




bell hooks

Reel to Real

Race, class and sex at the movies

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for the filmmaker who still dreams . . .

"We used to dream the same dreams. That was how I knew you would love me in the end."

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1

INTRODUCTION: MAKING MOVIE MAGIC

Movies make magic. They change things. They take the real and make it into something else right before our very eyes. Usually when I critique a movie lots of folks like, they tell me, "It was just showing the way things are. It was real." And they do not want to hear it when I make the point that giving audiences what is real is precisely what movies do not do. They give the reimagined, reinvented version of the real. It may look like something familiar, but in actuality it is a different universe from the world of the real. That's what makes movies so compelling. Talking about the need for an "aesthetic ecology" wherein the artistry of films is not submerged by any other agenda, visionary filmmaker Stan Brakhage shares this insight: "All this slavish mirroring of the human condition feels like a bird singing in front of mirrors. The less a work of art reflects the world the more is being in the world and having its natural being like anything else. Film must be free from all imitations, of which the most dangerous is the imitation of life."

Most of us go to movies to enter a world that is different from the one we know and are most comfortable with. And even though most folks will say that they go to movies to be entertained, if the truth be told lots of us, myself included, go to movies to learn stuff. Often what we learn is life-transforming in some way. I have never heard anyone say that they chose to go to a movie hoping it would change them utterly—that they would leave the theater and their lives would never be the same—and yet there are individuals who testify that after seeing a particular film they were not the same. Much of what Jeanette Winterson attributes to the power of the literary texts in her collection *Art Objects: Essays on Ecstasy and Effrontery* is equally true of cinematic narratives. She contends: “Strong texts work along the borders of our minds and alter what already exists. They could not do this if they merely reflected what already exists.” As cultural critics proclaim this postmodern era the age of nomadism, the time when fixed identities and boundaries lose their meaning and everything is in flux, when border crossing is the order of the day, the real truth is that most people find it very difficult to journey away from familiar and fixed boundaries, particularly class locations. In this age of mixing and hybridity, popular culture, particularly the world of movies, constitutes a new frontier providing a sense of movement, of pulling away from the familiar and journeying into and beyond the world of the other. This is especially true for those folks who really do not have much money or a lot of time as well as for the rest of us. Movies remain the perfect vehicle for the introduction of certain ritual rites of passage that come to stand for the quintessential experience of border crossing for everyone who wants to take a look at difference and the different without having to experientially engage “the other.”

Whether we like it or not, cinema assumes a pedagogical role in the lives of many people. It may not be the intent of a filmmaker to teach audiences anything, but that does not mean that

lessons are not learned. It has only been in the last ten years or so that I began to realize that my students learned more about race, sex, and class from movies than from all the theoretical literature I was urging them to read. Movies not only provide a narrative for specific discourses of race, sex, and class, they provide a shared experience, a common starting point from which diverse audiences can dialogue about these charged issues. Trying to teach complicated feminist theory to students who were hostile to the reading often led me to begin such discussions by talking about a particular film. Suddenly students would be engaged in an animated discussion deploying the very theoretical concepts that they had previously claimed they just did not understand.

It was this use of movies as a pedagogical tool that led me to begin writing about films as a cultural critic and feminist theorist. Centrally concerned with the way movies created popular public discourses of race, sex, and class, I wanted to talk about what these discourses were saying and to whom. Particularly, I wanted to interrogate specific films that were marketed and critically acclaimed as progressive texts of race, sex, and class to see if the messages embedded in these works really were encouraging and promoting a counterhegemonic narrative challenging the conventional structures of domination that uphold and maintain white supremacist capitalist patriarchy. Even though many traditional academic film critics are convinced that popular art can never be subversive and revolutionary, the introduction of contemporary discourses of race, sex, and class into films has created a space for critical intervention in mainstream cinema. Often multiple standpoints are expressed in an existing film. A film may have incredibly revolutionary standpoints merged with conservative ones. This mingling of standpoints is often what makes it hard for audiences to critically “read” the overall filmic narrative. While audiences are clearly not passive and are able to pick and choose, it is simultaneously true that there are certain “received” messages that are rarely mediated by the will of the

audience. Concurrently, if an individual watches a film with a profoundly politically reactionary message but is somehow able to impose on the visual narrative an interpretation that is progressive, this act of mediation does not change the terms of the film.

A distinction must be made between the power of viewers to interpret a film in ways that make it palatable for the everyday world they live in and the particular persuasive strategies films deploy to impress a particular vision on our psyches. The fact that some folks may attend films as "resisting spectators" does not really change the reality that most of us, no matter how sophisticated our strategies of critique and intervention, are usually seduced, at last for a time, by the images we see on the screen. They have power over us and we have no power over them.

Whether we call it "willing suspension of disbelief" or just plain submission, in the darkness of the theater most audiences choose to give themselves over, if only for a time, to the images depicted and the imaginations that have created those images. It is that moment of submission, of overt or covert seduction that fascinates me as a critic. I want to critically understand and "read" what is happening in that moment, what the film tries to do to us.

If we were always and only "resisting spectators," to borrow a literary phrase, then films would lose their magic. Watching movies would feel more like work than pleasure. Again and again I find myself stressing to students, to nonacademic readers, that thinking critically about a film does not mean that I have not had pleasure in watching the film. Although the movie annoyed me intensely, I enjoyed watching Quentin Tarantino's *Pulp Fiction*. I left the theater at midnight, came home, and sat writing into the dawn. My hands were cold, as the heat in the building had long since been turned off. My feet were numb, but as long as I was writing I did not notice, I was trying to capture the fierce

intense impressions the film had made on me. It's awesome when a creative work can charge my critical batteries in this way.

Rarely do I write about work that does not move me deeply. And I hate to write about a film when I think it's just "bad." There are two exceptions in this collection. Larry Clark's *Kids* did not move me at all; it enraged me. And because so many progressives critiqued the work in discussion but did not want to go public for fear of censure, I decided to write an essay. *Waiting to Exhale* is the one bad movie I write about. It is not bad because of the genre. There are some great popular films made solely to entertain, and this is not one of them. I chose to write about *Waiting to Exhale* as a way to critically reflect on the notion of "black film," to critically examine the way blackness as commodity is appropriated by mainstream media and then marketed as fictive ethnography, as in "this is about black life."

At its best cultural criticism of movies illuminates, enabling us to see a work in a new way. It enhances the visual experience. Quentin Tarantino is fond of declaring: "if I wasn't a filmmaker, I'd be a film critic. . . . I would rather get a well-written, thoughtful review, even if it be negative than a badly written gushy review. I they're coming from somewhere, that's interesting, it's all food for thought." The critical essays I have written on films usually provoke and cause a stir precisely because I write about work that has passionately provoked and engaged me. Spike Lee has done many films since *She's Gotta Have It* came out in 1985, but what a stir that picture caused. At the time, it was really remarkable that a black male filmmaker was perceived as offering a vision in cinema of a sexually liberated black woman. This film generated more discussions of the politics of race and gender, of rape and violence against black women, than any feminist article or book on the subject at the time. Naturally, I was moved to write a critical piece. This was the first essay I had ever written about a film. It was called "Whose Pussy Is This? A Feminist Comment." Published first in my column in the left

have a way to think about this film. Similarly, I was moved to write about the connections between eroticism and death in Mike Figgis's recent film *Lewin Las Vegas* because of the ways that film speaks to the issues of power and desire, pleasure and danger, reconfiguring tropes of female masochism in ways that may or may not be liberatory.

Seeing movies has always been a passion in my life. When I first met movie "aficionado" A. J.—Arthur Jaffa (a director and cinematographer)—he was pretty amazed that I could name and had seen movies he did not know about and vice versa. Some of the flavor of our ongoing dialogue is captured here in the critical conversation we have about film. This project began when Caleb A. Mose asked us both to come and be interviewed for a film he was making. This dialogue was spontaneous—unstructured. It was different from an interview. When I interviewed Charles Burnett, Julie Dash, Camille Billops, and other filmmakers, I went to them with a set of specific questions that formed the basis of our discussions. With Billops I wanted to talk about the place of confession and the autobiographical, with Dash her use of archival material and ethnographic research. Individuals who love Dash's *Daughters of the Dust* may have read our conversation in the book that focuses on the film.

When the subject is race I am particularly concerned with questions of race and black liberation. Many of the essays and discussions in this collection focus on the work of black filmmakers. In critical essays I reflect on the issue of aesthetic accountability and how the burden of representation informs this work. Exploring the issues of resisting images, I raise questions about what is required to imagine and create images of blackness that are liberatory. Changing how we see images is clearly one way to change the world. The work of black filmmakers receives much attention in *Real to Real* precisely because the multiple narratives it constructs revitalize contemporary critical discussions of the way blackness is represented and seen

magazine *Z*, it reached audiences both inside and outside the academy. Later I included it in *Talking Back*, my first collection of essays. It became the most xeroxed, the most talked-about piece, serving as a critical intervention challenging viewers to look at the film in a new way. To be honest, I was stunned by the feedback. Not only was I awed by the way folks managed to get ahold of this piece, I was moved on hearing story after story about the intense discussions that followed a viewing of the film when audiences had also read the essay.

I kept waiting for a Spike Lee film that would really have a complex awareness of sexual politics. Finally, after eight films, he made *Girl 6*. Ironically, many critics missed the shift in perspective in this movie. Unlike Lee's other work, this film critically examines sexism and misogyny. Excited to see the influence of feminist thinking, I was shocked that so many viewers failed to grasp this shift and decided it was necessary to write a feminist critique celebrating and exploring this change.

As a critic who has always worked to address audiences inside and outside the academy, I recognized that oral critical discussions of films took place everywhere in everyday life. Across class, race, sex, and nationality, people would see a film and talk about it. As a black woman intellectual working overtime to call attention to feminist thinking, to issues of sexism, one who wanted to talk about the convergence of race, sex, and class, I found films to be the perfect cultural texts. I was particularly pleased to have the opportunity to write about Atom Egoyan's work, because I had been a fan of his films since the beginning. When *Exotica* was made it was exciting to see that an interesting independent filmmaker could make a work that proved to have such wide appeal. Then there is Isaac Julien's short video/film *The Attendant*. When I showed it to my class of women students at City College, who were reading the essays of cultural critic Stuart Hall, they felt that they just could not grasp what was happening. I wrote this essay for them and for everyone else who wants to

in this society. Despite progressive interventions (there are certainly more black filmmakers making films, both Hollywood and independent films, than ever before), there have not been sustained major visual leaps in the nature of black representation. Concurrently, the essentialist belief that merely the presence of larger numbers of visible black filmmakers would lead to a more progressive and/or revolutionary cinematic representation of blackness has been utterly challenged by the types of films that are being made.

In keeping with the critique of essentialism suddenly we are compelled to think more deeply about the standpoint of the black filmmaker. Interviewing Isaac Julien after the premiere of his feature film *Young Soul Rebels*, we spoke about the ways black audiences can be as uncomfortable with diverse and/or radical representations of black subjectivities as any other group. Julien reminded us then that "blackness as a sign is never enough. What does that black subject do, how does it act, how does it think politically? . . . being black isn't really good enough for me: I want to know what your cultural politics are." The interrogation of the very sign of blackness by contemporary left cultural workers ruptured the critical complacency surrounding fixed assumptions about the black aesthetic that had for the most part constituted the conceptual framework within which most critical writing by black thinkers about film took place.

Often the new critical writing done by folks, like myself, who are not traditionally trained as film critics is viewed suspiciously. Indeed, our work interrogates the very assumptions about the nature of black representation that a preexisting body of film theory had helped to put in place and sustain. In the essay "What Is This 'Black' in Black Popular Culture?" Stuart Hall defined the subversive standpoint as one that refuses to see everything via the logic of binary opposition: "The essentializing moment is weak because it naturalizes and dehistoricizes difference, mistaking what is historical and cultural for what is natural, biological,

and genetic. The moment the signifier 'black' is torn from its historical, cultural, and political embedding and lodged in a biologically constituted racial category, we valorize, by inversion, the very ground of the racism we are trying to deconstruct." Dialogues with black British cultural critics and filmmakers were important critical interventions. These discussions challenged us all to think differently about black identity, to more forcefully engage critiques of essentialism and to focus on diasporic representations.

For individual traditional black film critics and many of us "new kids on the block" it was difficult to face that in some rare moments there were more progressive representations of blackness in the work of exceptional visionary white filmmakers (cultural workers like John Sayles and Jim Jarmusch) than in the work of individual conservative black filmmakers. Their representations of blackness, along with others, were the positive interventions providing concrete interrogative evidence that it was not so much the color of the person who made images that was crucial but the perspective, the standpoint, the politics. For so long most white filmmakers were interested in using black images only as a backdrop reinforcing racist paradigms that it was easy for a black essentialist aesthetic to emerge, since it appeared that most white artists were incapable of seeing blackness from a decolonizing standpoint. Now that more white filmmakers, both mainstream and independent, centralize black characters in films, diverse white perspectives and standpoints are more obvious.

Even though so much critical work has emerged in cultural studies and/or film studies interrogating old colonizing racial imagery, particularly the representation of blackness, creating new awareness of standpoint and accountability, some filmmakers still don't get it. Ironically, the focus on diversity has inspired some white filmmakers (for example, Quentin Tarantino and LARRY CLARK) to exploit mainstream interest in the "other" in

ways that have simply created a new style of primitivism. While these filmmakers made use of border crossing and themes of cultural hybridity, they did not do so in any way that was particularly subversive and/or enlightening. The essays on Tarantino and Clark in *Reel to Real* explore the ways transgressive imagery of a nonwhite "other" is used in the work of these filmmakers without challenging stereotypes or the existing structures of domination. All too often artists fear that thinking politically about their work will interfere with some "pure" vision. Yet it is this very notion of visual purity that is a distortion. We often have too narrow a notion of what it means to be political. Even though much of Stan Brakhage's work was very personal, in relation to gender he was making incredible interventions. This work was political. It was thrilling to hear Brakhage affirm that standpoint in the interview Suranjana Ganguly published in *Sight and Sound*, "All That Is Light." When asked to respond to critiques that his works are not that politically relevant, Brakhage insists that his works address sociopolitical realities emphasizing: "I think my films address that constantly. I don't think there has ever been a film that I wished to make that wasn't political in the broadest sense of the term, that wasn't about what I could feel or sense for better or worse from the conditionings of my times and from my rebellions against those conditionings." These issues are constantly relevant to black filmmakers, who are consistently made to feel that their work can have a profound meaning only if it is overtly political. Issues of accountability as they affect both filmmakers and critics are discussed in *Reel to Real: Race, Sex, and Class at the Movies*.

This collection of essays brings together new and old work. I am reprinting only previously published work that often finds its way into classroom discussions. Hopefully, this book will simply make that work more accessible. Much of the cultural criticism I wrote on film appeared first in small magazines with not a large readership. To make that work more available I have

begun to include individual essays in other books of collected work. Over time it became evident that the work was piling up and that indeed it was possible to do a collection of my work that focused just on film. Rather than include all the essays on film I have written, this collection includes only those previously published essays that received lots of attention and continue to be read and discussed. That work stands both in juxtaposition and in contrast to my new work. The conversations and interviews are important because they allow for feedback between critic and filmmaker. Contrary to Tarantino's declaration that if he were not a filmmaker he would be a film critic, I could never imagine making films—largely because it is a process that is the complete opposite of critical writing, which one does alone. Filmmaking is an awesome collaborative process, even though we still hold the individual filmmaker responsible for the final product. This is especially true of Hollywood films made with huge budgets. Hopefully, future discussions of race, sex, and class at the movies will expose and analyze more of what happens behind the scenes.

At different public events when questioned about either the homophobic images of gay characters in his films or the misogynist portrayals of women, filmmaker Spike Lee has mocked the issue of artistic accountability by suggesting he is merely documenting life "as is." His unwillingness to engage critically with the meaning and messages his work conveys (whether the content does or does not reflect his belief system) undermines the necessity for both critical spectatorship and critical thinking about representations. Certainly everyone who has ever exploited depictions of racial stereotypes that degrade black people and perpetuate white supremacy could argue that they are merely showing life as is. Thinking in a constructive way about accountability never diminishes artistic integrity or an artistic vision, it strengthens and enhances.

Much of the magic of cinema lies in the medium's power to

give us something other than life as is. I have written more critical essays about Spike Lee's work than about that of any other filmmaker. Often readers wrongly assume I do not find his work engaging. Indeed, there is a magical moment in every film Spike Lee has made, and I am always eager to see the work, to see that moment. I tell audiences, particularly nonacademic folks, when they question me about Spike Lee's work, that my desire is not to "trash" his work but to provide a critical perspective that could be useful to audiences and to him by enabling us to see Lee's work in new ways, to reimagine and reenvision. Indeed, all the critical writing and discussion in *Reel to Real: Race, Sex, and Class at the Movies* is meant to be constructive, to critically intervene in a way that challenges and changes. Movies do not merely offer us the opportunity to reimagine the culture we most intimately know on the screen, they make culture. These essays, conversations, and interviews rigorously and playfully examine what we are seeing, ways we think about what we are seeing, and ways we look at things differently. This work interrogates even as it continually celebrates cinema's capacity to create new awareness, to transform culture right before our very eyes.

2

GOOD GIRLS LOOK THE OTHER WAY

A page in the book *Her Tongue On My Theory* has a single photographic image of a woman's closed painted lips. Next to it the caption raises the question: "Stripped of history?" Desire has the power to do just that, to make us forget who we are. It both disrupts and deconstructs. It dismembers and disembodies. The power of desire to seduce, to lead us in dangerous directions is explored in Spike Lee's moving film *Girl 6*. Offering audiences intense close-up shots of lips—closed, moving, talking—the passion of this film is there in the mouth, the voice. Contrary to what most viewers imagine before they see *Girl 6* this is not a film that exploits the objectification of women. This is a film that explores the eroticization of stardom, of attention. It is a long slow narrative about lack, about where the inability to feel pleasure can take one. The film keeps telling us over and over again that there are spaces in our lives, spaces of longing where nothing matters but the quest to fulfill desire. The longing of women and men in this film is not for sexual satisfaction but for