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Black American Cinema: The New Realism

Manthia Diawara

The release of D. W. Griffith's *The Birth of a Nation* in 1915 defined for the first time the side that Hollywood was to take in the war to represent Black people in America. In *The Birth of a Nation*, D. W. Griffith, later a founding member of United Artists, created and fixed an image of Blackness that was necessary for racist America's fight against Black people. *The Birth of a Nation* constitutes the grammar book for Hollywood's representation of Black manhood and womanhood, its obsession with miscegenation, and its fixing of Black people within certain spaces, such as kitchens, and into certain supporting roles, such as criminals, on the screen. White people must occupy the center, leaving Black people with only one choice—to exist in relation to Whiteness. *The Birth of a Nation* is the master text that suppressed the real contours of Black history and culture on movie screens, screens monopolized by the major motion picture companies of America.

Griffith's film also put Black people and White liberals on the defensive, inaugurating a plethora of historical and critical writings against *The Birth of a Nation*, and overdetermining a new genre, produced exclusively for Black audiences, called race films. More insidiously, however, the racial conflict depicted in *The Birth of a Nation* became Hollywood's only way of talking about Black people. In other words, whenever Black people appeared on Hollywood screens, from *The Birth of a Nation* to *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner?* to *The Color Purple*, they are represented as a problem, a thorn in America's heel. Hollywood's Blacks exist primarily for White spectators whose comfort and understanding the films must seek, whether they thematize exotic images dancing and singing on the screen, or images constructed to narrate a racial drama, or images of pimps and muggers. With *The Birth of a Nation* came the ban on Blacks

participating in bourgeois humanism on Hollywood screens. In other words, there are no simple stories about Black people loving each other, hating each other, or enjoying their private possessions without reference to the White world, because the spaces of those stories are occupied by newer forms of race relation stories which have been overdetermined by Griffith's master text.

The relations between Black independent cinema and the Hollywood cinema just described above parallel those between Blackness and Americanness; the dichotomy between the so-called marked cultures and unmarked cultures; but also the relations between "high art" and "low art." The complexity of these relations is such that every independent filmmaker's dream is to make films for Hollywood where she/he will have access to the resources of the studios and the movie theaters. On the other hand, the independents often use an aesthetic and moral high ground to repudiate mainstream cinema, which is dismissed as populist, racist, sexist, and reactionary. Furthermore, a look at the relations between Oscar Micheaux and the Hollywood "race films," Melvin Van Peebles and the Blaxploitation films, Charles Burnett (*Killer of Sheep*), Haile Gerima (*Bush Mama*), and Spike Lee and the rethematization of urban life in such films as *City of Hope*, *Grand Canyon*, *Boyz n the Hood*, and *Straight Out of Brooklyn* reveals that mainstream cinema constantly feeds on independent cinema and appropriates its themes and narrative forms.

Some of the most prominent Black film historians and critics, such as Albert Johnson, Donald Bogle, and Thomas Cripps, emphasize mainly mainstream cinema when discussing Black films. With the exception of a few breakthrough films, such as those by Micheaux, Van Peebles, and Lee, these historians are primarily concerned with the issues of integration and race relations in mainstream films, Black actors and actresses on the big screen, and the construction of stereotypes in Hollywood films. They rarely pay attention to independent cinema, which includes far more Black directors than Hollywood, and in which aesthetics, political concerns such as authorship and spectatorship, and the politics of representation with respect to Black cinema are more prevalent. Critics and historians such as Clyde Taylor, Toni Cade Bambara, Phyllis Klotman, and Gladstone Yearwood are the first to focus on Black independent cinema as a subject of study. More recently, the *Black Film Review* has assumed the preeminent role in Black film history and criticism.

Hollywood's block-booking system prevents independently produced films from reaching movie theaters and large audiences. This may be one reason why film historians and critics neglect independent cinema: some film magazines, such as *Cineaste*, adopt a policy of accepting only reviews of films that have been distributed and seen by their readers. It is also possible to argue that Black independent cinema has remained marginal

until now because its language, not unlike the language of most independent films, is metafilmic, often nationalistic, and not "pleasurable" to consumers accustomed to mainstream Hollywood products. Black independent cinema, like most independent film practices, approaches film as a research tool. The filmmakers investigate the possibilities of representing alternative Black images on the screen; bringing to the foreground issues central to Black communities in America; criticizing sexism and homophobia in the Black community; and deploying Afrafemcentric discourses that empower Black women. The narratives of such films are not always linear; the characters represent a tapestry of voices from W. E. B. DuBois, Frantz Fanon, Toni Morrison, Malcolm X, Martin Luther King, Jr., Karl Marx, Angela Davis, Alice Walker, and Zora Neale Hurston. Even what passes as documentary in Black independent films, like *The Bombing of Osage Avenue* (Louis Massiah), is an artistic reconstruction of archival footage and "real" events.

What is, therefore, the Black independent cinema, and what constitutes its influence on mainstream cinema? The French appropriately refer to independent cinema as *cinema d'art et essai*. In France, the government sponsors such a cinema by imposing a distribution tax on commercial films. The *cinema d'art et essai* is less concerned about recouping its cost of production and making a profit; its main emphasis is toward artistic development, documenting an area of research, and delineating a certain philosophy of the world. In the late 1950s, a group of French youth, who were dissatisfied with commercial films and wanted to make their own films, mobilized private and personal funds along with government funds to produce low-budget films. The result is well known today as the French New Wave, considered by some as one of the pivotal moments in film history.

As an alternative to commercial cinema, which emphasized the well-made story, acting, and the personality of the actor, the New Wave put in the foreground the director, whom it raised to the same artistic level as the author of a painting, a novel, or a poem; the New Wave also demystified the notion of the well-made story by experimenting with different ways of telling the same story, and by deconstructing the notion of actor and acting. Jean-Luc Godard's *Breathless* (1959), for example, is famous for its reinsertion of the "jump-cut" as a valid narrative device. The jump-cut, which was avoided in Hollywood films in order not to disrupt the spectator with "unnecessary" repetitions, has today become a powerful narrative device used by directors such as Spike Lee, who redefines it and uses it to describe the repetition and the sameness in racial and sexual stereotyping. In *Do the Right Thing* (1988) Lee uses the same angle to repeat several shots of Blacks, Italians, Jews, and Koreans repeating racial stereotypes, unlike Godard, who uses the same image twice from the same angle. Lee

practices the same device in *She's Gotta Have It* (1985) to construct sexual stereotypes among young Black males.

This example of the New Wave reveals that independent filmmakers come to their vocation for at least two reasons: one political, and the other artistic. Politically, they are dissatisfied with commercial cinema's lack of courage to address certain issues. They feel that they have to make their own films if they want to see those issues on the screen. Artistically, they want to explore new ways of telling stories; they want to experiment with the camera, the most powerful invention of modern times, and engage the infinite possibilities of storytelling. There are other examples of alternative or independent cinemas that occupy important places in the history of film. The Italian Neorealism, the Brazilian Cinema Novo, and the Argentinian Third Cinema have all created alternative narrative techniques that were at first unknown to commercial cinemas, but are claimed today as part of traditional narrative practices.

Similarly, the cloning of Hollywood's mind to Black history and culture, which do not revolve around White people, is the reason why most Black filmmakers since Oscar Micheaux have turned first to the independent sector. Since Oscar Micheaux, Black independents have pioneered creating alternative images of Blacks on the screen, constructing new narrative forms derived from Black literature and folklore, and denouncing racism, sexism and homophobia in American culture.

This is not, however, to romanticize the independent practice. Micheaux made his films by selling personal property and borrowing money from friends. Still today, independent filmmaking causes many people to become poor. It takes more than six years for some filmmakers to gather the money for one film. Charles Burnett's *To Sleep With Anger*, and Julie Dash's *Daughters of the Dust* came only after arduous years of fundraising. Haile Gerima has been trying to raise funds for *Nunu* for several years now. We have not yet seen second features by talented directors such as Billy Woodberry (*Bless Their Little Hearts*), Larry Clark (*Passing Through*), Alile Sharon Larkin (*A Different Image*), and Warrington Hudlin (*Street Corner Stories*). Spike Lee sums up the harsh reality of independent production as follows:

When I went to film school, I knew I did not want to have my films shown only during Black History Month in February or at libraries. I wanted them to have a wide distribution. And I did not want to spend four or five years trying to piecemeal together the money for my films. I did my first film, *She's Gotta Have It*, independently for \$175,000. We had a grant from the New York State Council on the Arts and were raising money the whole time we were shooting. We shot the film in twelve days. The next stage was to get it out of the lab. Then,

the most critical part was when I had to hole up in my little apartment to get it cut. I took about two months to do that. I had no money coming in, so I had to hold off the debtors because I knew if I had enough time to at least get it in good enough shape to show, we could have some investor screenings, and that's what happened. We got it blown up to 35mm for a film festival. What you have to do is to try to get a distributor. You enter as many film festivals as you can.¹

Black independent cinema is any Black-produced film outside the constraints of the major studios. The filmmakers' independence from Hollywood enables them to put on the screen Black lives and concerns that derive from the complexity of Black communities. Independent films provide alternative ways of knowing Black people that differ from the fixed stereotypes of Blacks in Hollywood. The ideal spectators of the films are those interested in Black people's perspectives on American culture. White people and Whiteness are marginalized in the films, while central positions are relegated to Black people, Black communities, and diasporic experiences. For example, the aesthetics of uplifting the race in a film like *The Scar of Shame* (1928, *The Colored Players*) concern particularly Black spectators, whom the filmmakers' stated mission is to entertain and educate. The film posits Black upper-class culture as that which should be emulated by lower-class Blacks in order to humanize themselves. Unlike Hollywood films of that time, which identified with the ideal White male, the camera in *The Scar of Shame* identifies with the position of the Black bourgeoisie. The film is precious today as a document of Black bourgeois ways of being in the 1920s and 1930s. Crucially, it constitutes, with Oscar Micheaux's films, a genre of Black independent cinema which puts Black people and their culture at the center as subjects of narrative development; in these films, Black people are neither marginalized as a problem, nor singled out as villainous stereotypes such as Hollywood constructs in its films.

Contemporary independent films continue the same effort of inquiring into Black subjectivities, the heterogeneity of Black lives, the Black family, class and gender relations, and diasporic aesthetics. Recently, independent Black women filmmakers such as Kathleen Collins (*Losing Ground*), Alile Sharon Larkin (*A Different Image*), Ayoka Chenzira (*Zajota: the Boogie Spirit*), Julie Dash (*Daughters of the Dust*), and Zeinabu Davis (*A Powerful Thang*) have explored such themes as Black womanhood and spirituality, diaspora art and music, and Afrocentric aesthetics. Black manhood, the urban landscape, unemployment and the Black family are thematized in films like *Sweet Sweetback's Baaaaadassss Song* (Van Peebles), *Killer of Sheep* (Burnett), *Bless Their Little Hearts* (Woodberry), *Serving Two Masters* (Tim Lewis), *Street Corner Stories* (Warrington Hudlin), *Chame-*

leon Street (Wendell Harris), and *Ashes and Embers* (Haile Gerima). The themes of sexuality and homophobia are depicted in *Tongues Untied* (Marlon Riggs), *Storme: Lady of the Jewel Box* (Michelle Parkerson), *She's Gotta Have It* (Spike Lee), *Ganja and Hess* (Bill Gunn), *Splash* (Thomas Harris), and *She Don't Fade* (Cheryl Dunye). The major Black documentary artists, such as William Greaves, Louis Massiah, Camille Billops, and Sinclair Bourne, have also enriched the documentary genre by focusing their cameras on Black people in order to reconstruct history, celebrating Black writers and activists, and giving voice to people who are overlooked by television news and mainstream documentaries.

Two Paradigms of Black Cinema Aesthetics

In her contribution to this volume, Jane Gaines defines Oscar Micheaux's editing style as follows: "Perhaps to elude any attempt to essentialize it, we could treat this style as more of an ingenious solution to the impossible demands of the conventions of classical Hollywood style, shortcuts produced by the exigencies of economics, certainly, but also modifications produced by an independent who had nothing at stake in strict adherence to Hollywood grammar." Gaines goes on to posit that Micheaux's "freewheeling cinematic grammar" constitutes both a misreading and an improvement upon Hollywood logic. Clearly, Micheaux's "imperfect" cinema (to borrow a term from Julio Garcia Espinoza), which misreads and improves upon Hollywood logic, is a powerful metaphor for the way in which African-Americans survived and continue to survive within a hostile economic and racist system, and used the elements of that survival as raw material to humanize and improve upon American modernism. Micheaux's "loose editing," like the improvisation of jazz, surprises and delights the spectator with forbidden images of America that Hollywood's America conceals from its space. In so far as the classical Hollywood narrative proceeds by concealment of space, Micheaux's "imperfect" narrative constitutes an excess which reveals the cheat cuts, the other America artificially disguised by the Hollywood logic. It is in this sense that Gaines writes of improvement of film language by Micheaux. Another contributor to the volume, Ron Green, compares Micheaux's film style to Black English, and to jazz. His cinema is one of the first to endow African-Americans with cinematic voice and subjectivity through his uncovering of new spaces at the threshold of dominant cinema.

The first step in interpreting a Black film aesthetic must therefore be directed towards an analysis of the composition of the new shots discovered by Micheaux, and their potential effects on spectators. In this volume, Micheaux's films are discussed in an in-depth manner for the first time by Jane Gaines and Ron Green. Micheaux's legacy as an independent

filmmaker not only includes his entrepreneurial style in raising money and making films outside the studios. He also turned his cameras towards Black people and the Black experience in a manner that did not interest Hollywood directors of race films. Crucially, Micheaux's camera positioned Black spectators on the same side as the Black middle-class ideology, acquiring for his films an aesthetic that was primarily specific to the ways of life of that class.

Similarly, in the 1970s, Melvin Van Peebles and Bill Gunn positioned spectators with respect to different imaginaries derived from the Black experience in America. In *Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song*, Van Peebles thematizes Black nationalism by casting the Black community as an internal colony, and Sweetback, a pimp, as the hero of decolonization. In her contribution to this book, Toni Cade Bambara refers to *Sweet Sweetback* as "a case of Stagleee meets Fanon or Watermelon Man plays Bigger Thomas?" *Sweet Sweetback* is about policing and surveillance of Black communities, and the existentialist struggle of the film's main character, a Black man. As Bambara notices, Bigger Thomas is not the only literary reference in the film; it also draws on the theme of the running Black man in *Invisible Man*, which is collapsed into a transformed Hollywood stereotype of the Black stud. As such, *Sweet Sweetback* is famous as the paradigmatic text for the 1970s Blaxploitation films. The theme of the Black man running from the law or from Black-on-Black crime, which links Van Peebles to such Black American writers as Richard Wright, Ralph Ellison, and Chester Himes, is also echoed in 1990s films like *Juice*, *Straight Out of Brooklyn*, and *Boyz N The Hood*, not to mention *New Jack City*, a film directed by Van Peebles's son, Mario Van Peebles.

Sweet Sweetback's aesthetic draws on the logic of Black nationalism as the basis of value judgment, and defines itself by positioning the spectator to identify with the Black male hero of the film. Bambara rightly criticizes the centrality of Black manhood at the expense of women in *Sweet Sweetback*, but recognizes nationalist narratives as enabling strategies for survival, empowerment, and self-determination. As Sweetback is helped to escape from the police by one Black person after another, the nationalist discourse of the film transforms the ghetto, where Black people are objects, into the community, where they affirm their subjecthood. To put it in Bambara's words, "Occupying the same geographical terrain are the *ghetto*, where we are penned up in concentration-camp horror, and the *community*, where we enact daily rituals of group validation in a liberated zone."

In *Ganja and Hess*, Bill Gunn aestheticizes the Black imaginary by placing the spectator on the same side as the Black church. The spectator draws pleasure from the film through the confrontation between the ideology of the Black church and vampirism, addiction to drugs and sex, and

materialism. *Ganja and Hess* is perhaps the most beautifully shot Black film, and the most daring with respect to pushing different passions to their limits. The Black artist, Meda (played by Bill Gunn himself), is a nihilist who advocates total silence because, as a Black person, his art is always already overdetermined by race in America. The love scenes in the film are commingled with vampiristic gestures that are attractive and repulsive at the same time. At the Cannes Film Festival in 1973, Gunn's daring camera angles during one of the love scenes brought spectators to joy, applauding and screaming "Bravo! Bravo!" in the middle of the film. *Ganja and Hess* also pushes the classical narrative to the threshold by framing a frontal nude image of a Black man coming out of a swimming pool and running toward a window where a woman, Ganja (Marlene Clarke), smilingly awaits him.

What is radical about both *Ganja and Hess* and *Sweet Sweetback* is their formal positioning of Black characters and Black cultures at the center of the screen, creating a sense of defamiliarization of the classical film language. The two films also inaugurate for Black cinema two narrative tracks with regard to time and space. While *Ganja and Hess* is cyclical, going back and forth between pre-Christian time and the time after Christ, *Sweet Sweetback* is a linear recording of the progress of Black liberation struggle.

With regard to Black aesthetics, it is possible to put in the same category as *Ganja and Hess* such films as *A Powerful Thang* (Davis), *Daughters of the Dust* (Dash), *Losing Ground* (Collins), *Killer of Sheep* and *To Sleep with Anger* (Burnett), *Tongues Untied* (Riggs), and *She's Gotta Have It* (Lee). These films are concerned with the specificity of identity, the empowerment of Black people through *mise-en-scène*, and the rewriting of American history. Their narratives contain rhythmic and repetitious shots, going back and forth between the past and the present. Their themes involve Black folklore, religion, and the oral traditions which link Black Americans to the African diaspora. The narrative style is symbolic.

Sweet Sweetback, on the other hand, defines its aesthetics through recourse to the realistic style in film. The story line develops within the logic of continuity editing, and the characters look ordinary. The film presents itself as a mirror on a Black community under siege. The real effect is reinforced throughout the film by events which are motivated by racial and gendered causes. The sound track and the costumes link the film to a specific epoch in the Civil Rights Movement. Unlike the first category of films, which uses the symbolic style and concerns itself with the past, *Sweet Sweetback* makes the movement toward the future-present by confronting its characters with obstacles ahead of them. Other films in this category include *Cooley High* (Michael Schultz), *House Party* (Reginald Hudlin), *Chameleon Street* (Harris), *Passing Through* (Clark), *Do*

The Right Thing (Lee), *Straight Out of Brooklyn* (Rich), *Juice* (Ernest Dickerson), and *Boyz N The Hood* (Singleton). These lists are neither exhaustive nor fixed. The realist category has more in common with the classical Hollywood narrative, with its quest for the formation of the family and individual freedom, and its teleological trajectory (beginning, middle, and end). The symbolic narratives have more in common with Black expressive forms like jazz, and with novels by such writers as Toni Cade Bambara, Alice Walker, and Toni Morrison, which stop time to render audible and visible Black voices and characters that have been suppressed by centuries of Eurocentrism.

The comparison of the narrative styles deployed by *Sweet Sweetback* and *Ganja and Hess*² is useful in order to link the action-oriented *Sweet Sweetback* to modernism, and the reflexive style of *Ganja and Hess* to postmodernism. *Sweet Sweetback* defines its Afro-modernism through a performative critique of the exclusion of Blacks from reaping the fruits of American modernity and liberal democracy. *Ganja and Hess* is a postmodern text which weaves together a time of pre-Christian Africa, a time of Christ's Second Coming in the Black church, and a time of liberated Black women. Crucially, therefore, the repetition of history as played out on the grid of the Black diaspora is important to the definition of Gunn's film language. Through the repetition of these Black times in the film, Bill Gunn defines a Black aesthetic that puts in the same space African spirituality, European vampire stories, the Black church, addiction to drugs, and liberated feminist desires.

The New Black Films

It is easy to see the symbolic, reflexive, and expressive styles in films such as *Killer of Sheep* and *Daughters of the Dust*, and the active, materially grounded, and linear styles in *Boyz N the Hood*. But before looking more closely at these films, it is important to put into some perspective the ways in which Black films posit their specificity by challenging the construction of time and space in Hollywood films. It is only in this sense that arguments can begin about whether they displace, debunk, or reinforce the formulaic verisimilitude of Hollywood.

The way in which a filmmaker selects a location and organizes that location in front of the camera is generally referred to in film studies as *mise-en-scène*. Spatial narration in classical cinema makes sense through a hierarchical disposition of objects on the screen. Thus space is related to power and powerlessness, in so far as those who occupy the center of the screen are usually more powerful than those situated in the background or completely absent from the screen. I have described here Black people's relation to spatially situated images in Hollywood cinema. When Black

people are absent from the screen, they read it as a symbol of their absence from the America constructed by Hollywood. When they are present on the screen, they are less powerful and less virtuous than the White man who usually occupies the center. Hollywood films have regularly tried to resolve this American dilemma, either through token or symbolic representation of Blacks where they are absent—for instance, the mad Black scientist in *Terminator 2*; or through a substitution of less virtuous Blacks by positive images of Blacks—for instance, *Grand Canyon* or *The Cosby Show*. But it seems to me that neither symbolic representation nor positive images sufficiently address the specificity of Black ways of life, and how they might enter in relation to other Americans on the Hollywood screen. Symbolic representation and positive images serve the function of plotting Black people in White space and White power, keeping the real contours of the Black community outside Hollywood.

The construction of time is similarly problematic in the classical narrative. White men drive time from the East to the West, conquering wilderness and removing obstacles out of time's way. Thus the "once upon a time" which begins every story in Hollywood also posits an initial obstacle in front of a White person who has to remove it in order for the story to continue, and for the conquest ideology of Whiteness to prevail. The concept of beginning, middle, and end, in itself, is universal to storytelling. The difference here is that Hollywood is only interested in White people's stories (White times), and Black people enter these times mostly as obstacles to their progress, or as supporting casts for the main White characters. "Once upon a time" is a traditional storytelling device which the storyteller uses to evoke the origin of a people, their ways of life, and the role of the individual in the society. The notion of *rite de passage* is a useful concept for describing the individual's separation from or incorporation into a social time. The classical narrative in cinema adheres to this basic ideological formula in order to tell White people's stories in Hollywood. It seems that White times in Hollywood have no effect on Black people and their communities: whether they play the role of a negative or positive stereotype, Black people neither grow nor change in the Hollywood stories. Because there is a dearth of Black people's stories in Hollywood that do not revolve around White times, television series such as *Roots*, and films such as *Do the Right Thing*, which situate spectators from the perspective of a Black "once upon a time," are taken out of proportion, celebrated by Blacks as authentic histories, and debunked by Whites as controversial.

To return again to the comparison between *Sweet Sweetback* and *Ganja and Hess*, it is easy to see how important time and space are to defining the cinematic styles they each extol. The preponderance of space in films such as *Ganja and Hess* reveals the hierarchies of power among the characters, but it also reveals the preoccupation of this style of Black

cinema with the creation of space on the screen for Black voices, Black history and Black culture. As I will show later with a discussion of space in *Daughters of the Dust*, Black films use spatial narration as a way of revealing and linking Black spaces that have been separated and suppressed by White times, and as a means of validating Black culture. In other words, spatial narration is a filmmaking of cultural restoration, a way for Black filmmakers to reconstruct Black history, and to posit specific ways of being Black Americans in the United States.

The emphasis on time, on the other hand, reveals the Black American as he/she engenders him/herself amid the material conditions of everyday life in the American society. In films like *Sweet Sweetback* and *Boyz N the Hood*, where a linear narrative time dominates, the characters are depicted in continuous activities, unlike the space-based narratives, where the past constantly interrupts the present, and repetitions and cyclicity define narration. Crucially, whereas the space-oriented narratives can be said to center Black characters on the screen, and therefore empower them, the Black-times narratives link the progress of time to Black characters, and make times exist for the purpose of defining their needs and their desires. Whereas the space-based narratives are expressive and celebratory of Black culture, the time-based narratives are existentialist performances of Black people against policing, racism, and genocide. I would like now to turn to *Daughters of the Dust* and *Boyz N the Hood* to illustrate the point.

Space and Identity: Black Expressive Style in *Daughters of the Dust*

I am the first and the last
 I am the honored one and the scorned one
 I am the whore and the holy one
 I am the wife and the virgin
 I am the barren one and many are my daughters. . . .
 I am the silence that you cannot understand. . . .
 I am the utterance of my name.

(*Daughters of the Dust*)

I have argued that the Hollywood classical narrative often articulates time and space through recourse to a discriminating gaze toward American Blacks. When the story is driven by time and action, it is usually White times. I'll say more about this in my discussion below of *Boyz N the Hood*. Similarly, when spatial considerations dominate the production of the story, the purpose is usually to empower White men. Common sense reveals that characters that are more often on the screen, or occupy the center of the frame, command more narrative authority than those that are

in the background, on the sides, or completely absent from the frame. By presence, here, I have in mind first of all the literal presence of White characters in most of the shots that constitute the typical Hollywood film, which helps to define these characters as heroes of the story. There is also the symbolic presence through which narrative authority for the organization of space is attributed to certain characters in the story. These devices of spatial narration are effective in linking characters with spaces, and in revealing space occupancy as a form of empowerment. For example, through the character played by Robert Duval in *Apocalypse Now*, Francis Ford Coppola parodies the power associated with White male actors such as John Wayne as they are framed at the center of the screen.

There is preponderance of spatial narration in Julie Dash's *Daughters of the Dust*. Black women and men occupy every frame of the film, linking Black identity to a place called Ibo Landing in the Sea Islands of South Carolina, and, more importantly, empowering Black women and their ways of life. On a surface and literal level, the wide appeal of the film for Black women depends on the positioning of the women characters as bigger than life in the middle of the screen, which mirrors the beautiful landscape of Ibo Landing. Black women see themselves on the screen, richly adorned, with different hues of Blackness and Black hair styles, and flaunting their culture. In *Daughters of the Dust*, the screen belongs to Black women. At a deeper level, where space and time are combined into a narrative, Julie Dash emphasizes spatial narration as a conduit to Black self-expressivity, a storytelling device which interrogates identity, memory, and Black ways of life. *Daughters of the Dust* stops time at 1902, when the story was set, and uses the canvas of Ibo Landing in the Sea Islands to glance backward to slavery, the Middle Passage, African religions, Christianity, Islam, the print media, photography, moving pictures, and African-American folkways, as elements with which Black people must come to terms in order to glance forward as citizens of the United States. In other words, the film asks us to know ourselves first, know where we came from, before knowing where we are going. To put it in yet another way, Ibo Landing is a symbolic space in which African-Americans can articulate their relation to Africa, the Middle Passage, and the survival of Black people and their ways of life in America. Crucially, the themes of survival, the memories of African religions and ways of life which enter into conflict with Christianity and European ways of life, and the film's proposal of syncretism as a way out, are narrativized from Black women's points of view. I want to take more time here to show how Julie Dash uses women's voices to make these themes compatible with the space of Ibo Landing.

The conflict in the film concerns the migration of the Peasant family from Ibo Landing of the Sea Islands to the North. At first the conflict is

set in binary terms. For those who support the migration North, the space of Ibo Landing is primitive, full of people who worship the sun, the moon, and the river. The North therefore promises literacy, Christianity and progress. For Grandma Nana and the Unborn Child who link their identity to the space of Ibo Landing, the North represents the destruction of the family, disconnection from the ancestors, and the loss of identity for the children. For Grandma Nana, Ibo Landing is where the ancestors watch over the living, protect them, and guide them. It is in this sense that Nana does not want the family reunion to be a farewell party between those who are leaving and those staying. She prepares herself to give them something that they "can take North with [them] along with [their] big dreams."

As filmic space, Ibo Landing is the link between Africa and America. Or, to put it another way, Ibo Landing is Africa in America. According to the film, it is where the last slaves landed. *Daughters of the Dust* also argues that it is where African-Americans remained isolated from the mainland of Georgia and South Carolina, and "created and maintained a distinct imaginative and original African-American culture." The Peasant family must therefore learn the terms of their belonging to Ibo Landing, which will be an example of African-American belonging to America, and must use the space of Ibo Landing to validate their identities as Americans of a distinctive culture. It is interesting to notice here that, unlike the Hollywood narratives which claim space only as a process of self-empowerment, *Daughters of the Dust* acknowledges through the letter that Iona receives from her Indian lover that the space belonged to the Indians first.

Weaving the voices of Grandma Nana, the Unborn Child, and Eula (the mother of the Unborn Child) through the spaces of Ibo Landing, Julie Dash creates a narrative that connects Africa to America, the past to the present. Using African ancestor figures as her narrative grid, she places Grandma Nana at the center of her story, and constructs oppositional characters around her. On the one hand we have Haagar, Viola, the bible lady, and Eli, who is Eula's husband; on the other hand we have Yellow Mary, Eula, and Iona, who is Haagar's daughter. We have characters who are alike and who constitute reincarnations of ancestor figures with similar dispositions; and characters who are contraries of one another, and therefore require the intervention of the ancestors to bring peace and harmony.

Grandma Nana is the oldest person on the island. She spends most of her time visiting the graveyard where the ancestors are buried, and by the water which is a dwelling place of the spirits of the ancestors. I do not have enough space here to discuss the significance of water in *Daughters of the Dust*. But it is crucial to point out the recurring Middle Passage theme of Africans walking on water to go back to Africa. As an intertextual religious space, the use of water by Grandma Nana to communicate with the gods echoes *Yeelen* by Souleymane Cissé, where the mother baths

with milk in the middle of the river and asks the Goddess to protect her son. *Daughters* also reminds us of *Testament* by Black Audio Film/Video Collective, in which the characters walk into the middle of the river or visit graveyards in order to unlock the secret of the past. It would also be interesting to investigate the use of water in vases and on altars as a representation of Voodoo in *Daughters* and in *Dreaming Rivers* by Sankofa Film/Video Collective.

Daughters depicts the survival of African religious practices in Ibo Landing through Grandma Nana in other ways as well. She can hear the calls of the spirits, and, therefore, works with the Unborn Child to keep the family together. She teaches Eli about the core of African ancestor worship: "It's up to the living to keep in touch with the dead, Eli. Man's power don't end with death. We just move on to another place; a place where we go and watch over our living family. Respect your elders, respect your family, respect your ancestors."

A recourse to religion is central to the understanding of *Daughters of the Dust*. For Grandma Nana, ancestor worship provides the strongest stability for the Black family in America and Africa. Unlike Christianity and Islam, which are teleological and reserve the final reward for the end in Heaven, the ancestors in Grandma Nana's belief system just move to another world and watch over their living descendants. The children are the reincarnation of the ancestors, and this makes them precious to the adults whose fathers and grandfathers have joined the land of the ancestors. The Unborn Child in the film is one such reincarnation. She is doubled not only in the figure of Grandma Nana herself, but also in the young girl with tribal scars who appears with her mother in one of the flashbacks. She travels through time, and she is present at different settings in the film: we see her among the first generation of Africans working with indigo dye, and we see her in a 1902 setting among children playing in the sand. Like the ancestors, her role is one of a mediator in the family. It is in this sense that Grandma Nana states that for Africans, the ancestors and the children are the most sacred elements of society.

Julie Dash also uses the religious theme of reincarnation, and links the Unborn Child to African-American survival during slavery, genocide, and the rape of Black women. In the film, the theme of the Peazant family's disintegration entailed by the migration to the North is replayed in the subtheme of Eli's self-exile from his wife, Eula, because she's carrying a child that Eli does not consider his. Eli's first reaction to Eula's pregnancy is to become an iconoclast toward the ancestor belief system that Grandma Nana wants to maintain. He puts into question the religion and culture he has received from childhood to adulthood. In other words: How can this happen to him, who has played by the rules? How come the gods are not

avenging his misfortune? Subsequently, he picks up his ax and proceeds to smash all the fetishes that he had previously revered.

Grandma Nana finds an answer to Eli's blasphemous questions in her belief system. She links Eula's pregnancy to the condition of Black women in slavery who were raped, denied motherhood rights, and treated like animals. At the same time, the power and complexity of Black people come from their ability to maintain the sacredness of the womb by restoring to the group the children of interracial rape. Grandma Nana uses ancestor worship, and the place of children in it, to appropriate the baby Eula is carrying. By doing so, she bends the filiative and patriarchal rules Eli maintains in order to disavow the Unborn Child. For Grandma Nana, Eli, too, must learn the process of cleansing rape from the child's name, and making it his own child. Grandma Nana argues that the womb is as sacred as the ancestors, and that the Unborn Child is sent by the ancestors, precisely at this critical juncture in Ibo Landing's history, to ensure survival: "You need this one, Eli, to make the family stronger like it used to be." It is interesting to note the spatial organization as Grandma Nana talks to Eli. As the oldest person in the Peazant family, her role is that of a teacher. As she speaks to Eli, the space revealed on the screen is that of children playing games on the beach. The narrative implication here is that the children are the audience of her teaching. At one point during the children's game, the film changes to a slow motion. As the children fall on top of one another, we hear screaming and groaning, which remind us of the Middle Passage during which hundreds of Africans were piled on top of each other in the cabins of slave ships. The implication of Grandma Nana's teaching is that, just as captured Africans were thrown together during that painful time of the Middle Passage, Blacks today must see themselves in the same boat, and fight together to "make the family stronger."

Eli's questions about the paternity and, therefore, the race of the Unborn Child also touch on the issues of light skin and dark skin, pure blood and mixed blood, superior and inferior; in short, we are dealing with racism among Blacks. It is in this sense that Yellow Mary is ostracized by Haagar and Viola, who use her light complexion as a sign of betrayal and try to banish her from Ibo Landing. For Grandma Nana, Yellow Mary and the Unborn Child contribute to the survival and maintenance of Black people in America, because their presence makes Blackness diverse and complex. Black survival in America confounds and embarrasses both Whiteness and essentialist notions of pure Africans. Julie Dash puts onto stage one of the most beautiful and powerful scenes in the film to illustrate this point. Haagar and others have been chastising Yellow Mary for not being Black enough, when Eula stands up and delivers a speech worthy of an

ancestor figure. The mise-en-scène of this sequence reveals Black women in all their powers, as Eula reminds Haagar that no one is Blacker or purer than anyone else, and warns her and Viola about the wrath of the gods, if they were to continue their gesture of expelling Yellow Mary out of the race. Spatial representation again becomes paramount, because Eula's speech is directed to the on-screen audience of the Peasant family, as well as the off-screen spectators.

I have discussed so far the ways in which *Daughters of the Dust* uses African belief systems as the center which enables Black women and men to articulate their identities on the space of Ibo Landing. Grandma Nana, particularly, posits the ancestor worship system as a text which holds together the world of Ibo Landing and provides answers to practical daily problems. A crucial question remains: whether the belief in ancestors can coexist with other belief systems, such as Christianity and Islam, on and off the island? At first, religious systems seem to be opposed in *Daughters of the Dust*. Bilal, who is Muslim, is opposed to the Baptists, who think that their God is better. Viola and Haagar use Christianity to elevate themselves above Grandma Nana. They see ancestor worship as an idolatry which is confined to Ibo Landing. They look to the North as a sign of enlightenment and Christian salvation.

Clearly, Julie Dash represents all these belief systems on the space of Ibo Landing not to show the fixity of different religions, and their essentialist nature, but to propose all of them as part of what makes Black people in America complex. Toward the end of the film Grandma Nana brings together the different belief systems, when she ties together the Bible and a sacred object from her own religion, and asks every one to kiss the hybridized Bible before departing from the island. This syncretic move is her way of mixing up the religions in Ibo Landing, and activating their combined power to protect those who are moving North. Earlier in the film she commands Eli to "celebrate our ways" when he goes North. The syncretic move is therefore also a survival tactic for the African ways of life up North.

Arguably, another reason for deploying ancestor worship (and casting Grandma Nana at the center in the film) is to reveal its usable power in holding the Black family together. Placing women at the center of the frame is also Julie Dash's way of creating space for Black people in modernity, and is her redefinition of Black images in their relation to such modern tools as still photography, newspapers, and moving pictures. Julie Dash's spatial narrative style inextricably combines the identities of her characters with the landscape of Ibo Landing. Her mise-en-scène of Grandma Nana, Haagar, Yellow Mary, and Eula in the center of the frame makes the space theirs, and their possession of the space makes them bigger than life. They become so associated with the space of Ibo Landing,

through close-ups of various sorts, that it becomes difficult to imagine Ibo Landing now without the faces of these Black women. Analogically speaking, it is like imagining America in Western films without the faces of John Wayne, Kirk Douglas, and Gary Cooper.

The spatial narrative style of *Daughters of the Dust* enables Julie Dash to claim America as the land of Black people, to plot Africanism in American ways of life, and to make intelligible African voices that were rendered inarticulate. To return to the thematization of religion in the film, Julie Dash has made manifest an Africanism that was repressed for centuries, but that refused to die. As Grandma Nana states, "those African ancestors sneak up on you when you least suspect them." With her revival of ancestor worship as a narrative grid, as a point of reference for different themes in the film, Julie Dash has ignited the fire of love and caring among Black people. The path between the ancestors and the womb constitutes a Black structure of feeling, a caring handed down from generation to generation, which commands us to care for our children. In an article entitled "Nihilism and Black America," Cornel West proposes "a politics of conversion" as a way out of the carelessness of Black-on-Black crime, and as a protection against "market-driven corporate enterprises, and white supremacy." For West,

The genius of our black foremothers and forefathers was to create powerful buffers to ward off the nihilistic threat, to equip black folk with cultural armor to beat back the demons of hopelessness, meaninglessness, and lovelessness. . . . These traditions consist primarily of black religious and civic institutions that sustained familial and communal networks of support.³

Perhaps Julie Dash's theory of ancestor worship should be among those institutions that constitute Black structures of feeling; as Grandma Nana puts it, let the ancestors guide us and protect us.

Black Times, Black Stories: *Boyz N the Hood*

Either they don't know, or don't show, or don't care about what's going on in the 'Hood. (*Boyz N the Hood*)

To return now to *Boyz N the Hood*, I would like to illustrate its emphasis on time and movement as a way of defining an alternative Black film language different from the spatial and expressive language of *Daughters of the Dust*. Like *Daughters of the Dust*, *Boyz N the Hood* begins with a well-defined date. But unlike *Daughters of the Dust*, which is set in 1902 and looks into the past as a way of unfolding its story, *Boyz N the Hood*

starts in 1984, and continues for more than seven years into the future. *Daughters of the Dust* is about Black peoples' reconstitution of the memories of the past; it is a film about identity, and the celebration of Black ways of life. *Boyz N the Hood*, on the other hand, is a rite of passage film, a film about the Black man's journey in America. The story line is linear in *Boyz N the Hood*, whereas *Daughters of the Dust* unfolds in a circular manner.

In films like *Boyz N the Hood*, *Juice*, *Straight Out of Brooklyn*, and *Deep Cover*, the narrative time coincides with the development of the lives of the characters in the films. Many of these films begin with the childhood of the main characters, who then enter into adulthood, and face many obstacles in their lives. These films produce an effect of realism by creating an overlap between the rite of passage into manhood and the narrative time of the story. The notion of rite of passage, which defines the individual's relation to time in terms of separation from or incorporation into society, helps us to understand the use of narrative time in a film like *Boyz N the hood*. The beginning, middle, and end of *Boyz N the Hood* constitute episodes that mark the young protagonist's incorporation into the many levels of society. In fact, the structure of the film is common to African-American folktales, as well as to the classical cinema. It is as follows: A boy has to go on a journey in order to avert an imminent danger. He travels to the home of a relative or friend (uncle, aunt, father, mother, wise man, and so on) who teaches him, or helps him to overcome the obstacle. At the end, he removes the danger, and his nation (or community, or family) gets stronger with him. This skeletal structure is common to texts as diverse as *The Epic of Sunjata* (D. T. Niane), the *Aeneid* (Virgil), and *The Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* (Douglass), as well as to the Hollywood Western genre, the martial art films, and the Rocky films with Sylvester Stallone. The literal journey in time and space overlaps with the symbolic journey of the rite of passage. Typically, this type of storytelling addresses moments of crisis, and the need to build a better society.

The moment of crisis is symbolized in *Boyz N the Hood* by the opening statistical information, which states that "One out of every twenty-one Black American males will be murdered in their lifetime. Most will die at the hands of another Black male." Thus, *Boyz N the Hood* is a cautionary tale about the passage into manhood, and about the development of a politics of caring for the lives of Black males. More specifically, it is about Tre Styles (Cuba Gooding), the main character, and his relation to the obstacles that he encounters on his way to manhood. Crucially, the major distractive forces in the film are the police, gang life, and the lack of supervision for the youth. To shield Tre from these obstacles, his mother sends him to live with his father, whose teaching will guide him through the many rites of passage toward manhood.⁴

The film is divided into three episodes, and each episode ends with rituals of separation and transition. In the first episode the ritual ends with Tre leaving his mother (first symbol of weaning) and friends behind. The story of this episode implies that most of the friends he leaves behind will not make it. On the way to his father's house, Tre's mother says, "I don't want you to end up dead, or in jail, or drunk standing in front of one of these liquor stores." The second episode ends with Doughboy's (Ice Cube) arrest by the police, who take him to the juvenile detention camp. The third episode ends with the death of Ricky Baker, Doughboy, and many other Black males. At the end of each episode, Tre moves to a higher understanding of life.

Let us now focus on one of the episodes in order to show its internal conflicts, and the specific elements that enter into play to prevent the passage of young Black males into manhood and caring for the community. I will choose the first episode because it introduces the spectator to most of the obstacles which are complicated and repeated in the other episodes. The film opens with a shot in which the camera zooms in on a stop sign until it fills the screen. We see a plane fly over the roofs, and the next shot reveals Tre and three other young kids walking to school. The subtitles say: "South Central LA, 1984." The children walk by a one-way street sign. This sign, too, is depicted in close-up as the camera travels above to establish the crossroad. Then the four kids take a direction facing a wrong-way sign. They travel on that road and see a crime scene that is circled by a plastic ribbon with the words: "Police Line Do Not Cross." Inside the police line there are three posters of President Ronald Reagan with a sign saying: "Reagan/Bush, Four More Years." The kids cross the police line, as one of them moves closer to the Reagan posters. At that moment a rhythmic and violent editing reveals each of the posters in close-up with the sound of a gunshot. There are bullet holes in the poster. In the next scene, the kids are in a classroom where the students' artworks on the wall reflect the imagery of policing: drawings of a Los Angeles Police Department helicopter looking down on people, a police car, a coffin, and a poster of wanted men. Tre disrupts a lesson on the Pilgrims, and when the teacher asks him to teach the class, he points to the map of Africa and states that: "Africa is the place where the body of the first man was found." This is a reference to the multiculturalism debate not only across the curriculum, but also in rap music, and in the press. Tre's lesson ends with a fight between himself and another boy. The following shot begins with Tre walking home. He passes a group of young Black males shooting dice. They break into a fight. As Tre crosses the street to go home, he is almost run over by a blue car which presumably is driven by gang members. His mother is on the telephone talking to the teacher about the fight and Tre's suspension. The editing of the soundtrack is interesting in this scene. As

Tre walks past the men shooting dice, their noise is placed in the background, and we hear in the foreground the conversation between Tre's mother and the teacher. This editing device unites different spaces through their sharing of the same sound. For example, later in the film, the community is shown as one when people in different places listen to the same rap song. (Similarly, in *Do the Right Thing*, Spike Lee uses the DJ and his music to unite the community.) The last scene in this episode involves Tre and his mother driving to his father's house. They pass by liquor stores and junkies standing by the doors. The mother reassures Tre that she loves him, and will do anything to keep him from ending up in jail, or standing in the streets in front of liquor stores.

Signs (Stop, One Way, Wrong Way, LAPD, Liquor Store, POLICE LINE DO NOT CROSS, and so on) play an important role in limiting the movement of people in South Central Los Angeles. Showing the airplane flying over the roofs not only indicates where we are in LA, but also suggests the freedom associated with flying away from such an enclosed space. Black American literature often draws on the theme of flying to construct desire for liberated spaces: Bigger Thomas of *Native Son* (Richard Wright) sees flying as a way out of the ghetto of South Side Chicago; Milkman of *Song of Solomon* (Morrison) reenacts the myth of flying Americans in order to free himself from an unwanted situation.

The signs become control tools for the police, in the way that they limit individual freedom of movement in the "hood." They also define the hood as a ghetto by using surveillance from above and outside to take agency away from people in the community. In fact, *Boyz N the Hood* is about the dispute over agency and control of the community that pits the protagonist and his allies against gang members and the police. The drawings of helicopters, police cars, and wanted men show how the police surveillance has penetrated the imaginary even of schoolchildren in the hood. Later on in the film, helicopter noise, police sirens, and police brutality are revealed to be as menacing and distracting to people in the hood as drugs and gang violence.

The dispute over the control of the hood is also a dispute over images. The police need to convince themselves and the media that every Black person is a potential gang member, armed and dangerous, in order to continue the policing of the hood in a terroristic and militaristic manner. For the Black policeman in the film, the life of a Black person is not worth much: "one less nigger out in the street and we won't have to worry about him." It is by making the gang members and other people in the hood accept this stereotype of themselves that the community is transformed into a ghetto, a place where Black life is not worth much. It seems to me that *Boyz N the Hood* blames the rise of crime and the people's feeling of being trapped in the hood on a conspiracy among the gang members, the

police, the liquor stores, and Reagan. Indeed, the film raises questions of human rights violation when gang warfare and police brutality collude to prevent people from moving around freely, sleeping, or studying.

On the other hand, Tre's struggle to gain agency also coincides with his passage to manhood, and the development of a politics of caring for the community. *Boyz N the Hood*, in this respect, is one of the most didactic Black films. The other contenders are *Deep Cover*, and perhaps some rap videos which espouse a politics of identification with lawbreakers against the police.⁵ The didacticism of *Boyz N the Hood* emanates from the film's attempt to teach Tre not to accept the police's and the media's stereotype of him and other young Black males as worthless; and to teach him to care for his community and reclaim it from both the gangs and the police. Didactic film language abounds in the film. We see it when the camera lingers on the liquor stores and homeless people, as Tre and his mother drive to his father's house. The mother, in one of the first instances of teaching Tre in the film, states that she loves him and that is why she is taking him out of this environment. Earlier in the same episode, we also saw the Reagan posters interpreted in a didactic manner, so as to blame him for the decay of the urban community. The posters are situated in the same environment as the murder scene.

However, Tre's father, more than the didactic camera and editing styles, is the central figure of judgment in the film. He calls the Black policeman "brother" in order to teach him, in the presence of Tre, how to care about other Black people; he delivers lessons on sex education, Black-on-Black crimes, the dumping of drugs in the Black community, gentrification, and the importance of Black-owned businesses in the Black community. He earns the nickname of preacher, and Tre's friends describe him as a sort of "Malcolm/Farrakhan" figure. Crucially, his teachings help Tre to develop a politics of caring, to stay in school, and more importantly, to stay alive. It is revealing in this sense that a didactic and slow-paced film like *Boyz N the Hood* can be entertaining and pleasurable at the same time.

The New Black Realism

Realism as a cinematic style is often claimed to describe films like *Boyz N the Hood*, *Juice*, and *Straight Out of Brooklyn*. When I taught *Boyz N the Hood*, my students talked about it in terms of realism: "What happened in the film happens everyday in America." "It is like it really is in South Central LA." "It describes policing in a realistic manner." "The characters on the screen look like the young people in the movie theater." "It captures gang life like it is." "It shows Black males as an endangered species." "I liked its depiction of liquor stores in the Black community." "I identified with Ice Cube's character because I know guys like that back home."

Clearly, there is something in the narrative of films like *Boyz N the Hood* and *Straight Out of Brooklyn* that links them, to put it in Aristotelian terms, to existent reality in Black communities. In my class, some students argued that these films use hip hop culture, which is the new Black youth culture and the most important youth culture in America today. Thus, the characters look *real* because they dress in the style of hip hop, talk the lingo of hip hop, practice its world view toward the police and women, and are played by rap stars such as Ice Cube. Furthermore, the films thematize an advocacy for Black males, whom they describe as endangered species, in the same way that rap groups such as Public Enemy sing in defense of Black males.

It seems to me, therefore, that the films are about Black males' initiation into manhood, the obstacles encountered that often result in death and separation, and the successful transition of some into manhood and responsibility toward the community. In *Juice*, for example, of the four young boys who perform the ritual of growing up, two die, one is seriously injured by a gun shot, and only one seems to have been successfully incorporated into society. Removing obstacles out of Black males' way is also the central theme of *Chameleon Street*, *Straight Out of Brooklyn*, *Deep Cover* and *Boyz N the Hood*.

In *Deep Cover*, the ritual of manhood involves the main character's exposure of a genocide plotted by drug dealers in Latin America and the highest officials in the US government against the Black community. The real "deep cover" in *Deep Cover* is the recipe for caring for the community against genocidal forces like White supremacists, drugs, and Black-on-Black crime. The removal of obstacles out of the main character's way leads to the discovery of the politics of caring to the Black community. In this film, as in many new Black realism films, to be a man is to be responsible for the Black community, and to protect it against the aforementioned dangers. John (Larry Fishburne), a cop working undercover as a drug dealer, enters in an intriguing relationship with a Black detective (Clarence Williams), who plays the born-again policeman. The religious policeman keeps reminding John of his responsibility to the community, and John laughs at him. Toward the end of the film, when the character played by Clarence Williams gets shot, John is united with him by the force of caring, and realizes that he must fight both the drug dealers and the police to protect his own.

A key difference between the new Black realism films and the Blaxploitation series of the 1970s lies in character development through rites of passage in the new films. Unlike the static characters of the Blaxploitation series, the characters of the new realism films change with the unfolding of the story line. As characters move obstacles out of their way, they grow into men, and develop a politics of caring for the community. The new

realism films imitate the existent reality of urban life in America. Just as in real life the youth are pulled between hip hop life style, gang life, and education, we see in the films neighborhoods that are pulled between gang members, rappers, and education-prone kids. For the black youth, the passage into manhood is also a dangerous enterprise which leads to death both in reality and in film.

Notes

1. Janice Mosier Richolson, "He's Gotta Have It: An Interview with Spike Lee," in *Cineaste*, Vol. 28, No. 4, (1992), p. 14.
2. For more on the aesthetics of *Sweet Sweetback* and *Ganja and Hess*, see the important book, *Black Cinema Aesthetics: Issues in Independent Black Filmmaking*, edited by Gladstone L. Yearwood, Athens: Ohio University Center for Afro-American Studies, 1982; Tommy L. Lott "A No-Theory Theory of Contemporary Black Cinema," in *Black American Literature Forum* 25/2 (1991); and Manthia Diawara and Phyllis Klotman, "Ganja and Hess: Vampires, Sex, and Addictions," in *Black American Literature Forum* 25/2 (1991).
3. Cornel West, "Nihilism in Black America," in *Dissent* (Spring 1991), 223.
4. Clearly, there is a put-down of Black women in the rhetoric used to send Tre to his father's house. For an excellent critique of female-bashing in the film see Jacquie Jones, "The Ghetto Aesthetic," in *Wide Angle*, Volume 13, Nos. 3 & 4 (1991), 32-43.
5. See Regina Austin, "'The Black Community,' Its Lawbreakers and a Politics of Identification," in *Southern California Law Review* (May 1992), for a thorough discussion of Black peoples' identification with the community and its lawbreakers.