

# Some Reflections on Black Women in Film

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I would like to present a brief outline on some important aspects of a subject about which I'm most concerned—the deletion of a correct portrayal of Black women in film. I've been in many political discussions around this topic and as a Black woman I've gone to theaters only to be insulted by what I've watched on the screen. I have thus internalized the topic based on having an understanding of my own oppression as a Black woman. One film made me so angry I wanted to leave before the first half. The film was *Which Way is Up*. The comedy of Richard Pryor became the rage of Rosemari Mealy. I was so busy verbally analyzing the sexist attitude of Pryor towards Black women that I made a few folks move to other seats. I applauded the Chicana sister when she drove off, with *his child* and *another man* leaving him to his petit bourgeois sexist antics. For me that film was a personification of the sexist decadence exemplified in "contemporary" Black film.

Since the early 70's contemporary Black films have done little or nothing to depict the correct image of Black people, much less that of Black women.

Some years ago, I read Christopher Caudwell's *Illusion and Reality*. Caudwell was a European scientist, writer, and poet. My respect for his writings increased when I learned that he was also an anti-fascist who died fighting as such. Caudwell saw art as "adapting the individual psyche to the environment, and [as] therefore one of the conditions of the development of society." I agree with that perspective. Therefore, I cannot talk about the characterization of Black women in film without first understanding the characterization of Black people historically in film. And we all know that racism and sexism permeated that characterization.

*The Black Scholar* so amply summarized this characterization in its May 1976 issue:

The Hollywood film industry has historically been a chief arbiter of American cultural values and images. Hollywood has fashioned and purveyed a celluloid American Dream—a dream that has been extremely profitable for the white film-makers, and which has molded and titillated the psyches of millions and millions of moviegoers.

Hollywood movies created and popularized American heroes and villains—prototypically, the white cowboy-adventurer-secret agent portrayed in righteous combat against treacherous Indians, Asians or Blacks. (And when the villain was not actually dark-skinned, it was customary for him to wear a black hat and/or coat.) Movies have thus been a major institutional and ideological prop of American racism: distorting history, inculcating racist values and stereotypes, and largely excluding non-whites from participation in film-making.

The individual psyche of the Black theater audience has adapted to a dominant theme so prevalent in capitalist society. Violence then becomes the dominant theme in all social relationships. The perpetuation of racist and sexist stereotyping in film exacerbates the violence theme. Violence is an active phenomenon. Black women in film portray that violence; in reality, they are the victims of such in social and familial relationships—thousands of Black women were victims of domestic violence in the United States last year. The links between reality and the norms acceptable to institutions of society perpetuate the characterization within the film industry. Who are the heroes for our children? The pimp in *The Mack*, the super-niggers as portrayed by Fred Williamson and Jim Brown. What ingratiate these films to the bourgeoisie is the role most often portrayed by Black women—that of the victim as culprit. The extent of the Black woman's liberation on the screen is based on her willingness to take low, as well as how often she gives it up. From the historical perspective, the culprit has been the mammy, the tragic mulatto, the mammy-matriarch and the seductress.

In the March/April 1973 issue of *The Black Scholar*, Edward Mapp adequately describes the historical role of Black women in film. He cites only one example of Hollywood's portrayal of the Black woman's experience as a possible take off point for extending a positive approach to Black women in film. He cites *Lady Sings the Blues* (1972) for its depiction of the Black female's contribution to American culture and art. But even this is a totally inaccurate portrayal of the real life of Billie Holiday. I say we need films about Lucy Parsons, Black woman worker/labor organizer; the 1969 Charleston

Women Hospital workers, Ida b. Wells, Beulah Sanders, Fannie Lou Hammer, Ella Baker and Florence Wrice, ILGWU organizer; we need more films like *Nothing But a Man*, which creates a positive image in a negative context.

In the 70's, spurred on by the cultural nationalist movement, we were to produce a new image, but the very first Black multi-million dollar film set the tone for what was later to be Hollywood's economic bail-out and a contemporary version of *Green Pastures*, where porkchops and watermelon were replaced by butts, bosoms and gun-toting niggers—black-faced versions of what was once the exclusive property of the white, male, racist and sexist dominated industry. *Sweet Sweetback's Badass Song* was the film—a nightmare from the mind of Melvin Van Peebles.

The initial screen image presented by the film of the "New Black Image," even before the film title was introduced, is a Black woman prostitute committing statutory rape on a 10-year-old Black child. And it is significant that the first image was created by a Black male. But lest we fall into our bourgeois or feminist trap of the simplistic notion of Black men against Black women, we must define what kind of man Van Peebles is—what is his class attitude? It was always defined by him in terms



of money!!! To be sure, the brother was talented and witty. He even got across the racist Hollywood unions to make this flick, claiming he was giving Black people jobs, providing them with technical skills and film exposure. But how many of these non-union Black men and women were to reap a significant portion of the more than \$12 million in profits? And what organizations did Van Peebles leave behind to intervene and counter the racism of the union?

How women were depicted within the supposedly "New Image" was no more than a capitulation to sexist ideology. The screen no longer reflected the passive mammies, the tragic mulattos. They were now in the modern feminist idiom: the aggressive, gun-toting and in some cases emasculating "free fucking women," perpetuated by superstars Pam Greer, Vonetta McGee, and Pamela Dodson. They headed the money-making movies with their large breasts, long legs and pretty eyes rather than with their acting abilities. Or we saw the bit players whose primary acting talents lay in their ability to moan, groan and succumb to the ex-football machos like Jim Brown and Fred Williamson, or non-football heroes like Richard Roundtree. Again, these were men and women who were more committed to the mighty dollar—Hollywood—than to

portraying a positive image to Black people. None of them had the social consciousness of our first Black film star, Paul Robeson, whose portrayal of The Emperor Jones and a Black miner in the Welsh miners film called *Proud Valley* intimidated white film-makers. Paul Robeson was an ex-all-American football player who could also sing and act, even in the so-called "legitimate theater." But he refused to be housesnigger. In his book *Hear I Stand* he said, "The artist must elect to fight for freedom or slavery. I have made my choice." Between 1942 and 1946 his income dropped from \$100,000 to \$6,000.

There are some contemporary women who have refused to prostitute their talent. Cicely Tyson starved for years before she got the half-decent roles of Jane Pittman and the mother in "Roots." However, both dramas had their shortcomings due to the commercialism of the productions. Read the book to determine how Kizzy and the other women might have been portrayed. In the book, for example, Kunta didn't get caught because he stopped off to get a quicky, and it was he, not Belle, who fought to keep the slave buyer from taking his precious Kizzy. Note in the TV version that Belle's strength in fighting for Kizzy while Kunta fell crying to his knees was an excellent example of how the Black woman's image is manipulated to relegate the Black man to a demeaning, subservient position. Similarly in the show "Good Times," at one time TV's only complete and positive Black family, a strong John Amos was killed off, leaving Esther Rolle in a neo-mammy role, catering to the character played by Jimmy Walker. In this case, the demise of the strong male image manipulates the strong woman into a less than positive image.



The petit bourgeois will always level criticism at the progressive film-maker for presenting "Documentaries" as opposed to "Art" forms. This fragmented distinction between "art" and "reality" is a superficial offspring of a bourgeois capitalist society, reinforced by the artists/critics who see themselves separated and alienated from the masses.

Film-makers like Haile Gerima, Ousmane Sembene, Nana Mahomo, Chris Choy, Robert Van Lierop, and Jose Garcia will continue to have limited exposure. It is unfortunate that their creations will not reach the mass media and will never be the dominant theme of American film under the present economic system.

The internationally acclaimed Cuban cinema could never have existed in the old days. It

came only after the revolution. The award winning film *Lucia* demonstrates the ability of film to portray women in a revolutionary historical perspective. Its mass distribution is attributed to the Cuban revolution. Only now, as in Bob Van Lierop's *O Povo Organizado*, do we see a revolutionary historical perspective of the African woman. Now Mozambique's artists are able to produce revolutionary images on a mass basis through the establishment of the National Cinema Institute.

Black film-makers must now become proletarianized—organizers, building the unions that Van Peebles failed to build, going beyond the boundaries of bourgeois nationalism and making the necessary links with revolutionary film-makers on an international basis. Most desirably, when Black women themselves become involved in the film-making process there will be an appreciable change in portraying the true image of Black women in film, a portrayal which reflects our social reality.



Mrs. Rosanelle Powell. Whiskey Run Road, Camden, 1966.

It ain't hot. It's hell out here.

I was paying one hundred seventy-five dollars a year for that house, and it looked like it was about to fall. I was afeared the wind would blow it away. I had about twenty acres. I didn't make much, but I managed to get my children into college. Now I farm a little corn for the cows. I don't farm no cotton, 'cause there wasn't nothing to it.

I have ten children, but they're only three left. All the rest done gone to Connecticut.

It's been sad times. Jack and Bob and King are dead. They killed them, because they didn't want the Negroes brought out from under their foots. That's how come they killed them. I don't see nothing else.

—Mrs. Powell