

Chapter Four

African Americans and American Film



The cinematic **representations** of African Americans analyzed in this chapter provide specific historical examples of this book's central tenets. By studying the history of these images, one can see that there have been significant changes in the ways that African Americans have been depicted on screen. Those varying images are in many ways reflective of the changing social climate of twentieth-century America, and those images have, in turn, contributed to the ways in which all Americans understand the meaning of "African American-ness." While contemporary Hollywood images of African Americans may still leave something to be desired, they are recognizably different from the images presented during the early days of cinema. Opportunities for African Americans within the film industry are also measurably different than they were during previous eras. However, since American cinema for the most part functions under the dominant ideology of **white patriarchal capitalism**, it should not be surprising to discover that most popular film helps maintain dominant cultural attitudes toward African Americans (and issues of race in general). For example, something that has not changed significantly throughout the past century is that there still is a concept of this group, African Americans, as markedly not white, unlike several of the cultural groups surveyed in the last chapter.

African Americans in Early Film

Stereotyped images of African Americans appear in some of the earliest films ever made, including Thomas Edison's *The Watermelon Contest* (1896) and *Sambo and Aunt Jemima* (1897). Many of these exaggerated and derogatory images were borrowed from pre-existing cultural artifacts (books, music, and theater) popular in the so-called **antebellum** (or pre-Civil War) South, where African people (among others) had been routinely treated as chattels and bred as slave labor for over 200 years. Popular cultural images which depicted slaves as less than human greatly aided in their subjugation, for if African Americans could be thought of as beasts in the field, slavery could be justified as a moral economic endeavor. One of the most popular antebellum theatrical entertainments was the **minstrel show**, a type of musical comedy variety show that featured white actors impersonating blacks (or, as discussed in the previous chapter, European immigrants striving to be accepted as white). This tradition of **blackface** continued into the theatrical and cinematic traditions of the twentieth century. Although recent research has revealed many cultural complexities within the blackface tradition, the practice was still dependent upon broad and mostly demeaning stereotypes, being in effect the white man's misguided perception of what black lives were actually like.

Film historian Donald Bogle has identified five stereotypes of African Americans that repeatedly appear in **classical Hollywood films**; several of these are directly traceable to the nineteenth-century minstrel show. The ineffectual and lazy **Coon** stereotype was a foolish, jive-talking simpleton who would do anything to avoid work. The **Uncle Tom** character was a black house slave who faithfully served his white master. Uncle Tom's female counterpart was the **Mammy**, an overweight black woman who took care of the white master's children, without concern for her own. The Coon, Uncle Tom, and Mammy figures all represented black people as childlike, asexual, and happily docile. They were images that directly supported the supposed beneficence of slavery. Once slavery was ended however, the stereotypes turned even more disturbing. The **Tragic Mulatto** was a woman born of a mixed-race marriage or sexual union. She invariably died at the end of her story, punishment for her "sin" of being of mixed race (and for being sexual herself). The **Black Buck** was a brutal, animalistic, and hypermasculine African American man who threatened the white establishment because of his alleged sexual prowess. Both the Tragic Mulatto and the Black Buck stereotypes suggest a psycho-sexual dimension to social prejudice, centered as they are on fears of **miscegenation**, the sexual or romantic mixing of races. The Black Buck stereotype seems to be a reflection of white men's fears about black male power, and especially the fear that black men might brutalize and rape white women in retribution against white slave owners, who had done the same to black women for centuries.

These five stereotypes were prevalent throughout the first decades of film history, perhaps most vividly on view in D. W. Griffith's infamous film, *The Birth*



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In *Birth of a Nation* (1915), a mulatto rabble rouser played by a white actor in dark makeup (right) plays on the sympathies of white liberal politicians; his evil plans include "equal marriage" between the white and black races.

Birth of a Nation, copyright © 1915, Griffith

of *a Nation* (1915). Griffith's film was based upon a novel by Thomas Dixon entitled *The Clansman*; both book and film celebrate the birth of the Ku Klux Klan, a white supremacist group that was responsible throughout much of the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries for waging terrorist attacks on African American people. Griffith's three-hour film was also a breakthrough in epic, emotionally manipulative moviemaking. It uses Hollywood form and style to whip up audience sympathy – and prejudice. *The Birth of a Nation* was so effective at inciting hatred for blacks that it was used for decades as a recruiting tool by the Klan. Certain scenes also employed what Griffith termed "historical reconstructions" of actual events, a stylistic move that allowed the entire film to be perceived by some as documentary truth and not manipulative Hollywood fiction. Even President Woodrow Wilson, mistaking fiction for actuality, allegedly said it was "like writing history with lightning" – surely a powerful metaphor for the ideological effects of cinema.

Throughout *The Birth of a Nation*, African Americans are depicted as lazy, ignorant, vicious, and rapacious. The few "good Negroes" in the film are those who faithfully serve their white masters: a Mammy and an Uncle Tom figure. The

primary villain of the story is a mulatto rabble rouser named Silas Lynch who lusts after white women, a plot point designed to inflame social taboos against interracial relationships. Similarly, in another plot strand, Gus, a Black Buck figure, chases a young white woman through the woods until she throws herself over a cliff in order to preserve her "honor." As was common for the era, both Silas Lynch and Gus were played by white actors in blackface – African Americans were only used as extras in the background scenes. Furthermore, while the story focuses on two noble white families (the Northern Stonemans and the Southern Camerons), black people are more regularly shown as members of unruly mobs, apparently without families. During the film's climax, for example, when black mobs take over the streets, Griffith repeatedly cuts away to tableau shots of good white families endangered by the menace. Erasing images of African American families works further to estrange the black characters from audiences, making them less sympathetic and more animalistic. (Accusing minority groups of having no sense of "family," in order to justify prejudice against them, continues to this day.)

In 1915, the year *The Birth of a Nation* was released, African Americans lived under severe social restrictions brought about by prejudice. In the South, the so-called **Jim Crow Laws** defined in detailed ways that black people were to be afforded unequal treatment, while in the North prejudicial treatment was less legally inscribed but still a fact of everyday life. One aspect of this institutionalized racism was the segregation of community facilities: separate white and black public restrooms, drinking fountains, etc. This included seating in movie houses: except for theaters in African American neighborhoods, blacks were required to sit in balconies or attend separate screenings, segregated from white patrons. Various African Americans did what they could to combat the racism of the era. The **NAACP (National Association for the Advancement of Colored People)** had been founded in 1908 out of a pre-existing group called the Niagara Movement. The NAACP and other groups battled racism in all sectors of American life. They organized protests against *The Birth of a Nation*, but as often happens with the marketing of Hollywood films, such protests actually made the film more successful, as audiences flocked to see the source of the controversy.

A few black filmmakers decided the best way to counter the racist images in *The Birth of a Nation* was to make another film that would show African Americans in a more favorable light. From 1916 to 1918, African American filmmakers struggled to produce *The Birth of a Race* (1918), but because of white patriarchal capitalist control of the industry, the film emerged as a very muddled epic about the current world war. *The Birth of a Race* was a commercial failure, but it did foreshadow the rise of **race movies**, independently produced black-cast films which were distributed to black movie theaters from the late 1910s to the 1950s. (The rise of the race movie coincided with – but was separate from – the **Harlem Renaissance**, a flowering of black art, music, literature, and culture that occurred in the urban north during the 1920s and 1930s.) Compared to Hollywood films, race movies were frequently cheaply made and technically inferior; African Americans were not allowed to enter trade unions to learn skills such as editing or cinematography.

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The most famous is **Micheaux**. M. C. Micheaux, in his own novel *The Homesteader* (1925), *Soul* (1925), *Niggers passing* (1929), and other films were similar. They presented illiterate South-

In the late 1910s, the costly transition to talking. Many of the silent period backers shifted toward more producers of race Westerns, black critical commercial. One potential actor, writer, and director in the 1940s, and his race movie of interest in communities of the Adapting film did, raises several cinema. On the see black cover were now playing Hollywood movies that carry ideological. Hollywood white horse was age and culture. Black is usually Westerns, these consciously recognize particular genres. In addition, even tended to cast

Nonetheless, many small filmmaking companies, including Reol, the Lincoln Motion Picture Company, the Ebony Film Corporation, and the Colored Players Corporation, made films that presented more complex images of African Americans and their concerns than did Hollywood.

The most famous filmmaker to come out of the race movie industry was **Oscar Micheaux**. Micheaux wrote, produced, and directed 30 films, many adapted from his own novels. His Micheaux Book and Film Company produced his first movie, *The Homesteader*, in 1918. In films such as *Within Our Gates* (1919) and *Body and Soul* (1925), Micheaux tackled the issues of lynching, light-skinned African Americans **passing** for white, and corruption within black churches. Other Micheaux films were simply mysteries or melodramas, but even they were significant because they presented a range of black characters, from middle-class professionals to illiterate Southern sharecroppers.

In the late 1920s, Micheaux and his colleagues had a difficult time making the costly transition to sound film production that the Hollywood majors were undertaking. Many of the black-owned and black-operated filmmaking companies of the silent period were therefore taken over by white entrepreneurs. These new white backers shifted their productions away from potentially controversial material toward more escapist fare. Thus, throughout the 1930s and 1940s, these white producers of race movies copied popular Hollywood genres, and produced black Westerns, black gangster films, and black musicals. Most of them lacked any of the critical commentary on race that could be found in earlier black-produced race movies. One potential exception to this trend was the work of **Spencer Williams**, a prolific actor, writer, and director of race movies. He directed at least nine films during the 1940s, and his *Blood of Jesus* (1941) is often said to have been the most popular race movie of all time. His films bear his trademark self-deprecating humor and an interest in Christian morality as it was expressed within African American communities of the era.

Adapting film genres for African American concerns, as race movies frequently did, raises several important issues about the structure and form of Hollywood cinema. On the one hand, it was probably pleasurable for many black audiences to see black cowboys and black gangsters on the screen. African American actors were now playing the same types of roles that white actors were playing within Hollywood movies. Yet embedded within film **genres** are codes and conventions that carry **ideological** significance in and of themselves. For example, in the simplified Hollywood Western formula, the good guy often wears a white hat and rides a white horse while the villain wears black. This color code is present in our language and culture as well: white signifies purity, grace, and heavenly goodness while black is usually associated with night, dirt, and evil. In the making of black-cast Westerns, these codes were rarely challenged (and perhaps they were not even consciously recognized by 1930s audiences and filmmakers). Yet in following that particular genre formula, black-cast Westerns continued to inscribe darkness as villainous, even as the films themselves championed black heroes. The issue also extended to casting: frequently, lighter-skinned blacks played heroes and heroines

while darker-skinned actors were chosen for the villains. Thus, even as race movies showcased more diverse and heroic black characters, at the same time they potentially reinscribed certain racist tropes common to Hollywood film practice.

Blacks in Classical Hollywood Cinema

Hollywood in the 1930s and 1940s, as a conservative business with its eye on making money and not offending the status quo, did little to challenge the racist ideologies of the era. The stereotypes of African Americans that *Birth of a Nation* had capitalized upon became Hollywood's usual way of representing African Americans until the end of World War II. If anything, the range of African American images presented in Hollywood films grew smaller after the enforcement of the **Production Code** in 1934. The Tragic Mulatto was used less and less because her very presence invoked the idea of miscegenation, a topic the Code had expressly forbidden. The hypersexual implications of the Black Buck stereotype were also taboo to classical Hollywood filmmakers, although one can find traces of the stereotype in the "wild natives" of countless "Tarzan" movies, or in the

zombies and henchmen of numerous horror films. Consequently, the few representations of African Americans in classical Hollywood films were predominantly unthreatening and almost childish. The comedic Coon stereotype remained prevalent, exemplified by the work of character actors such as Stepin Fetchit, Willie Best, and Mantan Moreland. The Uncle Tom stereotype was reworked for modern-day stories as the servile doorman, butler, or shoeshine "boy" that populated the background of many classical Hollywood films. The Mammy was also the helpmate or servant to white women and children in countless films.

Thus, throughout the 1930s and 1940s, African Americans appeared most often in stereotyped supporting roles, and almost never in leading ones. African American actors who wanted to work in Hollywood film found themselves forced into playing these often demeaning roles. Nevertheless, many African

American actors were able to turn their bit parts into memorable characters. Hattie McDaniel, Clarence Muse, Louise Beavers, and Rex Ingram were among those actors often able to create characters with dignity and self-respect, even when the film's



Stepin Fetchit was a character actor from the 1930s whose "Coon" roles made him briefly famous. Unidentified publicity photo, authors' personal collection

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series set them up as comedic stereotypes. For example, Hattie McDaniel won an Oscar for her role as Mammy in *Gone With the Wind* (1939), a historic first which seemed to foreshadow the increasing liberalism of 1940s Hollywood. Yet it must be remembered that even winning an Oscar did not mean that Hattie McDaniel could suddenly be cast in roles played by Bette Davis or Joan Crawford. Because of institutionalized racism and the cultural codes of glamor and beauty, Hattie McDaniel was typecast for most of her career as a maid. And while Hollywood may have appeared liberal and progressive in awarding her the Oscar, it should also be remembered that she lived in an area of Los Angeles known as "Black Beverly Hills," because African Americans – no matter how famous or rich – were unwelcome in Beverly Hills itself.

One of the reasons Hollywood kept African American actors in smaller supporting roles was so that prejudiced audiences would not have to watch an entire movie about a Negro, or worse yet, see a black character who was smart, strong, and independent. Sometimes a Hollywood film would feature a black musical performer in a night club attended by the white hero and heroine. These musical performances were often shot and edited in such a way that if the number was found to be offensive to white audiences, it could simply be cut from the print by theater managers. This often happened to Lena Horne, the first black musical star to be placed under contract at MGM. Furthermore, the Production Code mandate against miscegenation even went so far as to prohibit interracial dance couples. Bill "Bojangles" Robinson, whom the famous (white) dancer Fred Astaire considered to be the greatest dancer of the era, rarely had the chance to let his talent shine on screen. He could not be shown dancing with a white woman, and studios were loath to cast him in a leading role with an African American love interest. Thus, Bill Robinson spent his years in Hollywood enacting mostly character parts, playing servants and butlers and dancing up and down staircases with Shirley Temple. It was assumed that this adult-child dance couple was "safe" and inoffensive in that it did not suggest a romantic relationship between the two.

During the classical period, Hollywood did produce a handful of all black-cast films, mostly musicals with religious overtones that the studios frequently sold as prestige pictures, and with which they could advertise their commitment to art and liberal ideals. These films include *Hallelujah* (1929), *Hearts in Dixie* (1929), *The Green Pastures* (1936), *Cabin in the Sky* (1943), *Stormy Weather* (1943), *Carmen Jones* (1954), and *Porgy and Bess* (1959). Despite the fact that these films were allegedly about black culture and (some of them) feature black musical idioms, all of these films were produced, written, and directed by white men. Because of this, the films present a romanticized and somewhat paternalistic vision of black culture, and they are also filled with stereotypes now commonly viewed as derogatory. Interestingly, Christianity was invoked in many of these films in order to make a plea for social tolerance, much as the **civil rights movement** of the 1950s would be galvanized by Christianity. Yet it should also not be forgotten that many white supremacist groups invoked (and continue to invoke) Christianity to uphold their beliefs regarding the superiority of white people.



Bill "Bojangles" Robinson, seen here as a butler in the Shirley Temple film *The Little Colonel* (1935), was considered one of the greatest dancers of his era.
The Little Colonel, copyright © 1935, 20th Century-Fox

World War II and the Postwar Social Problem Film

During the 1940s, the United States experienced a tentative surge of liberalism. As World War II was fought against avowedly racist Axis nations, many people in the United States felt the need to examine racism within our own country. Also, since much of the nation's workforce had become part of the armed forces, home-front industries began hiring both women and racial minorities. (However, such war-induced integration caused riots and retaliatory violence in many places.) African Americans were encouraged by both Hollywood and the federal government to get involved in the war effort, most famously through a government-produced documentary entitled *The Negro Soldier* (1943). This film was made for two main reasons: to explain to American blacks why they should fight, and to help eradicate racism in the ranks. The film was so popular that it crossed over into mainstream distribution, and it remains a powerful example of the US government using film as a means of educating the population about social issues. Even so, the armed forces would not be integrated until after the war, when President Truman issued an executive order for them to be so. President Truman also ordered a special report

on US race relations, and a civil rights plank became part of the Democratic party platform during those years. Many Southern Democrat politicians, including Strom Thurmond, left their party over this issue, and eventually found careers within the Republican party. (Strom Thurmond was the US Senator from South Carolina for many decades; in 2002, when Senate Majority Leader Trent Lott implicitly praised Thurmond's racist past, Lott was forced to resign his leadership post.)

The NAACP and other concerned groups petitioned Hollywood throughout the 1940s to make more diverse, less stereotypical representations of African Americans, yet films such as Walt Disney's *Song of the South* (1946) still depicted blacks as happy, docile servants. The spate of **social problem films** that were made in the late 1940s, though, began to tackle the issue of racism in America (in addition to such social issues as returning war veterans, alcoholism, and mental illness). Perhaps unsurprisingly, two of the first films to deal specifically with discrimination against African Americans were independent films. (Recall that the Paramount Consent Decrees [1948] had given more impetus to independent film production in America.) *Home of the Brave* (1949) and *Lost Boundaries* (1949) both addressed racism against black Americans in bold ways (for their era) and, when they made money, the Hollywood majors jumped on the bandwagon, producing films such as *Pinky* (20th Century-Fox, 1949), *Intruder in the Dust* (MGM, 1949), and *No Way Out* (20th Century-Fox, 1950).

The narrative formula of most of these films is to deal with racial issues not from a black point of view, but from a white one. For example, *Intruder in the Dust* focuses on a white boy and his father more than the black man around whom the story actually revolves. In the somewhat later social problem film *Black Like Me* (1963), white actor James Whitmore literally dons blackface to experience at first hand what racism feels like. Even when the lead characters were African American, white actors sometimes played the parts. For example, in *Lost Boundaries*, a film about light-skinned black characters passing for white, the roles were played by white actors. In *Pinky*, a light-skinned black woman is played by white actress Jeanne Crain. (This move also helped the studio get past the Code's miscegenation taboo, allowing Pinky to kiss her white fiancé.) Hollywood obviously felt that this formula – dealing with racism from a white perspective – was necessary to draw in white audiences. Even to this day, many Hollywood social problem films about race feature a white star as the lead character; Hollywood has rarely made a film about racism from an African American perspective. Furthermore, it should be reiterated that these films were all produced, written, and directed by white men.

The production of social problem films waned in the early 1950s, partly because of the **Red Scare** and the witch-hunting tactics of Senator Joe McCarthy. Hollywood stopped making movies that suggested in any way that America was less than perfect. While discussions of racial discrimination receded from movie screens, they became louder in the “real” world. Led by men such as Martin Luther King, African Americans organized for equality throughout the 1950s, demonstrating at boycotts, sit-ins, and marches to draw attention to racism. A major victory for racial equality occurred in the Supreme Court in 1954 when the **Brown vs. the Board**



Pinky (1949) was a postwar social problem film that explored contemporary race relations. Here, Jeanne Crain, as a light-skinned African American, is comforted by her granny (Ethel Waters). *Pinky*, copyright © 1949, 20th Century-Fox

of Education decision formally outlawed the “separate but equal” Jim Crow Laws that existed throughout the Southern United States. As the 1950s became the 1960s, more and more Americans of all colors and persuasions joined the struggle for civil rights. Northern university students organized in the early 1960s to help the cause, and the country slowly began to become more aware of the terrible effects of American racism. Yet opposition to those movements also became more pronounced, and terrorist crimes against the black community continued to be perpetrated. Institutionally, white racists in positions of power in both state and federal governments repeatedly sought to halt the advance of the civil rights movement.

Hollywood played it very safe during this era, and films about race or featuring African American stories were few and far between. Ethel Waters played memorable and dignified roles in *Member of the Wedding* (1952) and *The Sound and the Fury* (1959), while Dorothy Dandridge was promoted – cautiously – as Hollywood’s first African American leading lady. But like many black actresses before her, Dandridge was trapped within the old Hollywood formulas and stereotypes. Even as the Production Code began to weaken and interracial relationships began to be addressed, Dandridge was forced to play jungle goddesses and an array of Tragic Mulattoes who died for their “sin” of miscegenation. Enduring the institutionalized racism of Hollywood may have been too much for Dandridge, and most likely

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contributed to her death from an overdose of pills in 1965. By far the most successful black actor of the era was Sidney Poitier, who starred in films like *The Defiant Ones* (1958), *A Raisin in the Sun* (1961), *A Patch of Blue* (1965), and *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner* (1967). Poitier was considered by many to be a positive role model throughout his career, usually playing educated and articulate characters with great nobility and humanity. He also became the first African American actor to win an Oscar for best lead performance (for *Lilies of the Field* [1963]). Poitier's dignified persona perfectly fit the "passive resistance" strategy of the African American civil rights movement of the 1950s and early 1960s. His characters were non-confrontational black men with whom white viewers could sympathize, while black viewers could appreciate that his characters were markedly different from past stereotypes.

The Rise and Fall of Blaxploitation Filmmaking

By the mid-1960s, the civil rights movement had become more militant. After years of cautious optimism about the struggle for equal rights, a younger generation of activists grew tired of the slow pace of progress and began to demand civil rights in more vocal and inflammatory ways. Some suggested that equality for African Americans might have to come through violent means. Leaders such as Malcolm X and various members of the Black Panther Party advocated violence against the system where necessary, as such violence was in effect only self-defense. Physical attacks on African Americans were also becoming more violent: Malcolm X was assassinated in 1965, and Martin Luther King in 1968. Racial violence in America reached unprecedented levels, and riots broke out in many major American cities. Many black leaders saw the need for African Americans to close ranks and develop a strong group identity if they were going to challenge the power of institutionalized white supremacy. African culture was rediscovered by many black Americans, and popular slogans of the era such as "Black Power," "Black Pride," and "Black is Beautiful" reveal the forceful charge of this new Black Nationalist movement.

For many filmgoers in this younger, angrier generation, the go-slow, carefully integrationist Hollywood films of Sidney Poitier were an anachronism, and the work



Dorothy Dandridge was one of Hollywood's first African American leading ladies; she was nominated for a Best Actress Oscar for her role in *Carmen Jones* (1954).

Unidentified publicity photo, authors' personal collection



Successful 1960s leading man Sidney Poitier often portrayed educated and polite African American characters, in films like *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner* (1967).

Unidentified publicity photo, authors' personal collection

of previous African American character actors such as Stepin Fetchit, Hattie McDaniel, and Mantan Moreland were an outright embarrassment. There was clearly a demand for a new type of African American image on screen, and he appeared in a film with the memorable title *Sweet Sweetback's Baaadasssss Song* (1971). This film was independently made by African American filmmaker Melvin Van Peebles, and it followed the adventures of Sweet Sweetback, a streetwise hustler, sexual stud, and "justified" white cop killer who escapes to Mexico with the aid of the black and Hispanic communities. The film was a tremendous hit in the independent urban black theaters where it was shown, and it seemed to reflect the new defiant attitude of late 1960s civil rights activists. Huey Newton, leader of the Black Panthers, called it "the first revolutionary Black film."

Hollywood saw the profits *Sweet Sweetback* was making and began to produce its own gritty films about urban black protagonists. These

films collectively became known as **blaxploitation films**. Some of the most famous are *Shaft* (1971), *Superfly* (1972), *Blacula* (1972), *The Mack* (1973), and *Willie Dynamite* (1974). Hollywood's blaxploitation films were firmly rooted in traditional genre formulas – gangster, crime thriller, horror movie – and their black leading figures were violent, flashy, and charismatic. Many of the films represented images of black pride and black power, and they frequently exposed the horrors of ghetto living and institutionalized white racism. Blaxploitation filmmaking also provided new and greater opportunities for African American artists in Hollywood. While the majority of these films were still written and directed by white men, many black actors, writers, musicians, and directors did find work making these pictures. Indeed, the music they featured – still-familiar compositions by musicians such as Isaac Hayes and Curtis Mayfield – helped change the very sound of Hollywood films.

Blaxploitation films were not, however, without multiple controversies. As the term "blaxploitation" implies, these films exploited African American audiences in that they took money out of African American communities to fill white Hollywood's bank accounts. These movies were also **exploitation films** – cheaply made and sensationalistic movies that draw audiences by promising gratuitous amounts of sex and violence. Many middle-class blacks began to decry what they saw as negative images in these films. When *Superfly*, a gangster film about a sleek drug dealer, became a huge hit (and black youths started dressing and acting like the lead character), many concerned Americans of all races questioned Hollywood's

Blacks on TV

Television became America's most important communication medium in the 1950s. In the early part of the decade, several shows, including *The Jack Benny Program* and *Beulah*, featured African American actors in supporting roles, as manservants and maids. The most famous African American show of the era was *Amos 'n' Andy* (CBS, 1951–3). It had been adapted for television from a popular radio show created by Freeman Gosden and Charles Correll, two white "dialecticians" who gave voice to the antics of the show's titular African American characters. When the show was moved to television, black actors were hired to fill the roles. Alvin Childress played Amos, and Spencer Williams, the prolific race-movie filmmaker, played the role of Andy for the show's brief run. Later generations have condemned *Amos 'n' Andy* as a showcase of negative stereotypes created by white men, but the series was hugely popular among both white and black audiences of the early 1950s, and it arguably demonstrated the basic humanity of black people to a pre-civil-rights-era America. It would be many years after its cancellation before another television show would devote itself to leading African American characters.

During the late 1960s and early 1970s, television became more aware of race and racial issues. TV shows such as *Hogan's Heroes*, *The Mod Squad*, and *Star Trek* began to integrate black characters into their casts. *I Spy* was a **black and white buddy** show starring Bill Cosby and Robert Culp as international secret agents. In 1968, ABC's *Julia* became the first modern situation comedy starring and centering on an African American woman; despite vehement protest from white racists, the show ran until 1971. But it was the work of white television producer Norman Lear that broke much new ground in shows such as *All in the Family*, *The Jeffersons*, *Maude*, *Good Times*, and *Sanford and Son*. Norman Lear's shows dealt with topical issues and afforded a wider range of African American images on TV than ever before. For example, the Jeffersons were an upwardly mobile African American family who had an interracial couple as close friends, while *Good Times* chronicled life in the projects for the Evans family. But by far the most important television event of the 1970s centering on America's understanding of race was the broadcast premiere of *Roots* in 1977. One of US television's first mini-series, *Roots* was based on Alex Haley's best-selling novel about the history of slavery in America. The mini-series ran for twelve hours over eight nights, and its broadcast was truly a national event watched by millions of Americans. The compelling drama put a human face on the tragedy of slavery, and afforded Americans the chance to contemplate that terrible institution in emotional as well as intellectual terms.

In the 1980s, *The Cosby Show*, created by and starring actor and comedian Bill Cosby, became one of the most highly rated shows of the decade. Centering on a modern, professional African American family with several children, the show dramatized in a gentle, humorous way the basic values of familial love and respect. It was watched by millions of Americans, regardless of race. Its success arguably helped to open up television to African American performers and concerns. By the end of the century, though, many critics were again decrying the ghettoization of black performers into increasingly silly situation comedies, arguing that America still prefers to see blacks as comedic Coons rather than complex dramatic characters.

motives. What kind of a role model for impressionable inner-city youth is a sexy, super-cool cocaine dealer? The short-lived Committee Against Blaxploitation was formed in Hollywood by members of the NAACP and other civil rights groups. Yet when opposition was felt from African American filmmakers who were finding much-needed work within these films, the Committee soon disbanded.

The more usual charge of Hollywood sexism was also leveled against these films. In most of them, the black lead character is a smooth ladies' man, a sort of black James Bond figure who beds women of all races as he fights against "The Man." Some critics charged that this violent blaxploitation hero was simply another version of the old Black Buck stereotype, and that there was no space in the films for complex female characters. Blaxploitation filmmakers responded by placing women in the lead role, and in films like *Cleopatra Jones* (1973), *Coffy* (1973), *Foxy Brown* (1974), and *Friday Foster* (1975), black women "kicked whitey's butt" just as black men had. Yet many people were unhappy with this development as well, especially black spokesmen who felt that the black man had to be raised up before (and often at the expense of) the black woman. To those critics, films with strong females and weaker males were another slap at black manhood, and by extension, the black community. Because of these controversies and the limited nature of their generic formulas, blaxploitation filmmaking soon ran out of steam.

Yet not all films produced within this era were cheaply made and sensationalistic. There was a handful of more serious and complex films dealing with African American concerns, including *Lady Sings the Blues* (1972), *Sounder* (1972), *Buck and the Preacher* (1972), *Cooley High* (1975), and *Mahogany* (1975). Throughout the 1970s, movie audiences began to see and recognize serious black actors such as Cicely Tyson, Ossie Davis, James Earl Jones, Paul Winfield, Diana Ross, and Billy Dee Williams. Still, age-old Hollywood formulas persisted, most notably in the movie adaptation of the popular black stage musical *The Wiz* (1978). Sidney Lumet, a white filmmaker who had never before made a musical, was hired to direct this high-budget, black-cast project. Despite the star power of Michael Jackson, Diana Ross, Richard Pryor, and Lena Horne, it was a box office disappointment. For almost a decade afterwards, Hollywood mostly avoided producing any film projects it considered "black."

Hollywood in the 1980s and the Arrival of Spike Lee

The 1980s were paradoxical years for representations of African Americans. Black superstars in music and on television (Michael Jackson, Prince, Whitney Houston, Bill Cosby, Arsenio Hall, and Oprah Winfrey) were riding high, but it was still very difficult for African Americans to gain power within the Hollywood film industry. In front of the cameras, comedies and action films continued to integrate themselves. Eddie Murphy, who had been discovered on TV's *Saturday Night Live*, made concert films and buddy action movies. In fact, the **black and white buddy film** formula was one that Hollywood was happy to exploit throughout most of the 1980s and 1990s. In films such as *48 Hours* (1982) and *Lethal Weapon* (1987) – as well as their many sequels and imitators – a black and white duo bicker and argue but eventually come to value one another, all while defeating the bad guys. This formula has been an enormously successful one for Hollywood because the biracial casting of the lead roles makes the film appeal to both white and black audiences.

Hollywood producers don't want to finance an expensive "black" film unless they are sure it will also appeal to white audiences, which usually means the casting of a white star alongside a black one. Nevertheless, a new generation of African American actors, including Morgan Freeman, Danny Glover, Denzel Washington, Larry Fishburne, and Wesley Snipes, have become well known through work in these (and other) types of films.

Probably the most important (and controversial) 1980s Hollywood film about the African American experience was *The Color Purple* (1985), directed by Hollywood mogul Steven Spielberg and starring Whoopi Goldberg, Oprah Winfrey, Margaret Avery, and Danny Glover. The film was based on Alice Walker's Pulitzer prize-winning novel about black women struggling for survival in the South during the first decades of the twentieth century. Much of their struggle was against the black men in their lives, who abused them in physical, sexual, and psychological ways. When the film was released, there were predictable complaints about why it had been directed by a white man, but the largest controversy centered on the film's alleged "male bashing." Reiterating the arguments made in earlier decades, some critics and audiences felt the film was demeaning because while it celebrated black women, it also depicted African American men as rapists and abusers. The film did diminish many of the novel's more important points. For example, the novel makes it clearer than does the film that black men abuse black women as part of a "chain of oppression" that stems in the first place from white brutality. The novel also deals centrally with a lesbian relationship between characters Shug and Celie, an important aspect of the book's feminist project that was reduced to a single chaste kiss in the movie.

As if in answer to many of these controversies, African American independent filmmaking was jump-started the next year by the premiere of Spike Lee's first feature film, *She's Gotta Have It* (1986). This black and white comedy of manners among contemporary African American men and women became a big hit both in black communities and on the independent film circuit. Spike Lee had learned his craft at the New York University film school, where his 50-minute short film *Joe's Bed-Stuy Barbershop: We Cut Heads* won him considerable praise. After the success of *She's Gotta Have It*, Lee was offered a distribution deal with a major Hollywood studio for his second feature, *School Daze* (1988), a film that explores issues of assimilation and gender at an all-black college. It was his next film however, that affirmed his position as the leading African American filmmaker of his generation. *Do the Right Thing* (1989) explores the racial tensions in a small New York neighborhood during one very hot summer day. Complex and uncompromising, the film (like all of Spike Lee's work) offers no easy solutions to America's racial problems. The film's depiction of a race riot, police brutality, and unabashed sexuality made it one of the most talked-about movies of the year. When it was overlooked for a Best Picture nomination, one Oscar presenter took to the podium to call attention to that fact. (The more conventional race drama *Driving Miss Daisy* [1989] won the Best Picture Oscar that year, again reflecting Hollywood's preference for a glossy, soft-pedal approach to controversial subjects.)



Spike Lee is seen here on the set of *Get On the Bus* (1996), one of his more independent, smaller-budget films that focus on race in America.

Get On the Bus, dir. Spike Lee, copyright © 1996, Columbia/Tri-Star. Photo: Lester Sloan

Throughout the 1990s, Spike Lee continued to explore issues concerning race and racism in films such as *Mo' Better Blues* (1990), *Jungle Fever* (1991), *Crooklyn* (1994), *Clockers* (1995), *Girl 6* (1996), and *He Got Game* (1998). His epic film on the life of *Malcolm X* (1992) is a powerful statement about the slain civil rights leader. Even though the film failed to attract large audiences, it garnered a Best Actor Oscar nomination for Denzel Washington as Malcolm X. More recently, Spike Lee has also made several smaller, more challenging films such as *Get On the Bus* (1996) and *4 Little Girls* (1997), the latter a documentary about a 1963 terrorist bombing at a black Baptist church. In addition to his filmmaking, Spike Lee has also become a recognized and respected public figure, one who rarely shies away from the spotlight and is known for his straightforward statements on race in America. When Warner Brothers threatened to take *Malcolm X* away from him because he had gone over budget, Spike Lee noted loudly in the press that white directors go over budget all the time without the studio threatening to take their films away. Eventually the needed money was raised from various members of the African American community. Spike Lee has also shot television ads for Nike shoes and rigorously markets both himself and his films through merchandising tie-ins, a fact that some leftist critics find troubling. Nonetheless, Spike Lee remains America's pre-eminent African American filmmaker.