

Devoted to African American Film History and Preservation

OSCAR MICHEAUX SOCIETY

NEWSLETTER

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Program in Film & Video • 104 Crowell Hall Duke University Durham, NC 27708 (919) 660-3030 FAX (919) 660-3155
Volume 6, Winter 1997



Michael Unthank and instructor, Micheaux homestead, Gregory, SD

The celebration combined performances by local musicians with tours of Micheaux's homestead ...blended with the aroma of roasted corn, buffalo burgers, smoked turkey, and an endless variety of home cooked pies.

THE REINCARNATION OF OSCAR MICHEAUX: 1997 FILM FESTIVAL IN REVIEW

By Charlene Regester

The second annual Micheaux Film Festival was held in Gregory County in August 13-17, 1997, amidst a marquee advertising Micheaux's *Within Our Gates*, South Dakotans dressed in Western attire, Native American dancing and window dressings of local businesses proudly displaying Micheaux memorabilia. All this blended with the aroma of roasted corn, buffalo burgers, smoked turkey, and an endless variety of home cooked pies. This year's festival attracted an array of fans, scholars, entertainers, local historians and filmmakers including Pearl Bowser of African Diaspora Images and Director of the PBS special *Midnight Ramble*; Ted Blakey, a South Dakota Black Historian; Kathleen McNerney Donovan of South Dakota State University; J. Ronald Green of Ohio State University; actor James McDaniel ("Lt. Arthur Fancy" of the television series *NYPD Blue*); Micheaux's cousin Harley Robinson; Dave Strain, who is responsible for reprinting Micheaux's novels at the University of Nebraska Press; local historian Bette VanEpps Taylor; Pamela Thomas, the

Producer of *Midnight Ramble*; Michael Unthank, Director of State/Local Partnerships on the Arts and Cultural Affairs-New York; and Charlene Regester, co-editor of the *Oscar Micheaux Newsletter*. The celebration combined performances by local musicians with tours of Micheaux's homestead and sites in surrounding counties where Micheaux had ties.

The rebuilt Micheaux homesite highlighted the festival. Positioned on a hill surrounded by rolling acres, the log cabin with a sod roof, barn, garden, and corn shucker provided a remarkable reminder of Micheaux's lifestyle as the only African American homesteader in Gregory County in the early 1900s. Modest but accommodating, the single-roomed dwelling displayed remnants of Micheaux's past. One of his novels lay open on a small table. And though Micheaux did most of his writing by hand, there was also a dated typewriter nearby.

Having attended the first Micheaux Film Festival in 1996, I was particularly impressed with the hospitality

and enthusiasm shown by participants and attendees alike. The level of planning by committee members such as Richard Papousek, Francie Johnson, Sherry DeBoer (member of the South Dakota Humanities Council) and others was superb. The festival's awe-inspiring activities featured a host of events. For example, Friday's events included bus tours to the townships of Bonesteel, St. Charles, Herrick, and Lucas — which incidentally provided the basis for Micheaux's first novel *The Conquest*. A round table discussion was held for attendees who have developed an unending fascination for Micheaux. Participants attempted to reconstruct Oscar Micheaux — the man, his image, and his works — while assessing the impact that the South Dakota experience was bound to have had on the race filmmaker.

These round table discussions added to the legend and myth of Micheaux, as local historian Lee Barrie noted references to her uncle in Micheaux's first novel, *The Conquest*. The Friday afternoon session exhibited *Within Our Gates*, introduced by Ron Green, and the screening was followed by an additional discussion. There was also Native American dancing and a sunset dinner on Micheaux's home-site. Saturday's events similarly included a bus tour and two round

table discussions, interspersed with screenings of *Within Our Gates* and *Body and Soul* as these films were continually screened throughout the festival. *Body and Soul* was as controversial at this screening as it was upon release, evoking debate surrounding Robeson in one of his most provocative roles as a "jack-leg preacher." *Midnight Ramble*, a documentary on early black filmmaking produced by Pamela Thomas, was



similarly exhibited. Thomas led a question-and-answer session following the film. Audience members enamored with the documentary expressed satisfaction in the fact that they could lay claim to a Mid-Western genesis of African-American filmmaking, as William Foster of Chicago and the Johnson brothers, George and Noble, of Nebraska exemplify its early pioneers.

Most memorable was the theater where Micheaux's films were screened. The live accompaniment by a local pianist reinvigorated

Micheaux's work so vividly that these films came to life quite possibly simulating the films' premiere. In *Body and Soul*, Robeson on the wide screen reminds us of his presence like a towering inferno. *Within Our Gates* invoked suspense through its racially provocative themes that seemed all the more real today. It was in this theater, in a city that has now become known as Oscar Micheaux's former home, that the Micheaux screenings attracted fans gathered to honor this pioneer African American writer and filmmaker and to loudly proclaim: "Long Live Oscar Micheaux!" And a second generation of younger fans in attendance, smitten with a fascination for Micheaux and professing to have read Micheaux's novels, also demonstrated an unyielding commitment to preserve the Micheaux stories and capture his spirit for future generations.

Based on the number of persons attending the festival and the intense interest, indeed passion, for Micheaux expressed by these South Dakotans and Gregory County residents, I predict a successful series of annual Micheaux Film Festivals for years to come. Dates are now set for the 1998 festival — August 7-9. For more information, call (605) 835-8002/8391.

A TOUCH ON *THE EXILE*: LEONARD HARPER

by Rich Madden

Leonard Harper staged and choreographed the ensemble and cabaret scene for Oscar Micheaux's *The Exile* (1931). Harper met Micheaux through Frank Schiffman, who at the time owned New York's Lafayette Theatre. Schiffman had employed Harper since 1923 to direct and choreograph plays, so when Micheaux approached Schiffman to fund *The Exile*, Harper naturally became a candidate for a directorial position in the first African American "talkie."

Harper's cabaret scene is demonstrative of filmmaking genius. Women were eroticized and Harper understood all too well that sexuality was marketable. Bodily rhythms designed to shake the screen and the viewer were transformed to attract audiences and generate appeal for this film. Thus, the physique of each chorus line member served as an individual tambourine, a strategy used to lure audiences into the theater. Though the background music is heightened in pace, the body movements of the dancers synchronize with the music to capture its force and compliment its tempo. Though women's bodies were commodified by the film, *The Exile* epitomized a splendid marriage of film and musical performance.

Schiffman promoted the film in his chain of theaters along the eastern seaboard in cities such as Washington, D.C., Philadelphia, and even in his own hometown, New York. He popularized a technique known as "Around the



World" —Schiffman sent Harper to promote and direct plays through his theater chain, but allowed different choreographers to travel to each new theater while Harper remained at the "home" theater to promote and direct more plays. Thus, *The Exile's* 1931 debut had a ready-made conduit for its audiences, which already had the benefit of knowing Leonard Harper's talents.

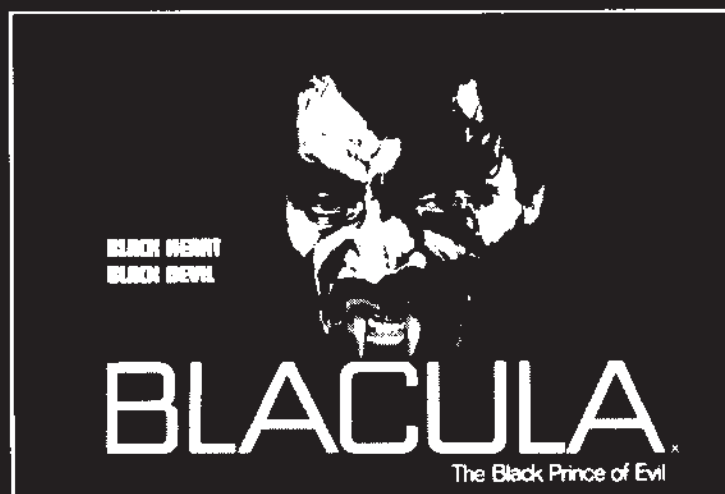
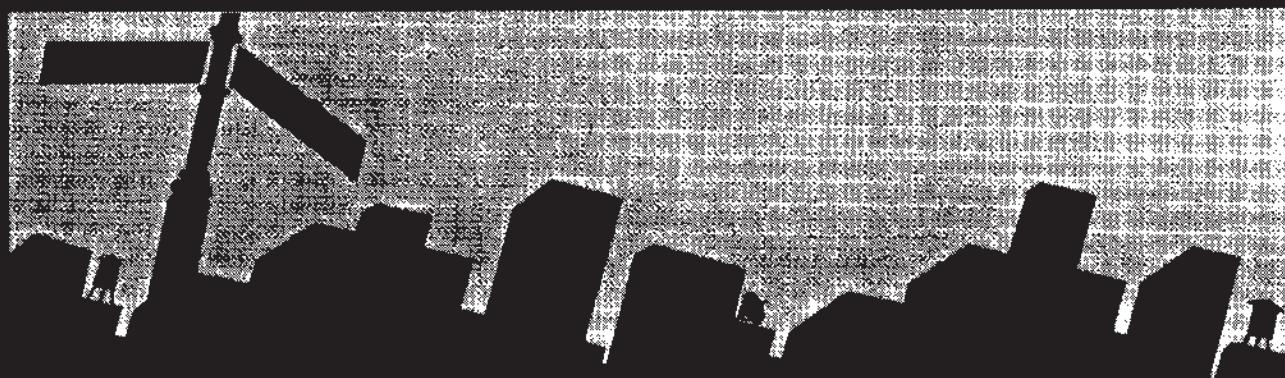
Even though Grant Harper Reid never met his grandfather, Leonard Harper, he inherited his name and creative spirit. The filmmaker and producer gets an assist from award-winning poet and playwright Ed Buttins for a play based on the life of Leonard Harper, entitled Hot Feet.

For more information, contact Grant Harper Reid at (212) 368-3107.

IN MEMORY OF BRIAN SELSKY

THE OSCAR MICHEAUX SOCIETY NEWSLETTER PAYS SPECIAL TRIBUTE TO BRIAN SELSKY WHO WORKED AS AN EDITORIAL ASSISTANT AND GRAPHIC ARTIST FOR THE NEWSLETTER FROM ITS INCEPTION UNTIL HIS DEATH IN OCTOBER, 1997. SELSKY WAS A DOCTORAL STUDENT AT DUKE UNIVERSITY ENROLLED IN THE GRADUATE PROGRAM IN LITERATURE. HIS COMMITMENT, DILIGENCE, INGENUITY, PATIENCE, ENTHUSIASM, AND COOPERATION WILL BE MISSED BUT NEVER FORGOTTEN.

SINCERELY, THE EDITORS



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BITS AND PIECES OF
OSCAR MICHEAUX:

*from the notes of
Pearl Bowser*

The 1997 Oscar Micheaux Film Festival scheduled four panel discussions, the focus of which were to engage the audience of visiting scholars — from locales such as New York, North Carolina, Ohio and Nebraska — in dialogue focusing on Micheaux's life in South Dakota. The objective was to reconstruct, through anecdotes historical and otherwise, the extent to which living in South Dakota might have influ-

enced Oscar Micheaux's work. Pearl Bowser asserts that if Oscar Micheaux had not traveled to South Dakota, "he probably would not have become a writer and later a filmmaker." This is borne out through adversarial scenes from Micheaux's life. There are stories of Micheaux *preferring* to walk beside his wagon instead of on his mule, of his boxing in the town square for extra money, and also of him extorting cash from the town saloon. One must not forget that Micheaux was the single African-American homesteading in Gregory. Such visions allude to a single-minded toughness shaped and influenced by Booker T.

Washington's "pulling oneself up by the bootstraps" philosophy. The fact that Micheaux employed these tactics illustrates a willingness to resort to extreme measures to realize his economic dream— of publishing his novels and producing his films. It is also ironic to note that while most of the predominantly white audience knew Micheaux as a writer and a homesteader, they had never seen any of his films. Thus the aesthetic of the struggle propelled Micheaux into constantly striving to "make it"— and the irony of such a pioneer spirit burning in one unrecognized must not be lost upon readers or viewers.

OSCAR MICHEAUX "In Progress"

Pearl Bowser, James McDaniel, and Michael Unthank are collaborating on a motion picture project that will provide a reconstruction of Micheaux as he is unveiled on the wide screen.

Turner Entertainment has expressed an interest in restoring Oscar Micheaux's *Symbol of the Unconquered*; a restoration that will be accompanied by a New York City premiere and television exhibition.

Sam Pollard, producer of *Eyes on the Prize* and who is affiliated with Blackside Films, is currently producing a documentary on African American Artists and will feature a brief segment on Oscar Micheaux.

Pam Thomas, assisted by **Pearl Bowser** is in the process of producing a documentary on early black filmmaking to complement the previously produced *Midnight Ramble*.



MINUTES FOR
OSCAR MICHEAUX SOCIETY MEETING

*SOCIETY FOR CINEMA STUDIES CONFERENCE -
MAY 19, 1997, OTTAWA, ONTARIO, CANADA*

The meeting was convened at 8:00 with Corey Creekmur, Karla Fuller, Arthur Knight, Jan Loveland, Charles Musser, Charlene Regester, Jacqueline Stewart, and Brian Taves attending.

I. American Sociological Association Meeting:

Arthur Knight organized a Micheaux panel for the American Sociological Association held in Washington, D.C., in the Fall of 1997 to promote Micheaux scholarship in other disciplines. The panel members included: Arthur Knight, Corey Creekmur, Louise Spence, and Charles Musser. The panel was chaired by Joanne Braxton.

II. Oscar Micheaux Film Festival:

Charlene Regester announced that the second Oscar Micheaux Film Festival was being planned in Gregory, South Dakota to be held in August of 1997. Micheaux Society members were encouraged to attend because of the importance of reconfiguring Micheaux in black cinema history and because of the need to support the festival to insure that Micheaux receives the coverage and exposure deserved.

III. Oscar Micheaux and His Circle:

Charles Musser discussed the project on *Oscar Micheaux and His Circle* that will include a touring package of Micheaux's films accompanied by a catalog of essays on Micheaux derived from papers presented at the Yale Conference. Musser reiterated the need to secure funding for film restoration and preservation to facilitate the completion of this project.

**IV. African American Museum—
Detroit, Michigan**

Jan Loveland conveyed the importance of providing an exhibition of Micheaux at the recently opened African American Museum in Detroit. Attendees were very much interested in her proposal

NEWS OF INTEREST

BROUGHT TO LIGHT BLACK CINEMA, 1921-1959: SELECTIONS FROM THE JAMES E. WHEELER COLLECTION. WITHIN OUR GATES: AMERICAN RACE FILMS, 1918-1949, Museum of Modern Art, New York, Spring 1997. Posters, lobby cards, and press books relating to American race films that played the circuit of black movie houses during a pre-integration period were exhibited from James Wheeler's (founder and director of Concept East 11, Detroit, Michigan) Collection. The exhibition included a discussion of cinema during this period led by Pearl Bowser, founder of African Diaspora Images, Henry Sampson, film historian and author, and Wheeler. Laurence Kardish, curator of the Department of Film and Video at Museum of Modern Art moderated.

AFRICAN AMERICAN FILM SOCIETY OF MISSOURI, an organization designed to promote film as a cultural art form among African Americans throughout the state through the exhibition of films, workshops, seminars, and aiding the creative development of aspiring African American filmmakers. For More Information, call **(816) 861-0480, African American Film Society of Missouri, 3217 Lockridge, Kansas City, MO 64128**

NEW MILLENNIUM STUDIOS, a movie studio dedicated to African-American film (especially those by and of women) opened in June 1997 in Petersburg, Virginia. This studio is the pet project of Tim Reid and his wife, Daphne Maxwell-Reid. For more information, call **(804) 957-4216, New Millennium Studios, One New Millennium Drive, Petersburg, VA 23805.**

"Oscar Micheaux's Avant-Gardism: Black Cinema in the 1920s," January 17, 1998. Lecture by Jane Gaines, Duke University, at the Gould Theater, California Palace of the Legion of Honor as part of the symposium "Rhapsodies in Black: Art of the Harlem Renaissance."

CONFERENCES

Twenty-Third Annual Film and Literature Conference, January 29-31, 1998, Florida State University, Tallahassee: "Race in Film and Literature." Contact: Sharon Gray, Center for Professional Development Florida State University, Tallahassee, Florida 32306-1640; or by e-mail: sgray@mailers.fsu.edu (850) 644-2655 FAX (850) 644-2589 for conference information.

Intercollegiate Department of Black Studies of the Claremont Colleges Annual Conference, February 6-7, 1998, Claremont, California, "OutingWhiteness: Interrogating Re-Presentations of Race & Racism." Contact Phyllis J. Jackson LeBus Court, Pomona College, Claremont, California 91711 for additional information.

First Annual Conference – Comparative Cultural and Literary Studies, February 26-28, 1998, University of Arizona, Tucson, AZ, "Articulating Conflicts in Cultural Studies: Agency, Resistance, and Social Change." Conference papers include: intersections of sexuality, race, ethnicity, gender, class, ability, age etc.; how queer theory relates to cultural studies; narratives of globalization and post-Fordism; nationalisms and resistance; disciplined bodies; interactions of postmodernity and postcoloniality; theorizing as praxis; the institutionalization of cultural studies; Marx in the academy, literature, media, and material, and pop culture as resistant strategies; coalitional politics in cultural studies; activism and/in/outside of the academy; bureaucracy and agency; technological bodies; borders, biomes, and regions; folklore, communities, and the university; graduate student unionization; politics of methodologies. For further information contact the conference organizer by e-mail: jodik@u.arizona.edu.

Society for Cinema Studies 1998, April 4-7, 1998, Hyatt Regency La Jolla, San Diego, California. For conference information contact the conference bulletin board or conference submission instructions available on the **SCS Website** at

www.cinemastudies.org. You can submit a panel, workshop, or paper proposal without having announced it on the Bulletin Board—as long as it reaches Linda Dittmar, 1998 Conference Program Committee Chair, by **October 1, 1997.** The conference will begin on Saturday afternoon, April 4, and run through noon on April 7, 1998. **OSCAR MICHEAUX SOCIETY MEETING WILL BE HELD SUNDAY MORNING ON APRIL 5, 1998 — TIME AND PLACE TO BE ANNOUNCED AT CONFERENCE.**

Screen Studies, July 3-5, 1998, University of Glasgow, Glasgow, Scotland, United Kingdom. Proposals should be sent to Caroline Beven, *Screen*, Gilmorehill Centre for Theater, Film and Television, University of Glasgow, Glasgow, G12 8QQ, Scotland, UK.

Tel. 0141-330-5035 FAX 0141-351, e-mail: screen@arts.gla.ac.uk, Web: <http://www.arts.gla.ac.uk/tfts/Screen.html/>

Fifth Domitor Conference, 1998, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C., June 1-5, 1998. The Fifth International Domitor conference will be devoted to sound and early cinema. It will be hosted by the Library of Congress, Washington, D.C., June 1-5, 1998. Conference activities will take place in the Madison Building of the LOC complex, especially in the Mary Pickford Theater. **For conference information, please contact: David Francis or Patrick Loughney, Motion Picture Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C. USA 20540.**

Pordenone Silent Film Festival, October, 1997. A series of pre-screening programs devoted to sound and early cinema were be presented at the Pordenone Silent Film Festival, in October 1997. A world-wide search for relevant films and sound materials was conducted by the Library of Congress. **Contact Richard Abel, 4816 Harwood Drive, Des Moines, Iowa 50312, USA.** If you have further questions or wish further information, please e-mail Richard Abel at richard.abel@drake.edu or FAX 1-515-271-2055.

screenings

Scenes from WITHIN OUR GATES, part of the exhibition tour of **Art of the Harlem Renaissance Exhibit**.

Hayward Gallery, London:
June 19 - August 17, 1997

Arnolfini, Bristol: September 6-
October 19, 1997

Mead Gallery, University
of Warwick: November 1 -
December 6, 1997

M.H. de Young Memorial
Museum, San Francisco:
January 17 - March 15, 1998

The Corcoran Gallery of Art,
Washington, D.C.: April 11 -
June 22, 1998

SCAR OF SHAME, Yale University, New Haven, Connecticut, February 3, 1996, was screened with a live musical score provided by clarinet virtuoso Don Byron. Byron was accompanied by his eight-member jazz ensemble who performed their first musical score. Byron's music, described as "oscillating with dissonance, ragtime and romantic themes," responded to the ironies of the film that focused on an African American female victimized by caste within the black bourgeois culture of the 1920s. The event was sponsored by the Yale Rep Special Events.

WITHIN OUR GATES, Oscar Micheaux Film Festival, Gregory, South Dakota, August 14-16, 1997. This film was among two of Micheaux's silent features screened at the second annual Oscar Micheaux Film Festival. The films were introduced by Ron Green.

BODY AND SOUL, Oscar Micheaux Film Festival, Gregory, South Dakota, August 14-16, 1997. This film was an additional silent film produced by Micheaux and screened at the Oscar Micheaux Film Festival.

WITHIN OUR GATES, Southern Historical Association Meeting, Atlanta Georgia, November 6, 1997. Micheaux's **Within Our Gates** was screened at the 1997 Southern Historical Association meeting in Atlanta. The panel was chaired by Fitzhugh Brundage (University of Florida-Gainesville & National Humanities Center) who was instrumental in scheduling the screening of **Within Our Gates** and who conveyed the importance of using media as pedagogical tool for teaching history and for documenting historical time periods. Commentary was also provided by Jane Gaines and Charlene Regester. Gaines commented on the film's discovery and restoration, while Regester commented on the socio-political implications of the film as the film foregrounds lynching.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR:

Martin Keenan, attorney with the Keenan & Boeckman Law Firm of Great Bend, Kansas submitted a letter (November 4, 1997) and article entitled, "Quiet Motion Picture Legend Buried in Great Bend," to the Oscar Micheaux Society Newsletter unraveling Micheaux's connections to Great Bend, Kansas. Excerpts from the article appear below:

Micheaux had relatives who homesteaded in Central Kansas. (The original spelling of the surname was Michaux, although some family members used the new spelling of "Micheaux.") His uncle, William P. Micheaux, together with Micheaux's grandmother, Melvina, homesteaded in Stafford County in the 1880s. So did Andrew Jackson Michaux, another uncle, who later moved to Great Bend and was married to Lily Michaux. Andrew once owned ... land in central Kansas and died in 1942. Oscar Micheaux's aunt, Harriett Micheaux, married Stafford County homesteader Napoleon Robinson.

BIBLIOGRAPHY UPDATE

Reel Black Talk: A Sourcebook of 50 American Filmmakers, Spencer Moon (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1996). This volume includes interviews conducted with some fifty African American filmmakers relating the challenges as well as philosophical beliefs possessed by these artists. The volume also contains essays on historical figures including Micheaux and Spencer Williams. It attempts to represent a cross section of African American filmmaking by these filmmakers.

"Oscar Micheaux the Entrepreneur: Financing **The House Behind the Cedars**," Charlene Regester, *Journal of Film and Video*, 49.1-2 (Spring-Summer 1997): 17-27. This essay briefly reconstructs letters of correspondence exchanged between Micheaux and Chesnutt regarding the screen rights to *The House Behind the Cedars* and best reflects Micheaux's business practices and strategies employed to produce films.

Within Our Gates: Ethnicity in American Feature Films, 1911-1960, ed. Alan Gevinson (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997). An American Film Institute Catalog that features films focusing on ethnicity between 1911-1960. The catalog provides lengthy, thorough, and detailed descriptions of films produced in this period, including

black silent films. Of most use are the film production notes made available for these films. As with many of these films, this information is rarely available.

Paul Robeson: Artist and Citizen, ed. Jeffrey C. Stewart (New Brunswick, NJ, and London: Rutgers University Press) presents an essay by Charles Musser entitled "Troubled Relations: Paul Robeson, Eugene O'Neill, and Oscar Micheaux" that explores the different relationships between Robeson and the two artists— O'Neill, the white; and Micheaux, the black.



Errata

The contact information for the following were listed incorrectly in the previous newsletter. We apologize for any confusion.

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The Oscar Micheaux Society Newsletter is dedicated to providing a medium through which we can promote discourse, debate, and discovery about filmmaker and novelist Oscar Micheaux and others who were active in early African American cinema. Unfortunately, much of their work remains inaccessible. It is through this medium that we hope to provide an avenue for inquiry into Micheaux and others who were active in early African American cinema.

The Oscar Micheaux Newsletter is a publication of the Film & Video Program at Duke University. We welcome your contributions, questions and comments. Information and articles for editorial review should be sent to:

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Duke University
Film & Video Program
104 Crowell Hall
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