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Introduction

“People are greedy, selfish, lonely; they love; they hate; it’s all universal.”

Robert Townsend¹

I

If cultural historians are right, no civilization has been more influenced by its image-makers than have those of us who grew up in the twentieth century. The visual values of the popular movie stars, the solutions to our problems provided in the oft-repeated screen stories, and the sterile stereotyping of various groups proved so believable, so indelible on our collective psyches, that emotion dominated reason. Consequently, many pundits believe that modern society is shaped more by perception than by reality.

The evolution of this psychological phenomenon is instructive. For the first half of the century, the evolving screen formulas became a major educational force. Mainstream moviemakers grew powerful and wealthy by realistically and simplistically presenting messages that unconsciously shaped the spectators’ dreams, desires, fears, and personal relations. Many gratified viewers mistook the illusions for certainty. Effortlessly, the seemingly undemanding forms of entertainment passionately encouraged us to be ruled by our senses rather than our brains. Then came the explosive sixties and the controversial cultural revolutions that destabilized our confidence in popular art. As scholars sought to explain the basis of the chaos and confusion, the revisionist media reflected the genuine struggles taking place daily in our streets and in our homes.

What is still unclear to many observers is the nature of the struggles themselves. Traditionalists take the position that it was a “we versus them” battle. What was going on in the sixties, for conservatives, amounted to a counterculture trying to upend the dominant hegemony. Consequently, the issues are framed in binary terms: right versus wrong, high culture versus low culture, and good versus bad. More recent cultural historians, like Stuart Hall, insist on viewing the times as the start of an anti-colonial era, where global cultures revolted against colonization worldwide. Instead of positing the battle in positive/negative terms, he argues for a cultural system that allows people to be inclusive of their diversity.

Either way, film, in particular, proved disorienting to society. Following the breakup of the studio system in the late 1950s, the movie moguls lost control of film content and audience dependability. Every movie made in America competed fiercely with every other movie released to gain widespread popular acceptance. Experimentation by independent artists unsettled viewers who once found the film narratives reassuring. Where for over fifty years spectators could confidently predict the character types and values produced in traditional film formulas, sixties movies challenged us to consider the consequences of letting entertainment shape our behavior and judgments.

What especially fascinated me in those perplexing films during the 1960s were the startling changes in the representation of African-Americans. The once accommodating marginalized black performers not only rebelled against white society, but also their rebellious actions became the focus of the narratives rather than just the subplots. At first, the stories centered on racial and sexual injustices in white society: e.g., *A Raisin in the Sun* (1961), *Gone with the Wind/Purlie Victorious* (1963), *Nothing But a Man* (1964), *One Potato, Two Potatoes* (1964), *In the Heat of the Night* (1967), *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner* (1967), *Up Tight* (1968), and

The Learning Tree (1969). However, when audience tastes changed, the industry lost a first amendment battle in the courts.² Hollywood understandably abandoned its Motion Picture Production Code for a Ratings System in the late sixties, and filmmakers sought to capitalize on their newfound artistic freedom. Following on the commercial success of such action-packed films as Bonnie and Clyde (1967), Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid (1969), and The Wild Bunch (1969), business interests wisely explored the commercial value of marketing a “New Negro” screen image to reflect the black power struggle in America. If audiences wanted something new, the filmmakers now were willing to make changes.

Thanks to the work of cultural historians, we no longer trust such a simplistic dichotomy of good versus bad. Not only do we appreciate how there is no one-to-one link between a screen representation and a spectator’s identity, but also we recognize the value of analyzing how we see ourselves and how others see us. Thus the value of studying screen representations is in understanding how those icons came to be, and what forces shaped their creation and perpetuated their role in film history. Imagine how valuable film study could be if we had the ability to appreciate the contributions of those artists whose work contributes to cultural history, but is now dismissed because it is out of step with the times.

Back then, movies about civil disobedience, racial vengeance, and black pride paralleled what was taking place in society, and many young people identified fervently with counterculture values. The “Melting Pot” theory got replaced by racial pride. Now it was acceptable to be both an American and hold allegiance to one’s ethnicity. Anti-establishment narratives gave us clear-cut ideas about what was wrong in a postwar colonial world. Many whites even began to be self-conscious of the advantages that their color and status brought them. These very same stories also terrorized conservatives, who found the

revisionist messages excessive and dangerous. Diversity be damned; protect the status quo.

Over the next six years, defiant and determined black performers like Bernie Casey, James Earl Jones, Jim Brown, Paul Winfield, Richard Roundtree, Moses Gunn, Yaphet Kotto, Richard Pryor, Ron O'Neal, Billy Dee Williams, and Fred Williamson, along with Cicely Tyson, Diahann Carroll, Dianna Ross, Dianna Sands, Pam Grier, and Tamara Dobson vigorously rebelled against conventional wisdom. In America's movie houses, a new generation found validation for its values. The problem was that the battle became not one of equality of roles and images, but also one of positive black representation and achievements. Only later did we understand we could build on the past, not merely reinvent the present.

Conservatives reacted just as strongly to what they perceived as narratives that irresponsibly inflamed passions in our culture. Heated debates over basic human rights exploded on college campuses and in public arenas. Passion bred neither tolerance nor understanding.

In the midst of this struggle for the hearts and minds of an enflamed generation rebelling against the ruling power structure, a number of individuals who had played critical roles in constructing the old and then discredited African-American screen imagery became alienated not just from their professions, but from younger generations. The Black Nationalist movement's attack on these celebrities helped define the progressives' new image of African-Americans. It did not suggest what was owed them for breaking the barriers that empowered the present. How the scorned performers reacted to the shock waves of unchained black pride teaches us about the problematic nature of representation.

What follows is not a statistical summary of how everyone felt at this moment in history, nor is it meant as a substitute for other approaches to film study. These are personal feelings that build on individual experience and reflection. I am not interested in positing one point of

view against another. If anything, the stories of these older celebrities recounted here call out for multiple analyses; they resonate with ideas that should benefit anyone interested in the relevance of the past to the present. I hope that the material aids its reader in discovering the complexity of responsible film criticism. The self-conscious elderly storytellers reveal their motives for their actions and thereby allow us to differentiate between generalizations and particulars about black film history. More than anything else, these pioneering entertainers reveal how much race, gender, class, age, and timing shaped their art and life.

Let me be very clear on one central theme. I have no desire to be an apologist for a colonial and imperialist ideology. This book is not interested in finger pointing or in pigeonholing. My purpose is to recall the pioneering contributions by important personalities currently ignored or disparaged by conventional wisdom. Their stories, then, can enrich our history.

This book contains annotated transcriptions of seven interviews with seasoned film celebrities taped thirty-five years ago. The term “interview” is somewhat misleading. More like encounters between strangers unable to communicate clearly, these conversations provide a sampling of unstated assumptions about race and gender. More to the point, they illustrate how little we understand ourselves. They add to the growing literature on how we see and define each other. Because pursuing the complexity of such representational issues goes beyond the scope of this project, I use the term “interview” for convenience rather than precision.

The tapings took place between November 1971 and August 1972. Initially, my discussions began as research on the representation of black themes and images in American film history. You will not be surprised by the fact that the emblematic questions I raised never got answered, or that misunderstandings were commonplace. Few people agreed on what anything meant. We had neither the time nor the inclination to explore

fully the complexity of W.E. DuBois' dilemma in defining what being a Negro meant to America. In the end, the conversations provided an archive on not only the thoughts and values of the personalities themselves, but also on racial differences both in 1972 and three decades later.

The persons selected for my research may seem unrelated, but I will explore how they represent a particular moment in history. Except for the fact that all the individuals were entertainers, little uniformity appeared in their make-up and their cultural backgrounds. Lillian Gish and King Vidor were both white; the former was born in Springfield, Ohio; the latter, in Galveston, Texas. At the time of the interviews, Gish lived in New York; Vidor, California. The other personalities in this book were African-American. Lorenzo Tucker, born in Philadelphia, was living in Harlem; Frederick Douglass O'Neal, born in Brooksville, Mississippi, also resided in New York. On the West Coast were other black pioneering artists: Clarence Muse, born in Baltimore; Woody Strode, Los Angeles; and Charles Edward Gordone, Cleveland. The contributions these seven artists made to American culture range from acting and directing to writing and producing, not just with film, but also in theatrical and musical history.

Casual readers might be surprised that white entertainers are included in this anthology. Why not include them? Film representation has never been the result of either a specific group or a single collaboration. Anyone aware of film history from *The Birth of Nation* (1915) to *Bamboozled* (2000) realizes the process by which the screen standardizes conventions. These particular personalities—Gish and Vidor—were two of the primary molders of public opinion concerning African-American film representation. Their stories shed light on how misunderstood and misguided movies distorted history.

Do not be misled into thinking this idea was part of my initial approach. Chance more than design brought us together. My student

projectionist at the University of Vermont in the early 1970s was Jason Robards, Jr., who contacted his famous father about helping me get interviews for my study. Lillian Gish I met during her 1971 visit to the UVM campus. These contacts led to other links, and by the end of my labors I had interviewed more than seventeen celebrities, including the people in this book.

The stories that come first are because the individuals are dead and no longer can tell their own tales. To sophisticated readers of African-American times gone by, the facts, on the surface, appear familiar. The personal narratives recall the influences that literature, music, art, radio, movies, economics, culture, and politics had on both the personalities and our national racial character. You will find in their words a sense of the passion of the political and cultural battles waged throughout America. As expected in such African-American show business recollections, the storytellers focus on their experiences mainly in the five major entertainment centers in the twentieth century: New Orleans, New York, Chicago, Kansas City, and "Hollywood."

However, here familiarity and fact take separate roads. Personal histories produce counter-narratives, reasons why this and not that, rationalizations for actions questioned by new generations about the choices of the past. Such Rashomon accounts appear especially apt for today because of our current interest in the anxious, confused, and chaotic years of the sixties and early seventies. These were the days of notorious assassinations, civil unrest, and revolutionary movements. It was an era in which countless African-Americans concluded that whites had betrayed them and demanded not only more control of their lives, but also questioned the behavior of controversial icons. Aesthetics seemed to flip-flop. The issue was no longer breakthroughs in art. Now the concern was how one applied art to racial representation. Great stars like Louis Armstrong and Sidney Poitier, long embraced by world audiences, were maligned as Uncle Toms and throwbacks to minstrelsy.

Even the remarkable artist and political activist Harry Belafonte found himself adrift in a recently politicized black world because he didn't fit the image of the "New Negro." Particularly problematic for black progressives was Belafonte's light skin color, an issue for many African-Americans throughout race history. As evident throughout this book, the screen image of African-Americans during the twentieth century depended more often than not with how dark-skinned the actor appeared to the audience. "I never underestimate," explains analyst Stanley Crouch, "the skin-tone factor."³ The memorable people you meet in this collection fit perfectly into the complexities of those revisionist years. They, too, found themselves accused of "selling out." One moment, they were lauded for their contributions to popular culture; the next moment, they were denigrated for their roles in perpetuating racist and sexist imagery. One moment in time, they are artists; another moment their artistry appears embarrassing to black history and culture.

My secondary interest, at the time, was in finding out what these film personalities thought about the so-called "blaxploitation" boom (films by and about African-Americans made between the late 1960s and the early 1970s), and where it would take black images. Not surprisingly, our encounters took us far beyond those limited goals. As the reader will discover, these until-now-private conversations disclose intriguing attitudes about not only where we were, but also how far we have come. They are thus historical documents about our past.⁴

No claim is made that these highly personal revelations remain all inclusive of the times. However, the thoughts and actions of these seven people and my presentation of them chart how such beliefs and behavior resulted from the culture of our society and heritage. They illustrate how artists use their art to respond to the challenges of their age. Their responses remind us how quickly taste changes, and the penalties imposed on breakthrough performers who fall out of favor with popular

audiences. As you will discover, the heated debate over what it means to be “black” pervades this book.

Nevertheless, as James Baldwin made clear, “... the question of color, especially in this country, operates to hide the graver questions of the self.”⁵ My presentations remind each of us how much race and perception play in shaping human relationships. Such reminders should prove useful to students of history and culture. Especially intriguing is how well the stories validate the old chestnut, “The road to hell is paved with good intentions.”