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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."

9

ARTISTIC INTEGRITY: RACE AND ACCOUNTABILITY

Most filmmakers do not have to deal with the issue of race. When white males make films with all white subjects or with people of color, their "right" to do so is not questioned. No one asks a white filmmaker in the United States or Britain who makes a film with only white characters if he or she is a white supremacist. The assumption is that the art they create reflects the world as they know it, or certainly as it interests them. However, when a black filmmaker, or for that matter any filmmaker of color, makes a work that focuses solely on subjects exclusively black, or white, they are asked by critics and their audiences to justify their choices and to assume political accountability for the quality of their representations. Embedded in the body of ideas that ensure that some folks will be interrogated about their choices and others not is the both racist and sexist assumption that integrity of artistic vision matters more to the filmmaker who is white and male than to those who are nonwhite and/or female.

Ironically, more than any group white men are able to make

films without being subjected to a constant demand that their work not perpetuate systems of domination based on race, class, and gender. As a consequence it is this work that is usually the most unthinking and careless in its depictions of groups that are marginalized by these institutionalized structures of exploitation and oppression. We might have witnessed a cultural revolution in the images of people of color and white women in cinema long ago had white male filmmakers been subjected to even a fraction of the critique that is directed at filmmakers from marginalized groups. Frankly, a little up-front interrogation can be useful. It can inspire any artist to be more vigilant. White male artists have not necessarily benefitted from the absence of certain pressures that would compel them to address their role in creating work that perpetuates domination. Filmmakers probably have more awareness than other people about the power of moving images in an age of ever-increasing illiteracy. Movies teach so much because the language of both images and words that they use is accessible. Luckily, individual white male filmmakers have begun to think critically some of the time about depictures of race, gender, or nationality. Certainly, it would benefit all filmmakers if this group would resist embracing the notion that they are more concerned with artistic vision than other groups.

Marginalized groups—white women, people of color, and/or gay artists, for example—all struggle with the question of aesthetic accountability, particularly in relation to the issue of perpetuating domination. Although this struggle is most often seen solely in a negative light, it enhances artistic integrity when it serves to help the artist clarify vision and purpose. A filmmaker like Derek Jarman was able to use the demand for accountability to strengthen his work. *Blue* is a powerful testament to the artistry of engaging overtly with the political and the metaphysical in such a way that neither is diminished and both illumined.

Stan Brakhage uses the phrase "aesthetic ecology" to articulate his belief that there must be a delicate balance between showing

conscious concern for the political in artistic production and allowing an unfettered expression of artistry to emerge. He feels it is important that a filmmaker "be very careful not to allow social and political impulses to dominate" his or her work, because that would "falsify the balances that are intrinsic and necessary to make an aesthetic ecology." All too often filmmakers from marginalized groups struggle with the issue of entitlement that is necessary to maintain such a balance. Most black filmmakers raised in a white supremacist culture wherein the vast majority of cinematic images are constructed in ways that preserve and uphold this structure of domination feel compelled to assume responsibility for producing resisting images. In and of itself this desire does not undermine artistic integrity, but it has placed limitations on those artists who allow it to overdetermine everything, they do. It is this overdetermination that disrupts the possibility of an aesthetic ecology, for it upsets the balance.

To become filmmakers black artists globally start from the standpoint of resistance, no matter the culture they work in. That is why the term black filmmaker signifies something different from the simple word filmmaker. Speaking about the way in which this term can function to both close down and open up creative possibilities in an interview published in the magazine of culture studies, *Border Lines*, the black British filmmaker John Akomfrah explains: "I'm a black filmmaker—means that there are certain prescriptions that you're expected to take on board. I'm not particularly troubled by that because that is par for the course. What I am troubled by is the Kantian nature in which that prescription is placed on us as a separate categorical imperative—a black filmmaker has to do this. I think this is not just wrong because it's absurd, but it's also wrong because it forecloses questions we need to ask." In the United States it has been assumed both in the past and in the present that a black filmmaker will construct black images, will focus on narrative

content that highlights black experience, and that the images he or she creates will necessarily work against the stereotypically negative ones represented in the white mainstream. This demand is imposed by both financial backers and audiences. No black filmmaker works with only white or other nonblack images. And while a wholly nonblack focus might not be desirable, the fact that it is not an acceptable choice just serves as a reminder of the limitations that are imposed on black filmmakers that are not imposed on everyone else.

For a long time in this culture it has been assumed that black filmmakers will make black films (i.e., will work with content and imagery that highlight black experience). Concurrently, given the dearth of compelling images of blackness in cinema, it is not surprising that so many black filmmakers choose to work within this visual terrain because it is a fertile frontier—so much had not been discovered or done. In this sense there is a freshness to working with black subject matter that you never really find when the focus is on whiteness. At some point in the way distant future blackness will also be overworked, overdone. Right now it is still being discovered by black and nonblack filmmakers alike. It is practically impossible to see any Hollywood film that is making use of transgressive subject matter that does not include black characters. For black images, absent for so long from mainstream cinema, allow for the creation of fresh perspectives and standpoints.

Enough work has been produced to ensure that black films will not cease to be made. It is now essential that black filmmakers not be locked into a position by financial backers and funders where their focus must always and only be on blackness. While white critics will often praise black artists for not focusing on blackness, they do not urge white artists to cease their obsessional focus on whiteness. The critique of racial essentialism must work both ways. Just as it is important for us to see blackness from multiple standpoints—imaged by filmmakers who are

not black—it's equally important that white and other nonblack experiences be imaged by black filmmakers. Asian filmmakers, both independent and mainstream, work with black subject matter but not vice versa. When black filmmakers are able to treat a range of subject matter, not just that which highlights blackness, then there is more freedom to resist the racial burden of representation.

Certainly the critique of racial essentialism has intensified awareness that the simple fact of their skin color does not ensure that black filmmakers will create images that are radical or subversive. We now know, even if we are not willing to live the truth of this knowledge, that race is less the factor that determines the type of images created in a movie than the perspective of the filmmaker. When conservative black filmmakers make movies, the images of blackness they create are often in keeping with the status quo, as informed by internalized white supremacist aesthetics as images created by unenlightened white and other nonblack filmmakers. In the past it was just assumed that black filmmakers in the United States would create resisting images, that their work would offer a perspective challenging dominant stereotypes. Yet now that black filmmakers make films that they hope will have mass appeal, they address the huge white moviegoing audience by providing them with familiar images of blackness. These images are usually stereotypical. Until both colonizer and colonized decolonize their minds, audiences in white supremacist cultures will have difficulty "seeing" and understanding images of blackness that do not conform to the stereotype.

More than ever before, black filmmakers realize that it is not enough to create images from a decolonized perspective, there must also be a new aesthetics of looking taught to audiences so that such work can be appreciated. The process by which any of us alter the way we look at images is political. Until everyone can acknowledge that white supremacist aesthetics shape creativity

in ways that disallow and discourage the production by any group of images that break with this aesthetic, audiences can falsely assume that images are politically neutral. In actuality unspoken restrictions govern the ways white artists produce images as much as they do other groups. Yet these restrictions can easily not be named when they are simply passively accepted. Or when conflicts about the politics of race and representation occur behind closed doors. When I interview Wayne Wang about his and Paul Auster's decision to make the thief a black male when they did the casting for *Smoke* (the racial identity of the thief was not given in the story), he did not really answer the question fully. By making the thief black, they were choosing to perpetuate racist stereotypes. Yet I am sure that the real reason for adding all the black characters to this story was to provide it with a different, to spice it up with racial contrast. There is an ethical dimension to aesthetic choices that no one wants to talk about. The decision to make this thief black was not an innocent one. Yet no one really wants to talk openly about the significance of this decision. And that includes many black actors who realize that lots of black people were cast once a black male was chosen as the thief. While they might not like the social and political implications of the film's narrative content, they want to work in Hollywood.

No Hollywood insider really wants to publicly disclose the role white supremacist thinking plays in casting. Or the degree to which it is simply easier for everyone to follow the continuum of a racist filmic legacy rather than challenge it. There has still been no collective political demand that Hollywood divest itself of white supremacy. Challenges are often made on the individual level, and they go unnoticed. Every now and then when a powerful white man in mainstream cinema chooses to act against white supremacist aesthetics, we are given a glimpse of the hostility whites subject themselves to when they defy the status quo. A good example is Kevin Costner's choice to make

Whitney Houston the lead in *The Bodyguard*. This break with the conventional racism of mainstream cinema, with its insistence that black women leads just would not have mass appeal did not occur because of outspoken collective resistance to racism. It was merely the whim of an individual white male. And he has ceased to be the "golden white male" that he was before this production. Recently, Marlon Brando was forced to publicly apologize for denouncing the racism in Hollywood, and for suggesting that many Jews working in the business challenge the reproduction of racist stereotypes when the issue is Jewish representation even as they condone the creation of denigrating images of other groups, particularly non-whites. The ways in which white people are policed by other white people in the arena of cinematic cultural production receive little attention. This allows for the fiction to endure that there is more artistic freedom to create progressive representations of race than there actually is. And here, it is a matter of depicting not only black characters in a progressive manner but also white characters and everyone else.

Ironically, white directors now assume that simply putting black characters in their films means that they could not possibly be perpetuating racism by way of their work. When some critics referred to Quentin Tarantino's *Reservoir Dogs* as a real "white guy movie," they were articulating a concern about the way much of its intensity early on is attributable to racially and sexually charged comments. Of course, Tarantino has taken the lead role in putting down anyone who suggests that his use of racist or sexist epithets is not merely politically neutral or cool. Significantly, while he made a case for the repeated use of the word "nigger" in his films by suggesting that it is important to strip that word of its power, he makes no connection between that rationale and what would need to be done to strip whiteness of its power to dominate. In *Quentin Tarantino: The Cinema of Cool*, author Jeff Dawson declares: "the truth is, the casting of *Pulp Fiction* has well and truly dispelled any notion of racism." This

declaration is indicative of our cultural failure to understand that merely putting black characters in a film does not assure that the work acts, whether covertly or overtly, to undermine racism. Those black characters can be constructed cinematically so that they become mouthpieces for racist assumptions and beliefs. Tarantino's "cinema of cool" has generated a backlash against the forces that demand artistic vigilance regarding the representation of race and gender. His movies make racism and sexism entertaining.

Mainstream cinema has so deeply invested in racist mythography as part of its narrative structures that it will take nothing short of a revolution (i.e., audiences simply refusing to pay money to see films that actively perpetuate systems of domination) to change this world. Right now audiences act in profound complicity with the status quo. When a film like *Corrina Corrina* shows audiences progressive images of a black woman character (giving Whoopi Goldberg a break from her usual racist, sexist role as mammy or ho), it is not a commercial success. White audiences are not the only ones that turn away from progressive images. Often unenlightened black and other nonwhite groups who, like many whites, have been socially conditioned to accept denigrating portraits of black people are dissatisfied when they do not see these familiar stereotypes on the screen. James Lull reminds readers in *Media, Communication, Culture* that the system of white supremacist hegemony works because everyone is in on the act. "Dominant ideological streams must be subsequently reproduced in the activities of our most basic social units—families, workplace networks and friendship groups in the many sites and undertakings of everyday life. . . . Hegemony requires that ideological assertions become self-evident cultural assumptions. Its effectiveness depends on subordinated peoples accepting the dominant ideology as 'normal reality or common sense.'" Hence, even though in "real" life there is little evidence that young black males brutally slaughter Korean shopkeepers,

when a film like *Menace to Society* depicts such a slaughter many young black folks insist that the dehumanized images of black masculinity are authentic, reflect reality. They both identify with and then seek to express culturally the identity the film gives them.

The culture most movies are making when it comes to race, both in mainstream cinema and independent work, is one that still upholds, either covertly or overtly, white supremacy. Independent films by self-identified progressive white women, straight and lesbian, still draw upon conventional, stereotypical ways of perceiving black womanhood to organize their narratives. This is true of both *Go Fish* and *The Incredible True Story of Two Girls in Love*. In the latter, the filmmaker casts a black woman as the homophobic, shrewish upper-class bitchy mother whose daughter has a lesbian fling. Even though the white filmmaker stated in interview after interview that she based this character on her mother, not a single reviewer asked her to discuss why she chose to cast this character as black. She could then have been asked whether or not such depictions perpetuate the notion that black women are more homophobic than white women, as they are in this film. Such interrogation does not take place because it is not seen as "cool." It's more hip to engage in an uncritical celebration of interracial same-sex desire. Black females are presented as shallow worshippers of Eurocentric culture in this film, and there is a link between these representations and those we see in *Waiting to Exhale*.

When it comes to the issue of race and representation, much of what we see on the screen paints a grim picture. As more nonwhite images appear on the screen, they at least promote public debate and discussion about the politics of representation. In the past everyone assumed racism and white supremacy would be challenged and changed in everyday life and that this would lead to a revolution in cinema. Reversing this process would pose a more strategic challenge to racism. Audiences have

the power to shut down a movie. Picketing and boycotts are one of the cheapest and most effective ways to let the world know that the images we are being asked to consume are undesirable. Since movie culture is one of the primary sites for the reproduction and perpetuation of white supremacist aesthetics, demanding a change in what we see on the screen—demanding progressive images—is one way to transform the culture we live in. As long as no one makes this demand, we are not just helped captive by the imagistic hegemony of the collective white supremacist capitalist patriarchal imagination, we will not have eyes to see the liberatory visions progressive filmmakers offer us.

locations. Using pleasure to play with power, they divest themselves of the racialized hierarchies that shape white-and-black interactions in the non-utopian space.

It is the conservator in her spectacular S/M scenario who seeks an experience of the sublime solely through submission. She wants to be taken to a higher, purer plane of existence. That is why she is most fully "turned on" at the opera. She quests after the extrasexual. It is her strange mysterious passivity throughout *The Attendant* that is so alluring. She is totally without a story, completely abject, and yet at the same time radiating strength. Interpreting the way "the erotic submissive possesses the power to define power as an absurdity" Polhemus and Randall ask us to "consider the Bottom's unresponsive, unmovable demeanor—calmly complying with whatever the Top may demand but steadfastly refusing to react visibly to, or be fazed by, those demands. In the end, such passivity and unlimited compliance mocks rather than celebrates authority, for it denies it its raison d'etre." A hint of such mockery is there in the conservator's applause. The solitary audience, the sole listening ear, she refuses to lose herself in lament even as she accords it its place. After all, she has not abandoned the attendant.

Her unseen labor really begins when all the visitors leave. She understands the meaning of performance, the way unconventional desire enables transgression and transformation. After all, the conservator and the attendant have left work to make it to the theater—to be at the opera. There in that space of performance they can play. Fantasy is the space of release. It is this intimacy that binds them. The conservator will not abandon the attendant. The pleasure of work, and the work of pleasure, would not be the same without his presence.

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BACK TO THE AVANT-GARDE: THE PROGRESSIVE VISION

Whether or not progress has been made in representing race, sex, and class holistically in film can be gauged if we take a critical look at the ways black females are represented in both mainstream and independent cinema. Rarely do I see compelling representations of black females. Although there are films that represent black womanhood in ways that I enjoy and respect, constructing "positive" images, on a deeper level these images do not convey the complexity of black female experience that I hope one day to see interpreted on cinematic screens in the United States. It troubles me that for a long time I have had difficulty finding words to articulate what these images might be, ways I desire to see black females depicted. It troubles me that when I talk to other black women, I hear them speaking of the same wistful yearning and of the same difficulty naming what they want to see.

Certainly I want to see images that are more diverse and exploratory. I liked the representation of the black woman

character in Woody Allen's *The Purple Rose of Cairo*. In the film within the film she plays the traditional part of the fat mammy-maid that was such a stock character in presixties Hollywood dramas. That moment when she walks off the screen to express her dissatisfaction with her job, with her dominating white mistress, and with her overall filmic role delighted me. It was a brief, pleasurable moment of cinematic resistance. Her few seconds of "talking back" to the screen required audiences to really take a good look at her—to stop rendering her image invisible by keeping their gaze always and only fixed on the white female star. Allen's subversive moment (an uncommon one in his films, which tend to give us witty versions of old racist, sexist stereotypes when representing black womanhood) felt like an experiment.

There are so few images of blackness that attempt in any way to be subversive that when I see one like this, I imagine all the myriad ways conventional representations of black people could be disrupted by experimentation. I am equally moved by that moment in Jim Jarmusch's *Mystery Train* when the young Japanese couple arrive in the train station in Memphis only to encounter what appears to be a homeless black man, a drifter, but who turns to them and speaks in Japanese. The interaction takes only a moment, but it deconstructs and expresses so much. It reminds us that appearances are deceiving. It made me think about black men as travelers, about black men who fight in armies around the world. This filmic moment challenges our perceptions of blackness by engaging in a process of defamiliarization (the taking of a familiar image and depicting it in such a way that we look at it and see it differently). Way before Tarantino was dabbling in "cool" images of blackness, Jarmusch had shown in *Down by Law* and other work that it was possible for a white-guy filmmaker to do progressive work around race and representation. And then there is that magic moment in Charles Burnett's film *Killer of Sheep* when the black heterosexual couple dances in their front room—no words, just the curious shadows their bodies make on the wall.

My passion for movies was not engendered by conventional cinema. I was obsessed with watching "foreign" films and drawn visually to avant-garde experimental work in the United States. Early on I developed a passion for Stan Brakhage's work that has been sustained. Coming to work by women filmmakers through explorations of feminist art practices, I was and continue to be fascinated by the work of filmmakers like Yvonne Rainer, Beth B., Leslie Thornton, Kathleen Collins, Julie Dash, and, of course the work of theorist and filmmaker Trinh T. Minh-ha, a longtime comrade and friend. Among this collective work, Minh-ha has centrally highlighted representations of blackness. At times she has been critiqued for this focus, interrogated about her choices. We have had long talks about the way in which white audiences and critics usually act as though an entire range of images constituted their purview but the moment an artist of color goes wherever their vision takes them, their right to such movement is questioned. In Minh-ha's case she was also often questioned by black people who were not "comfortable" with her work, with the images of Africa they saw in *Reassemblage* or *Naked Spaces*. Often these individuals approach her work from the standpoint of racial essentialism. Similar critiques about the construction of Africa etc. are rarely leveled at black filmmakers. The images I saw as a consumer of foreign films and experimental works in the United States shaped my visual expectations. Whenever I brought those expectations to bear on representations of blackness, I was sorely disappointed. I wanted a complexity that never was. Since feminist thinking informed my looking relations I was no more satisfied with what I saw in black films than the work of their white counterparts.

Indeed, patriarchal cinematic practices (ways narratives are constructed, images are shot) inform so much of what is identified as black film that it does not then become a location where

blackness is represented in a liberatory manner, where we can see decolonized images. This is one of the dilemmas we face when our understanding of black experience is shaped solely by a focus on race, when the ways sex and class mediate racial identity are ignored. It has served the interests of contemporary black male filmmakers in the United States to look past the ways their relations are shaped by cinematic pedagogy in terms of both their technical training and what they are accustomed to seeing. Ironically, there are infinitely more transgressive visionary images of black femaleness in the work of a filmmaker like Oscar Micheaux than there are in that of most black male directors, precisely because Micheaux was not seeing through the lens of white longings and expectations. When contemporary black filmmakers, particularly males, offer audiences the same white supremacist aesthetics that we see in mainstream white cinema (making their lighter-skinned characters more feminine, more desirable; glorying in thin bodies; imaging black female sexuality as whorish), they are not making critical interventions. And very few critics, male or female, have wanted to openly interrogate why it was that films that were most talked about as breaking new ground for black cinema in the United States (*Sweet Sweetback's Baadassss Song* [1971], *Bush Mama* [1975], *Passing Through* [1977]), all made by black men at the onset of contemporary feminist movement, simply imposed on representations of black sexuality, and black female sexuality in particular, a pornographic, patriarchal frame. One film that was not usually talked about as much was progressive in the ways it depicted race, sex, and class—that film was Charles Burnett's *Killer of Sheep*. While every black person and his mother, too, knew about *Sweet Sweetback*, whether they were alive when the film first came out or not, few black audiences knew of Burnett's film. There is a continuum in the patriarchal imagination that informs these early works and the films made by black filmmakers today, whether independent or mainstream. This continued allegiance

to patriarchy has made it easier for black male filmmakers who are in no way inventive when it comes to their construction of gender to make it in Hollywood.

While the making and production of Haile Gerima's film *Sankofa* was presented as an act of resistance, a challenge to Hollywood's white supremacist aesthetic practices, all the representations of black womanhood in the film were quite consistent with Hollywood narratives. In many talks Gerima proclaimed that the purpose of this film "was to disrupt Hollywood, . . . to disrupt their sense of movies." Yet this film broke its pact with Hollywood only in the way it challenged audiences to see slavery from the standpoint of the pain and anguish of the enslaved. Overall, the filmic narrative valorized hierarchies—that of male over female particularly, more powerful male over less powerful male, positioned black women as positive mother figures or sexual victims redeemed only as they seek healing from the wise black male. The two leading black women "stars" in this movie appear in roles that are so in keeping with Hollywood narratives that it is mind-boggling. Mother Nunu's character was just a contemporary remake of Annie in *Imitation of Life*, only here her sacrifices and martyrdom are for her biracial son. The other female, Shola, is an African American model, who in the present has become a willing paid sex object for massa and in slavery is the victim of a brutal rape (surprise, surprise). If mainstream cinema's dominant representations of black women have been as "mammy or ho," the images in *Sankofa* follow this same continuum, only the end result is different. Shola changes her wicked wicked ways to affirm blackness. This depiction of the sexual black woman as a betrayer of blackness is common in the works of successful contemporary mainstream black filmmakers. It seems both white and black audiences are more comfortable watching black women when we are kept in our place by sexist, racist characterizations.

Filmmaker Haile Gerima states in an interview published in a

newsletter entitled the *Gaither Reporter* that he "didn't think about male and female. I just thought about slavery and black people—African people. So I was not really into gender, women and men. . . . For me, all of them are supposed to come as human beings fighting to change a brutal circumstance." This comment seems completely disingenuous, since resisting representations of individual black men in *Sankofa* do indeed break with mainstream norms. Obviously the filmmaker thought about gender but not about the need to give audiences progressive, nonsexist images of black womanhood. Despite its positive construction of Africa as a common symbolic homeland for black people, *Sankofa* is conservative in its narrative, its construction of blackness, and its overall technique. Celebrated by black audiences from all classes, to some extent this film reinstitutionalizes an outmoded black aesthetic that sees black film as existing primarily as a tool in the liberation struggle. Gerima comments: "For me, film is not a playing toy. Film is used for social change. Film is not to duplicate our reality. Film is used to interpret our reality, to do something about our condition, to activate people, to even make people rise up against a system that is racist and make it change." Few black filmmakers would disagree with the idea that film can further liberation, but that cannot be its only purpose. Such a concept of the medium ignores the place of pleasure in relation to the visual and the need for diverse representations of our experience in the world, an experience that is defined by blackness even as it transcends it.

Focusing solely on representation and race tends to distort the perspective of black artists. Indeed, if more black male filmmakers were looking at the ways race, sex, and class converge, then their articulations of black experience might offer us more daring, complex interpretations—among them representations of black masculinity. Until black male artists challenge and change sexist thinking, their work will never have the power to engage black women and men fully in the work of liberation. The

patriarchal cinema, whether black or white, is fundamentally distorted and can only give us incomplete images of males and females. If all sexist black male filmmakers (and their female counterparts) would abandon the patriarchal cinematic pedagogy, we would begin to see a visual revolution, for the images that would emerge from this new consciousness would necessarily be different.

Creating new and different representations of blackness should not be seen as the sole responsibility of black artists, however. Ostensibly, any artist whose politics lead him or her to oppose imperialism, colonialism, neocolonialism, white supremacy, and the everyday racism that abounds in all our lives would endeavor to create images that do not perpetuate and sustain domination and exploitation. The fact that progressive nonblack artists who make films, especially experimental work, challenge themselves around this issue is vital to the formation of a cultural climate in which different images can be introduced. Avant-garde/experimental work is central to the creation of alternative visions. Yet when black filmmakers embrace the realm of the experimental, they are often seen as practicing elitism, as turning their backs on the struggle to create liberatory visions.

In all areas of cultural production black artists confront barriers when we seek to do work that is not easily accessible, that does not have a plot or a linear narrative. My perspective on these issues has been informed by the dilemmas I have faced as a creative writer trying to gain acceptance for my own experimental work, which is not written in language that is as clear and plain as much of my critical writing. This creative writing is often poetic, abstract, nonlinear. In a similar vein, no matter how many essays I write that do not use abstract or heavily academic language, those few I choose to write using academic language tend to be harshly critiqued for not being clear enough. As a black artist who works with words and who makes visual art now and then, I am acutely aware of the way in which our

longing to experiment, to create from a multiplicity of standpoints, meets with resistance from those whose interest in that work is primarily commercial, from audiences, and from critics. Whether we are talking about book production or the making of films, everyone wants more of what sells. Experimental work is always risky, all the more so in an area like film where the costs of production are so high. In his interview with *Border/Lines* filmmaker John Akomfrah shared his sense that "personal, reflective black cinema has been eclipsed in a way by a much more aggressive, marketed cinema."

Usually the relative dearth of experimental work in cinema by black artists in the United States is explained by the evocation of economic constraints. Filmmaker Julie Dash, who has made movies that mix the experimental and the conventional, says that the commercial "industry tells you there is no room for the avant-garde." In agreement with other black filmmakers I have spoken with, she reiterates that most people view the choice to be avant-garde as one that "ensures that you will be a struggling artist for the rest of your life." While it is obvious that economic constraints inform the artistic choices that black filmmakers make, that fact does not preclude an interrogation of the many other factors that inhibit and/or prohibit the creative expression of black artists.

Despite the differences between writing books and producing films, the fact that the incredible success of contemporary black writers has not created a climate in which more experimental writing by black artists can be published suggests that there is still an unwillingness on the part of producers and audiences to engage work by black artists that challenges conventional representations, whether in style or content, irrespective of the cost of production. Books are relatively cheap to produce, yet publishers still act as though there is no audience for unconventional work. The fact that publishing such work is not at all risky does not open up the cultural space for certain types of books to be

mass-marketed, even as experimental writings by white authors garner acclaim. Actually, when a black writer gains widespread success with work that is conventional, it does not open spaces for a variety of standpoints and styles of writing to emerge. It usually happens that individual writers are encouraged to reproduce what already has been proven to sell. Hardly anybody talks about the significance of writing that has not been composed with the marketplace in mind. The few black writers I know who do experimental work have jobs that allow them to self-publish, or seek alternative publishing; they never intended to make money from this work. Despite the success of my critical essays, I still find that publishers and editors are reluctant to engage writing that is unconventional.

A culture that is not ready for black writers to experiment with the written word will be all the more closed to the idea of engaging experimental images. No matter what a filmmaker dreams of doing in his or her imagination, there has to be a reality base where those dreams are realized. It is hard for black filmmakers to let their imaginations soar when they face a culture that is still so closed. Many filmmakers feel they are still trying to convince mainstream culture that they can actually make standard films. Doing experimental work has little appeal. That is why director-cinematographer Arthur Jaffa raises the issue of "sacrifice" in relation to artistic vision. If there is not a growing body of black artists who are committed to exploring experimentally, then we will never really see truly revolutionary or even radical images of blackness on the screen.

To a grave extent the formation of a critical black cinema has been undermined by the cultural obsession with mainstream success that overdetermines the direction of artistic work, especially the work of black artists. Spike Lee's success in conventional cinema means that lots of young black filmmakers see no reason to engage independent filmmaking at all. They want to find the easiest route to the money and the fame. Many folks

thought Julie Dash would have it made after the success of *Daughters of the Dust*, but of course she still has difficulty getting support for projects that are not conventional. The assumption that success in the mainstream makes it possible for other venues to emerge, for the unconventional to be affirmed is utterly false. In all areas of cultural production in this society those black artists who gain conventional success often act to censor and police art-making practices that they are not interested in. Until black artists and critics find ways to support and affirm the continual creation of experimental black cinema, visionary images will not emerge that will enable us to move to another level.

Black audiences have wrong-mindedly believed that the push for more "positive" images would necessarily lead to diverse representations of blackness. Yet the very insistence on positive images automatically acts to constrict and limit what can be created. The work of black artists in all arenas of cultural production in the United States is subject to heavy policing by consumers around whether or not that work is authentic, whether it is positive, and so on. All these efforts to impose a vision on the artist are restrictive. This is most evident in the filmmaking context.

Audiences who watched *Daughters of the Dust* (which merges the conventional and the unconventional) at an early screening witnessed resisting spectatorship. To a grave extent the film had to be positioned aesthetically before many viewers could see and appreciate it on its own terms. When viewers came looking for conventional cinema and did not find it, many were disappointed and enraged. The way in which black consumers hold black artists accountable for satisfying their conventional visual desire wrongly places incredible burdens on us. Again, this is especially true for filmmakers.

A vital dimension of critical black cinema will be lost if all black filmmakers abandon a passion for independent filmmaking to seek success in mainstream cinema. Until there are lots of

black filmmakers who are willing to work as struggling artists to produce a variety of representations that emerge from unfettered imaginations, we will never really witness a cultural transformation of representations of blackness. The mainstream will never create images that perpetually intervene and subvert the stereotypes. While there are minor interventions here and there (and certainly Spike Lee has created some of those cinematic moments), they occur rarely, usually in only one scene, and thus are not apt to alter the visual impact of an entire picture.

One difficulty black artists encounter when they attempt to create unconventional films is that the more commonly accepted markers of avant-garde filmmaking may be too restrictive for work that endeavors to engage the politics of representation. Trinh T. Minh-ha found that the criteria conventionally used to determine whether work is avant-garde often do not conform to the strategies she deploys. To her a film might set itself apart "because it exposes its politics of representation instead of seeking to transcend representation in favor of visionary presence and spontaneity, which often constitute the prime criteria for what the avant-garde considers to be Art." Indeed, it is equally possible that a narrow vision of avant-garde practices leads black filmmakers to assume that they must conform to styles of working that disallow critical engagement with representations of blackness. If so, then another dimension of the work to be done involves expanding that vision. Audiences have been rigidly socialized to see cinema in fixed and narrow ways, especially when it comes to looking at representations of blackness. Again and again the persistent desire on the part of black audiences of all classes to see "realistic" and/or familiar images on the screen acts to curtail the imaginative scope of artists who do not wish to ignore those audiences or make films that they never engage. As a consequence, individual black filmmakers doing experimental work must join forces with critics to teach viewers a different aesthetic, to share new ways of looking.

At the same time, while it is crucial for black filmmakers to consider issues of accountability and the politics of representation, it is equally crucial that artists sustain the integrity of their vision. It should be seen as not only fine but essential to the assertion of liberated black subjectivity that there will indeed be black artists in all areas of cultural production who do work that will not be easily accessible. I long ago made a commitment to writing that would reach a larger audience, even as I continued to actively produce work that does not necessarily have wide appeal. Often black artists are encouraged to believe that the value of what we create is determined by audience acceptance. To expand the scope of creative possibility, we need to know that there is room for all types of cultural production, that artistic diversity is essential, and that some exceptional work will have mass appeal and some of it won't. To the extent that black audiences and black artists passively endorse the binary opposition between what sells big and what doesn't, the nature of artistic production will suffer. It should be possible for artists in every cultural sphere to do experimental work alongside conventional work if they choose, or to devote themselves to one or the other.

Overall, black artistic production will be severely damaged if the values of the marketplace overdetermine what we create. There are individual black filmmakers who have access to funds that would allow them to do short experimental works. Yet not enough folks are ready to take the leap. Calling attention to those artists who are fully self-determining with regard to their work is one way to show that it is possible to choose alternative strategies for artistic fulfillment and lead a satisfying life, even if there is not a lot of cash flow. Camille Billops has certainly created her own space in which to work. The rewards are different from those she would receive if she had chosen to focus on being commercially successful, but they are rewards nonetheless. Arthur Jaffa has been raising funds to make an independent experimental film. He does other work to make money. There

is a growing number of independent black filmmakers charting different journeys. Only a few are seriously committed to experimental films, however.

If we long to transform the culture so that the conventional mass media are not the only force teaching people what to like and how to see, then we have to embrace the avant-garde/the experimental. Here is where we'll find radical possibility. We can deconstruct the images in the mainstream white supremacist capitalist patriarchal cinema for days and it will not lead to cultural revolution. For too long black people and everyone else in this culture have been socialized to see the avant-garde solely as a marginal place where art that only a few understand resides. The time has come to rethink our assumptions. When we embrace the avant-garde as a necessary matrix of critical possibility, acknowledging that it is a context for cultural revolution, new and exciting representations of blackness will emerge.

Imagine a film that dares to show us the naked black female form in a pro-sex narrative that does not begin with rape as the central metaphor of our existence and as the boundary of our sexual landscape. Or a film working with images of elderly black women. And how about a radical visual conceptualization of black heterosexual relationships? I dream of seeing a documentary film about a woman writer and the filmmaker she loved that would use still images, a voice-over with love letters. No conventional story—a fragmented narrative, maybe a sound track with Celtic music or Coltrane or Sufi chants. When we are willing to dare, to risk, to stretch the bounds of the visual, moving our imaginations all over the place, all will be possible. There will be nothing that cannot be seen.