



BFI FLARE

Black Is... Black Ain't

+ intro by programmer Rico Johnson-Sinclair

Marlon T Riggs' final film, made as he died from AIDS-related complications, directly addresses issues with misogyny and homophobia in the Black community that still exist to this day. Interviews with Marlon himself, from his hospital bed, are interspersed throughout the film and serve as testimony to the work we need to do to be truly united.

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In doing *When Marlon Riggs* died on 5 April 1994, independent cinema lost the voice and vision of an important artist at the very moment when he was coming into his own. With three major documentary films behind him – *Ethnic Notions* (1986), *Tongues Untied* (1989) and *Color Adjustment* (1992) – Riggs was working on an investigation into the cultural diversity of black identities, *Black Is ... Black Ain't*, when his life was cut short, at the age of 37, by AIDS. Like so many other influential black gay men of his generation – including critic James Snead, writer Joseph Beam and activist Craig Harris – Riggs' death bears witness to a bitter tragedy: that the 'talented tenth' of queer negro artists and intellectuals, who have been in the vanguard of the renaissance of black culture in the US and UK during the 80s and 90s, have helped create new forms of collective identity among black lesbians and gay men and have achieved so much in displacing outmoded racial and sexual paradigms, are now menaced by the spectre of premature death.

But Riggs' legacy is very much alive and is fully part of the almost daily re-evaluation of the ethics of multicultural diversity in this volatile moment. In a climate of deepening uncertainty, in which the fragmentation of social identities has been dominated by a politics of resentment, Riggs held a crucial position as a multi-dimensional media activist. His roles of filmmaker, lecturer, writer and advocate, pursued with prodigious energy, all contributed to the formation of a new politics of recognition which he sought to bring to public attention with urgency and passion. *Tongues Untied* remains his key work, not only because it was the first of its kind – a coming-out film for black gay men – nor because its struggle for self-representation was linked to the analysis of racial representation put forward in *Ethnic Notions* and *Color Adjustment*, but because its imperfections and rough edges offer fresh points of contact and contention. This is why the film retains its live and direct quality some five years after it was made.

In the culture wars of the early 90s, Riggs stood more or less alone in defending everyone's right to representation. Yet his work provoked an equally fierce controversy in the black gay community. Taking up writer Joe Beam's call for solidarity expressed in the slogan 'Black men loving black men is *the* revolutionary act', *Tongues Untied* unleashed a heated debate on the subject of inter-racial relationships which turned on the apparent discrepancy between the video's concessions to cultural nationalism and the fact that Riggs' life-partner of 15 years, Jack Vincent, is white. While movies such as *Jungle Fever* and *The Bodyguard* show that this is a topic which upsets everyone, what was lost in the demand for a 'perfect' representation of black

gay life was the opportunity for a broader debate, as B. Ruby Rich has argued, on why we remain tethered to ancient fears and fantasies about difference when it comes to sexuality and eroticism.

In the name of cultural decolonisation, Cuban filmmaker Jose Garcia Espinosa called for an ‘imperfect cinema’, a cinema whose very gaps make it a living part of a public dialogue about the nature and direction of progressive social politics. This may sound deeply untrendy in the face of the shiny New Jack cinema of Spike Lee, Matty Rich, John Singleton et al. But the kind of cinema Riggs struggled to bring into being in his passion for truth-telling and distaste for the hypocrisy that often characterises what Michael Eric Dyson has called ‘the racial unity narrative’ in African-American culture – is a cinema that is not afraid of difference or of being unpopular when it comes to speaking the truth.

‘I am a black gay man living with AIDS. My work is expanding the way we use film and video to tell stories about our lives as black people.’ In his commitment to an ethics of honesty that owed everything to the communal love and wisdom embodied in the Afro-Christian tradition in which he was raised (he once told me his parents thought he might become a preacher), Riggs created a rich legacy of work that is a valuable contribution to a fully inclusive cinematic vision of what our identities might be. Moving images are inherently about loss and memory. In the painful acknowledgment of his passing, there is a joyful obligation to treasure his memory in a way that Riggs’ own words best reveal:

‘At the end of *Tongues Untied* I flash a number of photos of black men who have died of AIDS. These images initially signify death. Eventually, the photos start to turn into a number of ancestral figures that have been so important to my life: Harriet Tubman, Frederick Douglass, Martin Luther King Jr. For me, these faces have transcended death. We continually remember these people; they resonate in our lives from generation to generation. I believe in humanity, in our ability to connect over generations and even beyond death to move forward as black people. And this defines my spiritual perspective, too. My connection is not to some invisible, overbearing God – it is to other human beings. Through this, I believe, lies our ultimate possibility of redemption.’

Kobena Mercer, *Sight & Sound*, August 1994

BLACK IS... BLACK AIN'T

Director: Marlon Riggs
Co-director: Christiane Badgley
Production Company: California Newsreel
Producer: Marlon Riggs
Co-producer: Nicole Atkinson
Associate Producer: Jasmine Dellal
Photography: Robert Shepard
Editors: Christiane Badgley, Bob Paris

USA 1994
87 mins



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