Special VIDEO Issue

Keeping Up With Video Technology: An Interview With Zeinabu Irene Davis

On the Black Planet Productions Tip

A Cultural Warrior: A Conversation With Thomas Allen Harris

Filmmaker Haile Gerima
“...BOLD AND INSPIRING...”
David Stratton, VARIETY

“...AUDACIOUS, INTOXICATING MOVIE.”
Hal Hinson, THE WASHINGTON POST

“...THE CHARACTERS SEEM TO EXUDE A DIGNITY AND SELF WORTH RARELY SEEN IN FILM PORTRAYALS OF SLAVES.”
Wiley Hall, BALTIMORE SUN

“One must return to the past in order to move forward to the future.”

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Contents

2  Letter from the Editor

3  BFR on Video in Our Future

Features

6  Keeping Up With Video Technology:
An Interview With Zeinabu irene Davis by Gloria Gibson-Hudson.
Video is changing the landscape of filmmaking or so says Zeinabu
irene Davis—and BFR agrees.

10  On the Black Planet Productions Tip
Reggie Woolery speaks with the members of the Black Planet Productions Video Cooperative. Until media literacy is a part of our everyday discourse we will remain passive observers of our society and culture rather than the informed, active participants we need to be. Read what BPP has to say about it.

17  A Cultural Warrior:
A Conversation With Thomas Allen Harris
BY REGGIE WOOLERY.
From the Bronx to Harvard to France and back again. Harris talks about his journey.

20  Making the Leap with Cheryl Dunye
BY DENISE SNEED.
Identity politics defines Dunye’s leap from video to feature film.

24  From the Continent
A Return to the Past by E. Assata Wright. To understand our present and fulfill our potential for the future we must embrace our past. Haile Gerima gives the guidelines.

29  Pat Aufderheide Speaks to Three African Filmmakers
In Search of an Identity...Towards Cultural Liberation...Le Maestro du Quartier Mozart.

Departments

4  Film Clips
Grindstone on the Potomac, On the Road With Black Planet Productions, The D.R.O.P. Squad, Filmfest DC

37  Essay
Looking at Malcolm
BY DON BELTON
Belton reflects on the two years since Spike Lee’s Malcolm X and offers reflection on impressions and the importance of healing.

41  Film Review
An Opportunity Missed: A Review of Warrior Marks
BY LEASA FARRAR-FRAZER

43  In Memory
In Memory of Jacqueline Shearer by Kathe Sandler. A warrior of the independent filmmakers’ movement moves onward.

45  Calendar & Announcements
In Closing
A Decade of Black Film Review

This year Black Film Review celebrates its tenth year in existence. In "small-arts-organization-years" that equals several lifetimes. Founded in 1984 by David Nicholson, Black Film Review has been the only consistent film journal dedicated exclusively to the work and concerns of Black filmmakers in America and the world. Issues have featured articles and interviews from around the globe and from diverse points of view.

We stand at the threshold of extraordinary changes in communications—in technique and technology. To meet the demand of a dynamic industry which grows ever more complex and competitive, Black Film Review will be revitalizing its focus over the months ahead to address the many issues and advances which will forever change the film and electronic media, while maintaining a critical and analytical edge which has informed and entertained our readers over the last decade.

You’ll begin to see those changes in our 10th anniversary issue, Volume 8/Number 2 to be published in Spring of 1994, as we begin to focus on the changing role of women in film, and add several new features and columns which we hope will make Black Film Review an indispensable tool for those who make and enjoy films. The unwavering support of a family of subscribers, friends and volunteers has kept Black Film Review up and running for the last decade. We extend a heartfelt thanks to each and every one of you. With our vision focused toward the future and your continued support Black Film Review will provide you with information that makes a difference for many more decades to come.

Leasa Farrar-Frazer, editor
Americal gets the lion's share of its information and understanding of social and cultural issues from the electronic media. This fact alone underscores the importance and far-reaching implications of the video explosion in our country. Hundreds of thousands of video cameras, televisions and VCRs are sold annually in the United States turning the average American into his own producer and director.

The growth in popularity of video technology and its cost effectiveness make it a viable production alternative for many independent filmmakers. While its easy accessibility gives America the opportunity to turn the camera on itself and others, the idea that everyone can be a filmmaker constitutes a flaw in our understanding of the video industry's social relevance. There are quantum leaps between simply documenting one's experiences with a video camera and breathing life into a visually compelling concept that can affirm individual and collective experiences, inspire and change people's thinking. This issue of Black Film Review explores the use and impact of video for a number of independent filmmakers.

Video affords an immediacy evident in Black Planet Productions' work which pulsates with an urgency with which its members feel we must embrace media literacy in our communities. Video montages of searing images informed by a hip-hop sensibility set the broad parameters of their message which presents social, racial, sexual and gender issues from a grassroots perspective. The members of Black Planet Productions Cooperative speak candidly with Reggie Woolery about its direction which includes a national tour. Zeinebu Irene Davis speaks with Gloria Gibson-Hudson about the advantages of using video rather than film format and the information exchange network—bartering for knowledge—in which she is active and which reflects a community approach operative in her work and teaching. Cheryl Dunye's video background is a spring board into her first feature film, a development that will not end her involvement with video, but, will enhance it. Indeed, many independent filmmakers use both film and video media interchangeably—as the budget allows. Identity and spirituality are themes which run through Thomas Allen Harris' work. He brings to his craft as a filmmaker/videographer, performance artist and writer a unique vision which he shares with Reggie Woolery.

Black Film Review continues its concern with all aspects of Black film wherever it is produced. Pat Aufderheide speaks with three African filmmakers in three separate and illuminating interviews. Achkar's very personal work is a reflection on the life of his deceased father and his own cross-cultural identity. The artist and cultural future of Cameroon is the thrust of Jean-Marie Teno's talk with Aufderheide. A music video sensibility infuses Jean-Pierre Bekolo's film Quartier Mozart. He explains his vision of the contemporary life of young Africans. The past and its relationship to our future and present is the cornerstone of Haile Gerima's work. He shares his view of the political implication of filmmaking and film distribution with E. Assata Wright. Some of the work of these four African filmmakers is now available on video which affords an opportunity for wider exposure to an American audience.

Video technology holds vast promise for the future and will continue to affect our lives in ways which were unfathomable a short decade ago. With the restructuring of America's telecommunication/media systems currently in full swing the power of the genre is increasingly evident. Its mobility, relative low cost, and spontaneity add to its appeal. However, video remains flat without the skillful eye and sensibility of an inspired videographer/filmmaker behind the lens. Black Film Review applauds the image makers in this issue and all those who strive to present images humanistic in impulse and global in scope.
Grindstone on the Potomac

Washington, D.C. firm Linro Enterprises, in conjunction with Makin' Movies, Ltd. Productions, are in final production on a feature film, A Razzin in Grindstone. Set in the 1940's in the southern coal mining town of Grindstone, PA, the story line centers around southern small-town justice and the Black family. When a murder by white town bullies is witnessed by Poogie, one of the film's central characters, the film takes a hard look at how family unity and integrity are necessary to maintain dignity. Interwoven throughout the story is Poogie's love for baseball, the sport upon which he hangs his dreams.

Written, produced and directed by Georgetown University graduate and Fulbright scholar, Wendell Robinson, the cast of A Razzin in Grindstone includes Lawanda Page. In her role as Agnes Sanders, proprietress of The Chicken Shack, juke joint and hang spot for the young folks, she plays yet another incarnation of her Sanford and Son Aunt Esther role. Full of spitfire and issuing forth the final word on a number of subjects, she adds a driving energy to the film. "Ms. Page is extremely patient, very helpful and willing to do anything necessary to get the project done," said Robinson. "Working with her is a good experience, one that you can learn from."

Shot on location in Washington, D.C., Potomac, MD and South Carolina, A Razzin in Grindstone is a result of the combined efforts of Robinson and Col. Jim Allen (USMC), who has twenty-five years experience in the motion picture and entertainment field. They pooled their resources to create Makin' Movies, Ltd. Productions in order to bring A Razzin in Grindstone to fruition. Allen, who worked as a technical military
consultant for *A Few Good Men* and *Inchon*, plays Edgar, the head of the Black family. Of his role as patriarch in the film he says, "This film is more about a Black man wanting his son to grow up and be somebody rather than Black versus white in a small mining town. The father spends a lot of time and energy trying to ensure his son gets a good education and has the opportunity to go to a college."

Filming, winding up in Washington, D.C. this winter, is due to be completed and released summer of 1994. - LFF

**On the Road with Black Planet Productions**

"Not Channel Zero Hits the Road" is an eight-city national touring exhibition of documentary video focusing on contemporary issues in African-American politics and culture. The programs in the series include *The Nation Erupts*, a community analysis of the LA rebellions; *Black Women, Sexual Politics and the Revolution*, where women speak out on gender, race, class and discrimination within the Black Power Movement; X 1/2: *the legacy of Malcolm*, an examination of the "X" symbol and its meaning to today's youth.

In addition to screening their work at media arts centers, museums, colleges and libraries, the producers will conduct media literacy workshops within local communities drawing attention to the power of cinema and television in today's society. For the "Not Channel Zero Hits the Road" venue nearest you contact Third Eye Media Group, 718-789-0633. (See in depth interview with Black Planet Productions producers in this issue). - LFF

**The D.R.O.P. Squad**

Spice Lee, who has a knack for shepherding controversial film projects, has done is again with *The D.R.O.P. Squad*. This time out, Lee is executive producer for the project which was shot on location in Atlanta, Georgia.

In *The D.R.O.P. Squad*, first-time director David Johnson has brought to the screen his vision of a society on the verge of losing its foundations of family and heritage. A pro-Black vigilante group takes it upon themselves to change the mindset of buppie-esque "wrong thinkers." What starts out simply as street-knowledge lectures soon escalates into kidnapping and brain re-washing as the D.R.O.P. Squad (an acronym for Deprogramming & Restoration of Pride) crosses the line in an attempt to create a more unified and culturally aware community.

Containing no sex, no car chases, and no shoot-outs, Johnson describes the film as both humorous and thought-provoking. Starting out as a light-hearted look at the diaspora of the Black experience, the film takes you into the "underworld" of the D.R.O.P. Squad's headquarters, where you are forced to take a sobering and sometimes frightening look at the consequences of your choices.

Johnson, along with his co-producers Butch Robinson and Shelby Stone (all Howard University graduates), likes to make a distinction between "movies" and "films." They characterize movies strictly as a business venture, while a film is an artistic vision. "I don't think Hollywood is trying to make Black films. I think they're trying to make Model Ts," says Johnson about the direction of the latest crop of movies to come out of Hollywood with African-American characters. While Johnson admits that these projects have been well received at the box office and credits the kids who see them with supporting the films they like, he would also like to see the Black film-viewing audience become more sophisticated in their viewing tastes so that they would come out in support of films such as *Daughters of the Dust* or *One False Move*.

*The D.R.O.P. Squad* is a film that explores a wide range of problems that face the Black community in the nineties. In the film, the Squad uses it deprogramming tactics on crooked politicians, money-grabbing clergymen, a drug dealer and finally an ultra-yuppie who creates negative images of Black people for the advertising campaign he creates. David Johnson and Butch Robinson have written a screenplay that asks the question, "Who has the right to say what's Black and what's not?"

Johnson and his partners at Freeyourmind Film Company were turned down by major studios before Gramercy Pictures agreed to offer a small budget for the film. They credit Spike Lee's influence and dedication to the project as a significant factor in bringing *The D.R.O.P. Squad* to the screen. - Larry Steele

**Global Rhythms at Filmfest DC**

The Eighth Annual Washington, DC International Film Festival will open on April 20, 1994. The festival, featuring a wide variety of international and American films, will run through May 1. "This year's lineup of films will provide a very exciting look at the best in international cinema. Filmfest will present works that should appeal to all local audiences," said Tony Gittens, Director of Filmfest DC.

For music lovers a special series of music feature films and documentaries from around the world featuring major international recording artists will be presented. The films of Spain's finest filmmakers will be highlighted and back by popular demand Filmfest DC for Kids and Cinema for Seniors will also be included. For additional information call 202.244.1278 or 202.274.6810. - LFF
Keeping Up with Video Technology:

An Interview with Zeinabu Irene Davis

by Gloria Gibson-Hudson

Video technology has become an American mainstay. There are thousands of video cameras in the common household and thousands more sold everyday. For filmmakers, the technology offers a cost effective and increasingly accessible format for recreating their visions. Zeinabu Irene Davis has embraced this technology with enthusiasm and dedication. She shares her thoughts on video technology and how it impacts on the independent filmmaker with researcher and scholar Gloria Gibson-Hudson for a project on Black women filmmakers.

Black Film Review: What are the advantages and disadvantages of shooting with video as opposed to film?

Zeinabu Irene Davis: The first advantage of working in video is that it's initially cheaper. You can shoot for long periods of time without having to change your tape or your setup. Second, video is particularly suited for documentary work, personal or more spontaneous work, or work that requires more time for gathering footage and ideas. Video gives you time to explore different kinds of sets, scenes, or situations, and to shoot more footage. In addition, depending on subject matter and access to equipment, you can usually finish a video quicker than you can finish a film. On the practical side, the equipment is much lighter to transport than film equipment.
Lightweight equipment actually helps you when you're out in the field?
Yes. If you use a Hi-8 video camera you could virtually shoot by yourself. You don't need to have many other crew people around to shoot footage and record sound. The sound on many of the Hi-8 cameras is stereo and it's certainly acceptable for most production work. That means you could be a one person production team. It just depends on the level of project you're trying to complete. If it's a short personal project you could do it with a Hi-8 by yourself, but if it's a longer piece you might need to bring in a crew.

What about the disadvantages of using video?
One drawback with video is that the systems still are not standardized. As opposed to 16mm and 35mm film, there are different formats of video such as VHS, Hi-8 video, Regular 8, Super VHS, 3/4 inch video, and Betacam. Sometimes working between the formats can improve or decrease the quality of the image. It depends on what you're doing. Another disadvantage is it's problematic to have screenings with large audiences because video screening systems are extremely expensive. And it's always difficult to match true colors. Unless you know a technician or someone who has experience with video technology who can adjust the set for proper registration and for proper color balance, sometimes it can be really annoying. Video exhibition does not yet have the quality level that I would like. But the immediacy and impact of it is good and much more affordable than film. The other thing I don't like about video is it's kind of a love/hate relationship in its accessibility to people. It's great to be able to say, "Hey, look Gloria. I just finished this tape. Can you take a look at it for me?" and then I just send you the tape in the mail, as opposed to sending a long big reel that you might not be able to have projected. So in that sense it's good because it can be an intimate personal experience. You can watch it whenever you want to and you don't have to go through this big long setup. But part of that problem is that I like my work to be seen in large groups whenever possible so people can discuss the issue or the concerns the film raises and that's not done when people are watching it individually in their homes. However, the more serious issue is that once the film is on video people can bootleg and copy it. This happens often even though there are supposed to be systems that protect the videos from being copied. Unfortunately that takes money away from the film or video makers forcing them to find other resources to continue their work. Do you feel there is a certain video camera and/or video stock that is better than another?
Not really. I don't think so. But I have to say that I haven't worked with video as much as I've worked with film. However, I think I could make a general observation and that is people really need to learn to light video. Some video makers think that since it's such an easy medium, you can just throw on a light if it's too dark and go ahead and shoot. However, you need to take time and light the scene well, just like you would light it with film. Part of the problem in the quality of some work is that you don't see Black peoples' skin being lit very well. It's really in the lighting. I don't think that the quality is necessarily as tied to video stock brands as it is with film. I've seen some beautiful work done by independent video artists and students that really makes video look very similar to film. So I think that the technologies are coming closer together and people are using them back and forth. Most people I know use video and film interchangeably.

Do you think your work is more accessible and marketable in video format?
Not really, because we as independent film and video makers don't have access to the home video market. It's really hard to break into that particular market because you need a large amount of capital to establish yourself. I can go to my local video store and ask them to pick up copies of my film on tape and some of them do that but it's not like I can access Blockbuster. This issue also touches on how much distribution and promotion do I put into a particular film or video, because that's going to
take time and money from the next project. So there's always a constant tension.

When you're using video are you in any way limited as to the use of special effects or is it easier on film?

That goes back to a statement I alluded to earlier when I said that video is cheaper. Part of the problem with video is that to be able to do some special effects, you have to have access to high end equipment, however the technology is rapidly changing. Some special effects that you couldn't do three years ago in video you can now do, and you can do them in your camera. You can do freeze frames, strobes, and different kinds of transitional effects like dissolves or wipes. You can do these in a Hi-8 camera or a piece of machinery called a video toaster. You can use this equipment for a cost that's less than three thousand dollars. So in a sense you have more access to trying out special effects. The problem is that as soon as the equipment becomes low-end, then, of course, everybody starts using it and the effects get a little cliché after a while. So it's up to your creativity as an artist to constantly try to figure out how to use it in new ways.

What about editing? I'm assuming that it's easier, and quicker, so perhaps you can get your video out faster. Is that true?

Yes. A major difference between film and video editing is that there's more than one way to edit video. With film you take the splicing block, chop it, and put tape on it. That's pretty much what you do regardless of whether its Super 8, 16, or 35. With video you could have a setup as simple as two VCRs in your house, editing back and forth between the two. This is a long and laborious process, but it's cheap. Or you could go all the way high end and use something called the AVID or another digital computerized editing system. So it kind of runs the gamut.

How do you make the decision of whether to shoot in video or film? Is the project the determining factor?

For me, the project determines that. The next consideration is how much money we have to complete the project. And then ultimately, where is the work going to be seen? I was just funded to do a children's film entitled Mother of the River, a project that's funded by ITVS, the Independent Television Service. I think at this point that it's going to be shot on video. The reason for this is that I have a certain amount of money allotted to complete this project. In order to set-up the historical period and to be able to shoot on location it's probably going to require me to shoot on video as opposed to film. And ultimately the audience is going to see this work primarily on television. That's how I came to the conclusion that I'll probably shoot on video.

I'd like to talk a little more about Mother of the River. Just briefly talk about what kinds of things artistically you hope to accomplish in that project, and what kind of video camera you have in mind to use.

Mother of the River is based on a folktale that has disseminated through the African diaspora. It's a story of an old, old woman, which in folklore language would be a crone, and a young girl who helps her. In the original story there are two girls, one girl helps her and the other girl doesn't. And of course, the girl who helps her is the one who receives happiness and the money. Marc Chery, my husband, who writes a lot of the screenplays that I do, and I have adapted the story. We work in a collaborative fashion in developing the screenplays and ideas. So this is one of his adaptations from a folktale and we reset it in the Antebellum South, somewhere around 1850. One of the things that we've been intrigued by is that most Americans have this kind of iconography of slavery that is based on what we've seen from Roots and Queen and other television series. But when we look at the research, the historical evidence that's available to us, it didn't look like that. There are many liberties people have taken in terms of depicting what slavery was like for both sides, for white people as well as for African Americans. For example, most people think plantations were really large with hundreds of slaves, but really that wasn't the case. The majority had fewer than ten slaves in a particular homestead. But one of the things that struck me was in the larger plantations, as opposed to the images depicted in Roots or Queen, slaves weren't living in individual cabins, people didn't have family cabins. They often lived in single-sexed barrack-style housing. Slaves were treated like property. So, one of the things that I want to show in Mother of the River is the lifestyle of slavery, as much as I can show in a half-hour program. With ITVS you're given a certain amount of money to do a project and you try to complete the entire project on that budget. That's one of the beauties of ITVS, it's a fully financed project, but one of the draw backs is that if your project initially costs more than that then you need to figure out how you can get the cost down. I really would like to shoot some of this project on location. So, I'm not sure where I'm going yet, but I would like to shoot somewhere in the south. If that's not possible, then somewhere in southern Illinois, at the very least. Video will enable me to take a smaller crew than I would need for a film. Aesthetically, Mother of the River has to have an element of magic to it, because it's a folktale, and it's supposed to depict a transformation between the young girl who meets the Mother of the River, who is like a Harriet Tubman figure—not actually Harriet Tubman, but someone who would be like her. In order to do this I would like to use some of the digital effect capabilities of the Hi-8 camera to convey a sense of magic and the sense of wonder that a child would have or anyone would have in meeting this old woman who can fly and who has magic eggs to give away. I'm using the technology to try to convey the magic and mysticism, which I could do in film, but it would cost more.

Let's talk about a few of your other videos. A Period Piece is one of your video projects. What went into the decision to shoot it on video?

Well, initially that project was one where I was going to have access to high definition television. It was a pilot program where video makers had access to high end technology that hadn't yet infiltrated the United States. The technology was so new and so few people knew how to use it that the chosen projects took a lot more time than they initially thought. I was bumped off. I liked the project so much that I decided to do it myself in a television studio using 3/4 inch equipment. I also wanted
to try some special effects on this project in a different way. So I used what's called a computer paint box. It took a while to raise money, costing somewhere around $250.00 an hour to use the equipment and to hire the operator after hours. I needed about six hours. It took time and money to use the paint box even though A Period Piece is really short. It's only four minutes but it cost me somewhere in the neighborhood of $3,000.00–$4,000.00.

There are more special effects and general experimentation in your piece on Clara Bryant, the Black woman trumpet player. How did that video project come about? Trumpetistically was originally conceived of as a longer documentary. There were six women artists in Los Angeles who were selected by the Women's Building to do five minute portraits of other women artists. Since I basically received a commission to do that piece, I was able to have access to various pieces of equipment. Before I received the commission, I started shooting that project on 16mm film and I ran out of money quickly. I think we did one shoot, which was a concert shoot, which cost somewhere in the neighborhood of $3,000.00. So we decided we couldn't complete it on film. Student loans only go so far. Since I was not able to complete the project on film I finished it on video.

Did you use Hi-8 video?
I used everything. I used 3/4 inch video, I used Hi-8 video, I used regular 8 video, it ran the gamut. I was still a graduate student, and I was basically using whatever equipment was available to me as a student.

By using different equipment, was the look consistent?
No, the look is not consistent at all, it evolved as the piece went along. But it's a short piece so I could get away with having so many different styles in the piece. When I was doing it I wanted to really try to see if I could make the piece reflect the music, that is the style of jazz music. I was really trying to see if the effects could almost match the rhythm of her trumpet. And in some parts of that piece I think I succeeded but in other parts if I had the chance to do it again I would do some things differently. But that's true with every piece.

Sweet Bird of Youth is a music video. It seems a number of African American artists are moving into the music video arena. Is that what you were thinking when you were doing this piece? Or is it a music video in the sense of something we would see on MTV?
No, it's not. I wish that there was a national outlet for alternative music videos because I would really like to see them done in a very different manner. I would like to see music videos that feature people like Sweet Honey in the Rock, Castleberry and DuPree, or jazz artists like Clara Bryant, Betty Carter, or Joe Henderson. I really didn't do it in the typical music video style. I wanted to use music as the thread that ran through the piece, but it's not necessarily the way music videos normally operate.

How do you keep up with the technology? It seems as if things are changing at such a rapid pace.
Well, it is really hard to keep up with the technology because it's constantly changing. But I think one good thing about being in a city like Chicago is that there are different organizations. For instance, there is a Chicago Association of Black Filmmakers which regularly has workshops where people can learn about new technology. A representative from a company or organization will also occasionally conduct workshops. It's a combination of sources. As a university instructor, students are always asking me, "What's new? What's going on? What can I see?" I constantly have to keep up with the literature or the trade shows. Producing Mother of the River will also help me keep up with video technology.

Once you see equipment at a trade show that you're interested in, what's the process of learning to use that equipment? Certainly once you're on a shoot that's too late.
Yes, well basically, if it's a camera you can ask the rental house or wherever you're getting it, to loan it to you or to take a half day rental to learn to use it. Sometimes, you don't have to pay for that. It depends on your relationship with the equipment house. The other avenue is to ask other people who have used it what the tricks and what the problems are. You can also try to familiarize yourself with the accompanying manual. You also make exchanges. I might show someone how to use an audio recorder, and then they might show me how to use the latest digital video equipment.

Can we conclude by talking about the role of video in the Black community?
I have a friend, O. Funmilayo Makarah, who did a wonderful video installation at the California Museum of Afro-American History in Los Angeles. It was a piece that addressed the LA uprising in April 1992. The installation addressed the issues in an immediate fashion and it was seen by an audience including children, who might not necessarily go to see independent film or video. I think her installation has set up a challenge for me and hopefully for other African-American artists who want to work more consistently. I think that her actually taking the space and creating a powerful environment was amazing. Her method of doing the project required very little long term commitment to editing or to shooting. The exhibition was very effective and also very cathartic. I think in this way we can use video to touch the communities that we live in more effectively.

I think that's an excellent point. While you were talking I was thinking of the video workshops for children.
I think that the video workshops for kids or just having access to a camcorder is very important. We have seen the rise of the twin Harris brothers whose mom tried to keep them out of trouble by giving them a video camera so they would learn to use their energy in a different way. I also think that access to media technology helps people learn to deconstruct images and to see why and how these images are put together. Film or video making is not a kind of magical thing that puts Barney on their television set. Once they know the process they might learn to question what they see on the television or in film and video productions.
ON THE BLACK PLANET PRODUCTIONS TIP

Interview by Reggie Woolery

hard-edged visionary realists, grass roots media activists, the newest wave of guerilla media communicators—all apply to the members of Black Planet Productions (BPP) video cooperative. Using a stylistically hip-hop approach, their body of work explores a wide range of topical issues: The Nation Erupts, a community analysis of the Los Angeles uprisings; X 1/2: the legacy of malcolm, an examination of the “X” symbol and its meaning to Black youth; Black Women, Sexual Politics and the Revolution, in which Black women speak out on gender, race, and class discrimination within the Black Power Movement. As they prepare for their first national tour, Reggie Woolery interviewed members Cyrille Phipps, Mark Abreu, Thomas Poole, Donna Golden, Art Jones, and George Sosa.

DONNA GOLDEN

Black Film Review: What are your working on now?
Donna Golden: I’m actually working on a ten-minute short video about this young woman who’s very detached and very numb and desensitized to things happening to and around her. For instance, she’s walking down the street with friends, not talking about much and a number of racist things happen to them and they don’t even pay attention to it. They are always tuned out. Later they feel these vague feelings of frustration, confusion and anger, almost to the point of wanting to kill somebody, but they don’t know why. In a way it’s autobiographical, but I’m fictionalizing things to speak more about how I see my generation. Both looking at the causes—tv, film, the way
it shapes your consciousness, white supremacy—but also the consequences—dehumanization, desensitization, apathy—(toward technology?), and the bizarre racist context in which we live, Blacks and whites playing off each other.

**BFR:** Is this piece coming out of the Third World Newsreel Production Workshop?

**DG:** I began writing the piece there, but wasn't able to get it off the ground. So I'm doing it independently now. Though it's about me, I don't want it to be like the typical self-reflective experimental video. I'm trying to make something I would want to see, something I can understand. I don't want to make a piece that in the end comes off detached and exacerbate the problem.

**BFR:** How do you see the idea of revolution in relationship to your work on the self?

**DG:** I think there is a problem if you only focus on the self. It isn't enough for me to talk about these feelings or the lack thereof. I'm a Black woman. What are the consequences of me not giving a shit about anything? 'I don't care what happens to me. I don't care what I do. I don't care about other people. I don't care about anything.' What are the consequences of that, living in a White supremacist society. And how does that society continue to inform my behavior?

**BFR:** How are you analytically going to break it down between the two extremes: very personal and self-reflective or intellectualized across categories of race, class, gender?

**DG:** I won't approach it at all from any academic standpoint. It's purely experience and emotion. I'm trying to figure that out. I don't have any hidden theories to help me. The readings I've done have only validated things I've run across. My approach is to pay real attention to my life and things going on around me. I'm considering the title "Virtual Reality" which explains this state of extreme detachment, perpetual boredom and simulated existence.

**BFR:** Coming at you from all sides.

**DG:** My problem is trying to avoid this work being seen as another "Generation X" twenty-something meditation where everyone talks about their alienation or their boredom. The problem with the book ["Generation X"] was that I think it's different for Black people. Not to generalize, but I don't think for us it's as easy as going out in the woods and thinking things are going to be okay.

**BFR:** How do you move from coming into film to your approach with Black Planet Productions?

**DG:** I have to talk more about this condition. The only reason I went to college was my parents forced me to go. I crossed everything off the list that I hated and history was left. Then I thought why not film because you don't have to dress up. Or it might be fun because I might become rich and famous. This was the shallow level I was operating on.

**BFR:** Where did you go to school?

**DG:** I was born in DC. Which everyone now tells me is the South. I went to Columbia in New York City where I started working on commercials and music videos. And I'd intern with all of these producers in school and they'd hook me up with jobs. Even after school I continued to work, doing a little coordinating, though I starved. It wasn't actually until a year later when I got involved in "The Gulf Crisis TV Project" with some people that I had met from Black Filmmaker Foundation (BFF), who eventually started Not Channel Zero (NCZ), did I realize this was something that I could actually do with media. It was fun. After that I joined Black Planet Productions.

**BFR:** Who do you see as your audience?

**DG:** Audience is very important. I want to be able to talk to people about this. There is not any particular group I'm targeting. I would like as many as possible to see it. Hopefully, more Black people.

**BFR:** Within the last year you've been in the Whitney Museum Biennial, and have received a Rockefeller Foundation Fellowship. You are definitely a part of the art world.

**DG:** That's the thing. What's the point if all of these rich people know NCZ but most Black people don't? I would think that we're not very successful if that continues to be the case. I mean, the exhibition at The Brooklyn Museum where "Black Women, Sexual Politics and the Revolution" showed was an example. I felt like most of the folks in the audience were people who are just into culture, middle-class folks who just have the time to get involved with that kind of stuff. The rest either were filmmakers and artists or had friends who were filmmakers. These same people come to all of our screenings. And that is a pretty small community.

**BFR:** What kind of interaction would you prefer?

**DG:** I find the most interesting discussions from folks who don't normally see it [our work.] Even when I just show tapes to friends of mine. They go, 'Wow! We've never seen anything like this!' You get really interesting critiques from folks not, into the world. You are definitely a part of the whole art scene. I think a lot of people feel left out of this whole post-modern, post-structuralist discourse.

**MARK ABREU**

**BFR:** When did you join BPP?

**MA:** A mutual friend of Tom and I told me Tom was having a screening of their first show, "Not Channel Zero", at Cooper Union. I wasn't able to make it but heard a lot of folks talking about the show. Then one day I was flipping through the channels and I saw the intro. The show was interesting. At the time I was working at downtown community tv. BPP had applied for an artist-in-residence
there and had been turned down. When I found that out I called their number from the tv show, was able to arrange for some access to post-production equipment and meeting space. At that time I had completely forgotten Tom was involved. I just called and left a message.

BFR: I first met you at DCTV. What were you doing there?
MA: I was taking a class at the Center for Media Arts and a classmate of mine was working at DCTV. After the class I was going to take an entry job in a small production house. But when I went to DCTV and saw my friend applying what he had learned I had to ask myself why should I go be somebody's gopher. So I became an intern at DCTV. That's when we met. I happened to be in the right place at the right time, and it rolled over into a job. I stayed there for four years.

BFR: Which Not Channel Zero projects have you been involved in?
MA: I was the associate producer for In Your Own Backyard, the second war show and I did the music for The Nation Erupts. We are still trying to finish the Crown Heights piece.

BFR: What's its focus?
MA: Its focus is the riots, particularly the preferential treatment given the Hasidic community. And the role of Black people as victims because we are not a vigilant people making sure our needs are constantly looked after. We tend to relax, to lower our guard. Our history should tell us we don't have the luxury of being slack.

BFR: Is it art, media or politics that attracts you to Not Channel Zero?
MA: Basically, it's all of those things. I see all of these things as propaganda. I see this as an opportunity for Black people. Not to say that there is a quintessential Black voice, but I do think there is a certain sentiment within the population that never gets expressed with legitimacy or allowed to stand on its own merit. I see it as our duty to express that side.

BFR: To get diverse community views?
MA: Yes. To have dialogue means being able to air out all sides of an issue—even the poison, the venom, the nasty stuff. Just get it out so you can see it, hear it, analyze it. So clear decisions can be made about what you want to keep, want to eliminate or what you want to change.

BFR: Where do you see the group evolving in the next two to three years?
MA: I'm a relative newcomer so I don't know what the three [founders] had in mind exactly. But, I don't think we're reaching our target audience. The more we get into the alternative media, film, arts community, the more it takes us out of our realm. A lot of us stay in this community for convenience. It's right there.

BFR: Everybody says they want to get diverse community views? To the day?
MA: I don't necessarily buy that. Just look at the way culture is transported within the Black community and you'll see that there are networks. Back in the day they called it the "chittlin' circuit." That circuit still exists today. An example is the growth of hip-hop. I've seen it grow from a street thing into an industry that basically spread from borough to borough, to the suburbs, down the East Coast throughout the country. Now it's international. That's a circuit, that's a network. If we put our energies into it, try to understand how they work, we can tap into these networks. That takes more effort and a deeper commitment.

ART JONES

BFR: Well, Art Jones! You're a recognized artist in your own right. How did you get into a collective?
AJ: The first time we met was at DCTV's grassroots videofest and I showed my work. They [BPP] were doing this poetry/video thing. The second time we met, they told me about their idea for a public access show. I showed a tape at their fundraiser for the show. Coincidentally, it was the day that Public Enemy's "Fear of a Black Planet" came out.

BFR: To the day?!
AJ: Yeah. And from that day they were Black Planet Productions. I was programming a film and video series at Suny-Purchase where I was a student at the time. A woman I knew asked me if I had heard of Not Channel Zero. They had actually broadcast a show by then on Nelson Mandela. During the Film Festival at Pratt School in Brooklyn I met Jackie Dolly and Joan Baker, who were on the panel. That's also when I saw the tape, In Your Own Backyard and I knew I really wanted to get down with them.

BFR: What did folks think of "Media Assassin"? It says some very specific things about accountability of both artists and the press.
AJ: They took it really silently. It was kind of the turning point that signaled I should go on and do my own thing.

BFR: What Not Channel Zero pieces have you had your hand in?
AJ: I was coordinating producer on The Nation Erupts with Donna and Tom. I did a segment for X 1/2: The Legacy of Malcolm X. In the commodification of Malcolm's image. I shot some footage for Our House: Gays and Lesbians in the Hood which was already in production when I joined the group. And for The Summa '91 Show, I did a segment on Leonard Jeffries.
BFR: Within the group do you see yourself on the media literacy tip, into programming or access?

AJ: I'm into the media literacy and access tip. I probably see Not Channel Zero more as a production model, for getting work done and seen—something that folks can grab and use to push their particular agendas. You can definitely get a larger audience from public access than if you screened work in your house or go the museum route. Then there's media literacy and media activism, the buzzwords of the '90s.

BFR: Is there a difference between how your work gets out as part of Not Channel Zero and how it got out in your solo career? And is that due to your distributors or the choice of public access?

AJ: Not Channel Zero has definitely been a vehicle for getting the work further out there. With public access there are a lot more places and contact people interested in the stuff. For instance, we've been just focusing within New York City, but folks from around the country have been coming to us. That's something we have to contend with.

BFR: What's happening now with your own projects?

AJ: I'm doing a portrait of six or seven characters who live in New York City in the early '90s from the infamous "Generation X", post-babyboomers who grew up on cereal and television.

BFR: How are you producing it?

AJ: Oh, you mean with no money?

BFR: That's a new concept! I heard you were brushing liquid light on adhesive tape to make film stock or something.

AJ: I'm doing everything, except processing the film myself. Its funny when you take on a large film project with little or no resources, how it becomes a part of your life. Over the last couple of years I've been trying to get into some sort of access situation. I currently work at Film Video Arts as equipment manager. I've been collecting archaic old cameras for years and trying to get them in working order.

BFR: I think of filmmakers having to teach at colleges. There seems to be almost no other way.

AJ: There is no other way. Unless you want to play a long waiting game. I'm shooting 16mm color reversal stock someone donated, using a small crew and video for sound, which I found will sync up. Unless I get some post-production funding, I'll be transferring the footage to a negative using an optical printer frame by frame, then cutting the negative myself.

BFR: I heard you were inventing a process that will revolutionize production.

AJ: It's working out pretty well.

**CYRILLE PHIPPS**

BFR: Tell me about your time at Rise N Shine.

CP: I worked at RS productions in New York about three years teaching educational media to high school students from around the city. I got the whole idea of working in grassroots video, media and media education from there. I graduated with a Bachelor of Fine Arts in film drama from Syracuse. Then I was a member of Black Filmmaker Foundation and later met Tom and George who were working there. George also worked for a while at Rise N Shine. I found out we had similar ideas about doing an afrocentric public affairs show that was more creatively produced, youth oriented, with a hip-hop type aesthetic to it. It turned into Not Channel Zero.

BFR: In your personal view where do you see the group going?

CP: Its hard to say. When our work first started it grew out of not having access to betacam, 16mm cameras or being able to produce broadcast-quality programming. It was the lack of resources that created our style. And folks now know us and have expectations. We're just branching out from VHS to Hi-8 and we have community screenings throughout the city at DCTV, Hunter College, NYU. There are two problems with getting more into the community. The first is getting access to a space. The second is getting known so people will want you to come. We're still at that grassroots level where we can't put $1,000 into advertising and $500 into renting a space or quit our day jobs to be video producers. We make just enough for us to think about how to stay true to our original intent without sacrificing the quality of the work.

BFR: There's an interesting paradox with public access. You can be in 300 places at once but folks can turn you on or off as they choose but its difficult to go to those same cities and find an organization or space willing to sponsor a workshop.

CP: It's true. We get mail from all across the country responding to our programming which helps us gauge how folks see it. It's still hard getting invited to those spaces. We're really trying to figure out new and creative ways to get the work out whether its on PBS or some other avenue.

BFR: Let's talk about you.

CP: My work usually reflects things that agitate me. I try to find issues people are concerned about or I feel have an effect on the African-American community at large. Then I try to figure out how to use it in a program. When I did my first work _Respect Is Due_, I had worked on a number of music videos and was really bothered by the way women were portrayed. At the same time I was also working with a lot of youth and was able to see the direct correlation between the videos and their attitudes, particularly how they dealt with each other and their families.

BFR: Do you think artists and filmmakers have to be conscious of who is going to see their work?

CP: Yes and I try to make responsible art.

BFR: Besides _Our House: Gays and Lesbians In the Hood_, what other productions have you been involved in?

CP: I honestly didn't do the film _Our House:_
**Gays and Lesbians in the Hood** just for NCZ, but because these were issues that were really on my mind. I was able to use the show as a vehicle to get these views out. Fortunately my style is similar to the NCZ style and I was able to incorporate a lot of things into the show that are tied to my personal vision and ideas. I've worked as co-producer, camera and editor on other productions. Particularly, *Black Women Sexual Politics and the Revolution, Our House.* On *The Summa of '91* show I produced a segment on the St. John's Rape Case.

**BFR: You work with Paper Tiger and a number of other groups. Do they allow you to express other parts of yourself?**

**CP:** Good question. Presently I'm working at Paper Tiger-TV which gives me the opportunity to see how to distribute videos. Its been an interesting training ground. I've been working with my sorority, Delta Sigma Theta, which has a teen mentoring program currently putting six teens through college. We were involved with a couple Black film organizations but became disillusioned with what they had to offer.

**BFR: Did those experiences teach you any lessons?**

**CP:** I think in general you have to be more careful with the independent media circles. You originally get the sense that we're one big happy family and we're all there to help each other but its not necessarily true. I think you have to be very creative, very focused in your ideas and goals and how to attain them because there really aren't that many resources out there.

**BFR: There are very few you can actually plug into.**

**CP:** On the other hand, you can end up getting used when actually you hoped to be a viable resource for someone or some other group. It makes me realize we have to be more careful about who we align ourselves with or we whom consider supportive.

**THOMAS POOLE**

**BFR:** Tell me about the last year or two for Not Channel Zero.

**TP:** As media artist and community activist we've been really struggling with being in the spotlight.

**BFR:** But it's been positive, right?

**TP:** Mostly. But I recently did a CBS report and got chopped a bit on national tv. It was embarrassing. I should know better. This is what I do for a living, right? They asked me to talk for 25 minutes about public access and what it means to be an independent producer. But when you see the report you hear me saying, "You can do whatever you want with public access." Then you see this woman's butt and the story segues into a segment on fringe public access, using my voice as a lead-in.

**BFR:** They caught you. So how did you get involved with the media?

**TP:** George was working at Black Filmmaker Foundation and I was volunteering there working on the newsletter. I had finished at Hunter College in Black and Puerto Rican studies. I liked BFF because you could hang out in the office and meet people. That's how I met George. Larry Carty was there as well. When I needed titles for the piece, I remembered Cyrille who had volunteered her computer, so it was very coincidental how we met.

**BFR:** And the rest is history.

**TP:** Not exactly. We had to find out if we could work together first. We started doing these Black Planet Production film festivals. We showed Chuck Stone music videos, Drop Squad Productions, Leslie Harris's trailer for *Just Another Girl on the IRT.* At one of the shows Greg Tate came, Trey Ellis, Cassandra Wilson came by, friends and family. We thought we were the vanguard. You can tell Public Enemy was very big then. We called ourselves "Black Planet." The cable show was "Not Channel Zero." Even our opening song has a Public Enemy beat to it, which Madonna eventually coopted.

**BFR:** Justify my video.

**TP:** We showed the same work at screenings at BFF. After that Jackie Dolly, Joan Baker and Donna Golden joined the group. Later during a video screening at Hunter College we met Art Jones who's piece *Media Assassin* was about Public Enemy and featured rap-activist Harry Allen. He really influenced our style. When he graduated from Purchase Art came on into the fold.

**BFR:** So how did all this lead to the work you are doing?

**TP:** We wanted to do work where we could express ourselves but still get shown as easily as possible. We knew we couldn't get on commercial tv because of the need for sponsors. We were newjacks and decided to just make something. See if it works first and put it on public access. That's what it's there for, right? We had nothing to lose.

**BFR:** Has the group moved out of the 1/2 broken camera mode yet?

**TP:** That was the camera my aunt bought me for my birthday. Its going into the Not Channel Zero hall of fame. Now we're into hi-8 broken camera. Actually, the group is really focusing on getting together a business plan and getting our work touring and out there like some other collectives—more film festivals, churches and community centers, which we originally said our work is about. We plan more media literacy events and dialogues with our communities about the things they are watching.

**BFR:** So public access will no longer be the big priority?

**TP:** We want it all. We want to stay on public access because we like being on tv and its free. Some folks say, "Ah, nobody watches it." But a lot of people do. Even with the irregular scheduling. There are 750,000 households in New York hooked up with cable. That's a potential of three to four million people. So if we're lucky, lets say 500 people watch one of our shows. You try and
call up 500 people to come out to a screening. I think we make a good enough show that if folks are scanning they'll stop and watch.

BFR: Any last words?
TP: Hopefully we'll have our own space soon. In the past NCZ has been like a rolling stone—wherever we laid our hat was our home. Lastly, I want to give a shout out to Deep Dish and Paper Tiger who have hooked us up with space. The National Black Programming Consortium pulled together some youth workshops for us and Rise N Shine who was there from the beginning. You can't do this kind of media alone in these times.

GEORGE SOSA

BFR: This year BPP is planning a grassroots tour of twelve cities in the U.S. What are your aims for this upcoming tour?
GS: Besides helping us expand some of our services and consolidating our infrastructure and distribution we want to let people see and hear the messages we're trying to communicate. Not that Not Channel Zero says anything new but we feel our approach is a fresh one which tries to be increasingly accessible to its audience.

BFR: Without being pandering.
GS: Compared to the relationship most audiences have to mediamakers, our approach could be considered revolutionary. We try to break down walls and demystify the people making commercial media. If those people are able to empower certain groups with their work then we should be able to study what they do and make it work for us.

BFR: Music writer and mediamaker Dream Hampton speaks about the state of hip-hop and used the term "modern urban guerrillas" to define today's "raptavists."

Does BPP see themselves in this arena?
GS: I don't know if I'd want to categorize ourselves with any kind of term because they end up being very loaded and meaning different things to different people. I'd say we are committed individuals who are willing to sacrifice a lot of time and effort toward making their community more able to think for itself.

BFR: BPP gives media literacy workshop, production training seminars and screening series. Explain the group's role as an agent of change?
GS: We all must address the issue of power dynamics and how it can be changed. If we are to make a substantive difference in people's lives we have to begin talking about sharing power, that collective effort which is going to be the foundation for major political change. I'm not saying overthrow the power structure but let's access how it works and modify it so more people can benefit from it.

Reggie Woolery is co-founder of Third Eye Media Group.

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The Cultural Warrior: A Conversation With Thomas Allen Harris

by Reggie Woolery

Thomas Allen Harris is a cultural warrior whose work as a film/videomaker, performance artist, writer and curator explores Black subjectivity, the complexities of desire and the spirit of evolution. Harris has 7 years in television experience as producer for such shows as The Eleventh Hour and Thirteen Live at WNET New York. His independent works include All in the Family, an experimental documentary that explores Black families through the eyes of lesbian and gay siblings, Heaven, Earth, and Hell, an experimental, narrative documentary visu-poem that charts a course through African, Christian, and Native American cosmologies, telling a tale of love, loss and search for freedom. Harris collaborated with video artist Philip Mallory Jones on First World Order, which presents a global perspective on the African diaspora. Black Body is a meditation exploring the body's physical and psychic interaction with the legacy of oppression. Harris's current work, Splash, explores identity, fantasy and desire in the pre-adolescence of a Black gay man.

Harris converses with Reggie Woolery for Black Film Review at Banff Centre for the Arts, Banff, Alberta, Canada where both took part in a 6-week Nomad media arts residency and on a park bench in Prospect Park, Brooklyn.
Thomas Harris: Of all these Black artists don't any of them have a vision of revolution?

Black Film Review: It doesn't sell.
My next piece, I want to do on Angela Davis...

ANGELA DAVIS? It's about hair, right? Isn't it always with Black people?

Aren’t there 15 blo pcs and revisionist films out on Back Icons? Audre Lorde, Malcolm X, Martin Luther King, Josephine Baker, James Baldwin, Ida B. Wells, Langston Hughes, Thomas Sankara. What could you do different with Angela Davis?

Well, I'd take her out of that context, that 60s context. And I feel the best way to do that is put her right back in it. I'm just really interested in talking about the spirit of revolution.

We talked about this before. Once you start getting too close to revolution you start getting afraid.

I used my fear quota up before I was five, for life. It's true I can be mouthing off about revolution, but am I really ready for revolution?

It reminds me of the Last Poets in the Malcolm documentary, "Niggas Is 'fraid of revolution."

And that is exactly what The Beloved and The Lover's character are about in my current film Heaven, Earth and Hell, the relationship with the colonizer. You get a little crumb of bread and you're content with that shit. But I really think people are evolving out of this. It's time for new ways of being, new ways of seeing. I'm really interested in how Native and African cosmologies, prophecies come into play within that movement. Even how African cosmologies shaped and influenced Catholi-

cism in a major way and Christianity in general. Heaven, Earth and Hell doesn't reject Christianity so much as talks about it in new ways, forces of good vs. evil, forces that build up and forces that tear down, choice and chance as signified by the Elegba character.

In the film you seem to resist the subtext around AIDS, as if that would limit or define too explicitly the work. Talk about that. AIDS/HIV is always a part of the work. I talk specifically about surrendering sexually to someone and the ultimate form of surrender being death. It's not that I didn't want to speak about AIDS but that I wanted to make sure I was being critical about this interracial relationship, this young Black man that goes to Europe in search of his beauty and desire. You have this white figure the Black male character is gallivanting around with who isn't actually The Lover but someone that he has to go through. This massive, frightening symbol of whiteness stands between me and The Lover. The final point in any relationship eventually boils down to this: getting to just you and me.

BFR: This is actually your fifth film/video and you're only 31, and also have just been nominated for a Rockefeller. Do you think you've been successful as an independent filmmaker?

(whispered) I think I've been successful.
Louder!

I think I've been very successful but it takes a lot to be able to recognize that. But I think being alive and moving in a positive direction is being successful.

I ask because unless you recognize what progress you've made you can't encourage others to make that journey. Look at the work you and artist Vejan Lee Smith are doing—personal journey, worked out across the body, influenced by outside forces of therapy, questioning history.

And spirituality. It's hard to maintain the feeling of success when you get that next rejection letter or when you hear someone else is working on a feature project.

After this current film, I think I'm ready to start looking outside me but still keeping true to myself. I've made my political statement in this area, most recently with Black Body. By the way, Black Body was done on the evening of the LA uprisings. I was stuck up in this media center in an all white town, where I was afraid to go outside, go anywhere, because I might have been burned in effigy for all the white folks on tv getting beat up by Black folks. It borrows a little bit from Tony Cokes works.

"Black Celebration?"
Black women’s work, as well. Alice Walker and Toni Morrison come to mind.

That way of speaking shows itself in Splash. Right, where Little Tommy is talked about. It is both a celebration and a painful memory. Ominous and disturbing. That piece began as a PBS-type documentary on Black women’s hair, but then I said ‘Thomas, you always [use to] to play up in your mother’s clothes. Who are you? Where are you in this piece?’ So I constructed this fantasy sequence which later came to dominate the piece. Black audiences seem to really understand that Splash. I guess because it comes from within, that part of us that’s fractured, torn between two different places, two different identities.

At least two.

Exactly. At least two in that fissure.

Wait until the community sees this new piece.

You know that’s right. I’ve been sweating over this film for two years. I thought, ‘Oh my god, I can’t do this film, this is some off the wall shit. Black people are going to hate me, white people are going to try and kill me.’ You know what I’m saying? Then I did it and it’s totally fine. I showed it to my mother and my aunt and they were in it. They may not have understood everything but it kept them fascinated until the end. You have to struggle with it.

You do, once you’re in something like that you wonder how do I get myself the hell out of here. That’s what I found intriguing about it. You just can’t wake up and come out, you need a flash light or something especially when what pulled you in are curiosity, recognition, identification, the spectacle of the performances.

And concern. You’re concerned for the black body in that piece and what’s going to happen to him.

I thought about Manthia Diawara’s essay on Looking for Langston entitled “The Absent One.” You straddle this fence between fear and narcissism, where one moment fear is ever present then it disappears. I’m sure the critiques of the film will range from “chilling” to “self-indulgent.” Along that entire line of race, gender and class, where “the absent one” is, for those who know, the cumulative experience of black bodies from previous works.

Interesting.

This is the nature of the engagement in the film, taking the audience through repetition, ritual and bringing our prejudices to the fore questioning our sense of possibility.

People have told me that these sections are a bit over-narrated, the visuals seem to work, but the text doesn’t allow enough of an exterior reading, a place for folks to insert something not so prescribed. Again, invoking the term “narcissist.” I’m aware of the work on that level as well. The same happens a bit with Splash. I’m working on paring down the reliance on text.

I wonder about your investment in particular answers. African-American and Native ties and Elegba. In fact, there are a number of issues that are presented in an inventive new way. Talk about the nature of class in your work and how that serves partially as context for the narratives.

Well, that talks about coming out of seven years of television and the investment of the filmmaker. Which is as much a story as the film itself. That is the film. The investment of a documentary filmmaker and their subject.

But you turn that around in Splash. Have you had to wrestle with this class question.

Initially I went to Harvard with the notion that it was going to provide me with a certain amount of freedom. I was in pre-med and thought I’d go to an island somewhere and set up a clinic. Do a Gauguin thing. Or at least I’d come out and always be able to get a job. Going to these types of institutions you assume you are a cut above the rest.

The talented tenth.

Exactly, you assume these things, these roles. But at the same time I was very critical of the wealthy people there, particularly the Black middle class who seemed very closed-minded. Even though my mother taught at Bronx Community College, we were working class people. My grandparents were domes-
The transition from independent videographer to feature filmmaker is a challenging one. Cheryl Dunye, whose credits include *She Don't Fade, Janine, The Potluck and the Passion*, is making that stretch. Characteristic of independent filmmakers, her productions have been community affairs. In her words they are, "...not even guerilla style but process shooting." With a production deal for her first feature film under her belt, she prepares to make the leap. Denise Sneed caught up with Dunye in New York.
Black Film Review: Let’s talk about the work you’ve done previously: *Janine, She Don’t Fade* and your new work *The Potluck and the Passion*. There are certain themes that emerge in your work which seem to come from the personal honesty you use to express issues relating to identity politics.

Cheryl Dunye: Well, I’ve been working in video since the late eighties. After a short stint in political theory I decided that the real politicking was going to be done in media. I’m still very angry with the media but a lot has changed. I initially got into it because there was a lack of representation about my identity, a young woman identifying as a lesbian and African-American. I wanted to make a place for that, so I began with some minor experimentation at the under-graduate level. This was in 1989.

And that was your beginning in video? That was the beginning of Cheryl. I submitted my final student work to a couple of festivals. It played a little bit but only under the guise of a student work. In grad school I finally turned the camera on myself and started talking about Janine, a girl I knew from high school. I found out from doing *Don’t Fade* that there are many stories within my story that could be brought to the screen or to the monitor. After some other small projects I decided to turn the camera on myself once again and did a tape called *She Don’t Fade*, in which I play the protagonist, a Black woman searching for the right lover. It was an all in the family type of production that developed out of my community. It was shooting not even guerilla style but process shooting, where I would look at the footage and say ‘Oh, my God’, I definitely need to do this again. Looking for what works and what doesn’t work. It’s a lot of fly talking, a lot of takes, a lot of off-camera remarks, my own personal montage of life, scripted and real.

Your use of real people in your life as part of the process interesting. It helps de-mystify the technical aspects of making film and video. Was that intentional or were these the people who were accessible to you?

It’s a bit of both I must say. Here are real stories that are our stories. How honest can that be, how real can that be. It has since become a strategy. It also stemmed from the lack of money to really get the talent and a lack of access. How was I going to find the Black lesbian girlfriend. What agency carries the look of a young marginal [woman] of mixed identity or a Black lesbian actress? So I just used the family. It was about empowering myself and this community. These people believed that I was capable of doing the project so they worked on it. There was no money involved. It was all done in good faith. There’s a little money involved now, in the sense that all the work is in distribution.

BFR: You and your characters are constantly going in and out of character. For example, in *She Don’t Fade* sometimes characters shift. There’s a woman who played your initial love interest, whose real name must be Wanda, because someone off camera calls her Wanda and she responds.

Yeah, that character's name is Margo.

There is this whole interplay between who these people really are and who the characters are. These elements often merge together.

There’s a lot of things there that we don’t really investigate. Especially dealing with issues of identity and in these hard times when people are striving to be who they want to be and who they’re supposed to be. There’s a lot of space and slippage between that kind of fantasy and the construction of who you really are. What is the difference between who you want to be and who you really want to see. People don’t really articulate that, at least the media has not articulated that. It’s created an illusion. In these days its a total fake reality. There’s nothing that’s true. I want to offer a whole other kind of text.

How do you identify in terms of your identity politics?

Initially a lot of my work talked about issues of race, class, and sexuality because there was little work out there by Black lesbians. What I did for the whole identity of Black lesbian directors is put it out there in a way that drew attention. That notion of identity was useful for a certain period in my work. I am still into it but I’m not necessarily going to limit myself to being the Black lesbian video, filmmaker, artist, because I’m about a lot of other things. Its shifted to being about multiple identities—what are the real politics going on when you put “Black” next to “lesbian”, then you put “lesbian” next to “artist”, then you put “black” next to “artist.” I’m into investigating how they come together in one character and one identity. Is it one identity, or do we have multiple identities.

This new stage came from listening to my Mom talk to me in Mom-voice. She was talking to me when the phone rang. She picked up the phone and immediately changed her voice. She hung up the phone and was like before, speaking in Mom-voice. The question occurred to me: how many voices, how many masks you can put on right in the room, in a day and not even think about it? Being able to shift is really interesting. It’s not just simply about the construction of an identity that we can put a label on. It’s very important that we know what we are, that we have a community we can identify with and that we are about something. There’s a lot of empowerment about identity politics, especially in terms of the rest of the world knowing that this identity exists. An example is the lesbian visibility movement that’s been happening in a lot of magazines and festivals. It’s extremely important for the world to know that, but I think it’s dangerous to limit it at just having a lesbian identity because there’s so many other issues that are being ignored within the lesbian identity. Nobody’s talking about the Black lesbian and why they’re not in half the pictures we see. Nobody’s talking about the interracial couple and their problems. You know they’re just talking about what to me is a simplistic lesbian identity, we’re all holding hands and we’re strong, there’s so many things going on in that. For me it’s necessary to not deconstruct but to examine some of those
I think a lot of people envision their lives as this kind of media spectacle or film. I see my life as a film and I use my life as a film. I don't see any problem with bringing that truth to the screen and adding other things to it.

Filmmaker Cheryl Dunne
produce your first feature film. Talk the film and what the experience is like for you?

Sande Zeig, who runs the New York Gay and Lesbian Film Festival, approached me and said, “Are you ready to do your film?” I said, “Yeah, sure.” I’d been thinking about this project for more than a year and a half. After that, I went into meetings with Good Machine. Because I usually work in this kind of improvisational, non-scripted way, I’ve been up here all summer working with them to learn about scripts, writing and what needs to be done in a film. I’m trying to keep my own style and not turn too commercial but I’m definitely cleaning up my act. The project is called Watermelon Woman, it’s a pseudo-autobiographical documentary. In the script, Cheryl, the name will probably change by the time we shoot it, is an NYU graduate student in the film department working on a documentary about a dark skinned 30’s race movie actresses who became known as “Watermelon Woman” Washington. She starred in a bunch of race movies as well as Hollywood-type movies. I’m going to construct her history. I’ve made her up to do this pseudo-documentary about her.

Is she a composite character?
She’s basically a fictional character. For example, the way she got the name Watermelon Woman goes all the way back to the slave narrative story about Melon Woman, a woman who escapes slavery by hiding in the melon patch, which is all again fake. She was also involved in the Harlem Renaissance as a poet for a minute. I can make her queer too, have her in a speakeasy in drag. Watermelon Woman was about a lot of different things, she was outside the Hollywood community and took jobs she shouldn’t have taken. She’s is a character who’s kind of funny, whose life seems like a comedy—the sad clown, portraying the marginal kind of stuff I’ve been talking about.

Are you at liberty to talk about the budget?
Good Machine has a no budget production philosophy. That means budgets of $50,000 and under. They try to use every resource available. My past projects have been done with less than a couple thousand dollars. I naively thought that I could do it for basically nothing. I’m also applying for grants.

I know that Good Machine has a good reputation among the independent community nationally. Are they working with any other African-American directors or producers?

Good Machine is composed of the efforts of Ted Hope, who’s produced all of Hal Hartley’s stuff with Hal Hartley and James Schamus, a Columbia professor who has worked with the queer Apparatus Group, which includes Tom Kalin who did Swoon and Todd Haynes who did Poison. James worked with Ang Lee on The Wedding Banquet. It’s amazing for them to cross over that way. I don’t know if that is going to happen with my work, it’s a whole different type of thing, but I know their name is out there and they have the attention. They’re also working with Ayoka Chenzira, a Black woman director who teaches at City College in New York. They’re just starting to work with people of color.

And what kind of support do they provide?
They have a reputation for working with no-budget but they have crews, access to equipment and other deals. Also, they help to distribute the work. They do self distribution. That’s where a lot of people lose out, in the sales and distribution. If you do it yourself you save a lot of money, that’s the only way you can make money actually. They offer cheap equipment, cheap film stock and everything that their office can provide relating to budget line breakdowns and all the other things I don’t know about film. It’s good that I’m working with them because my project will get done. I know that it’s guaranteed as long as I keep up the good faith and keep working on it.

I know that you’re interested in involving women of color in your production. Are there people you have been talking to?
The notion of my working with the family has not changed. There are other Black lesbians I really want to get involved in the project. Yvonne Welbon who did Making of Daughters of the Dust, and this tape called Monique, is a really good producer. I want to use her for her production skills to helping me to organize my stuff. My style has been wearing all the hats as producer, director, writer, crew, grip, gaffer and I can’t do that and don’t want to do that anymore. Aarin Burch who’s involved with Frameline and the San Francisco gay and Lesbian Festival and is also a filmmaker in her own right, actually called me up and asked if I needed any help. There’s a woman named Michele Crenshaw, a union assistant camera technician, who worked on Home Alone and Home Alone 2. She might be the director of photography on my project. There’s Shari Frilot who worked at WNET in New York and Shu Lea Chang who just shot a feature film. I think it is really important for sisters to help each other out. And I hope that everyone will get something out of it beyond my project being done.

What’s next?
Well, after I finish the project, I can have a moment of silence. After i finish the project I hope to do another project. Depending on the success of Watermelon Woman I’ll either become an academic or I’ll make another film. And I still want to make videos. I believe there’s a lot to do in video and that there’s a lot to what $2.90 and a postal mailer can do for a community that does not have access to media. Right now, I’m completing a new video project with an installation artist named Christina Deustch. We took a piece of my performance work called “Complicated Flashes,” where I talk about interracial desire and combined it with interviews of each other, the Cheryl Dunye talking head type thing along with some of her own dream text. Then I’ve yet to investigated my own family, I’ve talked about my community family but I haven’t explored my family and our connections to Liberia. What I do know is that I definitely want to be able to make media, all kinds of media, not just film. There’s a lot for me to do.
Earlier this year, Sankofa won a jury prize for cinematography at the Festival of Pan African Cinema and Television.

For the movie, Gerima used a narrative style that occasionally . . .

By E. Assata Wright
...borrows from the documentary genre. Tony Stafford, film executive, has said that Gerima’s work “smash(es) the tenets of polite naturalism...[and] eschews traditional genre distinctions between fiction and documentary.” Ironically, given the enduring popularity of Hollywood’s New-Jack-Boy-N-the-City-Menacing-Society genre, which uses a pseudo-documentary filmic style, movies like *Sankofa* are at risk of being overshadowed.

As much as the Video Soul X Generation may hate to admit it, history has taught that there is much to be learned from the past. Not just the glory years everyone likes to romanticize about. You know, the noble days when everyone and his neighbor was a king or queen. Or the radical 60s when everybody had a shotgun, a beret, and a leather jacket, and marched in the streets with Huey. I mean those in between years. Those years, those hundreds of thousands of years that fell somewhere between the Nile and Newton. It’s important to learn from these years as well, and not just for what they can teach about the past, but also for what they can teach about the present.

One might consider these points while viewing Haile Gerima’s latest feature length film, *Sankofa*. The theme of returning home is a recurring one in Gerima’s films, particularly this one. “Sankofa” is an Akan word that means “to return to the past in order to go forward.” Told from the perspective of a Eurocentric Black woman condemned to re-live slavery, the film is a story about self-awareness and a journey home in search of pan-African consciousness.

Early in the film it becomes clear that Gerima, who is Ethiopian, is employing a familiar genre—the slave drama—to subvert conventional assumptions about identity, race, and class within our own society. Gerima, who wrote, directed, and co-produced *Sankofa* with Shirikiana Aina, agrees the film is less about slavery, per se, than a commentary on contemporary sociopolitical dynamics. He says he wanted to use “slavery as a landscape” to bring into sharper focus the issues African Americans need to address today. “I see the contemporary echoes of the past,” he says. “If you look at America as a plantation, then you can codify the different classes and interest groups within the society.
Filmmaker, Haile Gerima

"I think the industry backs young people who are not the real intellectual, cultural, artistic products of the Black community. The Black community has always had a conflict, historically, as I observe it, [where] white America...intervenes and recruits their own guards."

Filmmaker, Haile Gerima
[and] only a handful of Afro-Americans hold executive positions with film studios or television networks."

Gerima also charges that Hollywood suppresses indigenous debate within Black communities and he indicts the industry for selecting cultural representatives who don’t challenge the status quo. These Hollywood approved screenwriters and directors, he says, make movies that are ultimately marketed as “the Black reality.”

“I think the industry backs young people who are not the real intellectual, cultural, artistic products of the Black community. The Black community has always had a conflict, historically, as I observe it, [where] white America intervenes and recruits their own guards. But there have always been Black Americans in [the arts] that are nurtured by the community. And the industry is incapable of allowing those artistic, intellectual sensitivities emerge to help the society to transform. What they do is pre-empt those local, nurtured African Americans and bring in their own version. They do the same with Black leadership and they do in the artistic world.”

The films these movie marionettes make, Gerima says, perpetuate the same Tom n’Jemima stereotypes Hollywood has produced in the past. The only difference today is Black directors have been hired to add a little masala to the mix. Gerima says that, “industry-backed African-American films are nothing but tour guides for the non-resident Black bourgeoisie and white Americans to visit the ‘terrible’ Black community.”

Clearly, Gerima intends for Sankofa to expand the boundaries of Black representation in ways that include more diverse, realistic, and empowering images and, in turn, enable Black audiences to see themselves in new ways that are divorced from dominant images.

Gerima reminds one of a street corner minister preaching the gospel to passersby and possible converts. His arguments are not without merit. But without a congregation, a regular pulpit, and, lord knows, a collection plate or two—in short, without the institutional support needed to spread his message to a wider audience—his converts will be few.

Gerima himself knows this. Therefore it should not be surprising that he advocates the re-creation of an independent Black film industry. For although Gerima doesn’t believe Hollywood-made movies can challenge us to re-think power relations, he says he doesn’t believe the industry and “the system” are omnipotent. Rather, he places the responsibility for recuperating Black images where he says it belongs: in the Black community.

Some critics have argued that it is necessary to have both independent Black cinema and Hollywood insiders, but Gerima says industry-made movies will forever be compromised in ways that betray our history and identities. The only alternative, he says, is to create an alternative film culture which allows us to reconstruct our image of ourselves and our relationships to one another. This alternative film culture, Gerima says, could help us to transform ourselves and re-work power relations within the society.

Not that we didn’t have an independent film industry before. Recall ing an earlier period, Gerima points out that African Americans allowed Hollywood to suck the life out of the Black independent film industry of the 1920s/1930s. By this time Black theater owners and filmmakers, notably Oscar Micheaux, had built a successful industry that was fueled and supported by Black actors, businessmen, newspaper critics, and audiences. But once Hollywood realized there was a growing audience of Black movie-goers, particularly in Northern industrial cities, it started including Black actors as extras and supporting characters in its films. Segregation laws were relaxed somewhat, thus allowing Blacks to attend theaters that had previously catered only to whites. Audiences and actors alike abandoned this independent cinema to participate in the dominant film culture.

Now the situation is reversed. Hollywood rediscovered Black people in the mid-1980s, and since then it has built up a sizable Black audience that will turn out for any Spike Joint or ghetto vehicle released. Gerima is advocating that contemporary independent filmmakers “recapture” this Black audience that has been nurtured on Hollywood’s ocular junk food, and nourish it with a new film culture.

Before we can accomplish this, he says, we must divest ourselves from the cinematic standards that have been set by Hollywood. As movie audiences we have grown accustomed to the dazzling, and expensive, film sets and special effects that come with million dollar, big studio productions. Similarly, we have bought into the star crazy mentality which uses big name individuals to draw ticket buyers to the box office. Gerima says these are among the superfluous frills we must abandon if we are to develop an alternative African American film culture. “We have to build up independent institutions, however modest and small they are,” Gerima says, “and build them—forever—without any doubt that they are legitimate. We could build an amazing culture of (film) production outside the existing system if we wisely invest in each others’ dreams and visions.”

Specifically, what Gerima is
calling for is a low budget film culture that is informed by minimalism. For example, during the making of Sankofa, when he realized additional money would not be forthcoming, Gerima couldn't pay his film crew the wages he wanted, couldn't employ certain color dissolves and special effects, and an entire section of the film had to be cut. He also had enough money to make only one print of the film. Despite these sacrifices, Sankofa, and other low budget films, demonstrate that it is possible to abandon the slick, glossy Hollywood aesthetic in favor of one that speaks more directly to the needs of Black people.

African Americans would embrace such a film culture, Gerima says, if mobilized by our cultural and political leadership. “When a film comes out (critics) are there to review the film. Very sad, because to me (the critics’) role should always be on a continual basis. People who write about film should always be there, alert, activating the community—even in the absence of films. It is the making of a movie, creating the conditions to have more movies being made within the Black community, that makes the community be activated. Similarly, organizations like the NAACP, instead of begging Hollywood, could do fundraising for Black artists in the Black community. Instead of marching, they could put their money in Black films.”

For Gerima, Sankofa—which he considers to be “a turning point and an amalgamation” of everything he has done to date—represents his own consciousness raising experiences and “homecoming.” The son of an insurgent Ethiopian playwright, Gerima did a stint in the Peace Corps, which he calls his period of “volunteer colonialism,” before coming to the U.S. in the late 1960s. He says he was influenced by the radical, militant African American culture he found when he arrived, and was deeply influenced by the Black arts movement that was afoot at the time. “It was the best time, historically, for me to have come to America,” he says. “The Black movement engulfed me and hijacked me out of my submissive colonial position. Out of that I developed [the theme of] ‘the return,’ the ‘journey.’ So, all of my films are about returning. I am deeply indebted to this period of Black American history.”

He carried this radical sentiment into UCLA, where, as a film student, he began researching and writing Sankofa. Throughout the 70s and early 80s Gerima wrote (and re-wrote) the script, and traveled to the southern U.S., Venezuela, Martinique, Cuba, and Jamaica to learn about American slavery. In 1985 he began raising money to produce the film, which he completed last year.

Thus far, Sankofa—Gerima’s eighth feature length film—has been shown in Germany, Italy, Burkina Faso, New York, Los Angeles, Washington, D.C. and Baltimore. By the end of this year, Gerima plans to show it in Ghana, South Africa, Tunisia and Los Angeles (again.) Hopefully, when another print of the movie is made, it will circulate to more cities and audiences. Until then, Gerima is entering Sankofa in selected film festivals around the world and is distributing the movie to local markets himself. Not surprisingly, all the major U.S. film distribution companies have labeled Sankofa a “Black history” or “Black culture” movie—which they apparently consider to be stigmas—and have refused to distribute it.

Interestingly, white Americans in the Hollywood film industry establishment appear to be alone in this assessment of Sankofa. White audiences in Europe have appreciated the film and found it to be relevant to their lives. For example, German audiences have discovered that African American slavery is a fitting metaphor for other institutions and patterns of behavior based on oppression. Because of Sankofa’s strong themes of identity, resistance, and struggle, Germans are using the film as a point of departure for debates on ethnic relations there.

Finally, and perhaps more important to Gerima, people of African descent also are claiming the film. For example, after a screening of Sankofa in Ouagadougou [Burkina Faso], several Black audience members sent him a taped message telling him how much the movie meant to them. A preview screening of a draft version of the movie elicited a similar response from a predominantly Black audience at Syracuse University. And Gerima’s film crew told him, after he apologized for not being able to pay them more than he did, that simply working on Sankofa and learning more about African and African American history was payment enough.

Gerima says the approximate 20 years it took to make Sankofa, with the resulting struggle and sacrifice, would not have been worth it, “if there hadn’t been a community of people who said, ‘Okay, you made this film. You brought it here and from here we will take it.’ Things like this make you say, ‘I’ll make my next film, too. I’ll regroup.’ What makes you want to make another film is the way [your films] materialize at the end. The feedback, the embracing is what repairs you.”

E. Assata Wright is a freelance journalist in Washington, D.C.
Guinean David Achkar's father was a dancer in the *Ballet Africains* during the continent-wide independence movement in the 1950's. A prominent figure in the struggle to assert African independence, he became part of the Guinean movement led by Sekou Toure, then a champion of pan-Africanism.

*Marouf Achkar in prison writing the journal from which much of the film's text is drawn.*
Upon independence in 1958, Marof Achkar, of Guinean and Lebanese descent, became UN ambassador and moved to New York with his métis (mixed culture) wife and family. David was born there in 1960. In 1968, Marof Achkar was recalled by the increasingly brutal Sekou Toure regime and disappeared into the notorious prison Camp Boiro. His family was exiled, unable to know his fate until many years later, after Toure's death and the institution of more open government.

Allah Tantou is a film that probes the officially forgotten, and, by reviving old controversies, raises urgent questions about human rights and good government. It is also an intensely personal film.

Achkar's film is a set of meditations on the world his father knew and a reimagining of the past, including his father's experience under torture. To accomplish his vision, Achkar combines scenes from his family's home movies and newsreel footage featuring his father with scenes in which an actor plays the part of the imprisoned Achkar. Material for these scenes comes from letters the family was only given a few years ago. Achkar gradually emerges both as an individual of profound integrity and as an example of a movement infused with idealism and betrayed into despair.

Like Lumumba: Portrait of a Prophet, a film about the great independence leader by Haitian Raoul Peck (who grew up in Congo/Zaire) and John Akomfrah's fictional but deeply personal Testament, Allah Tantou makes intense links between personal and public history. This resort has become a powerful tool for young filmmakers to reassess the recent African past, and their artistic role as spokespersons for the society.

David Achkar: I've lived in Paris for 17 years. Over the last ten years, I've been a writer and actor for plays and an assistant to a Black film director from Martinique living in Paris. That's how I got acquainted with filmmaking.

When I first went into the letters I knew it was going to be painful, and then something happened that I'm still questioning. I unplugged something in my head. Suddenly I was just working on documents; it was no longer my father.

David Acktar, director Allah Tantou

Would you say the film has a theme or message?

My film is addressing the question of what we in Africa did with the independence that we fought for. It's also the story of a man being held, and seeing his whole political past, and trying to find out what went wrong and why.

How has the film been received in Guinea?

It was well received. People who have been in Camp Boiro or who had relatives there say, "That's what it really was like." There is Sekou Toure as the myth and Toure as the leader. At the time we needed strong myths, because otherwise Africa never would have liberated itself. But at the same time we have to see the reality of the failure of the system, the dysfunction, in Guinea. Those who had been tortured wanted to see the torturers and the effect of torture. I didn't want to do that—it was too easy. The only way you hear that in the film is from the voices of people crying. If you understood the language, you could hear they're crying out for their mothers. Grown men, 40, 50 years old, crying out for their mother. It's stronger to put it that way than try for sentimentality.

BFR: Do you see yourself as part of a wider movement aesthetically, a movement to use and reinterpret personal and official visual documents?

I'm part of an international movement in the sense that a lot of people have these photographs at home, these home movies. They're always questioning these photos and some of us use them in films. Every time you look at a picture you have a past that comes back to you. I've seen more work like this—Raoul Peck's film, Lumumba: Portrait of a Prophet, for instance. What a film like this says is that "history" is a collection of "little histories," petites histoires. I'm a métis who doesn't have a country. I am black in Paris and white in Africa. Under these circumstances, you have to imagine even your own nostalgia. You create an image of your past that doesn't exist; you have always a compulsion to recreate things. But at the
The Vision, The Voice

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Cameroonian filmmaker Jean-Marie Teno’s latest film, *Afrique, Je Te Plumerei*, a feature-length documentary and a pointed critique of neocolonialism, is designed to provoke and to outrage. The title, “Africa, I’ll pull out your feathers,” is a twist on a French children’s song.

The filmmaker employs image essays; eloquent, sardonic pastiches of colonial and independence-era newsreel footage, and even a fictional character to make his points. He recalls fallen heroes of independence such as Lumumba and Nkrumah, and reminds the viewer of the fierce ideals of early independence movements. He explores the interiors of embassy and national libraries, universities and booksellers’ stalls to take the pulse of national culture. Teno, who has made several short and politically pointed films before this, has made a career of sorts out of saying the impermissible.

Black Film Review: How did you get such a controversial film made?
Jean-Marie Teno: In the beginning, I proposed to look at how writers have resisted throughout history in Cameroon. But when I got home journalists were embattled, and I said, “How can a state be so violent?” The film became more and more political. I realized censorship was always to secure cultural domination, leading to economic domination for the whole century. All the people who challenged this were crushed.

I got money from all over Europe. Ninety-five percent of the funding comes from Europe. France provided a third of the budget; the German TV channel ZDF and the government of Italy; and the Unitarians, and I got lots of other little grants. It finally cost 1.6 French Francs, between $250,000-$300,000.

What is the basic theme of your documentary?
I think freedom is also taking care of ourselves and the community. The problem in Africa is that we are not controlling what we are producing in our community. We have so called political independence but when you do not have economic independence you are not really free. Now thirty years later you have young people who are trying to control education, the culture, the economy; we are looking for cultural liberation. My own contribution is my own history, the stories I heard.
Has your film been seen in Cameroon?
No, but it has been shown in other African countries. It is not a simple situation. You don’t have the government on one side and the people on the other. You have people who are working on one side, and the vast majority of the people on the other. Sometimes you can have the government supporting you. The situation is very complicated, especially now. Maybe in the months to come the film will find a venue in the Cameroon.

What’s been holding it up?
The problem is that the film was going to be looked at by the Board of Censorship. I sent the film to the board and I haven’t had an answer. Censorship has existed since colonial times, not just on film, but also on the press, and every aspect of life.

You use some fictional characters in the film, do you not?
The TV executive is an actor. The rest are real people.

Are you making an indictment?
When I’m making a film I’m not trying to blame one or another person. I’m reading history from a personal point of view, personal as an individual and personal from the Southern point of view, because history is always been written by the winners, I’m proposing a completely different point of view. The winners are not all from the European or American perspective. To have many people identifying themselves so strongly with the winners, even in the south, and not looking at what they really are, is such a tragedy.

Are you concerned that you might, with your critique, be giving ammunition to the enemy?
One of the great successes of the colonialists was to be able to cut across the boundaries and to create a small class of oppressors, who would carry on their job when they retired. And what is marvelous now, is that at the end of the century they are putting all the blame on this little class they created. They are saying, “Look at what these people are doing to their countries,” but “these people” are the complete creation of the colonialists. All the people who could govern were killed. In Cameroon, the people were killed in the 60s or expelled, like Lumumba was in Congo. Nkrumah, all these people were crushed. Nkrumah said that you can’t keep these [colonially drawn] boundaries. He was a panafrikanist; he knew boundaries would lead to the fall of Africa again. The dignity of a Black man in America would ultimately

“Now we are creating first class citizens in the North [of Cameroon] and second class in the South [of Cameroon.] I read an article published in the New York Times saying that it was time again to restart colonialism because African countries couldn’t govern themselves. Africa has never been free, and nowhere in the world can the Black man really exist”

Filmmaker Jean-Marie Teno
lead to the dignity of a Black man in Africa. And yet people now think these ideas are irrelevant.

Now we are creating first class citizens in the North [of Cameroon] and second class culture in the South [of Cameroon.] I read an article published in the New York Times saying that it was time again to restart colonialism because African countries couldn't govern themselves. Africa has never been free, and nowhere in the world can the Black man really exist; we have always been linked to a dead end. My film is a reading of history that urges us to avoid becoming a dead end.

How did your political convictions affect your stylistic choices?

When I started this film I knew exactly what I wanted to say. I wanted a subjective camera, a personal thing. I had all these elements and wondered how to make them all work. I started thinking back in my childhood; I saw myself as a hybrid. The Indian influence, the American comics I was reading, the French education in school, the fact I wasn't growing up in my native village but a new growing town—how was it possible to give a sense of postmodernity? It just came and the film is completely me in that sense. I didn't have to answer any stylistic questions. It couldn't be another way.

You place a heavy emphasis on cultural colonialism.

The culture is the first thing that the colonists seek to destroy to exploit the country. They know the culture is the only way of resisting. People have no references, so they can be culturally dependent and always identify themselves with the colonialists. The colonists can give them the image of who they think they are. They achieved that perfectly in Africa. Some Africans don't even realize they're talking about themselves when they refer to other Africans. Now the work is to decolonize Africa culturally.

What has the reception to the film been?

I went to Ouagadougou [for the Pan African Cinema and Television Festival (FESPACO), the biennial film festival in Ouagadougou, Burkina Faso] with this film, and it was amazing. My main concern was to have the film shown. It was made with a lot of French money. No one knew what the content would be. When the film was done I got a lot of criticism—We gave you money to make a movie about literature, and it came out different." But I had a good friend who was responsible for the Canal France Internationale, which provides free images to Africa. The guy was very impressed by the film. He bought it and sent it to all Francophone TV free. I was happy, because I wanted the film to be shown. It was shown on African television, except in Cameroon of course. So in Ouagadougou people from all over said, "We saw your wonderful film on TV, it's so important for us that the film is made now." It was screened during FESPACO, and although it had been shown on TV three weeks before, it was packed, and they gave it a standing ovation.

I didn't expect a prize. At the Carthage Film Festival, there was a jury of civil servants, and someone came out and said, "We had a big problem with yours because you criticized so many people who give money to Africa. It was a very important film and we personally agreed with it, but we're civil servants." Why did you decide to make a feature-length documentary?

It's as long as it is for many reasons. Originally German TV wanted a 90 minute film. In the process of making the film, to really take my audience through all the issues I really had to go that long. I don't think the film will be distributed in the cinema. I'm working to spread a message, a way of seeing things that is different from what is shown every day on TV, and also have people rethink a lot of things. I'm making subversion.

Do you think of your work as part of a movement or tendency in African cinema?

In the African cinema you have many tendencies. There are people who come to cinema to make money. These people are being encouraged by foreign countries—this is a new form of African cinema. Now we are getting a lot of support from Europe from people who are supporting films, having festivals, talking about African films, and are responsible for the orientation of our art. They can say, "This is a wonderful film." Sometimes they come to consensus on a particular film, and suddenly a young guy who is just coming in, they can make him somebody. They can orient African film toward a dead end.

You have people making resistance—I am very happy making resistance. I didn't come to make movies to make a living. I could have been an engineer. But I want to express ideas and to challenge through films. The challenge is not making money; becoming famous is not a goal for me. I am against camouflage. Do what you want to do and don't represent African cinema. There's so much bullshit about so-called "African cinema" by people who don't know anything about cinema and who are manipulated and don't even realize it.

How are they manipulated?

For instance, there are films that support a very superficial view of Africa. People say, "This is young and new and challenging issues," but the real issues are not there. The real issue is a complete cultural decolonization. We are reaching the end of the century, and people are dying and dying, and it's almost as if we are not concerned. It's unbelievable.

What are you working on now?

And I'm going to work on a big project on African-Americans. I want to investigate what we have in common, what the future is going to look like, and what is our common destiny. Where is the word "African-American" leading us? What will the next step be? I'm trying to collect elements with my Hi-8. If my material turns out well, I'll transfer it to 16mm.
From the fingerpopping opening to sly ending glance, it’s clear *Quartier Mozart* is a movie with attitude, and its director has it, too. Cameroonian first-time director Jean-Pierre Bekolo takes the historic mandate of African cinema—to tell our own stories to ourselves—and moves it inside youth culture. This is a bold move, in a cinema that has rarely even acknowledged the existence of such a phenomenon.

In a foreign-but-familiar ‘hood, Quartier Mozart, a sassy young woman—with the help of a local sorceress—enters the body of teen hunk My Guy (Serge Amougou), who proceeds to romance the highly hormonal cop’s daughter (Sandrine Ola’a). Along the way to true love, the film stops to pay calculated attention to the hypocrisy and corruption of the adult world and the uneasy ways varying traditions mix, as well as to provide crisp moral messages on the need for respect and self-respect. Lessons about women’s rights and dignity are driven home with particular enthusiasm.

*Quartier Mozart* has the earnestness and defiance that has characterized recent African-American, youth-oriented, independent work, and that also informs the kind of music video that comes with a conscience. It is, then, no surprise that Bekolo has worked making music videos and shot the film on a budget the size of some productions’ light bills ($300,000)—thanks in part to his own neighborhood’s cooperation and his mother’s cooking.

“I’ve tried to make a popular film where people can see themselves and be amused,” he has said. “African cinema won’t have a future, if it does not reach an African public.” Indeed, one serious problem with the largely sober African cinema historically has been reaching a public otherwise lured to the theater with international popcorn epics.

Popularity doesn’t have to equate with inauthenticity. As the film signals with its title—a name Bekolo meant to signal cultural interpenetration—these days Africa participates in a world culture targeted at restless youth and registering their justifiable discontent.

A film like Amadou Seck’s recent *Saaraba* expresses, on behalf of young people, frustration and rage at the moral legacy of socio-political corruption. *Quartier Mozart* doesn’t get mad. It gets even.

The film earned the *Prix Afrique du Creation* award at Cannes (the Cannes jury called it “audacious”), a prize at Locarno in 1992, and a special jury prize at the Montreal Film Festival, also in 1992.
production. The prize in Cannes helped get money to finish paying for it. It cost $300,000. The problem is that we have to spend money in a very expensive place, because the money is to be used in France.

**How was the film received?**

In Cameroon, I had two kinds of reactions. The *petit bourgeois* said that the language of the film was street language and that it does not give a good image of Cameroon. But at the same time common people liked it a lot. I was happy with the reaction in general, from all kinds of people, not just young people. The reactions are quite similar internationally.

**And how has distribution been?**

It went into commercial theaters. There are many theaters in Cameroon. In Yaounde there are ten but there are two main ones. I have had a hard time distributing the film. The theater owners buy a package for the whole year so they weren't interested in showing my film. I didn't ask them to buy it, just to share profits. So I showed *Quartier Mozart* in Yaounde in the town hall for two weeks. It was a special arrangement from the government; they took 10 percent. It was a good deal for them. I had a little theater in Douala, Cameroon's second city.

**What did you mean to say with the title?**

The problem I wanted to talk about in the film is Africa adopting western culture, which is now part of African culture. When you say "Quartier Mozart" in Cameroon no one thinks about the composer. The title is just to point out the way western culture is now a part of ours. The way people are dressed, the French they're speaking is a French with an African language structure underneath it.

**You also seem to have a critique of elders and of some traditions.**

I don't think that polygamy is something bad, but I'm trying to show problems with the way it is practiced. For me the police chief depicted in the film is taking advantage. Young people are criticizing the hypocrisy of their elders. Polygamy was not traditionally practiced like that—you couldn't throw away a woman like that. In general, I just want us to make clear which way we want to follow, not just using western culture and tradition for whatever you want.

**How has your family reacted to the film?**

My father is a police chief, and also apolygamist so it was a bit tense. I was involved in that conflict for a long time, and it was very clear that I took my mother's side. Maybe that's why I made movies, because if I were on good terms with my father I could be an engineer making a good salary. But instead I went to work for TV.

**Are other directors searching for ways to describe the emerging culture of young Africans?**

There's no place to confront our work at all, to talk about aesthetics. There's the Panafircan Cinema Festival [FESPACO] in Ouagadougou every two years, but even there we don't talk much about aesthetics. You don't see yourself participating in a larger trend.

**Did you think in terms of working on a new aesthetic when you were filming?**

To begin with, I didn't want to work with people in France that most Africans work with. It has an influence on what you are doing. I'm also not in the tradition of African realism. I studied cinema at school, but I don't feel that's what drew me to film. I spent two years working as a video editor in Cameroon TV, which only started in 1985. After that I had a workshop for two years in Paris doing all kind of work in video. I edited a lot of music videos. Then I decided to make my own script.

**Do you prefer to work in film rather than video?**

I don't see a big difference between TV and film. I just used the medium to tell a story. But in the film I tried not to just tell a story. I wanted to tell a story in a very elliptical way, with a lot of editing and music, to let people feel happy, like when we are listening to a record. *Do the Right Thing* helped me with the dialogue in my film. I was used to working with video and images, but I didn't know how to write dialogue. Then in Spike Lee's film I saw three men talking, "I gonna do this, I gonna do that, when you gonna do what?" And that's the same thing you'd say in Africa but in French. So that liberated me. I was shocked by the way Africans speak French in the movies. It's like in books and not believable. Vulgar speech has a kind of strength, and the logic of people is in language. Also, *Spike Lee's Gotta Have It: Inside Guerrilla Filmmaking* taught me a lot about production and how to deal with many problems while preparing the films. In my film I also used this technique of talking straight to the camera, as a kind of statement. I wanted people to stand in front of the camera and say, "if you don't like it, too bad." My film is not a political film, but I want to put this kind of freedom into people, this kind of strength.

**So you see this film as a political act?**

I feel very politically involved. That's why I wanted to make films. I had to take a position very early against something at home. It gives a style to what I'm trying to do. All the style in *Quartier Mozart* came from that political aspect. I didn't want it to be a message movie. I wanted the style to carry the message. I want it to be entertaining. Charlie Chaplin was one of the most political filmmakers—funny and powerful.

**Do you have plans for another film?**

I don't know right now because I have no money to produce at the moment. But it's not a matter of the subject. I'm interested in a film biography of [deposed and assassinated Burkina Faso political leader] Thomas Sankara, which should be done as soon as possible. Children are in the street struggling for change. What they miss the most is people who believe in them, and Sankara was one of them. I don't think because one man died the experiment was a failure. There's something in movies that can restore this hope for change. The problem is that it will be an expensive film and I don't want to do it in an underground way.

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David Achkar, Jean-Marie Teno and Jean-Pierre Bekolo spoke with Pat Aufderheide at the Washington, D.C. International Film Festival (Filmfest DC) in April 1993. Aufderheide is an assistant professor in the School of Communications at The American University School of Communications and a senior editor of *In These Times* newspaper.
all my life I've known
these men/...
angry torsos
daring crackers or a fool to
look the wrong way/no just look
a funny way & it'd be over
or just begun

from Ntozake Shange's
poem/introduction for
Robert Mapplethorpe's
Black Book, photographs of Black men

Spike Lee's Malcolm X begins
with the image of an outsized
American flag seared by flames
that slowly form an X. The flag
burning is intercut with a replay of
familiar footage of Black motorist
Rodney King being beaten by the four
white policemen whose acquittal on
brutality charges by an all-white jury
sparked riots. The sequence unfolds
with the mystery and pathos of a
visual spell, as though Lee has found
the formula for rearranging the
iconography of another Black man's
body being brutalized by whites. This
time around, the familiar spectacle
not only loses its power to terrorize and "warn" Black spectators but serves to vindicate us. Rodney King is beaten as the flag that has come to stand for white hegemony burns, branded with the sign for our 400 year witness in the New World. I was so gripped by this opening credit sequence, played against a soundtrack of a Malcolm X speech, I almost forgot to notice an important name missing from the credits: James Baldwin’s.

The basis for Lee’s Malcolm X movie is a James Baldwin script that knocked around Hollywood for twenty-three years. The project began at Columbia Studios in 1968, when Baldwin was the most famous Black writer in the world, the jazzy zeitgeist capable of turning the making of "Malcolm X" into an event. During an era in which it looked like progress to have Sidney Poitier starring in the pallid integrationist bedtime story, Guess Who’s Coming to Dinner, Baldwin checked into the Beverly Hills Hotel and began a battle that would end in his angry departure for Europe and the project being shelved indefinitely by its producer. The project moved from Columbia when producer Marvin Worth, a former New York jazz act handler and Jewish hipster, turned the project around at Warner’s. At Warner’s Worth set aside Baldwin’s script and turned to other projects including Lenny, The Rose and a documentary on Malcolm.

In 1990, Malcolm X was finally going up under the direction of Norman Jewison. While working on Jungle Fever Lee successfully lobbied to take Malcolm X away from the white director, arguing that the project required a Black sensibility. Worth, still the film’s producer, agreed. Malcolm X was a martyred hero, the epitome of the Black man who wouldn’t sell out. The making of his story even as a Hollywood product could not afford to look like a sell out. From the time Worth set out to buy the rights to the Malcolm X story in 1967 until he made the deal with Lee, he’s been sensitive to the issue of Black credibility with regard to this project. With Baldwin, in any case, Worth bargained for more than he gained.

All the gargantuan seductions of Hollywood were not enough to compromise Baldwin’s vision. Worth’s difficulties with Baldwin were drawn around Baldwin’s demand for aesthetic control over the picture. Since he was the only Black person involved with guiding this important Black cultural story to the screen, Baldwin felt he had the cultural prerogative over Worth and the studio executives. Moreover, Baldwin saw the project as his own opportunity to bring the moral subpoena he had already advanced through his novels, essays, and plays deeper into the American consciousness via a popular film. Baldwin strove to bring a degree of Black subjectivity never before attempted in Hollywood. Worth wanted a picture that could do all that as long as it made a lot of money. He and Baldwin argued constantly about aesthetical matters. Baldwin thought he could make a non-Hollywood movie in Hollywood, bargaining on the political spirit of the times and the goodwill of Worth. Before Baldwin walked out on the project, he told Worth, "You can make my picture or no picture." Worth brought in a white writer, Arnold Perl, to rewrite Baldwin’s material. The day Baldwin rode to the airport, fed up and furious, there had been talk of making the film a vehicle for former football star Jim Brown.

It’s taken all these years for Black culture to produce a figure like Spike Lee—part Baldwin, part Baraka, part Don King. "I was born to direct this picture," said Lee. "I would have killed anybody who stood in the way." With regard to the remark, he named Warner head-whitemen Terry Simel and Bob Daley as two motherfuckers who could have been dead behind the making of Malcolm. Spike Lee is a new jack race man. And Papa don’t take no mess.

But Malcolm X is not Mr. Baldwin’s movie, however, it’s Mr. Lee’s. Ultimately, Lee’s aesthetic control does not at all equal Baldwin’s. Baldwin knew Malcolm, for one thing. Baldwin and Malcolm X met first in the 50s and over the years forged a friendship in which there was apparently a great deal of mutual love and respect. Malcolm X called himself the Black revolution’s warrior. He named Baldwin the poet. At the heart of Baldwin’s script is a sensibility seeking to reveal the humanity of Black masculinity and the beauty, even saintliness, of Black people. There is a homosocial tension that rides through Baldwin’s script and culminates in a scene in which an Egyptian man instructs a naked Malcolm in wrapping the traditional Isar and Rida cloths in preparation for pilgrimage to Mecca.

In a telephone conversation with Spike Lee a few months before the theatrical release of Malcolm X, I cited the Egyptian scene, asking Lee if his rewrite of Baldwin’s script had preserved Baldwin’s sensibilities. Lee shot back, “I’m not gay.”

I don’t know what Lee meant. Perhaps it was only another of his rhetorical wisecracks, yet I couldn’t help but think suddenly with grief and astonishment about how much of Baldwin’s prodigious human gift has been shunned by Black people, both during the author’s life and still,
because of contempt for the particular sexual witness Baldwin bore.

While *Malcolm X* was still in postproduction, long before rumors hit the street that Lee had cannibalized the Baldwin script and was turning in the sort of high-entertainment value film Worth wanted all along, Gloria Baldwin, executor of her late brother’s estate, was repudiating the whole affair. She petitioned an arbitration committee of the Writer’s Guild to remove her brother’s name from the Lee/Worth movie. “They are not doing Jimmie’s script. I don’t blame Spike, he’s young,” Gloria Baldwin told me late in the spring of 1992. She won the arbitration. I was thinking about all this, of course, when I saw *Malcolm X* for the first time.

*Malcolm X* is a big Hollywood picture, done in the epic narrative style—as in gargantuan. Lee’s films are not known for their thematic subtleties and during all of the film’s three hours and 21 minutes Lee makes little time for them here. I hasten to add *Malcolm X* is a great Hollywood picture. This is easily the most lavish Hollywood treatment I’ve seen afforded a Black subject since Berry Gordy bought out Paramount and released his own cut of *Lady Sings the Blues*. Before that, there are no “Black” films to compare with Lee’s *Malcolm X* except possibly *Cabin in the Sky* or *Stormy Weather*.

*Malcolm X* has everything one could want of a Hollywood epic. It has a tour de force performance by its star, Denzel Washington. Washington has the dapper grace and physical magnetism of a sexy, young Sonny Rollins. In many of the scenes I felt I was watching not an actor but an acolyte possessed by Malcolm’s spirit. Denzel Washington may prove to be the most engaging Black male actor since Paul Robeson, and no director has yet put Washington’s talent to better use than Lee. There’s the shimmering original score by Terence Blanchard. The cinematography is miraculous, playing with every conceivable color and temper of light. But there’s also the ridiculously over-choreographed dance sequence at the Roseland Ballroom replete with darkly hi-jinx supplied by Lee’s anachronistic Shorty and an overweight Black girl who’s staked him out as her main squeeze. And there’s the trivializing depiction of interracial desire, the sensationalized drug use and crime. Russian Roulette, anyone? The film would have been worthy of all the hype about telling Black kids to cut school to see it had Lee spent more time portraying Malcolm’s self-education process in prison beyond his writing out every definition from Webster’s Dictionary. (Although admittedly the scene where Malcolm and another Black inmate look up the words black and white in Webster’s is a show-stopper.) And where else but in the imagination of this film’s director would an army of exquisite young Black women array themselves in 1950s Harlem to hawk blow jobs to dirty old white men in broad daylight?

One scene Baldwin and Worth fought over was the one where Malcolm meets the seasoned racketeer West Indian Archie for the first time at Small’s Paradise Bar. In Baldwin’s original treatment, as well as in his restored script published under the title *One Day When I Was Lost*, Baldwin uses the scene to portray the making of a bond between the elder player and the adrift country boy dazzled by the big city. In Baldwin’s hands, the scene is really about West Indian Archie’s love for the young man, whom he sees a son and a younger version of himself. The older man is not casting to exploit Malcolm. He is attempting to “save” Malcolm with the only means he has. In failing to sensationalize the criminal element of West Indian Archie’s world at this juncture, Baldwin articulates the knowledge that though Black male identity itself has been historically criminalized in America, Black men have risen and continue to rise to make extravagant gestures of love and grace. The Malcolm whom Baldwin portrays in this scene is gentlemanly, quixotic, and winning. Baldwin constructs Malcolm, from West Indian Archie’s perspective, as a living jewel in the rough. All the qualities that would in time seduce the attention of thousands of people around the world toward his message and presence are there in that one scene.

Worth wished to disrupt the scene with the imposition of a sudden bar fight over something as niggerish as stepping on another man’s shoes and bad-mouthing somebody’s mama. Malcolm has to make an impressive macho display before he can be taken under West Indian Archie’s mentorship. This, Worth reasoned, would make the scene more entertaining. Lee not only goes Worth’s way with the scene, but goes even further to ease any sense of homosocial desire by imposing upon the scene a barmaid named Honey. We see Honey—not West Indian Archie—witness Malcolm bludgeon another Black man with a whiskey bottle for talking about his Mama.

West Indian Archie’s looking at Malcolm at this point is only implied when he orders Malcolm a drink from his table. As if that didn’t effectively eradicate any trace of a homosocial subtext from the scene, Lee has Malcolm join West Indian Archie’s table, drink in hand, introducing
himself disrespectfully, "...and I ain’t no punk."

Lee’s film constantly favors a Black hyper-masculinist aesthetic over the homosocial sensibilities of Baldwin’s film treatment. In scene after scene, Lee manipulates the symbols of Black machismo without interrogation as when at a rally the camera rests on a giant placard reading WE MUST PROTECT OUR MOST VALUABLE PROPERTY—BLACK WOMEN and then moves on. Or when pronouncements are left unchallenged about the inferiority of Black women’s power and place. Or when white women are summarily equated with pork and cigarettes. Most intriguing, for me, however, is the film’s unwillingness to interrogate the fact that Malcolm X’s assassination was fratricidal; that, perhaps the hyper-masculinist values of the Nation of Islam contributed to the murder of this Black jewel by his own brothers. More over, it is well worth interrogating to what extent the hyper-masculinity of contemporary popular Black male culture contributes to the current pandemic of Black male fratricide. How many Malcolms do we lose daily in the streets of LA, Newark, the Bronx, Philadelphia, and DC as young brothers act out the original gangster fantasies of overpaid rap icons and Hollywood and TV superspades? Without vision the people perish. Indeed.

There is an awkward scene in the prison shower where the Black inmate named Baines shames Malcolm about his use of hair straightener, exhorting him to embrace Islam. In the Baldwin script, Malcolm “luxuriates himself in the shower,” then stands wrapped in a towel talking easily with the other Black prisoners until the conk he has laid in his head begins to heat. Lee plays the scene this way: the camera pulls back from Malcolm standing beneath the shower. A half-wall conspicuously guards his body from the spectator’s gaze. Malcolm shuts off the shower and walks closer to the camera undercover of the wall and puts on a towel. Baines enters. Malcolm begins with Baines as he does with West Indian Archie, with protestations that he’s not a punk and not to be “hyped.” Baines tells Malcolm that Elijah Muhammad can free Malcolm from prison—from the prison of his mind. There’s a real tension between the scene’s verbal discourse about a Black messiah and Black liberation and the over-stylized spectacle of Washington hiding behind a towel. It is an instance of stasis in which the film both denies and contains charged issues of Black male sexual identity and the racial and gender politics of looking. Whatever Lee’s intention may have been here, the scene re-inscribes the Black males body as the site of taboo, subjection and self-surveillance.

From the stunning opening credit sequence to the big finish with actress Mary Alice turning into activist Nelson Mandela, Lee lays down scenes like the tracks on a Stevie Wonder double album. This is a highly programmatic and entertaining film. It is great pop art. But like other pop products its messages are often written in cartoon strokes. Scenes of the KKK are almost direct quotes from similar scenes in epic from Birth of a Nation to Lady Sings the Blues. Such scenes in Malcolm X seem obligatory rather than revelatory and do nothing to explode already-familiar ichnography. Lee quotes the melodramatic Lady Sings the Blues again when he depicts Malcolm X about to be let out of solitary confinement after a harrowing stint. The scene looks remarkably like the scene where Diana Ross busts her relaxer kicking dope on the floor of a padded cell.

By the time the film was creaking into its final 20 minutes, I felt I’d had enough and was about to step out when an image of Baldwin flashed on the screen in a flurry of 1960s documentary images. But the image passed quickly, and then contemporary Black vendors proffered Malcolm X caps, T-shirts, jackets, and jewelry on Lenox Avenue as Ossie Davis’ voiceover road the crescendo. Then came the schoolroom of Black boys and girls shouting: “I’m Malcolm X.”

Aretha Franklin sang over the final credits. I sat in the brightening theater. I wondered how come no white kids got to shout, “I’m Malcolm X” in the finale? Or at least one Native-, Hispanic-, or Asian-American kid? In a film that works as hard as Lee’s to hardsell its subject to a popular audience, its unconscientiousizable to snub so large a segment of that audience. White people paid their $7.50; they ought to get to be Malcolm X, too. It’s hard to tell if this film finds its apotheosis in Black pride or commercialism.

Baldwin loved Malcolm X. That love is evident on every page of his script. It is hard to tell if Lee has any more love for Malcolm X than Madonna has for Marilyn Monroe. Lee is an artist, entrepreneur, and young warrior who seems invincible. He seems poised to spin endless commercial successes. Who but Lee has proven himself so profoundly? Six important films in nearly as many years.

Still, for all its overtures to commercialism, the verdict on the film’s ultimate “success” is not yet in. Malcolm X needed to outsell the low-budget Boyz in the Hood to legitimize big budget Black movie-making to people like Simel and Daley. As of this writing Malcolm continued on page 44

continued on page 44
A Review of
Warrior Marks
by Leasa Farrar-Frazer

Alice Walker has lent her name and celebrity to the cause against female genital mutilation, also referred to as female circumcision or excision. The documentary film Warrior Marks, with director/filmmaker Pratibha Parmar and Walker as executive producer, had its Washington, D.C. premiere at Howard University's Cramton Auditorium in November, 1993. What should have been a stirring screening and discussion, however, missed the mark.

Warrior Marks opens with Walker's testimony of her own personal tragedy: as a child she was blinded in one eye as a result of the hostile actions of her elder brother. She speaks eloquently of the emotional alienation within her family and the sense of betrayal by those she believed were her protectors. Her brother was not reprimanded nor was she given the emotional support needed for the trauma she endured. Walker used this event in her childhood as an analogy for and point of departure into the discussion of the centuries old tradition of female genital mutilation which is practiced in parts of Africa, the Middle East and India. As a point of departure, it served the film well. The only problem is that Walker doesn't "depart." She stayed center stage through the remainder of the film while interviewing a number of African women and political activists. The actual act of circumcision was

One of the more compelling interviews was with Aminata Diop, a young woman who fled her home in Mali and sought asylum in France rather than submit to genital mutilation.

continued on page 42
symbolically depicted by footage of a skillful dancer which was interspersed throughout the film.

Alice Walker is one of America’s brightest and most illustrious writers. With great wisdom and insight her brilliant works have explored the dynamics of womanist thought and ideology. The literary world is richer thanks to her contributions. A film journalist she is not. The subject of female genital mutilation could be served better with a journalistic approach that explores all aspects of the practice. As I watched Warrior Marks I wondered, where was the hard hitting footage? Where were the interviews with the young girls as they were being taken to the surgery hut or upon their return? Where was the male voice? Any male voice. Why wasn’t I exploding with rage? Perhaps the key lay in the subhead used on the flyer for the film: “a gentle film—a harsh reality.” There is nothing gentle about female genital mutilation.

One of the more compelling interviews was with Aminata Diop, a young woman who fled her home in Mali and sought asylum in France rather than submit to the procedure. I was touched by her tragedy and appalled to learn that her father divorced her mother, believing her responsible for his daughter’s actions. Diop’s sadness and alienation are real, as is her wish to return and rescue her sisters who remain in Mali. I found it disconcerting to see Walker holding and patting this woman’s hands, the audience’s emotions were being unnecessarily manipulated.

There is a prescribed protocol for obtaining information in traditional Africa which is not unlike our traditional African American culture. Only through proper introduction, time, sincerity and reciprocation does one gain access to information. And then, not secret knowledge. A genuine, nonjudgmental desire to understand all aspects of one’s inquiry is also essential. When more light could have been shed on the elderly women who perform the surgeries, the opportunity was over-shadowed by the film’s mission to expose the practice as barbaric. Sadly, the humanity of these elderly women was not shared with the audience. I say this not in defense of the practice, rather in acknowledgment of the bond among women. As Walker pointed out in a television interview, these elderly women, who have themselves been mutilated, were born into this vocation. They are as much victims of this oppression as the women they mutilate. In the same interview, Walker described a powerful moment when, while sitting with these women, she comes to this realization. It was a transformative moment of truth for her that should have been captured on film and shared with the audience. It would not have detracted from the urgent message of Warrior Marks but would have further illuminated the cultural complexity of this practice for the women involved. It could have perhaps begun to explain their complicity, which is one of the more perplexing mysteries of this practice for the Western observer.

Instead, the viewer was left with the impression that these were merely primitive old women who obtain sadistic pleasure from administering this agonizing pain.

If Walker had taken herself out of Warrior Marks and allowed the women to speak for themselves, while trusting the audience to come to its own humanistic conclusion, it would have made a much stronger statement and ultimately a better film. The pain of these women and their struggle to eradicate this practice speaks volumes without the kind of celebrity endorsement used in the film. Nothing could do more to engage the public and world health organizations than the voices of women resonating with the anguish of this monolithic abuse of their human rights.

Yes, a film exposing every painful nuance and shameful statistic affecting the lives, and in far too many instances the deaths, of women subjected to genital mutilation needs to be made. However, Warrior Marks is not that film. At its very best, with the continued efforts of such organizations as Forward International and the Inter-African Committee, it will put female genital mutilation in the forefront of world attention. Alice Walker and Pratibha Parmar must be applauded for a courageous first step. But it may be more effective in the long run for celebrities to cut the apron strings, work diligently behind the scenes and allow the causes they support to take center stage on their own.

Warrior Marks constitutes a missed opportunity. It is a film that obscures the fact that the lives of the women at stake are ultimately more important than Walker’s own personal vision.
In Memory of Jacqueline Shearer

November 30, 1946 - November 26, 1993
by Kathe Sandler

Jacqueline Shearer was part of an important wave of African-American women independent filmmakers who began making low-budget films in the late 1970s against great obstacles—ground breaking films that redefined African-American life and reality and went against the grain. Her peers include Michelle Parkerson, the late Kathleen Collins, Ayoka Chenzira, Monica Freeman and Julie Dash, to name a few.

I met Jackie at a gathering of independent filmmakers, where she was the only other Black woman present. I had heard about her film *A Minor Altercation* (1978), a drama about the Boston school-busing crisis, and I took the opportunity to introduce myself. We both were distributing our works in the (now defunct) Black Filmmaker Foundation’s Distribution Services. We made an immediate connection that resulted in friendship, a working relationship and

She believed in mentoring, and she brought people of color, particularly Black people and Black women along with her at every stage to work in domains that had formerly been reserved for white men.
a process of mentoring from which I was able to benefit. Down to earth, modest and generous with her time, Jackie helped me in a myriad of ways. I sought her advice about fundraising, directing crews, realizing my vision in film and infusing my work with an oppositional perspective to the mainstream despite external resistance of all kinds.

Jackie provided me and others with a solid base of affirmation and encouragement. She had penetrating insights into situations and people. She was a low-key, intensely focused person with strong progressive politics about race, class and gender. She was acutely aware of the barriers facing all people of color and women in film. Her artistic vision incorporated her political and social views throughout her career. She believed in mentoring, and she brought people of color, particularly Black people and Black women along with her at every stage to work in domains that had formerly been reserved for white men.

Originally from Boston, Jackie graduated from Brandeis University with B.A. in American History. She was co-founder of Boston Newsreel, a community-based film organization. She lectured throughout the country at film centers and universities. Jackie understood the value of working within the system to effect change, and she did so in an uncompromising fashion. On panels like the New York State Council for the Arts, the National Endowment for the Humanities, the Corporation for Public Broadcasting and the Funding Exchange, she helped ensure that the funding pie was being distributed fairly and to projects that stood for something. Her most recent insider role was as board chair and president of the Independent Television Service.

For more than a decade, Addie and the Pink Carnation was Jackie’s passion. It was her feature film in development about the first union of Black women domestic workers back in the 1930s that she managed to scrupulously research and write the script over many years. Though she never had the opportunity to shoot Addie and the Pink Carnation, at 46 she managed to leave behind an impressive body of films including two of the programs for Eyes on the Prize II the PBS series on the Civil Rights Movement—“The Keys to the Kingdom” and “The Promised Land” (1989). She also directed, produced and wrote a stunning portrait of the first troop of Black Union soldiers during the Civil War—The Massachusetts 54th Colored Infantry (1991) for the PBS’s “The American Experience.”

Jackie had been a kind of godmother to my documentary film A Question of Color, which took many years to make. When I finally completed it, I learned that Jackie was seriously ill. Had she not lost her battle against cancer, she would have made many more wonderful and important films and continued her role as a positive and accessible mentor in a field where Black women mentors are desperately needed. She would have continued her mission as an advocate for the independent film community and a nurturer of issue-oriented works by people of color. Jackie will be honored in the years to come as the powerful and pioneering African American woman independent filmmaker she was.

Donations can be made to the Jackie Shearer Scholarship Fund, c/o The Funding Exchange, 666 Broadway, New York, NY 10012.

Kathe Sandler is a writer living in New York. This article first appeared in the Village Voice and is reprinted with author’s permission.

MALCOLM, continued from page 40 X has yet to exceed Boyz in receipts. It was thought that the revived interest of the 1993 Academy Award season might push the film into the vicinity of its expected receipt revenues, but given the Academy’s decision to once again snub Lee, those expectations were not fulfilled. In any case, Lee’s current deal with Warner Brothers should find him moving along with new projects for some time. Fortunately, this isn’t 1978 when the supposed poor box office of the Gordy/Universal 23 million dollar production of The Wiz had critics hanging death crepe over Black cinema, as Motown made preparations to move into television. Lee is too strong to go out that way. There is very little chance that 15 years from now Lee’s production company will assault us with anything as bankrupt as the Motown TV miniseries The Jacksons: An American Dream. However, though he is deservedly gaining a respect and a relatively secure position among Hollywood players, Lee has yet to become a witness like Baldwin.

But with Malcolm X, he shows signs of getting there. One moment in the film that provides the sort of witness I have in mind occurs in the scene where Angela Bassett playing Betty Shabazz weeps over her slain husband in the Audubon Ballroom. Her weeping is like a song that gets down into the soul of everything. It’s an incredible moment. In the 60s the brothers used to preach “It’s nation building time.” In the 80s Jesse Jackson, once he’d decided to make a career of running for president, tried to convince Blacks “our time has come.” It wasn’t until I heard Bassett’s ghostly cries that I realized what time it really is. It’s healing time.

Don Belon is a writer living in St. Paul, Minnesota.
The eighth annual National Educational Media Market, a leading international market for non-theatrical and educational film, video and multimedia programs is now accepting submissions. This one-of-a-kind market brings together viewing and deal-making in Oakland, CA each spring. Distributors, institutional, broadcast and consumer markets worldwide. Films, videos, interactive media and works-in-progress are welcomed. The National Educational Media Market will take place May 18-20, 1994 at Oakland Convention Center in Oakland, CA, as part of the National Educational Film & Video Festival. Fee is $60 per entry. Submission deadline is April 8.

FOR MORE INFORMATION
CONTACT:
Kate Spohr
National Educational Media Market
655 Thirteenth Street
Oakland, CA 94612-1220
Tel 510.465.6885
Fax 510.465.2835

The National Alliance for Media Arts & Culture requests submissions for the 1994 Media Arts Fund to support excellence in the media arts of film, video, audio, and multimedia on a local statewide or regional, and national basis. Up to $175,000 will be awarded. Grants will generally range between $2,000 and $10,000. Submission deadline: April 8.

FOR FURTHER INFORMATION AND ELIGIBILITY REQUIREMENTS PLEASE CONTACT:
NAMAC
655 13th Street, Suite 201
Oakland, CA 94612
Tel 510.451.2717
The National Endowment for the Humanities invites proposals to plan, script and produce a broadcast quality film on the subject of American pluralism. Proposals
will be judged on the depth and creativity of the approach, the demonstrated artistic and technical capability of the applicant, and the quality of the scholarly collaboration with the filmmakers. Submission deadline: April 8.

FOR MORE INFORMATION
CONTACT:
National Endowment for the Humanities
Division of Public Programs
Humanities Projects in Media, Room 420
1100 Pennsylvania Avenues, N.W.
Washington, D.C. 20506
Tel 202.606.8278

APRIL 22-24
The 2nd Annual Vintage Poster Art Convention & Auction takes place the weekend of April 22-24 in Cleveland, Ohio at the Sheraton Airport Hotel. Dealers from all over the world will be on hand to buy, sell and trade movie memorabilia. Richard Allen, noted film poster historian and author, will speak on poster history and art. An auction of rare and original movie items begins at 6:30 p.m. on Saturday, April 23. Admission is $8 a day.

FOR MORE INFORMATION
CALL:
Last Moving Picture Company
2044 Euclid Ave.
Cleveland, OH 44115
Tel 216.718.1821

APRIL 30
The New York Film Academy and the Black Filmmaker Foundation is sponsoring scholarship contest for young filmmakers. The contest offers youths an opportunity to speak out against senseless violence by asking them to design a sixty second commercial on the theme “Stop the Violence: Shoot Film, Not People.” Participants must submit either a one page treatment or a two minute VHS tape for their proposed commercial. The first place winner will receive a $5,000 scholarship to the New York Film Academy. Submission deadline: April 30.

FOR MORE INFORMATION
CONTACT:
Stop the Violence: Shoot Film, Not People
New York Film Academy/Black Filmmaker Foundation
Tribeca Film Center
375 Greenwich Street
New York, NY 10013

MAY 17-22
The 1994 National Educational Film & Video Festival conference takes place in Oakland, Ca. More than 50 award-winning documentaries, features, animation and shorts will screen. Educational film distributors, producers, publishers and developers will be in attendance. Seminars will cover a wide range of topics of importance to educational media.

FOR REGISTRATION AND PARTICIPATION INFORMATION
CONTACT:
National Educational Film & Video Festival
655 Thirteenth Street
Oakland, CA 94612
Tel 510.465.6885
Fax 510.465.2835

JUNE
JUNE 1
CALL FOR PAPERS: A special edition of Research in African Literature will be devoted to African Cinema.

PLEASE SUBMIT ENTRIES DEALING WITH AFRICAN FILM OR AFRICAN FILM CRITICISM TO:
Kenneth W. Harrow
Dept. of English
Morril Hall
Michigan State University
East Lansing, MI 48824-1036
same time, the memory is still based on some real image, and that is what gives us the courage to go on.

Was it difficult working on your own father's letters and images?

When I first went into the letters I knew it was going to be painful, and then something happened that I'm still questioning. I unplugged something in my head. Suddenly I was just working on documents; it was no longer my father. I was just like any scriptwriter who was saying, "This will work and this won't." And then I made the film. I shot it with my cousin [in the role of my father]. He didn't even see the home movies, although I asked him if he wanted to. On the set, we didn't have enough film to make mistakes, to do three or four takes. I said, "Do it the way you want to because we don't have time." And then a year passed. I felt I would only exist once I had finished the film. Then we had a meeting with the editor and sound mixer. The sound mixer, a woman, said, "Let your mother come." I work with a lot of women, the team was 90 percent women. When we watched it, my mother cried a lot. She has the film and has a private projection two or three times a month. It is like therapy for her, and now it's therapy for my brothers and sisters. We ended up with two hours of film. The film ratio was one-to-one. I kept the film in a drawer for a year, trying to raise money. I went to Amnesty International and they said I shouldn't have made a film about my father. I thought that was nonsense. No death is more beautiful than another. I made the film look like a short feature and $30,000 from the French Minister of Cinema. They thought I was making a feature but the script was pretty much what you have on the screen. And I got money from the French Ministry of Cooperation. Guinea wanted to back the film but didn't have any money, so the money came from France and was routed through Guinea. They gave $50,000. The whole thing came up to $80,000. There was a lot of work on the editing, and we had to blow up the 8mm.

Do you think video is an option for this kind of production?

8mm works better than video. These films are 30 years old, and there's not a scratch on them. [Video] is easy to work in, but the image is flat. It's good for news, but cinema isn't news.

What are you doing next?

I'm working on a feature, the story of a musician, supposedly myself. I work in studios as a musician; I sing and produce records for fun. It's the story of someone who lives in Paris, is caught in a jam and goes back to Africa. He goes upriver to find his mythical roots. The river is used in a semiological way; he's going up the river of his memory, to solve the problem of being considered black in France and white in Africa. I don't want to deal with political issues. I just want to have this homeboy going to Africa. He's falling in love with a woman. That's the problem with it. I had some people tell me it's very frustrating because he doesn't find anything, and I say, "That's the frustration I live." Allah Tantou is frustrating too, because the last words are, "It was on a day like this that I was shot in 1971," and then it ends. Why do I end films like this? Maybe it's because I'm a sad person.

How did you finance the film?

It was made in two stages. The first stage only cost $4,000 which was family money. People contributed for free, because I was letting them express themselves. We ended up with two hours of film. The film ratio was one-to-one. I kept the film in a drawer for a year, trying to raise money. I went to Amnesty International and they said I shouldn't have made a film about my father. I thought that was nonsense. No death is more beautiful than another. I made the film look like a short feature and $30,000 from the French Minister of Cinema. They thought I was making a feature but the script was pretty much what you have on the screen. And I got money from the French Ministry of Cooperation. Guinea wanted to back the film but didn't have any money, so the money came from France and was routed through Guinea. They gave $50,000. The whole thing came up to $80,000. There was a lot of work on the editing, and we had to blow up the 8mm.

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The hottest 10 year old in the movie industry. (apologies Anna Paquin)

Black Film Review
10th anniversary

Look for it on your local news stand.
See page 31 in this issue to subscribe.
Begin...or
Continue Your Family Tradition
at UDC

A 50-year family tradition lived on in the Allen Family when Kimberly Graves received a psychology degree, magna cum laude, last year at the University of the District of Columbia. Her mother, Desiree Graves, earned a quality education at UDC when it was called D.C. Teachers College. Kimberly's grandmother, Edith M. Allen, was in the Class of 1940 at Miner Teachers College, another UDC predecessor.

UDC roots go back to 1851 with its founding as Myrtilla Miner "school for colored girls". Teaching was the respectable option for coeds in Mrs. Allen's generation. Career choices for women were hardly greater for Kimberly's mother. Both made their mark as educators.

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