features took toward the politics of domination or independence, New Jack City, Boyz N the Hood, and Juice were all greeted in theaters across the nation by gang confrontations, shootings, and random violence. Thus the inadvertently intense social character of the black-focused urban–action–adventure flick manifests itself by assembling communal tensions and frustrations in its audience in the compressed and volatile space of the movie theater, while depicting these same tensions on the screen. Rather than think of these films as the cause
of theater violence, and more to the point, we should view them as vehicles through which society’s racial contradictions, injustices, and failed policies are mediated. They are the artist’s examination of, and dire warnings about, a society in which African Americans are, in terms of statistics, worse off today than before the civil rights movement. And though the news is bad, the blame resides with the social order in its totality, not the cinematic vehicle that delivers the news.42

Not all mainstream black creative energy or studio attention, however, has gone into projects rendering tales of violence and adventure in the ghetto, for the major part of black talent and white capital has been invested in the production of low- to mid-budget black comedy features. Being the most prolific genre in terms of black themes, casts, and images, and the only genre that has continuously engaged black talent since the collapse of the initial Blaxploitation boom, black-focused comedies as well as black-white buddy comedies have established themselves as Hollywood’s other lucrative, if not its most lucrative, black-centered enterprise. Moreover, the 1990s wave of black comedies has tended to express a broad number of related traits or thematic similarities, the most obvious of which has to do with the multivalent ways that black comedy provides a deflected, mostly non-threatening space within which America can tentatively engage its ubiquitous race problem. From the perspective of middle-class whites, black comedies allow for complex, pent-up racial fears and energies to be transcoded into simplistic entertaining formulas and solutions that often implicitly maintain white perceptions and expectations of blacks, as well as the racial status quo.43 The buddy vehicle White Men Can’t Jump (1992), starring Wesley Snipes and Woodie Harrelson, which earned $70 million-plus; the black-focused Mo’ Money (1992), starring Damon Wayans, which earned an impressive $17 million in its opening week; and the megahit (earning $100 million-plus) Sister Act (1992), starring Whoopi Goldberg, all in their slightly different ways comfortably define black people within the norms and expectations of mainstream consumer entertainment. Conversely, from the black side, at their best, many of these productions allow African Americans, through the subversion of parody and satire, to mask and express insurgent social truths and discontents that, if depicted otherwise, would make the suburban moviegoer uneasy. Even a be-
nign teen-entertainment flick like *House Party* well expresses this tendency. In its resolution, the metaphor for a superb party, "blow the roof off the sucker," becomes literal as the roof of the house falls out of the sky on to two bumbling, authoritarian cops, thus comically sublimating the same rebellious impulse that caused Ice-T to be so vilified in the national media for the release of his song "Cop Killer."44

But perhaps one of the most troubling ironies of the new black comedies of the 1990s involves the sheer cinematic proliferation of African American images of success and upwardly mobile characters engaged in the range of American business enterprises, while in off-screen, statistical reality, the vast majority of black people are increasingly being pushed to the margins of American society.45 In varying ways this painful contradiction between image and reality implicitly resonates in the humor of *Livin' Large*! (1991), and the 1992 releases *Strictly Business*, *Mo' Money*, and *Boomerang*, all of which employ variations of classic screwball or romantic comedy formulas. They depict an upwardly mobile or successful protagonist who either finds that he is dissatisfied with success or must renounce his cultural or class identity in order to succeed.

Directed by veteran black filmmaker Michael Schultz, creator of such black-cast hits as *Cooley High* (1975), *Car Wash* (1976), and *The Last Dragon* (1985), *Livin' Large!* explores the price and pain a striving black journalism student, Dexter Jackson (T. C. Carson), must pay in order to succeed in the competitive, white-ruled world of television newscasting. In a scenario that cleverly alludes to *Pygmalion*, *Dr. Faustus*, and *The Portrait of Dorian Grey*, Dexter gradually turns on his cultural origins and community loyalties, as well as abandons his hip-hop dialect, under the tutelage of an ambitious domineering white woman news director (Blanche Baker). He then discovers that he has trapped himself in a Faustian bargain that he finds increasingly suffocating. Symbolic of his barely repressed guilt and eroded identity, to his escalating horror Dexter is trapped in a hallucinatory dialogue with his deracinated whiteface alter image, who has the unnerving habit of confronting him from random television screens. After doing a series of "negative image" exposés of ghetto life and having an affair with the station's white coquette, Missy (Julia Campbell), which leads to a career-advancing arranged wedding promoted by the station as "Gone
with the Wind meets Superfly," Dexter loses community, friends, and his black fiancée (Lisa Arrindell). The situation blows up, à la screwball comedy, when Dexter’s conscience gets the better of him, and he cannot go through with the loveless wedding ceremony.

Implicit in Livin’s farcical treatment of the television news business, the primary institution controlling the hegemonic representation of political and social reality, is the African American argument that the news media represent the black community as a series of never-ending, intractable “problems,” that is, crime, drugs, welfare, absent fathers, racial violence, and the rest. Thus the mainstream audience is led to believe that the black community is totally dependent, degenerate, and in need of the paternal charity and discipline of the white power structure. Equally important, Livin’ satirically plays with the broadly held black contention that the only way to be accepted and succeed in the white-dominated realm of corporate business is to ape white upper-class culture and values. This theme recurs in a number of black-cast comedies, including the diegesis of yet another satire of African American success in the corporate world, Strictly Business (1992). Starring Tommy Davidson and Joseph C. Phillips, Business tells the story of a hyperconformist, deracinated “Buppie,” Daymon Tinsdale III (Phillips), who is forced to find his cultural expressivity and roots when he falls for a beautiful black nightclub singer, played by Halle Berry.

Both features articulate their comfortable position in the mainstream of commercial cinema discourse by resolving themselves on notes of comedic high optimism, utopian compromise, and the subtle reaffirmation of corporate values. In Livin’, Dexter’s revolt at his forced, miscegenous wedding wins him back the respect of his community, friends, and fiancée. And Dexter’s commandeering the microphone to report the chaos of his wedding so impresses the senior, white male management that he is offered the position of co-anchor on the station’s evening news. The final scene of the film offers a syncretic, biracial male-buddy resolution as it cuts to the “Channel 4 Evening News” logo accompanied by the Herbie Hancock–composed funk-hip-hop soundtrack. The now commercially hybrid Dexter, dressed in a sport coat over an Afro vest made of kente cloth, and his white male co-anchor, Clifford Worthy (Bernee McInerney), exchange jesting hip-
hop handshakes and greetings, with Worthy quipping, “We do be down.” Then, in linguistic affirmation of his allegiance to the dominant corporate culture, Dexter starts his reporting in perfectly articulated, race-neutral news talk as the film ends and fades to credits. *Strictly Business* also ends in an optimistic fantasy that celebrates the triumph of capital, romance, and racial cooperation, as Daymon Tinsdale III is able to negotiate his “double consciousness” deftly by maintaining his newly found hipness while moving up in the corporate hierarchy. His promised partnership in the firm is rescued with a $75 million investment by a group of Harlem fat cats, and Daymon negotiates the ownership of a nightclub to bond the affections of his new girfriend as well.

Though, as noted, in the new black-cast comedies, as in other black mainstream features, the opinions and perspectives of “blackness” are not entirely containable within Hollywood tropes and conventions; thus these comedies inadvertently conjure up resistant expressions and points of view of their own. For a prime example, most of the new black comedies articulate a sustained, if at times subliminal, negative critique of white corporate culture by pointedly fingering the agent of malfeasance and evil in their narratives as an overambitious white businessperson. In *Livin’,* the manipulative, careerist news director Kate Penndragin personifies an aggressive, career-obsessed white feminist as she manipulates Dexter to secure her own place in the corporate hierarchy. In *Strictly Business,* evil takes the form of a white male junior executive willing to do anything, including sabotage Tinsdale, for a partnership in the firm. And positioned as Damon Wayans’s corrupt nemesis in *Mo’ Money,* the white male director of security (John Diehl) oversees a scheme to defraud the credit card company that employs them out of millions of dollars. Clearly, the binary trope of black goodness versus white wickedness emerged as a staple during the Blaxploitation period, evolved in Richard Pryor’s biracial buddy comedies of the 1970s, and followed through in the black comedies of the 1980s, as evinced by two of Eddie Murphy’s features, *The Golden Child* (1986), where the white villain is a synecdoche for Satan, and *Harlem Nights* (1989), where the bad guys are white racist gangsters.

Significantly, in the majority of the 1990s black comedies, the inverse, Manichaean image of white corporate villainy is further reinforced with the corollary figure of the soulless, deracinated “Buppie.”
If African American comedy views corporate culture as alienating with many evil attributes, then the lost, decultured “Buppie,” in his Brooks Bros. suit, speaking with perfect diction and listening to “classical” music, has come to represent the ultimate African American cinematic nightmare of assimilation. In Livin’ Large!, Dexter climbs the corporate ladder while the features of his ghostly, video double become progressively whiter as it offers Dexter career-advancing power moves from the television monitor. When he rebels at his wedding, his persona in the monitor is the first thing Dexter smashes. In Strictly Business, Daymon Tinsdale III receives the revelation of hipness and dumps his corporate girl friend, who is played as an arrogant, black bourgeois snob (Anne-Marie Johnson). Mo’ Money relies on the same scenario, when black con man Jonny Stewart (Damon Wayans) steals Stacey Dash (Amber Evans) from an uptight, domineering black corporate boy friend so full of self-contempt that he tells antiblack jokes and considers African Americans outside his job description as “street trash.”

Showing up in a number of films, this consistent ridicule of the hyperconformist “Buppie” relates, in a Freudian sense, to a more generalized black thematic concern with unstable, shifting identities, the dissemblings and masks so essential to those on the run and trying to survive in a racially unequal society. Certainly, the arts of dissembling and unmasking make up the acid cores of both To Sleep with Anger and Chameleon Street, as well as the clichéd “mistaken identity” formula of the teen pic Class Act (1992). And this black sense of doubling and masking is stretched to its complex dramatic limits in the brilliant urban-crime drama directed by Bill Duke, Deep Cover (1992). In Deep Cover’s shallow, comic counterpoint, comedian Lenny Henry changes his race from black to white, going underground to expose the Mafia in director Charles Lane’s True Identity (1991). And in the mainstream comedy hit Sister Act (1992), Whoopi Goldberg stars as a second-rate Vegas nightclub singer on the run, masquerading as a nun and hiding in a convent. In her endless narrative role as the expression of “blackness” in a white milieu, Goldberg plays a missionary in reverse, bringing the gospel of black soul and spontaneity to the white natives of a sterile, cloistered nunnery.

In terms of capital invested, however, star casting, and narrative
exploration of an elite black world, the 1992 black mainstream comedy that presses the limitations of Hollywood’s budget ceiling has got to be *Boomerang*, directed by Reginald Hudlin and costing $42 million, with $12 million of that going for Eddie Murphy’s salary alone. Set in the exclusive, high-fashion, upper echelons of a successful black cosmetics firm, *Boomerang* tells the story of marketing executive, Marcus Graham (Eddie Murphy), a notorious womanizer who gets his sexploitative game turned on him when he falls for his new, career-driven boss Jacqueline (Robin Givens). In a classic comedy of reversed intentions and roles, Graham comes to realize the emptiness of hedonism and “success,” eventually winding up with a woman representing the true romantic ideal, played by Halle Berry. To the film’s credit, in much the same way that the black-cast major studio productions *Stormy Weather* and *Cabin in the Sky* (both 1943) employed a considerable range of the black entertainers of their day, *Boomerang* utilizes the talents of Eartha Kitt, Geoffrey Holder, Grace Jones, David Alan Grier, Chris Rock, and Martin Lawrence. Moreover, Reginald Hudlin artfully directs all these actors within the expectations and range of their career personas, including Grace Jones as a supermodel, doing a wicked parody of her media image.

Yet, in the ostentation of its high-rise, corporate mise-en-scène, its panoramic celebration of positive images of “black success,” and its unquestioning acceptance of the reigning commercial paradigm, *Boomerang* raises some interesting questions about the intent and direction of black cinema practice. Ultimately the film is a classic cinema romantic comedy, with its only distinction being that it is cast entirely in black terms. Perhaps *Boomerang*’s debt to genre and formula is nowhere more clearly revealed than in the comment of director Hudlin when he says of Eddie Murphy and his superstar persona in the film, “My goal was to make him Cary Grant.” This comment subtly recalls the early, imitative black cinema practice of conceptualizing the persona of the black actor in terms of contemporaneous white stars, dating from the early black auteurs who billed their actors with such titles as “the black Valentino” or “the sepia Mae West” or the “the colored Cagney.” So the set of critical questions that constantly vexes black cinema over the course of its evolution must again challenge us at this juncture. Is the fundamental purpose of the new wave of black cinema to regis-
ter “success” primarily in terms of box office receipts? Are black filmmakers struggling merely to imitate white “classic cinema” forms and formulas in order to take their assigned places in dominant commercial cinema’s symbolic order, without ever challenging the limitations or expectations of Hollywood or the terms of its hegemony over black filmmaking?

By examining one scene that is perhaps Boomerang’s most self-consciously political moment, it becomes apparent that the film’s answer to these questions, which are so fundamental to the development of a viable, liberated black cinema, tends toward accommodation and co-optation. Marcus Graham (Murphy), along with his buddies, played by Martin Lawrence and David Alan Grier, go shopping at an exclusive men’s clothing boutique only to be met with the race-inspired condescensions of one of the store’s salesmen. When the Martin Lawrence character ogles a sport coat costing $1,500 dollars, he is coldly informed by the clerk that the store has no layaway plan. As the three exit, in a perfect bit of insurgent Eddie Murphy humor, Marcus Graham loudly comments on the nervous paranoia of such establishments when dealing with what they perceive to be the alarming critical mass of three black men, as well as the clerk’s stereotypical inability to imagine that black men could afford such expensive threads. Satirizing the racism and elitism of the exclusive boutique is funny and well played, as it recalls Murphy’s previous infiltrations of the elite white world in his Beverly Hills Cop movies, as well as the famous shopping incident in Patricia Williams’s book Alchemy of Race and Rights.  

Yet this scene, as well as the glossy, opulent, high-fashion world of the corporation displayed throughout the film, points to the deeper political undercurrents and meanings in Boomerang. For, ultimately, all of this leads one to ask: Is the point of African American political struggle in this country to blow $1,500 on a sport coat in an act of vulgar conspicuous consumption that begs the acceptance of white shopclerks and, by implication, a dominant social order that looks on, as Du Bois says, “with pity and contempt” and that will never see blacks as fully equal? Indeed, by extension, this act of slavish consumerism subtly echoes Boomerang’s indenture to, and overall containment within, the “classic cinema” form. In this sense, Boomerang supplants, as does the commodity system itself, acts of political choice and free-
dom with the great reductive act of postmodern industrial living—the freedom to shop, to consume. Thus the grand collective ideals of the late 1960s, so precious to African American struggle, those of political freedom and self-determination, are cinematically transposed into striving “Buppie” desire in the 1990s, expressed as the market freedom to choose among a myriad of industrial commodities, high-fashion “looks,” elite poses, and fantasy personas. Or, as Spike Lee observes, “We’ve almost gotten to the point where the old saying is not, ‘All I can do is stay Black and die,’ to ‘All I can do is stay Black and buy.’” And almost by way of guilty compensation to the political consciousness of the film’s mostly lower-class, inner-city black audience, *Boomerang* vaguely acknowledges, in a formulaic way reminiscent of the screwball comedy resolution, that corporate culture and the high-fashion executive life may not be the answer to its protagonist’s problems. In this case, boy (Murphy) gets the right girl (Berry) and discovers that he is unhappy with corporate values, be they black or white, and the film ends on a dominant cinema cliché with the once-selfish Marcus deciding to quit the corporation to serve humanity in the form of teaching black children. The problem with this disingenuous closure is that after an hour or more of the spectacle and allure of the black high-fashion world, by contrast, the film’s tacked-on moral comes across as the thinnest ideological packaging. The audience can hardly miss this point, simply because any film’s principal argument is made in what it visually portrays. In *Boomerang*, its main appeal resides in the glamour and spectacle of its costuming and expansive mise-en-scène, not its obligatory moral resolution. Ultimately and ironically, *Boomerang* was trapped by the very market formula and system it celebrated, especially with its disastrous $12 million salary for Eddie Murphy. In failing to cross over on the basis of Murphy’s drawing power as a star, *Boomerang* crashed as a “star vehicle,” and after a couple of months in a coma at the box office, it was declared brain dead.51

The outstanding achievement of the 1990s black film wave definitely has to be Spike Lee’s epic *Malcolm X* (1992), running 3 hours and 21 minutes and dramatically interpreting the sweep of Malcolm’s life as he told it to Alex Haley in the remarkably enduring work *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*. The Malcolm X project had been systematically repressed, held in studio purgatory for twenty-five years, as
a steady stream of African America's most talented writers, including James Baldwin, David Bradley, and Charles Fuller, were assigned to the screenplay and then fired. Lee must be commended simply for finally getting the script out on bail, making the film, and releasing it to the public. Comments by Baldwin and Bradley as they left the "X" project reveal the industry's intense resistance to a film that would deal with the reality and politics of Malcolm's life. During Baldwin's tenure, studio executives expressed in a memo the curiously twisted view that the "tragedy of Malcolm's life was that he had been mistreated, early, by some whites, and betrayed (later) by many blacks." Baldwin wryly explains that he finally quit the project in frustration because he "did not want to be a party to a second assassination" of Malcolm. Some twenty-five years later, after threading his way through the same studio obstacle course, David Bradley came to essentially the same conclusion, realizing that the studio "didn't keep firing writers because the scripts were wrong. They kept firing writers because the story was wrong." 52

Into this long, weary continuum of studio second-guessing and manipulations Spike Lee stepped dauntlessly, only to find himself the target of the volatile political energies and repressions surrounding the project. Fortunately for the further prayers of a viable black cinema in this country, Lee proved equal to the contest, as his writing, filmmaking, and marketing skills were brought into high focus in the "X" project. Lee, always an in-your-face, issue-oriented filmmaker, employed all the strategies and moves in his repertoire, from keeping the project in the prerelease media spotlight with such inventive gestures as designing the "X" baseball cap early on, to constantly upping the ante on the studio for an expanded budget in order to get the picture to the screen in the way he envisioned it. In the whirlwind of prerelease controversy, hype, and marketing of the commodified "X" on everything from knock-off hats, posters, sweatshirts, to even "X" potato chips, possibly the sharpest criticism of Lee's reading of Malcolm X arose from the media beef that erupted a month before he was to begin shooting. In August '91, the black writer and critic Amiri Baraka declared at a Harlem rally of the United Front to Preserve the Legacy of Malcolm X, "We will not let Malcolm X's life be trashed to make middle-class Negroes sleep easier." Baraka further proposed a
letter-writing campaign to warn Lee “not to mess up Malcolm’s life.” This attack harmonized with criticisms coming from a cluster of black media personalities, including neighborhood activist Sonny Carson, Carl Rowan, Stanley Crouch in the Village Voice, and Armond White in the City Sun. Lee’s editorial rebuttal to these charges followed a reasoned line of defense when he asked who appointed Baraka, among others, “ministers of Black Culture.” He went on to make the salient point that African Americans with as diverse a range of political views as Clarence Thomas, Louis Farrakhan, Jesse Jackson, and Public Enemy’s Chuck D all admire and claim Malcolm and some stage of his evolution and politics as their own. Thus, Lee claimed the right as an artist to develop his own interpretation of Malcolm’s life. It is also important to understand here that the Lee versus Baraka media duel definitely did more to build broad audience anticipation for the film than it hurt Lee. Recalling the prerelease press generated around Do the Right Thing and Jungle Fever, we can readily see that Malcolm X, the third of Lee’s films to be set up with an advance media-marketing campaign, was energized by the nation’s perpetual fixation and ongoing debate about its most persistent and volatile issue: race.

Yet, as the “X” project got under way and into its shooting schedule, Lee’s encounter with Baraka proved to be a minor tussle compared to the subsequent run of bedeviling incidents combined with the tremendous struggles with the studio over money and the form of the film. Among other things, in rapid succession came Lee’s breakup with his girlfriend, Veronica Webb, his father’s arrest on drug charges, and a saboteur’s attempt to destroy one of the film’s Harlem sets with a driverless car propelled by a brick tied to its accelerator. Then, as Lee approached the end of shooting, Warner Bros. warned him not to exceed the film’s $28 million budget. But Lee was determined to stick to his scripted vision of the film (including on-location scenes in Egypt and Mecca), which demanded no less than $34 million to deliver the three-hour-plus epic. Obliquely, the enduring issues of industry control and co-optation of black expression were subtly focused, via budget limitations, on the film’s running time. Throughout this struggle, Lee continued to point out the industry’s double standard when dealing with black films and filmmakers, noting the $45 million budget for Dan Aykroyd’s debut as a director of Nothing but Trouble or the $50
million allocated for the production of Alien III or the more than $50 million spent on the box office dud Bonfire of the Vanities. Lee also went on to note that the studios have routinely carried such over budget productions as Dances with Wolves and Heaven's Gate and have supported many films of epic proportions, including Gandhi and JFK. None of his arguments mattered. When the “X” project ultimately crossed the $28-million budget line Warner Bros. had drawn in the proverbial sand, the Completion Bond Co., which has the contractual power to keep a film within budget and on schedule, seized control of the project and demanded that the final cut come in close to two hours in length. The ostensible marketing purpose was to be able to show the film as many times as possible per theater booking. In this instance, the co-optative, marketing pressures of Hollywood manifested themselves in the studio demand for some sort of commodity packaging for Malcolm’s life. So, a rigid commercial form was suggested to limit or contain what the studio perceived to be an insurgent black content, mostly to ensure a subdued, standardized product consumable by the broad crossover audience that studio executives felt was necessary to maintain a high profit-to-production cost ratio and succeed according to industry calculations.

Once again, the ever-resourceful Lee demonstrated that, among other talents, directors of feature films must be able to organize and market their vision against opposition from all sides. In this instance, Lee managed to preserve his vision against considerable industry pressures by pulling together a group of black investors including Bill Cosby, Magic Johnson, Tracy Chapman, Oprah Winfrey, Michael Jordan, Janet Jackson, and Prince, and coming up with $200,000 in a brilliant maneuver of media politics that forced Warner Bros. to kick in the additional $5 million so that he could finish the film to his specifications with a budget (as he predicted) of just over $34 million. In the course of black cinema history, if the “X” project is remembered for nothing else (and it will be remembered for considerably more), Lee’s financial maneuvering will stand as one of the most important and convincing demonstrations of black unity at the entrepreneurial level since Melvin Van Peebles’s seminal effort to raise money for Sweet Sweetback twenty years earlier. Lee’s strategy worked, not because of the amount of money raised from blacks, but because of the politics of the
gesture. That is, what Lee managed to do was to get a vote of confidence from some of the biggest names in the black nation. Any studio executive could clearly see that this was turning into a battle, not with Spike Lee the individual, but with the social collectivity of African America, which makes up 25 to 30 percent of dominant cinema’s market. Understanding the material and political importance of his efforts, Lee announced at a press conference at the Schombung Center for Research in Black History and Culture in Harlem: “These are black folks with some money who came to the rescue of the movie. As a result, this film will be my version. Not the bond company’s version, not Warner Brothers’.“ At this juncture Lee was able to live up to the phrase often associated with Malcolm the man and now the film and the title of Lee’s book about the film: “By any Means Necessary.” Pointedly registering the travails and struggles he encountered on the project, Lee added to the book’s subtitle “(while ten million motherfuckers are fucking with you!).”

Malcolm X stands out as a powerful marker of the hopes and possibilities of the new black film wave, not only because it represents both Lee’s and Denzel Washington’s best effort at black filmmaking to date, but even more significantly because of the way that Lee has been able to inscribe, from an African American point of view, the broad sweep of national events surrounding a life as intense and heroic as Malcolm’s, by weaving the play of history captured in grainy documentary footage with his own dramatic filmic artistry. Beyond the slick, poster-bright colors and the crisp big-screen cinematography that are increasingly Lee’s signature, this is exactly the issue that powerfully resides at the center of the film, its historical intertextuality. The panoramic use of Malcolm X’s historical intertexts begins with the film’s stunning opening sequence with Malcolm’s voice explaining the historical truth of white colonialism, imperialism, and racism, “the greatest kidnapper . . . thief . . . murderer” intercut with the Rodney King beating. Then the flag burns away, only to reveal the potent contradiction of race in the form of the smoldering “X” that always dwells, repressed but ever present, under the Pollyanna red, white, and blue surface.

Malcolm X’s historical intertext reveals itself in other clever ways. The unmistakable implications of the diverse, collective black political consciousness working against all racist oppression, resolving the
categories of past, present, and future, flows through the film and
is clearly articulated in a number of moments, including a Harlem
"speakers' corner" scene where Malcolm (Denzel Washington) orates
for the Nation of Islam while sharing the sidewalk with two other black
speakers. As a late 1950s Malcolm proselytizes, the frame subtly col­
lapses all time tenses into the urgent, ongoing, black political "now,"
as the camera shifts to reveal the other two speakers, played by Bobby
Seale, co-founder of the Black Panther party, and New York black
activist the Reverend Al Sharpton. This sort of temporal, historical
self-reflexive gesture is given a further spatial, pan-African dimension
by closing the film on freedom-fighter Nelson Mandela, transposed into
a grainy clip of Malcolm, calling for the recognition of black human
rights on this earth, in this time "by any means necessary." The film
ends with Mandela standing in front of a South African classroom as
the next generation chants "I am Malcolm."

To praise the insistent, intervening power of history, however it
makes itself known in the text, is not to overlook Malcolm X's potent
and finely worked dramatic moments or the brilliant performances
registered by Denzel Washington, Angela Bassett, and Al Freeman,
outstanding among the long list of the film's excellent cast. But, then
again, it seems these performances belong to history, in this case The
Autobiography, for the film's most brilliant dramatic moments, as in
Malcolm's life, turn on a transformation wrought out of suffering lead­
ing to illumination. For Malcolm, these awakenings were always punc­
tuated with a name change. Lee has caught this shedding of skins
or identities in a number of instances, including a subtle but strik­
ing scene when "Red"/Malcolm is thrown into solitary confinement for
not answering to the prison-assigned number replacing his name. The
screen is covered with the blackness of solitary, occasionally stabbed
by a shaft of light coming through the slot in the cell door, as Malcolm
raves, mumbles, and battles with the devil inside. The scene ends,
weeks later, with the cell door opening to reveal a prone, delirious
Malcolm finally willing to recite his number. As agonizingly inhuman
as this sequence is, it makes the point that the conked, hustling "Red"
of Harlem and Boston who occupies the first quarter of the film had to
be burned away by some dialectically rigorous process that opened up
space in his personality for the growth and transformations to come.
For, as Gandhi, Martin Luther King, Jr., Nelson Mandela, among many others, tell us, the insight of the social revolutionary is often strengthened with unexpected revelations that come in jail or prison.

Highlighting Denzel Washington's considerable power as an actor, the contrasting scene to this solitary confinement sequence occurs in another sort of isolation, the shadowy inner sanctum of power, the guarded private office where, on release from prison, the dedicated and cleansed disciple Malcolm meets the leader of the Black Muslims, the Honorable Elijah Muhammad, brilliantly played by Al Freeman. Here one gets a poignant cinematic insight into the often-written-about meetings between guru and acolyte that fill so much of Eastern spiritual literature, as Malcolm (Washington) bows, clasps the teacher's hands, and bursts into silent tears of joy. Of course, this moment sets up its dialectical opposite when, later in the film, Malcolm, discovering the flaws and corruption of the great man, undertakes his spiritual pilgrimage to Mecca and the final metamorphosis in his life.

As important as Malcolm's thinking and ideology at any stage of his accelerated life was his ability to change, to transform the fixed politics of a given moment through forced reflection and growth; any film that missed this central alchemical quality that animated so much of the Autobiography would be a failure. It is on this prime issue of transformation, the broadening of political and spiritual horizons, most pronounced in the last year of Malcolm's life, that Lee's vision, his struggle for an epic scale and an expanded budget, is vindicated. The importance of Malcolm's life, the global scope of his thinking, and the social relevance to black people could never have been communicated if scenes of his pilgrimage to Mecca to find a multiracial, universal Islam or his travels in Egypt to find the origins of black civilization had been shot on some studio backlot, as was suggested by studio executives. In this sense, then, of Malcolm's progressive transformations, the film works. Lee has been successful in catching and depicting each register in Malcolm's politics and consciousness, from the ambitious hustler rendered in the poster-bright colors of Malcolm and Shorty's zoot suits and the metaphor of conked hair to the austere self-reflection and illuminations wrought by prison life to Malcolm's rise through the Nation of Islam to become a national spokesperson for black people to his final incarnation as a world-class leader who brought the issue of
black human rights in America to the world’s attention. In the words of Ossie Davis, Malcolm was “A Black Shining Prince who didn’t hesitate to die because he loved us so.”

It is also necessary to say something about the open manner in which the film deals with the unresolved issue of who was responsible for Malcolm’s death. On this question, Lee’s film connects with the common motif or thread that runs through so many contemporary productions, from *The Conversation* (1974) through *All the President’s Men* (1976) through *Winter Kills* (1979) through *Videodrome* (1983)—the idea of the social totality as a vast conspiracy. It is an idea that links *Malcolm X* to a parallel epic depicting the 1960s that has registered so markedly in the social imagination of the 1990s, Oliver Stone’s *JFK* (1991). Again demonstrating his skills as a director–marketeer, Lee has managed to walk a tightrope (all the more precarious because he is a black man, and a successful one at that) and imply what has been an open suspicion for years. By depicting the tape recorders, microphones, and blank-faced operatives, the whole paranoid apparatus that kept Malcolm under continual surveillance, the film implies government collusion with Malcolm’s black assassins. Perhaps James Baldwin put our speculations and suspicions about social totality as a vast overdetermining conspiracy most eloquently when, on hearing of Malcolm’s murder, he commented that “whatever hand pulled the trigger did not buy the bullet. That bullet was forged in the crucible of the West, that death was directed by the most successful conspiracy in the history of the world, and its name is white supremacy.” Yet that is the sad irony of it all: Heroes, thinkers, and social aspirations are difficult to kill simply because they cannot be easily extinguished from history. And this realization underscores what will be the enduring accomplishment of *Malcolm X*, beyond the admiration and commercial hoopla of the moment. Malcolm and his ideas, in large part due to the efforts of Spike Lee and company, are more alive today and available to a new generation than at any time during his life.

Rather than articulate a position that comes to a set of definitive and resolved conclusions, I want to close this discussion on an open-ended note, really a mix of feelings and intuitions about the new possibilities and directions the 1990s black film boom may take from here. Certainly, the success of megahits like *Boyz N the Hood*, or the slick articu-
lation of films like Boomerang, or the outstanding accomplishments of Daughters of the Dust, To Sleep with Anger, not to mention Malcolm X with all its attendant media hype and attention, leave us with great expectations of even grander cinematic moments and projects to come. In this sense, then, black cinema has made a great leap forward. Yet it is a leap that is not without its qualifications because, like all leaps, its measure will be determined by gravity, which in this case largely consists of the overdetermining, cyclical economics of the dominant film industry that are always to a degree conditioned by the state of black political consciousness. As critics are already starting to note, black film production has leveled off and hit the notorious glass ceiling in a double sense; that is, black films are limited to roughly a dozen, mostly black-male-directed, productions a year, with the overwhelming majority of them relegated to budgets well below $30 million.

Unquestionably, the present run of black-directed, black-cast commercial hits will sustain the new black boom in the near future, but for now, the production and circulation of black films lies largely outside any meaningful control by African Americans. Thus, much like the Blaxploitation period, a boom that has had an expansive upside can easily be reversed by a combination of forces that are largely uninfluenced by black aspirations. Now that the new boom is on its upside, what is needed is the intervention of new variables, perspectives, and ways of doing things. Certainly shifting demographics and the relentless exploitation and co-optation of black culture by the entertainment industry mean that Hollywood will come gradually to make more concessions to the consumer power of African Americans and nonwhites in general. African Americans must add to this leverage by gaining more control over, not only all aspects of production, but also the distribution and exhibition of black films if they are going to control the images that define so much of their lives. Significantly, more than half of the $7 billion annual profit generated at the box office goes to distribution—exhibition. Yet African Americans have been completely shut out of this end of the movie business; astoundingly, there is only one black-owned, first-run theater out of the 23,000 operating in the country. Consequently, black people must work to own and control the means of production of their images at all levels, not only production but also the overlooked and profitable enterprises of distribution and exhibition.
At present, there is room in black cinema for maneuvering and a sense of guarded optimism, for cultural consumption is always in flux, continually shifting. One factor that distinguishes the 1990s black movie boom from its Blaxploitation predecessor is that new delivery systems and technologies have reshaped culture and consumption. In the 1980s the VCR became an indispensable household appliance. Along with the neighborhood video store, a progressively shorter wait for theater releases to drop into tape, and the possibility of actually owning one's favorite films on tape, the VCR deck has completely reconfigured the way in which we consume, understand, and circulate feature films. Notably, the reproduction of movies on videotape has in many ways made the feature film analogous to the paperback novel; a film that otherwise could be permanently marginalized can now be passed from person to person, viewed in small groups, viewed repeatedly, and easily taught and appreciated in classrooms. Accordingly, because of its ability to assemble so many different cinema narratives, story worlds, and cultural points of view in one place, the video store, much like the bookshop, has become one of the clearest expressions of heterogeneity in our culture.

The broad popularity of films on tape has had two interesting outcomes for black filmmakers. First, the racism and exclusion of dominant cinema at all levels, financing, production, distribution, and exhibition notwithstanding, the rise of the VCR has enabled the filmmaker with a racial, different, or emergent perspective to find his or her constituency (slightly) more easily through the audience segmentation that inevitably occurs when one rents a tape that appeals to one's particular orientation (racial, sexual, political, ethnic) from among the thousands of films on the rack at the local video store. Be it *Chan Is Missing*, *Desperately Seeking Susan*, *Powwow Highway*, *Sugar Cane Alley*, *American Me*, or *Sammy and Rosie Get Laid*, the spectator-consumer can now support features that mediate his or her subjectivity in ways that were not possible before the emergence of a vast home VCR audience. Also because of audience segmentation, ever-shrinking release times from theater to tape, and a more nuanced and flexible video distribution system, the VCR format encourages medium- to low-budget productions (Lee's initial "guerrilla filmmaking") that mediate the territory between the independent and mainstream sensibili-
ties. Thus the VCR format enhances the two facets of the Van Peebles to Lee production formula—the ability to raise financing and more easily find one's audience and, as a result, the ability to develop one's creativity and vision over a series of films.

But any forecasts about the practice black cinema must also recognize that African Americans as a people and an audience find themselves in a much more plural, heterogeneous situation than they were, say, in the late 1960s, at the height of the cultural nationalist and black liberation politics of the Blaxploitation era. New identities, collectivities, and orientations have appeared on the black cinema horizon to articulate the vast social construct we call “blackness” as a plural, multiverse experience: from Celie’s claim to selfhood for women in The Color Purple; to reclaiming repressed sexual histories in Looking for Langston or mixed-race issues in Purple Rain; to the exploration of class, caste, and color realities in School Daze, Jungle Fever, and Sidewalk Stories. In fact, the black cinema experience has grown so sophisticated and quantified that it has reached the grand dialectical moment of self-parody with the release of I’m Gonna Git You Sucka (1988).

Obviously, there is much to be done on the big screen, for there are huge gaps and distortions in narrative cinema’s production and representation of African American life and experience. Perhaps because the politics and revelations of what it means to be black (and consequently white) in America would shatter the escapist fantasy of the vast, anesthetized consumer audience, black authors (especially women) have yet to find the enabling conditions that would permit them to transpose and direct for film the brilliant novels of such writers as Toni Morrison, Toni Cade Bambara, David Bradley, Ishmael Reed, Gayl Jones, or John Edgar Wideman. Nor are there any black female dramatic leads on the level of recognition of, for example, Denzel Washington or Larry Fishburne. Moreover, we must continue to expand our depictions of black life across a number of diverse styles, story worlds, and genres from science fiction–fantasy (e.g., The Brother from Another Planet), to an insistent dramatic realism that portrays the oppressive institutional and material conditions that still strangle much of black life—as is achieved in the independent masterpiece Bless Their Little Hearts.

Perhaps here it is best to conclude with the riddle so brilliantly posed
in the opening of Bill Duke's powerful crime-action drama about passing, dissembling, and double consciousness, *Deep Cover* (1992). Applying for an undercover assignment, a black cop (Larry Fishburne) is interviewed by a slimy Washington bureaucrat who, in order to test Fishburne's cool, asks him a Zen-like question, "What's the difference between a black man and a nigger?" The question is supposed to have no answer, or innumerable answers, as African Americans must confront or negotiate this question every day of their lives. Fishburne, his face a cool, dissembling mask, responds by saying in effect that a nigger is someone who would even try to answer such a question. In a referential parallel manner, then, this question highlights something at the heart of the African American cinematic challenge. All black filmmakers confront exactly this defining task. Fishburne, playing the masked trickster, answers appropriately to his situation in the movie, but black filmmakers are obligated to respond in their films in complex political and aesthetic ways. If they fail to do so, they surrender control over the production of the ideas, images, and narratives that so indelibly define the limits and possibilities of black life in America. Only by weighing the many possible answers that arise in the riddle-like social transactions of "race" can black filmmakers create authentic humanized images and narratives of black life. Inevitably this decade will bring new spectacles and entertainments that celebrate black life and culture. The new insurgent cinema languages, films, and possibilities of the black movie boom are the primary means African Americans have to challenge the compromised, niggardly images designed to keep them in their media-constructed place. African Americans must continue to expand their influence over the production, distribution, and exhibition systems that make up the dominant cinema apparatus, while insisting that the emergent narratives of the black world be rendered from an honest, unco-opted, liberated perspective.
From House Party (1990), courtesy of Black Film Review.

From Strictly Business (1991), courtesy of Black Film Review.
From Juice (1992), courtesy of Black Film Review.
From A Rage in Harlem (1991), courtesy of Black Film Review.
From *Mississippi Masala* (1991), courtesy of Museum of Modern Art Film Stills Archive.
From *Malcolm X* (1992), courtesy of Black Film Review.
Notes

1: From ‘Birth’ to Blaxploitation

1. Robert B. Ray, *A Certain Tendency of the Hollywood Cinema, 1930–1980* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985), p. 6. Here I follow Ray’s interpretation of the work of Louis Althusser when Ray points out that “cinema as a whole, and even more emphatically, any individual movie, is massively overdetermined. No film results from a single cause, even if its maker thinks it does; as a discourse, the cinema, especially the commercial cinema, is simply too exposed, too public, to permit such circumspection.”

2. Here I am inspired by the work of Edward D.C. Campbell. But my phases differ in that I focus on slaves and the slavery motif; I discuss the first phase as being culturally hegemonic in the Gramscian sense, and my work suggests the subtle expression of a fourth, contemporary or sedimented phase. For a lucid discussion of Gramsci’s concept of “cultural hegemony,” see Ronald T. Takaki’s *Iron Cages, Race and Culture in 19th Century America* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1979), pp. xiv–xv.

3. Fred Silva, ed., *Introduction, Focus on The Birth of a Nation* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice Hall, 1971), p. 2. Silva relates that “the number of times that the film has created a local disturbance must now number close to 500.” Moreover, these protests over the showing of the film have not died down and are very much a contemporary phenomenon, as evidenced by occasional articles that appear in the press, such as “Blacks Protest K. C. ‘Birth’ Show,” *Variety* 15 (April 1987).


12. Silva, Intro., Focus on The Birth of a Nation, p. 4.


23. Campbell, Celluloid South, p. 74.


25. Alain Locke and Sterling Brown, “Folk Values in a New Medium,” in Patterson, Black Films, p. 27; and Robert Benchley, “Hearts in Dixie,” in Patterson, Black Films, p. 84. When sound was first introduced in filmmaking, it was argued that black voices recorded better than white voices, and that because of this, African Americans would find more opportunities in Hollywood. These articles provide a good discussion of this contention. As for the latter hope, it proved to be naive, to say the least.


28. Campbell, Celluloid South, p. 100.

29. Ibid., p. 111. Campbell notes this trend and follows it through a number of
films. "The urban society appeared devoid of any white class beneath the aristocracy—no merchants, craftsmen, not even a middle class. Everyone seems well to do, and cared for by a devoted slave class. Passersby give slight hint of being workingmen or tradesmen. In film after film, as in The Mississippi Gambler (1953), The Gambler from Natchez (1954), and particularly Jezebel, with its frequent shots of large gatherings and balls, there was no sign of the diversity of the region's population and customs."

32. Steinberg, Reel Facts, p. 5.
35. Thomas Cripps, "The Dark Spot in the Kaleidoscope: Black Images in American Film, in Miller, Kaleidoscopic Lens, p. 26; Leab, Sambo to Superspade, p. 129.
40. Campbell, Celluloid South, p. 143.
42. The “Blaxploitation” period lasted from 1969 to 1974 and produced more than sixty films of varying quality. The genre was named thus because many black critics felt that while these films had black story lines and actors, they projected the wrong role models for black youth and were moneymakers only for Hollywood.
47. Raymond Williams, Problems in Materialism and Culture (London: Verso, 1980), p. 41. What Williams means by “emergent” is “that new meanings and values, new practices, new significance and experiences, are continually being created.” But Williams goes on to explain that the dominant culture continually tries to co-opt emergent cultural practices, that “indeed it is significant in our own period how very early this attempt is, how alert the dominant culture now is to anything that can be seen as emergent culture.” This observation is particu-
larly relevant to the manner in which Hollywood is able to incorporate into its formal conventions almost any experimental or independent innovation emerging in marginal or alternative cinema practice.

2: Slaves, Monsters, and Others


5. Frederic Jameson, The Political Unconscious (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1981), pp. 211–212. Here I apply Jameson’s concept to film, in that images, stereotypes, themes, metaphors are subject to a “vertical repression and layering and sedimentation,” causing “the persistence of the older repressed content beneath the later formalized surface.”


8. Cornel West, “The Paradox of the Afro-American Rebellion,” in The ’60s...
West notes that the suppression of black inner-city rebellions of the mid-1960s into the early 1970s was brought about partly by the “drug industry,” which was “aided and abetted by underground capitalists” and “invaded black communities with intense force, police indifference and political silence.” West concurs with my argument by connecting the drug industry to neoslavery, noting that “it accelerated black white-collar and solid blue-collar working-class suburban flight, and transformed black poor neighborhoods into terrains of human bondage to the commodity form, enslavement to the buying and selling of drugs.”

9. Pierre Machery, *A Theory of Literary Production* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1979), pp. 85–89; Sylvia Harvey, *May ’78 and Film Culture* (London: BFI Publishing, 1980), p. 113; Fredric Jameson, “On Magic Realism in Film,” *Critical Inquiry* 12, no. 2 (Winter 1986): 321. Jameson adds to the discussion, saying that “narrative reduction has, for example, very real and practical consequences for ideology and ideological analysis. It is not enough to show a systematic abridgement in the generation and projection of narrative meanings, as though that were only a matter of aesthetic choice; we must try to understand that such eradications also have a political function.”


15. Lerone Bennett, Jr., “The Emancipation Orgasm: Sweetback in Wonderland,” *Ebony* 26 (September 1971): 110. Perhaps Bennett articulates it best when he says that “the essential genius of the black tradition which does not recognize the Platonic-Puritan dichotomies of good–bad, work–play, sacred–profane. This has caused no end of misunderstanding, even among black mythologists, who elaborate, say a blues mystique as opposed to a spiritual mystique. The black tradition, read right, recognizes no such distinction. The Blues are the spirituals, sex is sacrament, God is the devil, and every night is Saturday night.”
16. Robert Stam and Louise Spence, "Colonialism, Racism and Representation," Screen, no. 2 (March/April 1983): 9. Many writers are now calling for a move beyond the "reductionism" of focusing the examination of cinematic racism on stereotyping alone. They discuss the need to look at other "mediations" and at how the "cinematic apparatus" as a whole structures racism into its operations. This concurs with James Spellerberg, "Cinemascope and Ideology," Velvet Light Trap, no. 21, p. 26. He states that "film technology is itself ideological in nature not merely a neutral channel for ideological content."


20. Chuck Kleinhans and Julia Lesage, "The Politics of Sexual Representation," Jump Cut, no. 30 (1985): 25, 26; Amos Vogel, Film as a Subversive Art (New York: Random House, 1974), p. 235: "In the commercial cinema the portrayal of the homosexual has moved through well defined, if ridiculous, stages; his/her invisibility, his/her elimination, his/her transformation into something slightly less offensive (such as a Jew), his/her having to die a difficult death or commit suicide, and later, actual hints of his/her 'odious' activities and sniggering or circumscribed acceptance."

21. Bill Nichols, Ideology and the Image (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1981), p. 1: "Ideology operates as a constraint, limiting us to certain places or positions within these processes of communication and exchange. Ideology is how the existing ensemble of social relations represents itself to individuals; it is the image a society gives of itself in order to perpetuate itself. These representations serve to constrain us (necessarily); they establish fixed places for us to occupy that work to guarantee coherent social actions over time. Ideology uses the fabrication of images and the processes of representation to persuade us that how things are is how they ought to be and that the place provided for us is the place we ought to have."


24. It is interesting to note that blue eyes as racial metonymy for intelligence is perfectly constructed in Whoopi Goldberg's Burglar (1987), when in a full-face close-up featuring a spark of recognition in her blue eyes (provided by contact lenses), she solves the mystery of the film's plot.


28. For an in-depth discussion of the shift from political threats of the 1950s to the biological threats of the 1980s onward, see Edward Guerrero, “AIDS as Monster in Science Fiction and Horror Cinema,” *Journal of Popular Film and Television* 18, no. 3 (Fall 1990): 86–94.

29. Margo Skinner, “NAATA Denounces Stereotypes,” *Asian Week*, August 10, 1984. This article notes that the stereotypic racial nature of the film was not missed by the National Asian American Telecommunications Association. Furthermore, one member of the organization’s board, John Esaki, is very aware of the director’s racial insensitivity, noting Joe Dante’s comment about the Chinese shopkeeper that “he spouts aphorisms and all that old Charlie Chan stuff.”

30. Here I feel that it is important to note Steven Spielberg’s connection to a whole string of cinematic figurations and films dealing with the themes of racial otherness and racial minorities. These films range from his construction of alien others in *Close Encounters of the Third Kind* and *E.T.* to the imperial subjugation of people of color in the *Indiana Jones* series, and the exploration of blackness in *The Color Purple*. And while Spielberg did not direct *Gremlins*, as the film’s executive producer he collaborated closely with Joe Dante on all details of the script.


32. Clearly marking the final stage of Stripe’s evolution, the broad, unified anger and actions of blacks and Latinos during the 1992 Los Angeles rebellion well illustrates the anxieties of a white-dominated social order about its crumbling hegemony in the face of an unassimilated, dissatisfied Third World within the nation.


### 3: The Rise and Fall of Blaxploitation

10. Larry Neal, “The Black Arts Movement,” *Drama Review* 12 (Summer 1968): 29. Neal writes: “It is the opinion of many Black writers, I among them, that the Western aesthetic has run its course: it is impossible to construct anything meaningful within its decaying structure. We advocate a cultural revolution in art and ideas. The cultural value inherent in western history must either be radicalized or destroyed, and we will probably find that even radicalization is impossible. In fact, what is needed is a whole new system of ideas.”
15. Fredric Jameson, “Periodizing the '60s,” in Sayres and Stephanson, *'60s without Apologies*, pp. 183–184.
25. Ibid., p. 312.
34. Steinberg, *Reel Facts*, p. 146.


40. “H’wood NAACP In Stepped-Up Pitch for Negro Film-TV Prod. Employment,” Variety, July 28, 1965; Vincent J. Burke, “US Plans to Prod Film Industry on Job Discrimination Charges,” Los Angeles Times, October 19, 1969. Of particular interest is the latter article’s discussion of the “double refusal” by which blacks are denied studio work because they are not in the union and are denied entry into the union because they have no studio affiliation.


50. Ibid., p. 116.


54. Charles Peavy, “Black Consciousness and the Contemporary Cinema,” in *Popular Culture and the Expanding Consciousness*, ed. Ray B. Browne (New York: Wiley, 1973), p. 194. See also William H. Grier and Price M. Cobbs, *Black Rage* (New York: Bantam Books, 1969), p. 53: “The mythology and folklore of black people is filled with tales of sexually prodigious men. Most boys grow up on a steady diet of folk heroes who have distinguished themselves by sexual feats. It is significant that few, if any, of these film heroes are directing armies or commanding empires. Dreams must in some way reflect reality, and in this country the black man, until quite recently, had not been in positions of power, his wielding of power had been in the privacy of the boudoir.”


60. Clayton Riley, “Shaft Can Do Everything—I Can Do Nothing,” *New York Times*, August 13, 1972: “Film bears mystery before us. About the world we live in. But the new Black movies, in trying to unravel that mystery, have accomplished little more than a re-statement of those themes the American cinema has traditionally bled dry and then discarded. Like the stepchild, we get the leftover, in this case a celluloid hand-me-down. Black movies bringing color to the old movie industry Triple-S stamp: Slapstick, Sadism and Safety—from anything that might disturb the Republic’s peace of mind.”

61. David E. James, “Chained to Devilpictures: Cinema and Black Liberation in the Sixties,” in *The Year Left 2*, ed. Mike Davis, Manning Marable, et al. (London: Verso, 1987), p. 134; Stanley Kauffmann, “The Mack,” *New Republic* 168 (April 28, 1973): 20; Cripps, *Black Film as Genre*, pp. 133-134; Leab, *Sambo to Superspade*, p. 254. As Leab writes, “Superspade was a violent man who lived a violent life in pursuit of black women, white sex, quick money, easy success, cheap ‘pot,’ and other pleasures. In these films white was synonymous with every conceivable kind of evil and villainy. Whites were moral lepers, most of whom were psychotically antiblack and whose vocabulary was laced with the rhetoric of bigotry.”

62. H. Bruce Franklin, *Prison Literature in America, The Victim as Criminal and Artist* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), pp. xvi-xvii. Donald Goines, in writing sixteen novels, was the most prolific and brilliant of several writers to articulate the inner-city, pimp, hustler motif. The titles of some of his works give a good indication of this thematic focus: *Black Gangster, Inner City*
Hoodlum, Daddy Cool, and Never Die Alone. Moreover, Goines’s novels differed from the films of the Blaxploitation genre in that the 1960s to mid-1970s ideology of black struggle and liberation was a central consciousness in all his works, whereas this same ideology was dismissed or ridiculed in many of the films of the genre.

63. Riley, “Shaft Can Do Everything.”
64. Cagin and Dray, Sex, Drugs, Violence, pp. 211–212; Sklar, Movie-Made, pp. 296–299; Maltby, Harmless Entertainment, pp. 305–307.
73. Ibid., p. 101.
74. Ibid., p. 142.
75. Bogle, Toms, Coons, p. 251.
85. Maltby, Harmless Entertainment, p. 45; James A. Miller, “From Sweetback to Celie: Blacks on Film onto the ’80s,” in Davis, Marable, et al., Year Left 2, p. 147.
86. Quart and Auster, American Film and Society, p. 87; Sklar, Movie-Made,

89. Miller, “From Sweetback to Celie,” p. 152.

**4: Recuperation, Representation, and Resistance**

3. Kolker, *Cinema of Loneliness*, p. x: “Every film, long before it actually becomes a film, must be sold for videotape distribution, to cable and network television. What occurs in the elaborate deal-making processes is a sort of preplacement, the assuring of prospective corporate clients—even before they are approached—that the film will be acceptable, accessible, and undemanding in any way. The result is a staggering uniformity and predictability of content which is generated by an invisible form that demands nothing of the spectator but an assenting gaze.”
4. Louis Althusser, “Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses,” *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays* (London: New Left Books, 1971), p. 155. Hollywood’s 1980s project of ideological recuperation is best described when Althusser says, “What is represented in ideology is therefore not the system of the real relations which govern the existence of individuals, but the imaginary relation of those individuals to the real relations in which they live.”
5. Joe Flaherty, “Rocky’s Road,” *Film Comment* 18 (July/August 1982): 60.
7. Richard Dyer, “White,” *Screen* 23, no. 4 (Autumn 1988). Dyer argues effectively that the representational power of “whiteness” resides in its ability to be “everything and nothing” or to be constructed as the norm against racial difference, which is exactly what happens throughout *Star Wars*. He goes on to say: “The colourless multi-colouredness of whiteness secures white power by making it hard, especially for white people and their media, to ‘see’ whiteness. This, of course, also makes it hard to analyze. It is the way that black people are marked as black (are not just ‘people’) in representation that has made it relatively easy to analyze their representation, whereas white people—not there as a category
and everywhere everything as a people—are difficult, if not impossible, to ana-
lyze qua white. The subject seems to fall apart in your hands as soon as you begin.”

noncompetitive, nonsexual comrades and friends, one of the chief emotional satis-
factions of racism. We would like friends and allies who have our best interests
at heart, but people prefer a leading role in their own play to a secondary one in
ours. In fantasy, members of lower classes or races can fill that supporting role
because they cannot compete with us. In the fantasy at least, they accept their in-
ferior position without question and assume the role of loyal follower and trusted
side-kick.”

44–45. As Yearwood insightfully points out, “Filmic signification in traditional
cinema emerged out of a tradition in which cultural heroes of the dominant
society, such as the Lone Ranger, were costumed in a range of colors signifying
purity and goodness; they fought against enemies who were the embodiment of
blackness. Thus the film industry is constructed upon a system of signification
consisting of a series of fixed ideological positions developed historically in West-
ern society.”

12. Harvey R. Greenberg, “Dangerous Recuperations, Red Dawn, Rambo, and
the New Decaturism,” Journal of Popular Film and Television 15, no. 2 (Summer
Magazine 4, no. 8 (February 28, 1988): 8–11; Cecil Brown, “Blues for Blacks in
15. Lawrence Cohn, “Black Pic Employment Still Lags,” Variety, December 1,
1982, p. 32; Steinberg, Reel Facts, p. 43; Michael Dempsey and Udayan Gupta,
“Hollywood’s Color Problem,” American Film 7 (April 1982): 67; Peter Roffman
16. A Position Paper against the Airing of Beulah Land: A Call to Cre-
ate, Nurture and Protect Positive Black Images. Pamphlet distributed by the
National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, 1980; Sandra
Sharp, “Hollywood Blacks Fighting Back,” Black Collegian, October/November
17. “NAACP Moves Closer to a Selective Boycott of Films,” Variety, July 7,
1982, p. 5; “NAACP to Target One Major Studio for ‘Direct Action,’” Variety,
18. Cohn, “Black Pic Employment”; “Two Blacks Quit SAG Committee over
19. “Poor Forecast for Black Leads on Stage and Screen,” Jet, July 14, 1986,
p. 61.


24. W. Lawrence Hogue, _Discourse and the Other_ (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1986), pp. 115–116. Here I use the term “blues idiom” to refer to the philosophy and lifestyle that African Americans developed to endure and triumph over racial oppression in America. Contrary to the Blues Brothers, played by Aykroyd and Belushi, Hogue says of bluesmen: “These legendary blues heroes possess qualities that make them fantastic and mythic. They are hero in character and have superhuman qualities. They do not have jobs or power, and their lives are fraught with frustration and personal troubles. Yet they confront life openly; they deal with it in all its dimensions, possibilities, potentialities, and absurdities. They have mastered the ‘irony and absurdity. . . . in the briarpatch in which they were born and bred.’ They accept and endure life’s stress, strain and hardship.” Also see Houston A. Baker Jr., _Blues, Ideology and African-American Literature: A Vernacular Theory_ (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984).

25. Dyer, “White,” pp. 71–79; Sylvia Winter, “Sambos and Minstrels,” _Social Text_ 1 (1979): 152. Winter provides a lucid explanation of the reasons for this strategy of essential oppositions: “First of all the system produced the imaginary social signification of the Place of the Norm. The Place of the Norm is constituted by and through the definition of certain desired attributes. The most desired attribute was the ‘intellectual faculty.’ The sign that pointed to one’s possession of this attribute was whiteness of skin. The sign that pointed to its nonpossession was blackness of skin, which revealed non-human being.”


29. Mas’ud Zavarzadeh, “Diva,” _Film Quarterly_ 26, no. 3 (Spring 1983): 55–56. Zavarzadeh’s observations about a current crisis in relationships between white men and women in the West seem to be relevant when he says, “The traditional codes of connection in male–female relationships have been decentered and Western women are no longer a mere actant of men’s erotic and domestic fantasies. As a result Western man has had to search for this lost center . . . somewhere else. As Diva clearly indicates, the new search for an erotic and emotive center, following a rather familiar pattern in Western history, has led to the emotional.


31. Ed Guerrero, "Tracking 'The Look' in the Novels of Toni Morrison," Black American Literature Forum 24, no. 4 (Winter 1990): 761–773. See also Yearwood, "Hero in Black Film," p. 43. Yearwood maps the terms of black objectification when he observes that spectator pleasure "centers around the acquisition of the black body through symbolic domination and control, and involves (a) the constitution of the spectator in relation to the film, (b) the specific presentation of the black body within the narrative diegesis and (c) the ideological area which surrounds the development of cinematic languages and pictorial technology in the ways that camera and lighting, for example, function to attach semes of inferiority, fear or suspense to blackness. Hence, traditional cinema produces a structure of seeing within which the black body is constituted as the object of the look, thus reproducing traditional relations in society."

32. Richard Corliss, "Street-Smart Cop, Box-Office Champ," Time, January 7, 1985, p. 103. Ironically, Corliss makes my point well by explaining, with more than a bit of paternalism, why the dominant audience likes Eddie Murphy's cop roles. "All of white America is a classroom for Fast Eddie's crash course in street smarts. . . . And everyone loves it, in the movie and in the audience, because Murphy's jive is blessedly free of malice. Under the ghetto guttural talk lurks a sassy little boy, outfoxing the grownups at a game he has been practicing all his life. He is a Little Rascal playing Dirty Harry, and winning." See also Sam Chu Lin, "Checking Out Charlie Chan," San Francisco Examiner, April 6, 1989, p. C1. In this article, Charlie Chan's "No. 1 Son," played by Keye Luke, again ironically defends the stereotyping and cultural isolation of Asian Americans in the Charlie Chan movies by saying that Charlie Chan was respected by white police departments and solved their cases for them. He proudly proclaims, "Here was a Chinese hero in a completely Caucasian world!"

33. Dyer, "White," pp. 2–8, 101; Carol Cooper, "‘Soldier’s Story’ Salute," Film Comment, November/December 1984, p. 17.


49. Ibid.


54. Gayle, *Way of the New World*, pp. xvii–xxi; Waldron, “Robert Townsend Explains,” pp. 58–59. Townsend reveals his intentions: “I didn’t want to be bitter, but I just think sometimes people are ignorant and they need to be educated. And I wanted to really express, in a funny way, what was going on.”


59. Ibid.

60. Ibid., p. 47.


71. For an excellent discussion of how the use of “realism” is an arbitrary, aesthetic construct, usually at the service of dominant cinema, but specifically applied to Do the Right Thing, see Wahneema Lubiano, “But Compared to What?: Reading Realism, Representation, and Essentialism in School Daze, Do the Right Thing, and the Spike Lee Discourse,” Black American Literature Forum 25, no. 2 (Summer 1991): 253–282.

72. Zavarzadeh, Seeing Films Politically, pp. 7–8. Zavarzadeh urges the critic to go beyond dominant ideology’s “own terms” of formalist, aesthetic criticism. He argues that one must explore the suppressed political “tale” under the dominant narrative surface by not asking “how a particular tale means” but rather WHY it means what it is taken to mean.” He writes that he has found the “political (why) to be a more effective mode of inquiry than the rhetorical (how).”


5: Black Film in the 1990s


8. Hacker, *Two Nations*, pp. 45–46. Hacker puts it succinctly: “If you are a black woman you can expect to live five fewer years than your counterpart. Among men the gap is seven years. Indeed, a man living in New York’s Harlem is less likely to reach sixty-five than is a resident of Bangladesh.”


13. As with the Blaxploitation period, so now with the new black movie boom, a wave of articles focus on the disproportionate consumer power of the black movie audience. I cite a sampling with their size estimates: *Urban Profiles*, July–


25. Fredric Jameson, “On Magic Realism in Film,” Signatures of the Visible (New York: Routledge, 1990), pp. 128–129. I am struck by Jameson’s comment that the “magic realism” draws upon “a kind of narrative raw material derived essentially from peasant society, and drawing in sophisticated ways on the world of village or even tribal myth.” It seems that Daughters’ narrative reveals exactly this subtle, fleeting quality.


36. The ghastly dimensions of the slaughter inflicted on the black community, which Singleton explores in Boyz, are clearly and statistically spelled out in a definitive article by Robert Staples, “Black Male Genocide: A Final Solution to the Race Problem in America,” Black Scholar 18 (May–June 1987): 3. It is worth noting some of the facts that compliment Singleton’s opening inscription: While black men are only 6 percent of the population, they make up over half of those incarcerated; 25 percent of those stricken by AIDS are black males; 46 percent of black males between the ages of sixteen and sixty-two are not in the labor force; 32 percent of black males have incomes below the officially defined poverty level.


39. Alan Light, “Ice-T, the Rolling Stone Interview,” Rolling Stone, August 20, 1992, pp. 28–32, 60. Ice-T puts the terms of his cinematic containment best when he says, “To play the cop in New Jack, I had to do a lot of apologizing to my hard-core fans. Me playing that was sacrilegious in the ghetto. ‘Why did you have to be a cop? You could have hated dope, we all hate dope, but why do you got to give credit to the Man? Why couldn’t you have just been a brother that went out there and handled it?’ I had to tell them it wasn’t my movie. I had to get in the movie, and this is the laws of Hollywood: The only way you can run around with a gun is to be a cop.”


44. The recent campaign to force Ice-T to withdraw his song “Cop Killer” from his popular CD “Body Count” stands as a glaring example of the racist double standard still inflicted on African American artists in the 1990s. The difference between Arnold Schwarzenegger, who shoots and maims dozens of cops in the blockbuster *Terminator II*, and Ice-T, is that the former is white, considered an artist, and was invited to the White House; the latter is black, cannot possibly be granted First Amendment rights or the latitude of artistic, poetic interpretation, and has become the new Willie Horton as a visualization of white fear and anger. See Jon Carroll, “A Reality Sandwich with Ice-T,” *San Francisco Chronicle*, July 28, 1992; Light, “Ice-T” pp. 28–32, 60; “Ice-T Cites a Double Standard in Criticism Of His Song ‘Cop Killer,’” *Jet*, August 10, 1992, p. 38; Kevin Zimmerman, “Hip-Hop Hum Hewn by Recent Racial Uproar,” *Variety*, June 22, 1992, pp. 48, 54.


47. Ibid., p. 56.


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