

THE SOULS OF BLACK FILM: ART AND POLITICS

By

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To my parents, for everything

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I propose an experimental approach to researching and writing about black cinema, and avant-garde black cinema in particular. Although it acknowledges recent calls for a black cinema studies rooted in specifically African American cultural practices, this study suggests that a new mode can be derived from the avant-garde. I want to reconsider the role of aesthetics in African American cinema and encourage a different set of discussions around it.

My goal is a study of black cinema that complements established political approaches with a renewed emphasis on those cinematic effects that are not reducible to meaning in the sense of conventional interpretation. Some effects of the medium escape thematization, and may be experienced as “excess.” This attention to aesthetics, cinematic excess, and an improvisational approach to research compliments the priority of critique, challenging our expectations about black cinema, fostering other ways of looking at black films, and other possibilities for making films. The films I discuss include Haile Gerima’s *Bush Mama* (1976), Larry Clark’s *Passing Through* (1977), Dudley Murphy’s *Black and Tan* (1929), Julie Dash’s *Daughters of the Dust* (1991), and Edward O. Bland’s *The Cry of Jazz* (1959).

CHAPTER 1 INTRODUCTION

The Task of the Black Film Critic



Figure 1-1. Joachim Kühn, Ornette Coleman and Jacques Derrida, La Villette Jazz Festival, July 1997: photo by Christian Ducasse.

Most people think of me only as a saxophonist and as a jazz artist, but I want to be considered as a composer who could cross over all the borders.
--Ornette Coleman¹

That soul, that which deserves the name of soul, is what is not programmed, it's not cloned.
--Jacques Derrida, from the text he tried reading on stage with Coleman, "Play -- The First Name."²

I begin with the suspicion that something haunts black film studies. The question now?: "What is a black film critic/theorist to do about it?" First, I look ahead³, I improvise.

¹ Ornette Coleman, quoted by Vivien Goldman, "Ornette Coleman Biography," http://www.electricsongs.com/jazzmp3s/ornette_bio.doc.

² Jacques Derrida, "Play – The First Name," trans. Timothy S. Murphy, *Genre: Forms of Discourse and Culture* 37:2 (2004): 337.

³ Think here of the latin *providere* (to look ahead, or prepare), as the root of improvisation.

In 1997, philosopher Jacques Derrida interviewed avant-garde jazz composer and musician Ornette Coleman, who was performing at La Villette, a museum and performing arts center north of Paris that Derrida helped design. During the interview, the two men found common ground on several points, including ideas about improvisation. Derrida expanded on improvisation, allowing it to include written and pre-written forms. “Perhaps you will agree with me on the fact that the very concept of improvisation verges upon reading, since what we often understand by improvisation is the creation of something new, yet something which doesn’t exclude the pre-written framework that makes it possible,”⁴ as in an improvisation prompted by a written song.

Coleman invited Derrida to join him on stage to perform a “solo” (fig. 1-1). When the philosopher entered the stage, the audience, having paid to see Coleman, not Derrida, began screaming insults. Other audience members began screaming at their disgruntled neighbors, demanding they cease their insults and allow the performers to continue. But alas, Derrida, drowned out by both groups, was essentially booed off stage.⁵

This story interests me for several reasons. For one thing, it invokes an apparently failed event, which can often prove educational. Even more, the possibility of a Derrida “solo,” or a Coleman/Derrida duet is not unimaginable. In fact, to anyone who follows either man’s career, it is not even startling. Reasonable connections between the two suggest that their paths should cross.

⁴ Derrida interviewed in “The Other’s Language: Jacques Derrida Interviews Ornette Coleman, 23 June 1997,” trans. Timothy S. Murphy, *Genre: Forms of Discourse and Culture* 37:2 (2004): 322.

⁵ See Colin Nettlebeck’s detailed description of the performance in his book *Dancing with de Beauvoir: Jazz and the French* (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 2004), 197-201.

A translated version of this “performance” has been published. In it, Derrida picks up on an anecdote about Coleman’s mother. Once, after Coleman complained about the pressure to play what was popular at the time, rather than his own style, his mother asked: “Do you want them to pay for your soul?”⁶ Taken with this idea of an economy of soul, Derrida explores the idea as if he were an improviser playing with a musical motif, repeating it and creating his own motifs (using the etymology of “improvisation” as an “unforeseen” event). In particular, Derrida plays up the convergence of soul with acts of improvisation and writing.

The soul and the soul's music, what are they? What does that mean? How is the soul recognized, outside of all psycho-theologicico-spiritualist discourse? By that which cannot be sold or capitalized in advance; it is the defeat of capitalism, it is the revolutionary limit, it is unsaleable at birth, when it happens, when it's created, and when it is not calculated, when it is taken elsewhere by a saxotelephone call that none will have seen or heard coming, even though one will nevertheless have worked so much, like Coleman, to write; for he is a man of writing.⁷

Following Derrida’s improvisation on soul, I’ve made it my task to extend the motif for my own “writing” purposes. I use it in the spirit of Ludwig Wittgenstein’s “family resemblances,” which he describes as “spinning a thread ... fibre on fibre. And the strength of the thread does not reside in the fact that some one fibre runs through its whole length, but in the overlapping of many fibres.”⁸ In my case, “soul” becomes a term that gathers and twists other terms around it. Soul, in its most general sense must always remain ineffable, difficult to reduce to a formula, or “cloned” as Derrida says in

⁶ Jacques Derrida, “Play -- The First Name,” trans. Timothy S. Murphy, *Genre: Forms of Discourse and Culture* 37:2 (2004): 337.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 337.

⁸ Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, 3rd ed. (Malden: Blackwell Publishing Ltd., 2001), 28.

the epigraph above. In my text it joins the family of “aporias,” “third meanings,” “crossroads,” “excess,” and the “unforeseen” at the root of the word improvisation.

It is in this spirit that my title alludes to W.E.B. Du Bois’s groundbreaking 1903 text, *The Souls of Black Folk*. Itself a hybrid text (mixing songs, autobiography, political and sociological analysis, ethnography, and other essay forms), Du Bois’s book serves as a model of formal experimentation. Paul Gilroy has described Du Bois’s aesthetic:

The genre of modernist writing he inaugurated in *The Souls of Black Folk* and refined further in his later work, especially *Darkwater*, supplements recognizably sociological writing with personal and public history, fiction, autobiography, ethnography, and poetry. These books produce a self-consciously polyphonic form that was born from the intellectual dilemmas that had grown alongside Du Bois’s dissatisfaction with all available scholarly languages.... I prefer to see its combination of tones and modes of interpellating the reader as a deliberate experiment produced from the realization that none of these different registers of address could, by itself, convey the intensity of feeling that Du Bois believed the writing of black history and the exploration of racialised experience demanded.⁹

Beyond the actual event of Derrida and Coleman’s time on stage, the encounter symbolically embodies my own hybrid interests as an avant-garde filmmaker and film theorist, which encompass both Ornette Coleman and Jacques Derrida, among other “odd couples” or “soul mates.” What interests me is the incommensurability that threatens such juxtapositions in general and that points to the limits of competing scholarly approaches to black cinema in particular. In this text, my own “deliberate experiment,” the difficulty in placing several discourses on stage at the same time, this discursive excess, seems generalizable, if one thinks of it in terms of a different way to think through issues of *mise-en-scène*.

⁹ Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993), 115.

Mise-en-scène, a key element in postwar film theory, literally means “placing in the scene.” The term has its roots in theater, but it became a privileged idea for French film theorist André Bazin. In Bazin’s hands, *mise-en-scène* assumes metaphysical importance as a code word for the elements of cinema he most valued, the cinematic elements that elude verbal formulation even as they compel attention.

Jim Hillier argues that in the hands of Bazin and his protégés at *Cahiers du Cinéma*, *mise-en-scène* “is a relatively ‘conservative’ aesthetic.”¹⁰ In 1950s France, however, the *Cahiers* critics reacted *against* the suspicion of aesthetics. François Truffaut’s famous article “A Certain Tendency of the French Cinema” reasserted aesthetic concerns against what he saw as the “hack” politics of France’s “cinema of quality.” For Truffaut, *real* political work happened at the level of form, or *mise-en-scène*.¹¹

But, as semiotic analysis began to dominate film theory in the 1960s and 1970s, *mise-en-scène* became one of the first casualties. Even auteur critics, *mise-en-scène*’s staunchest adherents, witnessed a move towards less romantic, structuralist approaches suggested by Peter Wollen and writers at *Screen*. An auteurist like Andrew Sarris began to seem naïve when he wrote:

The art of cinema is the art of an attitude, the style of a gesture. It is not so much *what* as *how*. The *what* is some aspect of reality rendered mechanically by the camera. The *how* is what the French critics designate

¹⁰ Jim Hillier, *Cahiers du Cinéma: The 1950s: Neo-Realism, Hollywood, New Wave*, ed. Jim Hillier (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1985), 10.

¹¹ John Hess argues that *la politique des auteurs* was itself “in fact, a justification, couched in aesthetic terms, of a culturally conservative, politically reactionary attempt to remove film from the realm of social and political concern, in which the progressive forces of the Resistance had placed all the arts in the years immediately after the war.” John Hess, “*La politique des auteurs* (part one) World view as aesthetics,” *Jump Cut*, no. 1 (1974): 19.

somewhat mystically as *mise-en-scène*. Auteur criticism is a reaction against sociological criticism that enthroned the *what* against the *how*.¹²

For an auteur critic like Sarris, a director's style and attention to *mise-en-scène* is where the "what" and the "how" come together as a unified vision.

For Peter Wollen, the critical questions posed by auteur criticism should reveal "a core of meanings, of thematic motifs," found via an analysis of codes rather than *mise-en-scène*, which refer only to the text under analysis.¹³ But even a structuralist sympathizer like Ronald Abramson finds this enthronement of *mise-en-scène* too hasty, writing "A 'truly structuralist' approach to the cinema would reveal a core of thematic motifs by a close examination of the *mise-en-scène*, that is, by analyzing both narrative and formal structures and their interrelationship. There is nothing in Wollen's method that is specific to the film medium as such."¹⁴

But in the end, *mise-en-scène* eventually moved quietly into the shadows, found these days more often in glossaries than in serious film analysis. My study will address the degree that aesthetic concerns have been, like Derrida, figuratively booted off stage when it comes to discussion of black cinema. And, since my interest is an aesthetic one, issues of *mise-en-scène* must resurface. For example, Chapter Two asks: "what does the presence of black talent on-screen actually evoke?" Black images on-screen inevitably invite multiple discourses to share the stage, even if they battle over the spotlight. Later chapters examine what happens if one goes beyond programmed

¹² Andrew Sarris. *The American Cinema: Directors and Directions 1929-1968* (New York: E.P. Dutton and Co., 1968), 36.

¹³ Peter Wollen, *Signs and Meaning in the Cinema* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1972), 78.

¹⁴ Abramson, Ronald, "Structure and Meaning in the Cinema," in *Movies and Methods*. Vol. 1., ed. Bill Nichols (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1976), 565.

attention to culture and politics to address unpredictable excesses of *mise-en-scène*, or what Roland Barthes might call “third meanings.” How quickly would one be kicked off stage then?

Of course, this situation raises the question: why would one want to pay attention to such things? Chapter Four addresses this question. But let me clarify now: I’m not suggesting a strictly programmed approach. Nor am I claiming that what I propose here is “*the* proper task of the black film critic.” Instead, what follows is my attempt to find new spaces, or “free-zones” (to borrow a useful phrase from Mark A. Reid¹⁵) to interact with black cinema and the writings about it. This text is structured in part as a series of juxtapositions, dialogues, collaged conversations, quotations, layered voices, point-of-views, and arguments between artists, writers, philosophers, filmmakers, and theorists, all superimposed and grafted together by motivic threads, like musical accompaniments, “comping,” in jazz parlance.

Mise-en-scène is traditionally associated with the *Cahiers du cinéma* critics, particularly those who wanted to become filmmakers themselves. They were interested in poetics, how films are put together. They also created spaces for new conceptions of cinema. This study is also interested in the question of a poetics of black cinema -- and my own interest in both writing about films and making them.

Which Way to Black Film Criticism?

I initially became interested in this project after thinking about the current state of black film studies. In particular, I noticed that even though theorist Henry Louis Gates, Jr.’s work on literature has been influential, and though Gates himself has written about

¹⁵ Mark A. Reid, *PostNegritude Visual and Literary Culture* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1997), 18.

film on several occasions, the main body of black film criticism has made very little use of his work. Gladstone Yearwood's *Black Film as a Signifying Practice* stands as an exception. Both Gates and Yearwood (as did Alain Locke and Black Aesthetic proponents before them), emphasize the need to find culturally antecedent foundations for theorizing about black texts, working against the "colonizing" relation between black texts and a "master" theoretical paradigm.¹⁶ And for Gates, this approach also guarantees the culturally authoritative readability of the texts.¹⁷ He is quick to stress that his own analogical use of poststructuralist theory is "not to suggest limitations or lacunae in black theory," and that "Anyone who analyzes black literature must do so as a comparativist, by definition, because our canonical texts have complex double formal antecedents, the Western and the black."¹⁸

Similarly, Yearwood cautions against a simplistic use of Western theories to address black texts. Putting aside questions about the certainty of this "Western" appellation, Yearwood proposes that the primary source for black films must come from a dynamic "black tradition": "Black film is a dynamic concept. It is characterized by a dialectic of change as new works and critical strategies emerge and extend established boundaries. This insight opens up productive ground for black film theory."¹⁹

Furthermore, he cautions, "The search for a tradition is not to suggest that black art can

¹⁶ Perspectives, as Aldon Lynn Nielson suspects, "that seems to begin with the assumption that poststructuralism is a particularly white mode of mythology." See Aldon Lynn Nielson, "Black Deconstruction: Russell Atkins and the Reconstruction of African-American Criticism," in *Diacritics* 26.3-4 (1996): 86.

¹⁷ Henry Louis Gates Jr., *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of African-American Literary Criticism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), xx.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, xxiv.

¹⁹ Gladstone L. Yearwood, *Black Film as a Signifying Practice: Cinema, Narration and the African-American Aesthetic Tradition*. (Trenton: Africa World Press, Inc., 2000), 121.

be evaluated using pre-established ideas of what it should be. In African American cultural expression, tradition is always in motion.”²⁰ Aesthetic analysis is one way to approach this dynamism:

First, it is a useful point of entry and a mode of critical inquiry into black independent cinema. It allows us to pose critical questions about the value given to special expressive forms and narrative techniques unique to African American film. As a conceptual framework, it establishes the importance of giving primary attention to the text (the film as art), in the first instance; but here it is not being used to close off our ability to establish a relationship between the film and its sociocultural context or its intertextual sources -- Rather, the reformulated concept of a film aesthetic sharpens our critical tools so that we can better establish the relationship of film to the black cultural experience. A reformulated notion of the aesthetic can be used to enrich our understanding of important intertextual sources and contextual supports that inform black film.²¹

Yearwood's “reformulated” notion of aesthetics is not simply an interest in “black formalism,” but an attempt to grapple with the core notion of “black cinema” itself, a notion that ultimately, I argue in Chapter Five, is itself an aporia. Yearwood argues that grappling with these definitional concerns must precede theorizing black cinema aesthetics. He identifies three flawed criteria in the most common definitions, and their failure to ground black films aesthetically: iconic criteria, indexical criteria, and intentional criteria. I will challenge each of these criteria myself in the chapters that follow, so his descriptions will be useful:

One popular approach conceives of a correlation between the film image and black life. In this view, one knows a black film because its images or subject matter are identifiably black. This iconic criterion for the definition of a black film suggests an immediate reflective identification because of its content. In simple terms, one sees and recognizes black faces. Thus, the identity and meaning of the film image are readily asserted. Of course,

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 119.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 77-78.

iconic criteria only serve to present superficial distinctions but falter when substantially examined.²²

I examine this “iconic” approach in Chapter Two. Specifically, I consider how such a position stands up to cinematic image's densely overdetermined tendencies.

Next, he challenges the “indexical” approach, using the filmmaker's “socio-cultural background” to conceptualize the film.²³ This approach also quickly collapses after considering only one or two films or filmmakers who complicate assumptions. As Yearwood points out, “Whereas iconic criteria limit discussion to the formal aspects of content, indexical theories shift discussion away from the art work to sociological criteria,” though, he does not deny the importance of the filmmaker's background.²⁴ Chapter Three examines this approach, and the degree narrow political criteria can handle aesthetic and socio-cultural excess. Yearwood remains sympathetic to the indexical approach. His disagreements lie with simplistic applications, not necessarily with the threat of excess. The filmmaker's background “forms the context for the articulation of specific cinematic languages,” but offers “no guarantee of a black film.”²⁵ For Tommy Lott, what such an approach lacks most is “criteria that would account for the political dimensions of black filmmaking practices.”²⁶ This attention to filmmaking practices is important when considering the next approach Yearwood identifies.

²² Gladstone L. Yearwood, “Towards a Theory of Black Cinema Aesthetics,” *Black Cinema Aesthetics: Issues in Independent Black Filmmaking*, ed. Gladstone L. Yearwood (Athens: Center for Afro-American Studies - Ohio University, 1982), 68.

²³ *Ibid.*, 69.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 69.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 69.

²⁶ Lott, 222.

The third approach is based on the filmmaker's intent. Like the indexical approach, the "intentional criterion" shifts away from "the work itself," this time to, "self-laudatory proclamations which serve to devalue the work. Black cinema must exist on a solid, material base."²⁷ This criticism seems to be aimed primarily at Thomas Cripps's *Black Film as Genre*. Cripps limits his definition to only a few criteria, with intention being a major determinant: "those motion pictures made for theater distribution that have a black producer, director, and writer, or black performer; that speak to black audiences possessed of preternatural curiosity, attentiveness, or sensibility toward racial matters; and that emerge from self-conscious intentions, whether artistic or political, to illuminate the Afro-American experience."²⁸ Mark A. Reid has argued for an even more practical, specific, and limited definition of black independent film, describing it as "any film focused on the black community and written, directed, and controlled by blacks in collaboration with either non-black technical crews or predominantly black crews."²⁹ For Yearwood intentional criteria fail to offer strong theoretical foundations for black cinema, and black cinema aesthetics, instead, he proposes evaluative criteria based in semiotics. "A black film must be constructed from symbolic images which emanate or are mediated by a black socio-cultural experience."³⁰ I devote critical attention to Yearwood's preferred definition in Chapter Five, but I suspect his proposal seeks to bridge formalism and cultural identity.

²⁷ Yearwood, "Theory of Black Cinema," 70.

²⁸ Thomas Cripps, *Black Film as Genre* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1978), 3. See also, Lott, 221, which also raises questions about Cripps's criteria, "But this leaves us to wonder what to do with a well-known group of films about black people by white filmmakers."

²⁹ Mark A. Reid, *Redefining Black Film* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), 17.

³⁰ Yearwood, "Theory of Black Cinema", 70.

To his credit, Yearwood is quick to challenge anti-formalist positions in black film studies, understanding that contextualized criticism cannot exist in a vacuum anymore than a film's form can completely separate itself from contextualized concerns. And on this point, I agree. Complete separation of form from content is as impossible as divorcing montage from *mise-en-scène*.

Such theoretical positions are not without critics. Cornel West's warns against a dogmatic black formalism, and I think it's worth quoting him at length here:

Recent developments in African American literary criticism that focus on the figurative language of the texts are indeed improvements over the flat content analysis, vague black aesthetic efforts and political didacticism of earlier critics of African American literature. Yet this new black formalism ... overreacts to the limits of the older approaches and thereby captures only select rhetorical features of texts while issues of power, political struggle and cultural identity are inscribed within the formal structures of texts and thereby misses the implicit historical readings of the crisis that circumscribes the texts and to which the texts inescapably and subtly respond.³¹

He then goes to the core of the suspicion of aesthetic/formalist approaches, addressing the stakes in film studies directly:

To put it crudely, this notion rests upon a fetishism of literature -- a religious belief in the magical powers of a glorified set of particular cultural archives somehow autonomous and disconnected from other social practices. Must film criticism develop only from film itself?³²

Which begs a variation on an earlier question: Why pay such attention to the "film itself"? Would this be a "fetishism" of cinema or theory? (Leaving aside, for the moment, the question: "has anyone actually ever written such fetishistic black film criticism"?) Barbara Christian's "The Race for Theory" asks "for whom" appropriated theories

³¹ Cornel West, *Keeping Faith: Philosophy and Race in America* (New York: Routledge, 1993), 41.

³² *Ibid.*, 42.

function, and for whom are these theories appropriate?³³ It may be one of the most important questions to ask. But too often, even this line of questioning fails to address one particular question (and what might be called “intellectual honesty”): Do you avoid theory to the extent that you refuse to deal with certain questions these theories may raise? And, we may ask, at what cost?

Much of the writing on black film privileges social and political interpretation and criticism, while marginalizing aesthetic discussion of films. Accusations of formalism often greet concerns with aesthetics in general. For example, Gates’s use of poststructuralist theories remain somewhat controversial. Literary critic Joyce A. Joyce famously takes Gates to task for misunderstanding the role of black literary critics. For Joyce, the task of the black critic is to “merge the roles of critic and political activist.”³⁴

Meaningful political involvement, in the case of the Black critic especially, demands that we give “presence” to the text, that we deal with the question of values, that we distinguish clearly between indigenous values (those that serve our best interests)... In other words, the literary critical activity is not free of personality and history, as the deconstructionists would have us believe. Neither should literary critical involvement be free of commitment, especially in the case of the Black critic. The poststructuralist sensibility in its claim that to acquire knowledge is impossible, its emphasis on fragmentation, plurality of meaning, selflessness, and indeterminacy only exacerbate the Black critic's estrangement from the important social, political, economic, and maybe most importantly, the psychological forces that shape black culture and that are responsible for what [Larry] Neal refers to as a collective psyche.³⁵

³³ Barbara Christian, “The Race for Theory,” *Feminist Studies*, Vol. 14, No. 1 (Spring, 1988): 77.

³⁴ Joyce A. Joyce, “Who the Cap Fit: Unconsciousness and Unconscionableness in the Criticism of Houston A. Baker, Jr. and Henry Louis Gates, Jr.,” *New Literary History*, Vol. 18. (Winter, 1987): 377.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 378. For Larry Neal, one of the key figures in the 1960s and 1970s Black Arts Movement, this collective psyche (or soul) is best represented in black music. See Larry Neal's *Visions of a Liberated Future: Black Arts Movement Writings*, ed., Michael Schwartz (New York: Thunder's Mouth Press, 1989).

For Joyce, poststructuralism offers little to black literary analysis besides interfering with the critic's role as intermediary.³⁶ But her diagnosis is even more dire. Too much alignment with poststructuralism may endanger the black critic's very identity. She warns, "It is insidious for the Black literary critic to adopt any kind of strategy that diminishes or in this case -- through an allusion to binary opposition -- negates his blackness."³⁷

Gates's defense is always his "critical gumbo" approach to literary theory: "I have tried to work through contemporary theories of literature not to 'apply' them to black texts, but rather to transform by translating them into a new rhetorical realm."³⁸ What I always find interesting is Gates's dialectical approach to both vernacular theory and poststructuralism, and have taken this aspect as a model for my own project. In *Figures in Black*, Gates describes the development of his theory and the sequence of paths he took. I have adapted it, noting corresponding chapters in my dissertation, and commenting on my own appropriations and diversions in brackets:

1. Black Aesthetic [Chapters Two and Three]
2. Repetition and imitation [Chapter Four; My use of Barthes, in particular, falls into this category.]

³⁶ Joyce A. Joyce, "The Black Canon: Reconstructing Black American Literary Criticism," *New Literary History*, Vol. 18. (Winter, 1987): 338.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 341. To which Gates replied, "I must confess that I am bewildered by Joyce Joyce's implied claim that to engage in black critical theory is to be, somehow, antiblack. In fact, I find this sort of claim to be both false and a potentially dangerous--and dishonest--form of witch-hunting or nigger-baiting. While it is one thing to say that someone is wrong in their premises or their conclusions, it is quite another to ascertain (on that person's behalf) their motivations, their intentions, their affect; and then to imply that they do not love their culture, or that they seek to deny their heritage, or that they are alienated from their "race," appealing all the while to an undefined transcendent essence called "the Black Experience," from which Houston Baker and I have somehow strayed." See Henry Louis Gates Jr., "What's Love Got to Do with It?": Critical Theory, Integrity, and the Black Idiom," *New Literary History*, Vol. 18. (Winter, 1987): 346.

³⁸ Henry Louis Gates Jr., "What's Love Got to Do with It?," 351.

3. Repetition and difference -- Trope of revision. [Chapters Four and Five; Gates uses Continental theory to help read black texts, but he does so in a way designed to implicitly critique these theories. This approach is designed to highlight ironies in the relations between these theories and black texts. The theoretical juxtapositions become as much the subject at hand as the texts analyzed.]

4. Synthesis [My approach doesn't go beyond Gates's third phase. In a sense, I question the degrees of synthesis possible or necessary. These theories are instead grafted together, keeping their differences in play and open to improvisation and chance.]³⁹

Outside of black literary circles, the debate among black film critics and black independent filmmakers can be just as contentious. The debate between David Nicholson, Clyde Taylor, and Zeinabu irene Davis is an important one for me. As an avant-garde filmmaker and scholar, I am particularly interested in their suggestion that jazz can provide a useful model for both black film critics and black filmmakers. Nicholson notes long traditions of critical writing on dance, literature, and music, jazz, in particular. "Surely filmmakers could do worse than to emulate the music's subtleties, its shading, and its nuances and above all, its absolute fidelity to the human condition."⁴⁰

And, though Zeinabu irene Davis argues with parts of Nicholson's assessment of the state of black independent film, as a filmmaker, she sees the jazz model as a way to counter even his more conventional ideas.

Nicholson calls for filmmakers to be like "jazzmen" and to "connect with absolute fidelity to the human condition." Yet, at the same time, he wants the filmmakers to adhere only to a simple narrative structure. History shows us that jazzmen and women broke with form and tradition that they themselves had established in order to take music to a new level. Why

³⁹ Henry Louis Gates Jr., *Figures in Black: Words, Signs, and the "Racial" Self* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), xv-xxxii.

⁴⁰ David Nicholson, "Which Way the Black Film Movement?," *Cinemas of the Black Diaspora: Diversity, Dependence, and Oppositionality*, ed. Michael T. Martin (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1995), 447.

won't Nicholson let Black filmmakers emulate this creative process as well?⁴¹

Clyde Taylor, whose important critique of aesthetics I detail in Chapter Three, concurs with Davis. "We all talk about Black music as the paragon of creativity. But the spirituals, the blues, jazz, gospel, were all mistakes when they appeared, according to the 'elementary' rules governing musical expression, and were viciously attacked as such."⁴² All of these discussions and debates suggest a history behind the paths my study takes, despite their contentiousness.

In the end, my own criteria for the "task of the black film critic" (specifically, myself as critic) remains grounded in a few basic film studies protocols. Inspired by Dudley Andrew's proclamation that "The study of figures, not codes, must be paramount in an examination of cultural artifacts,"⁴³ I believe a poetics of black film must acknowledge the problems and effects of language and figures: what do we mean by "black" film, and how slippery is our criteria? Yet, in the process, basic questions arise: How are particular films put together? What effects and functions do particular films have? David Bordwell suggests these basic questions inform a poetics of cinema.

Taken singly, no interpretive schema or heuristic can be definitively abandoned, since an open-textured poetics of film might find anything appropriate to illuminate a given film in a particular historical context. By the same token, though, not every film will be interpretable to the same degree,

⁴¹ Zeinabu irene Davis, "The Future of Black Film: The Debate Continues," *Cinemas of the Black Diaspora: Diversity, Dependence, and Oppositionality*, ed. Michael T. Martin (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1995), 452.

⁴² Clyde Taylor, "The Future of Black Film: The Debate Continues" *Cinemas of the Black Diaspora: Diversity, Dependence, and Oppositionality*, ed. Michael T. Martin (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1995), 458.

⁴³ Dudley Andrew, *Concepts in Film Theory* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1984), 161. David Willis and Peter Brunette criticize Andrew's position as one verging on mysticism and romanticism. See Peter Brunette and David Wills, *Screen/Play: Derrida and Film Theory* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989), 56-57.

and in many cases interpretative inferences will be the least pertinent ones."⁴⁴

And, as some of the effects that interest me remain difficult to reduce to meaning (soul, for example), interpretation will not be the main focus of this text.

Yet, I would make clear that my study does not attempt a historical poetics of film in any pure "Bordwellian" sense. Still, the influence remains: Bordwell's book on Ozu will always be one of my favorite film books, and Kristin Thompson's writings on Jean-Luc Godard remain some of my favorite film criticism.⁴⁵ Both writers stop at "approximate truths," positions open to verification and debate. Rarely is an aporia left without a probable or plausible explanation, or at least a best guess based on the facts on hand. Postmodern rhetorical flair is effectively outlawed by rigorous, precise adherence to plausibility. Satisfyingly straightforward, economical, with excess primarily acknowledged as a subject to be explored formally, *by design*, they must leave unattended those avenues that an approximate, piecemeal approach *by definition* shall not indulge. This limited, deliberate approach is the task of film poetics, as they see it. But what if they went further, into aporia, beyond the certainty of approximate truths and plausibilities? What if they acknowledged their own rhetorical performances?

Roland Barthes imagined another task for the critic:

I can imagine an antistructural criticism; it would not look for the work's order but its disorder; for this it would suffice to consider any work as an encyclopedia: cannot each text be defined by the number of disparate objects (of knowledge, of sensuality) which it brings into view with the help

⁴⁴ Bordwell, David. *Making Meaning: Inference and Rhetoric in the Interpretation of Cinema*. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1989), 267-268.

⁴⁵ See David Bordwell's *Ozu and the Poetics of Cinema*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press), 1988, and Kristin Thompson's *Breaking the Glass Armor*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press), 1988.

of simple figures of contiguity (metonymies and asyndetons)? Like the encyclopedia, the work exhausts a list of heterogeneous objects, and this list is the work's antistructure, its obscure and irrational polygraphy.⁴⁶

Combining Barthes's "antistructural criticism" with "poetics" as defined by Bordwell (both authors stress paying close attention to the text/film under consideration), what can my experiment contribute to the framework of an "Antistructural Poetics" of black cinema, and to general questions about film's de-compositions and unpredictable, undecidable effects? This is the task I've set for myself, piecemeal in its own way, clearly open to debate, but one that no one has to imitate.⁴⁷

This brings me back to my appropriation of Gates's second and third steps listed above: "Repetition and imitation," and "Repetition and difference." My theoretical interest here turns to the work of Gregory Ulmer⁴⁸ and Robert B. Ray⁴⁹. In "The Object of Post-Criticism," Ulmer associates post-critical practice with the "application of the devices of modernist art to critical representations."⁵⁰ Both Ulmer and Ray suggest that the avant-garde can be a useful model for generating new information. In Ray's case, the target discipline is cinema studies. I've chosen avant-garde jazz as my own model. Let me clarify what I mean, in general, by avant-garde.

⁴⁶ Roland Barthes, *Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: The Noonday Press, 1977), 148.

⁴⁷ Which is not to say my results should be taken as "self-evident", as Bordwell has criticized many contemporary film theories, "Most of these theories have slender empirical support, but they are immune to testing or refutation because they tend to be vague, equivocal, truistic, or all three at once. They are incorrigible." See Bordwell, *Making Meaning*, 266.

⁴⁸ See in particular, Gregory L. Ulmer's *Teletheory: Grammatology in the Age of Video* (New York: Routledge, 1989), and *Heuretics: The Logic of Invention* (Baltimore: The John Hopkins University Press, 1994).

⁴⁹ See Robert B. Ray's *The Avant-Garde Finds Andy Hardy* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1995), and *The ABC's of Classic Hollywood* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008).

⁵⁰ Gregory L. Ulmer, "The Object of Post-Criticism," *The Anti-Aesthetic: Essays on Postmodern Culture*, ed. Hal Foster (Seattle: Bay Press, 1983), 83.

As James Naremore and Patrick Brantlinger argue in “Six Artistic Cultures,” there have been at least two avant-gardes: political (often anti-aesthetic) and aesthetic. They argue for a distinction between modernism and the avant-garde. “Generally speaking, whereas modernism tended to be critical of industrial society, the avant-garde welcomed machines and celebrated their utopian potential.” Naremore and Brantlinger relate this contrast to the debates between the modernist critiques of Theodor Adorno and the avant-garde wing of left German culture represented by Walter Benjamin.⁵¹ Early jazz, which they place under “popular” art, also crosses over into “mass art.” And, as they explain the distinction, “Despite its industrial basis, however, twentieth-century mass art has allowed and selectively encouraged certain kinds of experiment,” noting its ability to absorb other artistic cultural categories.⁵²

Because jazz and film are both commercial and popular forms that can also develop as an avant-garde, I enjoy them both. The Black Arts Movement of the late 1960s and early 1970s functioned as a hybrid avant-garde, influencing musicians, filmmakers, visual artists, and writers. The close relationship these artists had to politics makes it difficult to separate politics from aesthetics (the “Black Aesthetic” in particular). Avant-garde jazz is a key reference point for the 1960s black aesthetic, which I look at in Chapter Three. The level of experimentation involved sometimes makes it difficult to recognize the music’s “use value.” But it is this attention to experimentation that makes

⁵¹ James Naremore and Patrick Brantlinger, ‘Introduction’, *Modernity and Mass Culture*, ed. Naremore and Brantlinger (Bloomington, 1991), 10. See also, Peter Berger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, trans. Michael Shaw (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984).

⁵² *Ibid.*, 12-13.

avant-garde jazz useful for my project. In particular I've chosen as models two avant-garde jazz composers who theorize their own work: Ornette Coleman and Sun Ra.⁵³

Why Avant-Garde Jazz?

When asked if there is a black aesthetic in cinema, filmmaker Haile Gerima responded:

Well, I hope so. I hope it will emerge. To me, every village, all humanity has their own evil and good based on their own historical, social and psychological circumstances. Of course, ours is intervened, interrupted, intercepted. As Black people, we're trying to find our psyche, etc. But I think if jazz musicians withstood all the racism to create a musical form that they made the world recognize, so could Black filmmakers.⁵⁴

Why the music analogy? I became interested in avant-garde music while in high school. During a summer program, I witnessed live performances of compositions by John Cage, Arnold Schoenberg, Igor Stravinsky, Edgard Varèse, Erik Satie, Karlheinz Stockhausen, and Steve Reich. I read music history and theory. My father, a music teacher, had a "History of Classical Music" collection on LP, with musical biographies of Mozart, Bach, Beethoven, John Phillip Sousa, and others. I listened carefully to these records. I began listening to classic jazz recordings from the local library (Louis Armstrong, Benny Goodman, and Charlie Parker). In college I advanced to Ornette Coleman, Anthony Braxton, Sun Ra, Cecil Taylor, and the Art Ensemble of Chicago. While in Chicago, I was lucky enough to catch several performances by members of the

⁵³ It might be useful to note here Bordwell's point that the intentionality emphasis remains strong in avant-garde film criticism: "Avant-garde criticism has in fact been the last stronghold of intentionality in film interpretation. While Hollywood films can often be rendered interpretable only by positing unintentional and spontaneous artists behind them, the experimental filmmaker, supposedly free of commercial constraints, has usually been assigned more responsibility for the effects the film creates. Divergences in viewer's responses can be credited to an artist who deliberately seeks a range of implicit meanings or who frees the spectator from the tyranny of pat messages." David Bordwell, *Making Meaning*, 106.

⁵⁴ Gerima quoted in Alexander, George, *Why We Make Movies: Black Filmmakers Talk About the Magic of Cinema*, ed. George Alexander (New York: Harlem Moon, 2003), 204.

Association for the Advancement of Creative Musicians (AACM). Reading about these musicians inspired my own creative and theoretical outlook. I listened to all genres and styles of music (I come from a musical family, where everyone plays multiple instruments), and when I switched from illustration to film and video in college, I brought all of these interests with me. The musical perspectives became as much a part of my intellectual and creative soul as my love of cinema.

Some of the more interesting possibilities suggested by avant-garde jazz include an interest in improvisation and experimentation. For example, Ekkehard Jost has admirably analyzed Ornette Coleman's "harmolodic" theory and practice.

Coleman invents, as he goes along, motives [motifs] independent of the theme and continues to develop them. In this way -- independently of the chord progression, let it be noted -- an inner cohesion is created that is comparable to the stream of consciousness in Joyce or the "automatic writing" of the surrealists: one idea grows from another, is reformulated, and leads to yet another new idea. For this procedure, which is of the utmost importance for the understanding of Coleman's playing, we would like to introduce the term motivic chain-association.⁵⁵

This motivic chain-association neatly describes the guiding logic of my project.⁵⁶ Much of the structure and content of my research developed from motivic associations and improvisational experiments. Coleman himself has suggested general applications of harmolodics: "The more I use [harmolodics] in my playing and writing, the more I realize that it can be used in almost any kind of expression. You can think harmolodically. You can write fiction and poetry in harmolodic. Harmolodic allows a person to use a

⁵⁵ Ekkehard Jost, *Free Jazz: The Roots of Jazz* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1974), 50.

⁵⁶ David Bordwell also identifies and follows the motivic organization of Eisenstein's visual and thematic associations in *The Cinema of Eisenstein* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1993), 49.

multiplicity of elements to express more than one direction at a time.”⁵⁷ Jost stresses the “open” quality of Coleman’s motivic associations, particularly at points where he will stop “just short of the goal for which he is heading and place a dash -- instead of an exclamation mark.”⁵⁸ This description nicely fits the elusiveness of Roland Barthes’s “Third Meaning,” which I turn to as a model in Chapter Four.

Musicologist Stanley Sadies suggests that motifs also function as arguments. Explaining the term “theme” as a musical idea, he writes “it implies something longer than a motif, forming a unit in itself, but capable, like a motif, of giving rise to some kind of musical 'argument' or working-out.”⁵⁹ And for Ornette Coleman, improvised music is itself an aporetic argument. “In improvised music I think the musicians are trying to reassemble an emotional or intellectual puzzle, in any case a puzzle in which the instruments give the tone.”⁶⁰ Kristin Thompson writes about motifs as visual and cinematic elements, objects of investigation. She argues that a “motif is not simply a recurring element. Something beyond repetitions is necessary to create a motif as such.”⁶¹ She analyzes “floating” motifs Sergei in Eisenstein's *Ivan the Terrible*. These motifs proliferate to such a degree they create a profusion of associations beyond fixed meanings and narrative motivation.⁶² These argumentative and investigative figures of

⁵⁷ Ornette Coleman quoted in Peter Niklas Wilson, *Ornette Coleman: His Life and Music* (Albany: Berkeley Hills Books, 1999), 69.

⁵⁸ Jost, 50.

⁵⁹ Stanley Sadies, “Musical Form,” *The Cambridge Music Guide*, ed. Stanley Sadies and Alison Latham (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 59.

⁶⁰ Coleman quoted in “The Other’s Language,” 322.

⁶¹ Kristin Thompson, *Eisenstein’s Ivan the Terrible: A Neoformalist Analysis* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1981), 158.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 160-161.

performance and structure suggest research strategies. And as Derrida points out, improvisation (written and pre-written) happens “unforeseeably, without seeing it coming, unpredictably.”⁶³

Another possibility suggested by avant-garde jazz theory and practice, comes from Lawrence “Butch” Morris. Morris developed a system of conducted improvisation called “conduction.” This approach allows the music director, or conductor to “compose, (re)orchestrate, (re)arrange and sculpt with notated and non-notated music.”⁶⁴ This notion of conduction pairs well with Derrida and Coleman's expanded views of improvisation.

Avant-garde jazz is known for its hybrid nature, though it is usually considered rooted in certain traditional practices. This music also has roots in politics and formalism. Composers like Sun Ra, Anthony Braxton, and Ornette Coleman act as musicians, activists, theorists, and philosophers. With their interest in multiplicity and hybridity comes an interest in the sublime and “the impossible.” Institutionally, their theories and practices function as interruptions.

Larry Clark's *Passing Through* (1977), one of the key films from the Los Angeles black independent movement, explicitly makes an analogy between black independent filmmakers and avant-garde jazz musicians. The film portrays problems facing musicians who want to control their art and establish their independence from the commercial recording industry. According to Clyde Taylor, “By Larry Clark's testimony,

⁶³ Derrida, “Play -- The First Name,” 332.

⁶⁴ “Butch” Morris quoted by Robin D. G. Kelly, in “Beneath the Underground,” *Uptown conversation: The New Jazz Study*, ed. Robert G. O'Meally, Brent Hayes Edwards, and Farah Jasmine Griffin (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004), 406.

the sharp-edged racial portrayals in *Passing Through* ... reflect his frustrations in getting his film completed against such resistances.”⁶⁵



Figure 1-2. *Passing Through* (Larry Clark, 1977).

The analogies extend beyond the plot level. The film's visual experimentation also suggests comparisons (fig. 1-2). Clyde Taylor has written about the film's visual and editing strategies. As Taylor explains, “More subtly fulfilled than its story is its visual exposition through musical montage. Each sequence is introduced or segmented by music. Musical cues dominate its architecture.”⁶⁶ For example, at several points, the camera zooms into a musician's instrument and the film cuts to documentary-like flashback sequences. Taylor describes these as figural, or rhetorical montages, “Clark's montage suggest visual references for the solo's nonverbal expression, offering a visual exegesis of the way improvised jazz solos reflect individual and group experience.”⁶⁷

⁶⁵ Clyde Taylor, “New U.S. Black Cinema,” *Movies and Mass Culture*, ed. by John Belton (London: Athlone, 1996), 234.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 244.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 245.

Like jazz, filmmaking can be an individual experience, but is more often a group endeavor. For example, Horace Tapscott and his Pan-African Peoples Arkestra worked on *Passing Through's* primary music. Tapscott had formed the Underground Musician's Association (UGMA) which Alyn Shipton describes as "a far more overtly political organization than either BAG [Black Arts Group] or the AACM, discussing racial and other issues in an open manner."⁶⁸ Black independent filmmakers like Clark shared this struggle, combining independent production strategies with black nationalism and avant-garde practices. These kinds of collaborations emphasized their connections with larger political and aesthetic movements.

Likewise, close collaboration between the black filmmakers coming out of Los Angeles helps create the sense of a unified film movement derived from an otherwise diverse group of filmmakers with diverse cinematic visions. Beyond time (mid-to-late 1970s), location (Los Angeles area), and physical collaboration (these filmmakers often worked on each other's films), Taylor argues for other connecting factors.

What gives this new cinema its particular unifying character? In truth, little more than its determined resistance to the film ideology of Hollywood -- but that ... is a great deal. Under that broad umbrella of kinship, these filmmakers have produced work of considerable diversity, pursuing various goals of aesthetic individualism, cultural integrity, or political relevance. Despite this diversity, some core features, or defining aesthetic principles, can be seen to underlie many works of the new black cinema in three directions: its realness dimension, its relation to Afro-American oral tradition, and its connections with black music.⁶⁹

I will grapple with Taylor's larger aesthetic critique in Chapter Three, but his analysis of black independent filmmaker's desires for "a culturally-based film structural

⁶⁸ Alyn L. Shipton, *New History of Jazz* (Harrisburg: Continuum, 2002), 826.

⁶⁹ Taylor, "New U.S. Black Cinema," 233.

style founded on black music”⁷⁰ suggests there is more to my use of avant-garde jazz as a model than a rhetorical dare. I believe such models serve practical purposes, “use value,” that suggest research possibilities. The Surrealists argued for the use value of their experiments and “research.”⁷¹ When one thinks of traditional jazz, dancing is its most immediate use value. But what about avant-garde jazz? Where is its use value if it “ain’t got that swing”?⁷² Ray has argued for the avant-garde’s use value as “that branch of the humanities which, since the nineteenth century, has functioned as the equivalent of science’s pure research.”

If instead of thinking about the avant-garde as only hermetic self-expression, we began to imagine it as a field of experimental work waiting to be used (in the same way that pure science’s exotica becomes another generation’s technology), then we might begin to apply certain avant-garde devices for the sake of knowledge.⁷³

Inevitably this dissertation’s title, *The Souls of Black Cinema* begs the question: “What are the souls of black cinema? And, what knowledge can be generated from exploring this question?” What, then, is my task?

Why the Souls of Black Cinema?: Post Souls and Alter-Destinies

I propose an experimental approach to researching and writing about black cinema, and avant-garde black cinema in particular. Although it acknowledges recent calls for a black cinema studies rooted in specifically African American cultural

⁷⁰ Clyde Taylor, “Black Cinema Aesthetics,” *A Companion to African-American Philosophy*, ed. Tommy Lott and John Pittman (Malden: Blackwell, 2003), 403.

⁷¹ The Surrealists opened the Bureau de Recherche Surrealist in Paris in the 1920s.

⁷² Braxton, quoted in Graham Lock’s *Forces in Motion*: “In this period my work is perceived as being very cold and Braxton doesn’t swing -- that’s only because those same forces are dictating and defining what feeling is.” Graham Lock, *Forces in Motion: The Music and Thoughts of Anthony Braxton* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1988), 237.

⁷³ Ray, *The Avant-Garde Finds Andy Hardy*, 10.

practices, this study suggests that a new mode can be derived from the avant-garde. I want to reconsider the role of aesthetics in African American cinema and encourage a different set of discussions around it. Musicians Ornette Coleman and Sun Ra provide models: Coleman's motivic-chains, and Ra's "Alter-Destiny" motif, which connect with both Jacques Derrida's writing on "aporias," and Roland Barthes's "third meaning."

My goal is an "aporetic" study of black cinema that complements established political approaches with a renewed emphasis on what Barthes called "figuration." How do I justify the motivic-associations thus far mentioned: soul, aporias, figuration, excess, and third meanings? Clearly, there is no one aporia, no one-to-one relationship between any of these terms. Jean-François Lyotard claims that theory (and more precisely, discourse) and figuration are interdependent, and that a binary opposition has been imposed on the terms, privileging the literal (politics, theory) over the figurative (aesthetics, art).⁷⁴ Historically, there are clearly different uses of the term "figural" being used among theorists as varied as Henry Louis Gates, Houston Baker, Barthes, Lyotard, Dudley Andrew, Fredrick Jameson, and Christian Metz. These definitions and uses of figuration are not reducible to a single motif. Often they have been re-inscribed strategically -- as with, for example, Lyotard's use in *Discours Figure*. Also, differences between figural and literal, etc. are difficult to maintain (one may consider Barthes's love of binaries), themselves figures of aporia. And, as Derrida writes of aporia:

What was ... at stake with this word was the 'not knowing where to go.' It had to be a matter of the nonpassage, or rather from the experience of the nonpassage, the experience of what happens and is fascinating in this non passage, paralyzing us in this separation in a way that is not necessarily negative: before a door, a threshold, a border, a line, or simply the edge or

⁷⁴ See Jean-François Lyotard's, "The Dream-Work Does Not Think," in *The Lyotard Reader*, ed. Andrew Benjamin (Cambridge: Basil Blackwell, 1989), 19-55.

the approach of the other as such. It should be a matter of what, in sum appears to block our way or to separate us in the very place where it would no longer be possible to constitute a problem, a project, or a projection, that is, at the point where the very project or the problematic task becomes impossible and where we are exposed, absolutely without protection, without problem, and without prosthesis, without possible substitution, singularly exposed in our absolute and absolutely naked uniqueness, that is to say, disarmed, delivered to the other, incapable even of sheltering ourselves behind. What could still protect the interiority of a secret? There, in sum, in this place of aporia, there is no longer any problem. Not that, alas or fortunately, the solutions have been given, but because one could no longer even find a problem that would constitute itself and that one would keep in front of oneself, as a prosthetic substitute, as some kind of border still to cross or behind which to protect oneself.⁷⁵

What do I mean by aporia? Etymologically, it comes from *aporos*, Greek for “without passage.” As Richard Beardsworth argues, this “impracticable” route “is one that cannot be traversed, it is an uncrossable path. Without passage, not treadable.”⁷⁶ In Greek philosophy it usually implies a philosophical puzzle. Jacques Derrida suggests a plural logic of aporia. He writes, “It appears to be paradoxical enough so that the partitioning among multiple figures of aporia does not oppose figures to each other, but instead installs the haunting of the one in the other.”⁷⁷

Aporetic discourse suggests that some effects are not reducible to meaning in the sense that interpretive critics employ: some effects of the medium escape thematization, as in the domain that Kristen Thompson, following Barthes, describes as “excess.” As Derrida points out, “No context can determine meaning to the point of exhaustiveness. Therefore the context neither produces nor guarantees impassable

⁷⁵ Jacques Derrida, *Aporias*, trans. Thomas Dutoit (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1993), 12.

⁷⁶ Richard Beardsworth, *Derrida and the Political* (New York: Routledge, 1997), 32.

⁷⁷ Derrida, *Aporias*, 20.

borders, thresholds that no step could pass, trespass...⁷⁸ Chapters Four and Five explore the extremes of these *cinematic* aporias, which, like third meanings, amount to interruptions, sites analogous to Foucault's third principle of heterotopias, "capable of juxtaposing in a single real place several spaces, several sites that are in themselves incompatible."⁷⁹ They "conduct" their observer along multiple routes, only some of them anticipated by the filmmaker.

An aporetic discourse on black cinema attempts to theorize through a form of affirmative interrupting, beyond totalizing assumptions about politics, culture, aesthetics, and identity. Can this alternative "aporetic criticism," by challenging the priority of critique, foster other readings exploring the general notion of figuration in black cinema studies? What might searching the "souls" of black cinema reveal?

Commenting on the positive effects of cultural nationalism ("cult-nat") on black artistic production, Greg Tate writes, characteristically, "This cultural confidence has freed up more black artists to do work as wonderfully absurdist as black life itself."

The impulse toward enmeshing self-criticism and celebration present in the most provocative avant-garde black art of the '70s and early '80s (cf. Miles Davis, David Hammons, Senga Ngudi, Art Ensemble of Chicago, Ishmael Reed, Charles Burnett, Pedro Bell, George Clinton, Samuel R. Delany, Richard Pryor, Charles Johnson, Octavia Butler, Jayne Cortez, Ntozake Shange, Toni Morrison) owes a debt to the cult-nats for making so much noise about the mythic beauties of blackness that these artists could traffic in the ugly and mundane sides with just as much ardor. ...What's unfortunate is that while black artists have opened up the entire "text of blackness" for fun and games, not many black critics have produced writing as fecund, eclectic, as freaky-deke as the art, let alone the culture itself. [He includes Clyde Taylor, Gates, and Houston Baker among the exceptions] ... for those who prefer exegesis with a polemical bent, just imagine how critics as fluent in black and Western culture as the postliberated artists could

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 9.

⁷⁹ Michel Foucault, "Of Other Spaces," in *Diacritics* 6.1 (1986): 25.

strike terror into that bastion of white supremacist thinking, the Western art world.⁸⁰

In this spirit, recent scholarship has taken up Nelson George's "Post-Soul" concept as a way to understand the political and aesthetic transformations taking place in black cinema.⁸¹ Greg Tate describes Nelson George's "post-Soul" culture as "the African-American equivalent of postmodernism." It emerges from the "novel social, economic, and political circumstances the sixties Black movements produced in their wake."⁸² For George, it represents "the culture of African-Americans who've come of age since the demise of the civil rights movement in the late '60s."⁸³

The meaning of "soul" is itself the object of some controversy. According to William L. Van Deburg, the element of mystery ("who did or didn't have soul") "made this quintessential in-group concept one of the most compelling elements in contemporary black folk expression."⁸⁴

Soul was the folk equivalent of the black aesthetic. It was perceived as being the essence of the separate black culture. If there was beauty and emotion in blackness, soul made it so. If there was a black American mystique, soul provided much of its aura of sly confidence and assumed superiority.⁸⁵

⁸⁰ Greg Tate, *Flyboy in the Buttermilk* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1992), 200-201.

⁸¹ See Nelson George's, *Buppies, B-Boys, Baps and Bohos: Notes of Post-Soul Black Culture* (New York: Harper Collins Publishers, 1992).

⁸² Greg Tate, *Everything But the Burden: What White People are Taking From Black Culture* (New York: Broadway Books, 2003), 6.

⁸³ George, xi.

⁸⁴ William L. Van Deburg, *New Day in Babylon: The Black Power Movement and American Culture, 1965-1975* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 194.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 195.

When a reporter asked Aretha Franklin, the Queen of Soul, for a definition, she replied: “Soul is black.”⁸⁶ Soul, it would seem, aesthetically expressed blackness itself. Monique Guillory and Richard C. Green describe soul as “that magical domain of powerful nothingness where fantasies and ancestors live,” ...“embedded in the sacred and the profane, the sublime and the sensational.”⁸⁷ And like Derrida, Paul Gilroy emphasizes the economics of soul:

First of all, it seems to me that soul is the mark of a particular cultural axiology. It is first and foremost a sign of value. What’s important to me about the political language of soul and the language of cultural value in which the trope of soul circulates is that it is a sign that the axiology of the market does not work. It is a sign that we are dealing with a realm of cultural production, cultural utility, cultural dissemination where the calculus of worth cannot apply or applies rather problematically. So for me, the value of soul and the idea of soul is that they mark that realm which resists the reach of economic rationality and the commodifying process. Soul is a mark of how that precious, wonderful, expressive culture stands outside of commodification, how those cultural processes and the history in which they stand have resisted being reduced to the status of a thing that can be sold.⁸⁸

Yet, according to George, “As a musical genre, a definition of African American culture, and the code word for our national identity, soul has pretty much been dead since Nixon’s reelection in 1972.”⁸⁹

What characterizes post-soul culture? Greg Tate proposed a “new black aesthetic” in 1986. George suggested a correction. “He [Tate] had a point, though I’d argue there was more than one aesthetic at work. For better and worse, the spawn of the post-soul

⁸⁶ Aretha Franklin quoted in Monique Guillory and Richard C. Green's, “By Way of an Introduction,” in *Soul: Black Power, Politics, and Pleasure*, ed. Monique Guillory and Richard C. Green (New York: New York University Press, 1998), 1.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 1.

⁸⁸ Paul Gilroy interview in “Question of a ‘Soulful Style’” *Soul: Black Power, Politics, and Pleasure*, ed. Monique Guillory and Richard C. Green (New York: New York University Press, 1998), 250-251.

⁸⁹ George, 2.

era displayed multiple personalities.”⁹⁰ Tate agreed. For Tate, post-soul encompasses artistic expressions as diverse as Ntozake Shange and Spike Lee, or the presidential campaigns of Jesse Jackson and the art of Jean-Michel Basquiat.

All this work managed the feat of being successful in the American mainstream in a language that was as easily referenced to white cultural models as to African-American ones. Its signature was not its smooth Blackness but its self-conscious hybridity of Black and white cultural signifiers.⁹¹

If post-soul is analogous to postmodernism, it is a hybrid. Like modernism, which is both present within and superseded by postmodernism, soul may still exert a privileged force on the post-soul era. And the other lesson of postmodernism is the reverse: postmodernism was present in the modernist era, and traces of post-soul surely existed in even the earliest incarnations of soul as an African American cultural concept.

As Derrida asks, “How is the soul recognized?”⁹² The most famous early incarnation, W.E. B. Du Bois’s *The Souls of Black Folk* expresses this chiasmus in the clearest way.

[T]he Negro is a sort of seventh son, born with a veil, and gifted with second-sight in this American world, -- a world which yields him no true self-consciousness, but only lets him see himself through the revelation of the other world. It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others, of measuring one’s soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his twoness, -- an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in

⁹⁰ ibid., 2.

⁹¹ Tate, *Everything But the Burden*, 6.

⁹² Derrida, “Play -- The First Name,” 337.

one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder.⁹³

Of course, Du Bois's "soul" is only retrospectively connected to the "soul" that we associate with the 1960s black popular culture. By then, soul had become a strange (non)entity. As a cultural concept soul signified unfathomable depth. As a cultural commodity and phenomenon, it signified style and ornamentation. As the following chapters reveal, soul became *the* aporetic figure of black aesthetics/politics debates.

Since Du Bois, soul has always been aporetic, at least "two souls, two thoughts," and never completely reconciled. What haunts black film studies should not be construed as lacunae, but as excess, as its soul, haunting the field with unforeseen possibilities and incalculable futures. It is a "call that none will have seen or heard coming."⁹⁴ It is this futural sensibility that I align with Sun Ra's Alter-Destiny motif, his vision of the future, his aesthetic challenge to predetermined expectations and directions.⁹⁵

Finally, in addition to the "souls" and "Post-souls," "Post-nats," "Cult-nats," and "PostNegritudes," I would like to add an "other": an "alter"-nat, an "other" within and without traditional nationalist concerns; an "alter" identity-politics or alter-ego. But, why use any of these terms at all? There is nothing inherently cinematically specific about alter-destiny, aporia, third meanings, excess, motivic-associations, or soul. Even the medium specific effects and experiences of *photogénie* or cinephilia, could be described

⁹³ W.E.B. DuBois, *The Souls of Black Folk*, 1903 (New York: Vintage, 1990).

⁹⁴ Derrida, "Play – The First Name," 337.

⁹⁵ I discuss Sun Ra's "Alter-Destiny" motif in more detail in Chapter Six. See also, Graham Lock's *Blutopia: Visions of the Future and Revisions of the Past in the Work of Sun Ra, Duke Ellington, and Anthony Braxton* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1999), 33.

in simpler language, or reduced to theories of attention. I choose to use aporia, alter-destiny, *photogénie*, cinephilia, third meanings, and excess for their historical and cultural references, *and* their rhetorical power. And rather than argue for equivocation, this project's interest lies in the rhetorical possibilities of catachresis, and figuration in general.⁹⁶ Like Ra's alter-destiny, these motifs are tropological as well as topographical: spaces where one can think and act otherwise. I offer, here, a different view from the stage.

⁹⁶ Think here, perhaps, of the sometimes uncomfortable alliance between Henry Louis Gates's "Signifyin'(g)" and Derridian deconstruction", or the catachresis "blackness", or black cinema.

CHAPTER 2 SOUL ON SCREEN

Art and Politics at the Crossroads

X, to whom I say that his manuscript (a weighty tome attacking television) is too dissertative, insufficiently protected aesthetically, gives a start at this word and immediately gives me back as good as I gave: he has had many discussions of *The Pleasure of the Text* with his friends; my book, he says, “keeps brushing up against catastrophe.” No doubt catastrophe, in his eyes, is to fall into the aesthetic.¹

Hence, because of a perverse disposition to see forms, languages, and repetitions, he [Barthes in the third person] gradually became a political misfit.²

If we concede, *only* for the moment, that “soul” describes “blackness” expressed aesthetically, one obvious question is “what exactly is evoked?” How does one recognize “blackness” expressed? Different forms of expression may have their different criteria. Music, for example may make assumptions about rhythm, melismatic vocals, or syncopation. In fact, music probably has the most uncontroversial set of criteria for identifying “Africanisms.” I will not take the time here either to confirm or debunk these markers; I only wish to note the general consensus on music's ability to express culturally distinguishing marks.

Is blackness expressed when presented on film? What criteria do we have for recognizing it? What does black presence evoke on-screen? What are the aesthetic and political effects of this expression? At first, these ideas seem too simplistic for consideration. They risk reducing cinematic expression to iconic criteria. As noted in the last chapter, Gladstone Yearwood criticizes this iconic criterion for its tendency to

¹ Roland Barthes, *Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: The Noonday Press, 1977), 104-105.

² *Ibid.*, 170.

conflate film images with blackness simply because “one sees and recognizes black faces,” criteria that fails to evoke anything beyond “superficial distinctions.”³ Specifically, Yearwood critiques this criterion's ability to identify and define “black cinema,” but can any simplistic iconic criterion identify blackness-on-screen in any general sense? These notions seem to invite the narrowest kind of racially essentialist and stereotypical iconography. But like it or not, these culturally and socially shared ideas do play a part in how images are produced and consumed. As Michelle Wallace points out, “After all, if it makes no difference how a film deploys its black bodies, why have they been so relentlessly excluded in the past?”⁴ My point here is not to justify these aesthetic ideas, but to examine them, guided in part by the pioneering iconic analysis of Jacqueline Najuma Stewart and James A. Snead. At the risk of “falling into the aesthetic,” if *only* for the moment, this chapter asks: “If ‘soul’ is a quality evoked on film, what exactly do we see?”

The first thing we might consider is: what assumptions do we bring to these questions? What might we be looking for in advance? Clyde Taylor has described soul as a passage, “a medium through which we can access what has happened to Black people over the last two or three decades. Because when we’re talking about soul, we’re talking about survival -- our very existence and the stuff we’re made of.”⁵ And though this may seem a fairly limited and vague guide at first glance, how this “soul as

³ Gladstone Yearwood, “Towards a Theory of Black Cinema Aesthetics,” *Black Cinema Aesthetics: Issues in Independent Black Filmmaking*, ed. Gladstone L. Yearwood (Athens: Center for Afro-American Studies - Ohio University, 1982), 68.

⁴ Michele Wallace, *Dark Designs and Visual Culture* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004), 484.

⁵ Clyde Taylor at the Roundtable discussion “Ain’t We Still Got Soul?” *Soul: Black Power, Politics, and Pleasure*, ed. Monique Guillory and Richard C. Green (New York: New York University Press, 1998), 273.

passage” can be expressed may in fact still vary greatly, and not necessarily as literal expressions of survival. Still, Taylor’s “passage” figure is only one understanding of soul as black aesthetic.

Portia Maultsby notes, soul may be expressed differently across generations and degrees of commodification. And, though what soul means may change within different contexts, the “original meaning and sociocultural and political significance are preserved or adapted to meet the demands of a new situation.”⁶ If mutability is the case, one should be able to recognize expressions of soul in different contexts. Maultsby argues that this iterability is due to soul’s structure and function as a “style”:

Soul is a style -- it’s a style distinctive to African Americans characterized by improvisatory components. The call-response, community participatory components, defined by a worldview that’s all a part of the concept of soul that is manifested in a style. There is a style of the seventies; there is George Clinton and the P-Funk. That was his soul. The rappers have their soul -- in a different way. But also they maintain some of those fundamental aesthetic features -- this is what links African Americans from two to four hundred years ago to the present day. We share a core of aesthetic qualities. We share a particular worldview that’s been shaped by an oppressive existence that has not changed for four hundred years; now it may have taken on a different form so we’re still creating out of that experience, drawing from our aesthetic qualities and expressive styles of an African past.⁷

Thinking of soul as a style might help us identify it on-screen. Like Taylor, Maultsby sees this soul-style rooted in an aesthetic of survival, and assumes some amount of black, communal creative control. But the other social-contextual consideration we should remember is the larger context of American culture. African-American culture is a hybrid culture. Yet, as Ralph Ellison reminds us, this hybridity

⁶ Portia Maultsby at the Roundtable discussion “Ain’t We Still Got Soul?,” in *Soul: Black Power, Politics, and Pleasure*, ed. Monique Guillory and Richard C. Green (New York: New York University Press, 1998), 283.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 283.

works both ways: “American culture would not exist without its Afro-American component, or if it did, it would be quite different.”⁸ This hybridization is especially true if one looks at American culture during the early years of cinema.

The popular success of minstrel shows and ragtime helped solidify the way blacks were viewed in America. Even as minstrel shows waned in popularity at the turn of the century, blackface was revived on the silver screen. Despite the “stylistic” continuity of soul expressed by blacks, popular images of blacks remained centered on those most comfortable for mainstream audiences. At their best, these images grew out of “authentic” black creative expression, and at their worst, they regressed to stereotypical representations.

Jacqueline Najuma Stewart has researched the effect of black images in preclassical cinema. She identifies voyeuristic fascination at work in these early films. She writes,

I want to describe how preclassical films work to enable a sense of white, visual mastery over Black objects by confirming their knowability, policing their difference, and exposing their transgressions despite their opening up many potential holes in these processes, such as displaying the self-consciousness of the makers and subjects.⁹

For example, she looks at the popular Edison company travelogue sub-genre, “black-baby-washing” films. Primarily, these films were not made for black audiences, who were generally indifferent to the early film phenomena.¹⁰ So, when considering the

⁸ Ralph Ellison, *Conversations with Ralph Ellison*, ed. Maryemma Graham, Amritjit Singh (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1995), 328.

⁹ Jacqueline Najuma Stewart. *Migrating to the Movies: Cinema and Black Urban Modernity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), 68.

¹⁰ See, Thomas Cripps's *Slow Fade to Black: The Negro in American Film, 1900-1942* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977), 11. He writes, during the preclassical period, “Negroes, both intellectuals and urban masses, shared an indifference to the cinema. Because of their deep puritan fundamentalist

effect these images had on white audiences, Stewart draws on contextual cues. The combination of stereotypes around black hygiene habits (adding to the visual joke of vigorous scrubbing), and Booker T. Washington's contemporary, nationally popular speeches promoting black hygiene improvement, provide a key to preclassical frames of reference.¹¹



Figure 2-1. *A Morning Bath* (1896).

In addition to this larger context, however, Stewart notes the *mise-en-scène's* visual force. Authenticity is a key factor for most of these black baby-centered films. As she notes, the use of white babies in blackface makes no sense, as the burnt cork will simply wash off. In fact, as Stewart points out, blackface is rarely used on black babies or young children in early films. "Black babies and children are valued as curiosities in their own right."¹² For example, the visual effect of juxtaposing white suds on black skin is used to sell *A Morning Bath* in an 1896 Edison catalog, "This is a clear and distinct

roots, black churches eschewed film as needless frivolity... Not until the spring of 1909 would fragments of the Niagara Movement and the Constitution League join with other blacks and liberal whites to form the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, and not until 1915 would its house organ, the *Crisis*, speak to a national black audience on the subject of the cinema."

¹¹ Stewart, 69.

¹² *Ibid.*, 54-55.

picture in which the contrast between the complexion of the bather and the white soapsuds is strongly marked. A very amusing and popular subject”¹³ (fig. 2-1).

Rarely do these films have elaborate narratives beyond “woman washes baby.” A *Morning Bath* is barely 25 seconds long. If we accept Stewart's analysis of preclassical cinema's voyeuristic fascination with blackness, is that all there is on-screen? What made these films so popular? Beyond the visual pleasure in contrasting white suds with black skin, what else is visually communicated other than the basic act of washing? Without a substantial narrative to ground it, how could *A Morning Bath* evoke the stylistic “worldview” identified as blackness or “soul”?

One means of evaluating such early cinematic visual communication is the notion of *photogénie*.¹⁴ Though not a full-blown theory until the 1920s, *photogénie* aptly describes preclassical spectatorship, and the visual pleasures found in movement and details such as soap against skin. As Laura Marcus describes the effect, “it was variously described as a form of defamiliarization, as a seeing of ordinary things as for the first time, and as a temporal category, a sublime instant.”¹⁵ Fascination with the baby's movement (struggling in the mother's arms), and the iconic reference in the soap rolling down its skin, reveals how closely intertwined contextual cues about race (hygienic stereotypes) and early theories of cinematic essence (*photogénie*) can be.

¹³ Quoted in Stewart, 69.

¹⁴ For Jean Epstein, *photogénie* is the art of cinema: “What is *photogénie*? I would describe as photogenic any aspect of things, beings, or souls whose moral character is enhanced by filmic reproduction. And any aspect not enhanced by filmic reproduction is not photogenic, plays no part in the art of cinema... *Photogénie* is the purest expression of cinema.” Jean Epstein, “On Certain Characteristics of *Photogénie*,” in *French Film Theory and Criticism: A History/Anthology 1907-1939*, ed. Richard Abel (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988), 314-315.

¹⁵ Laura Marcus, *The Tenth Muse: Writing about Cinema in the Modernist Period* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 182.

Marcus explains *photogénie*'s importance as one of the first aesthetic film theories, "Issues of time, duration, and movement were inextricably intertwined with aesthetic questions, and with attempts to define the specific aesthetic of the cinema."¹⁶ I will return to these questions about *photogénie* and cinematic essence, *mise-en-scène*, and iconic blackness later in this chapter. For now, let me simply state, such questions appear reasonably suggested by either an iconic or image analysis of *A Morning Bath*.

In another example of iconic analysis, James A. Snead suggests the metaphoric power of black images supplements the need for literal narrative expressions of black identity. He writes, "I agree with W.E.B. Du Bois, when he said that the 'Negro' is the metaphor of the twentieth century, the major figure in which these power relations of master/slave, civilized/primitive, enlightened/ backward, good/evil, have been embodied in the American subconscious."¹⁷ In his analysis of black images in early cinema, Snead hones in on the effect of "black skin" on-screen. "From the very first films, black skin on screen became a complex code for various things, depending on the social self-conception and positioning of the viewer; it could as easily connote white superiority and self-regard as black inferiority."¹⁸ The drive of these codings is, according to Snead, to reduce the ambiguity between black and white images, brought about because blackness "cannot always, either in films or in real life, be determined."¹⁹ From this

¹⁶ Ibid., 182.

¹⁷ James A. Snead. *White Screens, Black Images: Hollywood from the Dark Side* (New York: Routledge, 1994), 2.

¹⁸ Ibid., 2-3.

¹⁹ Ibid., 4-5.

analytical position, Taylor and Maultsby's "soul-style" can be evoked *iconographically* by figures (codes, metaphors) of black on-screen presence.

Even black absence can be examined in this way. It was common in the 1930s and 1940s to film black stars in such a way that their scenes could be cut for Southern distribution without interrupting the main narrative. Snead sees this disposable quality as an issue of *mise-en-scène*:

Even within the individual frame, we often (though not always) find the black excluded, peripheral, distant from the source and focal point of action. But since "framing," "editing," and "cutting out" are indeed the exigencies of filmic and aesthetic practice, it was possible to hide ideologically motivated distortions under the masks of artistic economy or exigency.²⁰

I've summarized the basic modes of two strong examples of iconic, or black image analysis. Though I've selected work that may analyze *mise-en-scène* in more detail than others, I still find their approach typical of black film research practiced today. Though iconic criteria offer some support for exploring soul as black aesthetic expression, what *is* exactly evoked or expressed remains either vague, or clumsily obvious. The aesthetic effect of iconic "black skin" simply plays its role in a metaphoric black-white binary. Politics, it may be argued, provides the best explanation of aesthetic effects. What does black presence evoke on-screen? The reduction of aesthetic effect to political metaphor seems too limited a path to provide satisfying answers. If soul can be described as a "passage," black image analysis seems to lead to an impasse, a crossroads: aesthetics leading in one direction (haunted by the specter of *photogénie*), while politics veers off in the other.

²⁰ Ibid., 6.

This crossroads motif can be extended to encompass routes, relays, and conductors. These pathways can have their own logic. Gregory L. Ulmer has suggested a conductive logic to supplement traditional ideas of inference and argument. Instead of moving logically through abduction, deduction, and induction between things and ideas, conductive logic moves directly between things.²¹ He names this “electronic path of inference” conduction, and explains that “its operations show that ‘chance’ has its own order that makes ‘opposition’ thinkable in another way (a new gesture).”²² This electronic logic can be generalized to include written, and other discourses. Thus movement can be sparked by otherwise unrelated details and discourses. And the unprogrammable relations between chance encounters can program the logic of the movement.

Also, thinking about critical and historical debates around art and politics as a crossroads at least suggests different possibilities and directions. Houston Baker, Jr., has effectively used the crossroad motif in his influential *Blues, Ideology, and Afro-American Literature: A Vernacular Theory*. He uses the blues as a trope, “to summon an image of the black blues singer at the railway junction lustily transforming experiences of a durative (unceasingly oppressive) landscape into the energies of rhythmic song.”²³

This is a matrix marked by constant traveling.

The “X” of crossing roadbeds signals the multidirectionality of the juncture and is simply a single instance in a boundless network that redoubles and circles, makes sidings and ladders, forms Y’s and branches over the

²¹ Gregory L. Ulmer, *Heuretics: The Logic of Invention* (Baltimore: The John Hopkins University Press, 1994), 127.

²² *Ibid.*, 194.

²³ Houston A. Baker, Jr., *Blues, Ideology, and Afro-American Literature: A Vernacular Theory* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984), 7.

vastness of hundreds of thousands of American miles. Polymorphous and multidirectional, scene of arrivals and departures, place betwixt and between (ever *entre le deux*), the juncture is the way-station of the blues.²⁴

This “X” also marks a problematic set of directionalities. It can “mark the spot” (a particular destination), or it can represent the unknown. It can be a *chiasmus*, signaling the interdependence between “the art of politics” or “the politics of art.” It also signifies danger, a warning, an aporia or impasse. It all depends on where you want to go. For now, it seems clear that the black image analysis we've explored thus far shows little interest in going down the “catastrophic” aesthetic direction. The politics of representation, rather than aesthetics, remains this brand of criticism's main emphasis and compass, generally ignoring the “danger, impasse!” warning signs.

Historically, such critical attention to black representation, or lack thereof, came to the forefront after the release of D. W. Griffith's *Birth of a Nation* (1915). The organized effort to condemn the film's portrayal of blacks, and the combined pressures from civil rights leaders, like W. E. B. Du Bois, and black newspapers, shaped the debates around representation that predominate black film criticism today. Even Du Bois, who opposed censorship, joined the protest against the film's racist propaganda, while acknowledging the film's innovative qualities.²⁵ And when the film was re-released in 1923, Du Bois responded in an editorial, and the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) petitioned to suppress the film under New York's motion picture censorship law.²⁶ Ironically, as David Levering Lewis notes, “The

²⁴ Ibid., 7.

²⁵ David Levering Lewis, *W. E. B. Du Bois: Biography of a Race, 1868-1919*, Vol. 1. (New York:Henry Holt/Owl Books 1994), 507.

²⁶ David Levering Lewis, *W. E. B. Du Bois: The Fight for Equality and the American Century 1919-1963*, Vol. 2. (New York:Henry Holt/Owl Books 2001), 87.

paradox was that *The Birth of a Nation* and the NAACP helped make each other.”²⁷ This irony also held true for burgeoning black film critics and black independent filmmakers.

Between 1912 and 1916, the beginnings of independent black productions in Chicago and Los Angeles suggested an alternative cinematic perspective. But, these small companies were responding to more than the success of *Birth of a Nation*. Factors ranging from The Great War, the Great Migration and northern industrialization, the Garvey Movement and changes in racial consciousness, and the waning reality of the metaphorical “Southern Negro,” contributed to their development.²⁸ Bill Foster's Foster Photoplay Company and George and Nobel Johnson's Lincoln Motion Picture Company, produced and distributed films to black audiences in segregated theaters in Chicago, Omaha, Los Angeles, New York, and other cities.²⁹ These filmmakers addressed a black popular audience. In general, they attempted to avoid stereotypes while presenting positive images and representations of black life, following the call of Du Bois and others to “advance the race.” As Anna Everett argues,

The advent of independently produced black films allowed African American spectators new forms of image cathexis or identification. Absent the need to endure a discomfited spectatorship generated by the displacement of their visual pleasure onto white cinematic heroes and heroines, black audiences could now indulge their escapist fantasies and ego gratifications through

²⁷ Lewis notes that, “Du Bois was quick to appreciate that the fight against the film 'probably succeeded in advertising it even beyond its admittedly notable merits.' But the fight also mobilized thousands of black and white men and women in large cities across the country (outside the Deep South) who had been unaware of the existence of the [NAACP] or indifferent to it.” See Lewis, Vol. 1, 507.

²⁸ Anna Everett, *Returning the Gaze: A Genealogy of Black Film Criticism, 1909-1949* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2001), 108.

²⁹ Though initial black audiences for all films were small, the demand continued to grow. As Paula Massood notes, “African American venues for film predate even the Foster Company's incorporation in 1910, indicating that from its very beginnings, a black audience existed, and this audience, like the films to follow, emerged in a segregated environment. More important, this audience was increasingly targeted by film producers.” See Paula J. Massood, *Black City Cinema: African American Urban Experiences in Film* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2003), 47.

new heroic portrayals of fictional and actual black screen figures projected larger than life in the wildly successful innovation of “race films.”³⁰

Overall, the films followed the narrative models of the day, as the burgeoning black audiences primarily watched the same films shown in most other urban theaters at the time (the heyday of Hollywood silent cinema).

Black audiences and the black press were no longer indifferent to film; in fact, they often felt under attack by mainstream images. Black newspapers like *The Chicago Defender*, *New York Age* (with Lester A. Walton as a leading black film critic), *New York Amsterdam News*, *Cayton's Weekly*, and *The Crisis*, helped create a critical framework. As Everett shows in her study of early black film criticism, “the formidable alliance between the influential black press and the evolving black cinema movement ... made it increasingly difficult for the nation to delay further its day of reckoning with a multifaceted New Negro movement.”³¹ Film became one of the first targets in what would become the first real debate about aesthetics, politics, and black creative self-expression in the twentieth century. To continue to ponder the question of “soul” as black aesthetic, I will take a closer look at this early debate about art and politics at a crossroad.

The Soul of Harlem: Art or Propaganda?

Originally known as the Negro Renaissance, the Harlem Renaissance, though brief (peaking in the mid-1920s and deteriorating after the October 1929 stock market crash), became the first intense period of cultural production and innovation among African American writers, visual artists, and musicians. Though New York was the

³⁰ ibid., 110.

³¹ ibid., 109-110.

primary site, this “renaissance” also resonated in Chicago, Paris, London, and the Caribbean. For nearly a decade, the spirit of black culture was celebrated in jazz clubs, publishing ventures, art galleries, and occasionally on the silver screen.

This period was the height of black modernism. As David Levering Lewis observes, “For the modernist whites, art was the means to change society before they would embrace it fully. For the Late Victorian Negroes, art was the means to change society in order to be partly accepted into it.”³² It was an elitist, utopian movement, which seemed almost incongruent considering it existed among a people only two generations out of slavery. And despite activists’ successful attempts to organize around issues of representation in film almost a decade earlier, no one could have predicted a large-scale artistic endeavor would consume so much attention and material support from political organizations like the NAACP and the Urban League.³³

Through the dedication of Charles S. Johnson, Alain Locke, James Weldon Johnson, and Walter White, the projection of a “New Negro” with impressive cultural and artistic credentials was to be the frontline defense against racial discrimination. Charles S. Johnson, as the editor of *Opportunity*, the official organ of the National Urban League, and W.E.B. Du Bois, at the helm of *The Crisis*, the official magazine of the NAACP, provided intellectual and institutional encouragement as well as financial support, publishing artistic work and awarding annual cash prizes for their respective organizations.

³² Lewis, Vol. 2, 172.

³³ Ibid., 166-167.

Writers associated with the movement include Langston Hughes, Jean Toomer, Zora Neale Hurston, Claude McKay, Jessie Fauset, Wallace Thurman, and Countee Cullen. Visual artists included Aaron Douglas, Hale Woodruff, Palmer Hayden, Richmond Barthé, and Augusta Savage. Oscar Micheaux, the most prolific black filmmaker at the time, would produce around 38 films from 1919 to 1948, shooting several movies in Harlem in the mid-1920s. No one identifiable style or approach marked the movement's writing or visual work. And though the northbound migrating jazz musicians shared a common lineage, this period was also one of innovation and individual expression, from the solo styling of Louis Armstrong to the orchestral swing of Duke Ellington.

In Harlem, aesthetic positions were as diverse as Du Bois's Victorianism and the folksy, blues-inspired poetry of Langston Hughes. Yet, it seems inevitable that this diversity would be short-lived. It was a period of increased lynching; the race riots of the "red summer" of 1919 still lingered in the minds of many. The shared goal of race-advancement could not obscure some artists' desires to express the complicated world around them. The publication of *The New Negro* in 1925 represented a larger consensus than actually existed.

Edited by Alain Locke, a Rhodes Scholar, Harvard graduate, and European trained Assisting Professor of Philosophy at historically-black Howard University in Washington D.C., *The New Negro* contained material from most of the movement's key figures. An anthology of poetry, prose, criticism, and illustrations, it contextualized the politics of this cultural and social phenomenon. One of Locke's contributions is an

essay, "The Legacy of the Ancestral Arts," which urges black artists to look to African art as inspiration, as European Modernists had begun to do.

Du Bois disagreed with some of Locke's editorial decisions regarding *The New Negro* anthology, including disparaging remarks Locke made about Du Bois's contribution "The Negro Mind Reaches Out." There were also clear differences between their ideas about the role of art in the uplift of the race.³⁴ And halfway through 1926, W.E.B. Du Bois was losing faith in the New Negro's aesthetic priorities.³⁵ He had been wrestling with certain doubts for months. And as Lewis explains, "He had always worried about what he saw as the inherent susceptibility of an artistic and literary enterprise to go off track, spinning in its own momentum away from what he deemed to be the central purpose."³⁶

At "The Negro in Art," a 1926 symposium sponsored by the NAACP, and organized by Du Bois, lines were drawn in the sand. Bits and pieces of Carl Van Vechten's novel *Nigger Heaven* were already circulating, though the official publication wouldn't happen until later that summer. Van Vechten's portrait of black life in Harlem, with his portrayal of upper-and-lower-class Harlemites, was being praised by some and criticized by others. For some, Van Vechten, nominally one of the Renaissance's more important white patrons (Alfred A. Knopf published writers like Langston Hughes at his suggestion) had written a novel that merely reveled in stereotypes and lasciviousness. At the symposium, Van Vechten posed the question directly: "Are Negro writers going to

³⁴ Lewis, Vol. 2, 162.

³⁵ Ibid., 172.

³⁶ Ibid., 174.

write about this exotic material while it is still fresh ... or will they continue to make a free gift of it to white authors who will exploit it until not a drop of vitality remains"?³⁷

This "exotic material" was already being used by some of the younger writers; some were generally excited about the publication of *Nigger Heaven*. Some, of course, were not. But the growing trend was addressed in Du Bois's contribution to the symposium, "The Criteria of Negro Art." He set out to challenge the "art/politics" binary. Chastising the gathering for privileging an art discussion without acknowledging the contradictions produced by the expectations of white patrons, he wrote, "the white public today demands from its artists, literary and pictorial, racial pre-judgment which deliberately distorts truth and justice as far as colored races are concerned and it will pay for no other."

Thus all art is propaganda and ever must be, despite the wailing of the purists. ...I do not care a damn for any art that is not used for propaganda. But I do care when propaganda is confined to one side while the other is stripped and silent.³⁸

For Du Bois, Negro art should be based on decisions identified by Negro artists, who must strive for freedom. "We can afford the truth. White folk today cannot. As it is now we are handing everything over to a white jury,"³⁹ Yet, his own aesthetic criteria remained conservative and Victorian. Proclaiming the duty of "black America" "to begin this great work of the creation of beauty, of the preservation of beauty, of the realization

³⁷ Carl Van Vechten, "The Crisis Symposium," *The New Negro: Readings on Race, Representation, and African American Culture, 1892-1938*, ed. Henry Louis Gates and Gene Andrew Jarrett (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007), 191.

³⁸ W.E.B. Du Bois, "Criteria of Negro Art 1926," in *African-American Literary Criticism: 1773 to 2000*, ed. Hazel Arnett Ervin (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1999), 42.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 42-43.

of beauty,” Du Bois insisted “we must use in this work all the methods that men have used before,” citing “truth” as the first and most important tool.⁴⁰

It is precisely the ambiguous relationship of beauty to truth that Langston Hughes addressed in what seems to be a response to Du Bois reduction of art to propaganda. In the June 1926 issue of *The Nation*, Hughes published what many consider a manifesto, “The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain,” arguing for both creative responsibility and creative freedom. He challenged both the black and white bourgeoisie:

We younger Negro artists who create now intend to express our individual dark-skinned selves without fear or shame. If white people are pleased, we are glad. If they are not, it doesn't matter. We know we are beautiful. And ugly too ... If colored people are pleased we are glad. If they are not, their displeasure doesn't matter either. We build our temples for tomorrow ... free within ourselves.⁴¹

Hughes embodied the double-consciousness explored in Du Bois's *The Souls of Black Folk* but with an important difference. For Du Bois, this double-consciousness, this “second-sight,” “only lets [the Negro] see himself through the revelation of the other world.”⁴² Hughes took an actively hybrid perspective. Completely aware of the social situation for blacks in 1926, Hughes leaned politically left, attuned to the urban, syncretic mixture of art, politics, and life. And as Lewis eloquently puts it, “Metaphorically speaking, Hughes turned his backside to the editor of the *Crisis*,

⁴⁰ Ibid., 41.

⁴¹ Langston Hughes, “The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain 1926,” in *African-American Literary Criticism: 1773 to 2000*, ed. Hazel Arnett Ervin (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1999), 48.

⁴² W.E.B. DuBois, *The Souls of Black Folk*, 1903 (New York: Vintage, 1990), 3.

Schuyler, Brawley, Cullen, Fauset, and every custodian of culture north and south -- and mooned them.”⁴³

Du Bois was suspicious of Hughes’s manifesto. According to Lewis, when Du Bois read the essay in *The Nation* “he saw his worst fears confirmed about the direction the movement was taking ... Du Bois could only look upon Hughes’s essay as a deeply disturbing manifestation of anarchy, rather than the declaration of artistic independence intended by its author.”⁴⁴ Despite his obvious interest in the arts, it was equally clear that Du Bois, the social scientist, had a different viewpoint from the racial mountain.⁴⁵

Teaming with Zora Neale Hurston, Wallace Thurman, Aaron Douglas, Richard Bruce Nugent, and Gwendolyn Bennett, Hughes co-founded the magazine *Fire!!*, an experimental, folk-centered, younger, bold and controversial alternative to the comparatively conservative publication policies of *Opportunity* and *The Crisis*. Initially, *Fire!!* and its cause was applauded by Locke and Charles Johnson. Locke in particular had always had sympathy for the expressive needs of the Renaissance artists.

His 1926 essay “Art or Propaganda” was more accommodating than Du Bois’s. Considering it the most important cultural question of the day, he asked,

Art or Propaganda. Which? Is this more the generation of the prophet or that of the poet; shall our intellectual and cultural leadership preach and exhort or sing? I believe we are at that interesting moment when the prophet becomes the poet and when prophecy becomes the expressive song, the chant of fulfillment.⁴⁶

⁴³ Lewis, Vol. 2, 179.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 179.

⁴⁵ Darwin T. Turner, “W.E.B. Du Bois and the Theory of a Black Aesthetic,” *The Harlem Renaissance Re-examined*, ed. Victor A. Kramer (New York: AMS Press, 1987), 9-30.

⁴⁶ Alain Locke, “Art or Propaganda 1928,” *African-American Literary Criticism: 1773 to 2000*, ed. Hazel Arnett Ervin (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1999), 49.

He dismissed charges of “art for art’s sake,” seeing instead “a deep realization of the fundamental purpose of art and of its function as a tap root of vigorous, flourishing living.” For Locke,

It is the art of the people that needs to be cultivated, not the art of the coteries. Propaganda itself is preferable to shallow, truckling imitation. Negro things may reasonably be a fad for others; for us they must be a religion. Beauty, however, is its best priest and psalms will be more effective than sermons.⁴⁷

These literary debates were echoed in the visual arts. Philanthropist William E. Harmon’s Foundation began its annual awards for black artists in 1926 and staged its first exhibition of black artists in 1928. The foundation’s curators, finding the submissions too heavily influenced by European Modernism, encouraged artists to draw more on their own background, and subsequent exhibitions displayed a re-invigorated “black cultural expression.” The shows traveled to different cities, and the cash awards and scholarships provided new opportunities to black painters and sculptors.

The 1930s, however, brought the full effects of the Great Depression, and a new set of aesthetic influences. Many artists, including the next generation of black writers (Richard Wright, Ralph Ellison, Margaret Walker) were employed through the Federal Arts Project and the Works Projects Administration. Inspired by the revolutionary Mexican painters Diego Rivera and David Alfaro Siqueiros, artists Charles Alston, Jacob Lawrence, William Walker, Hale Woodruff, and Romare Bearden created murals with strong social realist aesthetics. Richard Wright, involved with Marxist publications, exemplified the changes in Post-Renaissance black cultural practices.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 50.

Wright's "Blueprint for Negro Writing" (1937) clearly presented the new attitude: "Today the question is: Shall Negro writing be for the Negro masses, molding the lives and consciousness of those masses toward new goals, or shall it continue begging the question of the Negro's humanity?"⁴⁸ The black artist now participated in a global struggle.

These tasks are imperative in light of the fact that we live in a time when the majority of the most basic assumptions of life can no longer be taken for granted. Tradition is no longer a guide. The world has grown huge and cold. Surely this is the moment to ask questions to theorize, to speculate, to wonder out of what materials can a human world be built.⁴⁹

Though not all black artists shared this view, Marxism and socialism clearly played a stronger role than during the peak of the Renaissance (though there were several important socialist and communist connections, conflicts, and collaborations among Renaissance figures). This impact was also felt as new and different newspapers competed for black proletarian audiences. As Hortense Spillers observes, "As these considerable antagonistic forces warred over time for the soul of Harlem," the community slowly lost "a paradigmatic occasion to hammer out an infrastructure of institutional support that would generate and sustain African-American cultural life."⁵⁰

The impact of early black film critics also diminished during the post-Renaissance period. With black independent film now competing with Hollywood's increased use of black on-screen talent, the "race" film era came to an end. The black press,

⁴⁸ Wright, Richard, "Blueprint for Negro Writing," *African-American Literary Criticism: 1773 to 2000*, ed. Hazel Arnett Ervin (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1999), 82-90.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 90.

⁵⁰ Hortense J. Spillers, *Black, White, and in Color: Essays on American Literature and Culture* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), 436.

correspondingly increased their attention on Hollywood representations. As Anna Everett explains,

Coming of age as it did in the wake of the Harlem Renaissance, black film criticism during this epoch grew increasingly more complex, for here the African American literati as well as journalist and academics were disillusioned by the demise of the black renaissance, the financial devastation of the Great Depression, and the technological barriers erected by the sound revolution in film. All together, these devastating events ushered in a period of critical reevaluation for African Americans writing about the cinema during the ascendancy of the now-classical studio system.⁵¹

As black artists turned increasingly to social realist aesthetics, and black critics turned their critical attention to Hollywood, the aesthetics/politics debate shifted from questions of aesthetics and cultural identity to post-Renaissance concerns with political representation and identity. Art and politics remained at a crossroad, and soul, a figuration of “blackness” expressed, is that crossroad, figured.

Beyond Category

What happened to blackness on screen after the renaissance? Much has been written about the impact of sound cinema on black cinematic representation. With the modest success of Warner Bros.'s *Jazz Singer* (1927), MGM's *Hallelujah!* (1929), and Fox's *Hearts in Dixie* (1929), sound proved an effective vehicle for black talent (or black inspired performances). As Thomas Cripps notes, “There were some who saw the era of sound as the apotheosis of blackness because, they believed, the Negroid voicebox recorded with greater fidelity than the Caucasian. And yet at the crest of this wave

⁵¹ Everett, 9.

blacks still had not gained much recognition.”⁵² For the most part, black roles remained small, rare, based on the same old stereotypes⁵³.

One genre did see an increase in black on-screen presence. Musical shorts exploiting the new technology, also exploited popular black performers: Louis Armstrong in *I'll Be Glad When You're Dead* (1932), Cab Calloway in *Minnie the Moocher* (1932), and Duke Ellington in *Black and Tan* (1929) and *Symphony in Black* (1935), are good examples. As Cripps notes, “The best of them used black performers in ways that allowed them to influence the ambiance of the films.”⁵⁴ And in the best cases, this ambiance is both visual and aural. *Black and Tan*, featuring Duke Ellington and his orchestra, is such a case. The combination of black on-screen performance and director Dudley Murphy's experimental instincts, give us one more chance to test the limits of the iconic criterion, one more look at the aesthetic.

Dudley Murphy had already achieved fame with the avant-garde *Ballet Mécanique* (1924), co-directed with artist Fernand Léger. When he turned to mainstream productions, he brought this ciné-club aesthetic with him. As Susan Delson notes, “For Murphy, avant-garde cinematic strategies were fair game for mainstream filmmaking, and no approach was too sophisticated for the moviegoing public.”⁵⁵ After modest success directing *St. Louis Blues* (1929), a musical short set in Harlem featuring popular blues singer Bessie Smith, RKO asked him to direct another. More than *St.*

⁵² Thomas Cripps, *Slow Fade to Black: The Negro in American Film, 1900-1942* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977), 104-105.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 109.

⁵⁴ Thomas Cripps, *Black Film as Genre* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1978), 31.

⁵⁵ Susan Delson, *Dudley Murphy: Hollywood Wild Card* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006), 95.

Louis Blues, *Black and Tan* continued Murphy's interest in experimental forms and techniques.⁵⁶

Like *St. Louis Blues*, *Black and Tan* is set in Harlem. As Delson argues, this urban setting set these films apart from contemporary Hollywood productions. "Unlike all other all-black films released in 1929, *St. Louis Blues* and *Black and Tan* presented urban blacks in modern settings. Most of the characters were poised, attractive, and self-possessed -- a striking contrast to prevalent Hollywood depictions of blacks on-screen."⁵⁷ This iconic association with urbanity is emphasized from the very first scene.



Figure 2-2. *Black and Tan* (1929).

The film opens on an interior medium shot, inside Duke Ellington's apartment (the room's size is not immediately evident). He sits at a piano, rehearsing "Black and Tan Fantasy" with trumpet player Arthur Whetsol. Both men are well dressed. Ellington and Whetsol are presented as sophisticated, competent musicians (fig. 2-2).

⁵⁶ Ibid., 95. Delson describes the combination of traditional narrative and experimental forms, "In *Black and Tan*, hot jazz, sexy showgirls, and a sentimental story line coexist with near-abstract visual sequences that engage the sheer pleasure of gazing at the screen," Delson, 95.

⁵⁷ Ibid., 98.



Figure 2-3. The repo-men.

We then cut to the first sign of contrast: in an external shot (on an authentic Harlem street), we watch two repo-men, dressed in work clothes, walking up to and into the apartment building (fig. 2-3). In a series of alternating cuts, Ellington and Whetsol continue to rehearse the song, while a vaudeville-style comedy bit ensues between the repo-men in the hallway (the primary gist of the joke is their illiteracy).



Figure 2-4. Clothing and dialect contrasts.

Once they make it into the apartment, interrupting the rehearsal, the conversation is further marked by differences in clothing and dialect. Also, this is a wider shot, revealing a small one room apartment, with the bed next to the piano (fig. 2-4).



Figure 2-5. Symbolic bottle of gin.

In the midst of the banter, Fredi Washington enters the room, excited about her new job as a nightclub dancer (despite having a heart condition). Realizing the repo-men intend to reposes the piano, she pours a glass of gin, gives it to the repo-men, who of course decide to leave without the piano after all (fig. 2-5).



Figure 2-6. Introducing the song.

Ellington and Whetsol play her the song, and we fade to black (fig. 2-6). Scene over.

Just another day in Harlem. Here is one direction we could begin analyzing *Black and Tan* iconographically. Following Jacqueline Najuma Stewart's lead, we can start by considering contextual cues. The clothing, instruments, and set establish Ellington and Whetsol's image.

Switching tracks, we could explore director Dudley Murphy's interest in black culture, thinking back to Carl Van Vechten's question for black writers. Like many white modernists at the time, Murphy saw blacks as the iconic, aesthetic embodiment of urban modernity, and as Delson argues, "his films often conflated blacks with performance and spectacle."⁵⁸ This was as true in *Ballet Mécanique* as it was in *St. Louis Blues* or *Black and Tan*.⁵⁹

Take for example, the performance sequence at *Black and Tan*'s center. Inside the nightclub, we cut to a closeup of Ellington playing piano. The camera dollies backward to reveal the band and male dancers. As the scene plays out, the camera pans up and down to a mirrored floor, showing stylized reflections of Ellington and the dancers, a technique whose excess is excused as jazz modernism rather than by any narrative motivation.

The experimentation continues. We cut to Fredi Washington, who waits for her cue to dance on stage. She swoons, both seemingly taken by the power of the music, and by the stress of her heart condition. This is a classic glamor-shot, typical of Hollywood starlet images, though not typically how black women were photographed. It is a photogenic image, there as much to emphasize Washington's beauty as to reveal her state of mind. In one of the few discussions of *photogénie*'s relations to notions of beauty and race, Robert Stam notes, "the notion of *photogénie* ... becomes a normative

⁵⁸ Ibid., 97. Delson also points out that Murphy's interest was not based on ideas of social injustice or diversity, "instead, he seized upon a highly stylized view of black culture as a crucial element of his filmmaking vocabulary. In this he was not alone. Around the country, blacks faced virulent discrimination in housing, employment, and education; in the South, lynching was still a powerful tool of white terrorism. But in Hollywood, in 1929, African Americans were suddenly hot." See Delson, 97.

⁵⁹ Delson notes, "One of the signal characteristics of Murphy's filmmaking is the alignment between innovative visual strategies and the musicality of African-American jazz. It's a crucial premise of *Ballet Mécanique*, and it reemerges with increased sophistication in *Black and Tan*." See Delson, 95.

epidermic notion of beauty, associated with youth, luxury, stars, and, at least implicitly, whiteness.”⁶⁰ This close-up also gives subjective motivation for the most of the camera tricks that follow (fig. 2-7).



Figure 2-7. Fredi Washington's glamour shot.

We cut to Ellington on stage, ostensibly from Washington's woozy point-of-view, an excuse for a kaleidoscopic image of the band playing and dancers dancing mechanically (fig. 2-8). Delson reads this two minute kaleidoscopic shot as an extended visual essay, expanding on ideas Murphy explored with Leger in *Ballet Mécanique*. She argues that Murphy used abstract experimentation as an interruption of the narrative, sketching out “a more visually driven alternative that almost pulls away from the narrative construction that preceded it.”⁶¹

⁶⁰ Robert Stam, *Film Theory: An Introduction* (Blackwell, 2000), 26-27.

⁶¹ Delson, 93-94.



Figure 2-8. The subjective kaleidoscopic image.

Later, Washington's dancing and the band's playing become feverish, justifying more cinematographic abstraction. We cut to a shot of Washington twirling as she dances, from underneath the floor (fig. 2-9). This kind of abstraction was still rare, and critics noted Murphy's visual innovations. Busby Berkley's famous abstractions would not be commonplace until after *Whoopie!* (1930), his first film, still a year away.⁶²



Figure 2-9. Abstracting Washington's frantic dance.

Again, this is a classic example of *photogénie*, particularly as a fetishistic display of cinematic movement pushing the extremes of narrative justification. The fact that Washington eventually collapses, her heart giving out on her, does little to explain the

⁶² *Ibid.*, 95.

extreme camera angle. Yet, rhetorically it manages to express a certain sense of abandon associated with the frantic rhythms of Ellington's composition.

Taking this track in our analysis, we've looked at the layers of *photogénie* and iconic associations between black performers, jazz, and cinematic playfulness and abstraction. The tensions here lie less in sociological readings than with narrative strategies versus visual excess. As Delson observes,

In themselves, the visual strategies in *Black and Tan* aren't groundbreaking, drawing as they do on techniques developed in *Ballet mécanique* and other avant-garde films. Instead, the film's experimental nature lies in the use of these strategies to push the narrative envelope: to interrogate the rapidly standardizing Hollywood style in terms of how much purely visual, nonnarrative digression it might successfully absorb and to explore the impact of that material on the narrative film form.⁶³

These visual digressions, either in abstraction, or as *photogénie* reveal the densely overdetermined, uncontrollable nature always lurking in cinematic representation.

Robert B. Ray has described the *photogénie* effect as “an acute description of the way movies are often experienced -- as intermittent intensities (a face, a landscape, the fall of light across a room) that break free from the sometimes indifferent narratives that contain them.”⁶⁴ And despite their tendencies to interrupt the narrative flow, these intensities also supply classical Hollywood with much of its allure. As Ray argues, Hollywood moguls like Irving Thalberg quickly realized that “the movies succeeded commercially to the extent that they enchanted.”⁶⁵

And, as sound was added to the visual intensities, the importance of jazz to this overdetermined quality of a film like *Black and Tan* should not be underestimated. As

⁶³ Ibid., 94.

⁶⁴ Robert B. Ray, *How a Film Theory Got Lost*, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2001), 4.

⁶⁵ Ibid., 2.

Delson points out, it is ironic that a film about sound should reemphasize the visual, “In 1929, sound film had not entirely lost its aura of novelty with either the public or the film industry, and the standard sound-film form had not quite solidified.”⁶⁶

Jazz itself had not quite solidified. Duke Ellington often challenged the very category. Indeed, “Beyond category” became his favorite phrase for describing musicians he admired,⁶⁷ and also his way to emphasize the varied group and individual expressions possible in music.⁶⁸ For Ellington,

Those large words like “modern” don't mean anything.... Anybody who has anything to say in this music -- all the way back -- has been an individualist. I mean musicians like Sidney Bechet, Louis Armstrong, Coleman Hawkins. Then what happens is that hundreds of other musicians begin to be shaped by that one man. They fall in behind him, and you've got what people call a category. But I don't listen in terms like “modern” jazz. I listen for those individualists. Like Charlie Parker was.⁶⁹

Musicologist Frank A. Salamone has compared Ellington's idea to Claude Lévi-Strauss's “categorization of anomalous mediating categories as dangerous and sacred ... These anomalous categories, according to Lévi-Strauss, partake of the categories which they mediate and consequently are neither fish nor fowl. They are dangerous and somehow pollute.”⁷⁰

⁶⁶ Delson, 95.

⁶⁷ Billy Strayhorn, Ellington's composing and arranging partner, is generally credited with coining the phrase “beyond category.” See Mark Tucker, *Ellington: The Early Years* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1991), 6.

⁶⁸ See Graham Lock's description of Ellington's “beyond category” in Graham Lock, *Blutopia: Visions of the Future and Revisions of the Past in the Work of Sun Ra, Duke Ellington, and Anthony Braxton* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1999), 123.

⁶⁹ Ellington quoted in Nat Hentoff's *Listen to the Stories: Nat Hentoff on Jazz and Country Music* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1995), 3.

⁷⁰ Frank A. Salamone, *The Culture of Jazz: Jazz as Critical Culture* (Lanham: University Press of America, 2009), 125-126.

Ellington also liked to combine the visual with the aural. There is a famous passage from Ralph Ellison's account of first experiencing Ellington's live performance.

And then Ellington and the great orchestra came to town; came with their uniforms, their sophistication, their skills; their golden horns, and their flights of controlled and disciplined fantasy; came with their art, their special sound; came with Ivy Anderson and Ethel Waters singing and dazzling the eye with their promising manners.⁷¹

The use of Ellington's band for visual as well as musical presence does make a difference in how *Black and Tan* expresses what it does. The final scene, Fredi Washington in her death bed, begins with visual evocations of the graphic silhouettes made famous by visual artists like Aaron Douglas during the Harlem Renaissance (fig. 2-10). The band plays a slow blues/spiritual influenced number, as the shadowed figures sway their arms from side to side. This abstract, yet folksy image helps place this film as a bookend to the Renaissance aesthetic debate. Here, aesthetics remains linked to an expression of identity and iconic association: In Murphy's hands, black performers and black music function iconically, recognizable as figures of blackness, urbanity, visual and aural excess, and modernity.

⁷¹ Ralph Ellison, "Homage To Duke Ellington on His Birthday," *Living With Music: Ralph Ellison's Jazz Writings*, ed. Robert G. O'Meally (New York: The Modern Library, 2001), 81.



Figure 2-10. Renaissance-like graphic silhouettes.

Yet, due to the instability of such figures, layered with *photogénie* effects, defining the film's aesthetic effect remains a problematic task. *Photogénie* itself has historically left film theorists at a loss for words. As Ray reminds us, “by insisting that film's essence lay beyond words, the *photogénie* movement left even its would-be followers with nowhere to go.”⁷² He argues that this is one reason linguistic based theories like Sergei Eisenstein's became preferred directions for film theorizing. “As the hedonistic 1920s yielded to the intensely politicized 1930s, Eisenstein's propositions seem a far more useful way of thinking about the cinema.”⁷³

Switching tracks one last time, consider another classic aesthetic/politics debate, this one key for film studies.⁷⁴ This debate revolves around reconsideration of the German Marxist debates of the 1930s, particularly between Theodor Adorno and Walter

⁷² Ray, 5.

⁷³ Ibid., 5.

⁷⁴ These Critical Theory debates, though sharing certain epistemological concerns with “showing how things really are,” continue to haunt subsequent debates, which privilege social realist convention over avant-garde experiment. The political upheavals in France, Britain, and the United States in the late-1960s saw the re-evaluation of these aesthetics/politics debates. The developing political avant-garde found its champion in Brecht, as new translations began to appear.

Benjamin. Both were committed to certain popular front, anti-fascist ideals, and both were interested in exploring the development of a socialist art.

Benjamin already met resistance to certain critical excesses from Adorno, who complained that his *Arcades Project* was “located at the crossroads of magic and positivism. That spot is bewitched,” suggesting, “Only theory could break the spell -- your own resolute, salutary speculative theory.”⁷⁵ And as Ray observes, Adorno's description of Benjamin's problem is a good description of film theory's relationship to cinema. “For what could be a more exact definition of the cinema than 'the crossroads of magic and positivism'? Or a more succinct definition of film theory's traditional project than to 'break the spell?'”⁷⁶

If we concede that iconic criteria, or the analysis of black images, can at best offer limited answers to our initial question: “What does black presence evoke on-screen?,” it does, nonetheless provide a starting point for analysis of *mise-en-scène*. Also, the very limitations of iconic analysis, highlighted by spells cast by *photogénie* and excess, speak directly to the limitations of an analysis that reduces aesthetics to political metaphor. Soul as a political and aesthetic figure seems to appear at multiple places along the tracks: urbanity, modernity, blackness, and as photogenic beauty and excess. If, as Clyde Taylor claims, soul is a passage, it is best described as a crossroads, which I add to my relay of motifs.

⁷⁵ *Aesthetics and Politics: Debates Between Bloch, Lukacs, Brecht, Benjamin, Adorno*, translated and edited by Ronald Taylor (London: Verso, 1980), 129-130.

⁷⁶ Ray, 2.

CHAPTER 3 THE POLITICS OF SOUL

A Taste for Aesthetic Resistance

If the over-determination of the formal elements of art manifests itself in an aestheticism removed from the currents of African American life, then an abstract formalism is of dubious value in black cinema.¹

It must never be forgotten that the working-class “aesthetic” is a dominated “aesthetic” which is constantly obliged to define itself in terms of the dominant aesthetic.... It is no accident that, when one sets about reconstructing its logic, the popular “aesthetic” appears as the negative opposite of the Kantian aesthetic.... Nothing is more alien to popular consciousness than the idea of an aesthetic pleasure that, to put it in Kantian terms, is independent of the charming of the senses.²

If the Harlem Renaissance concerned itself primarily with questions of aesthetics as they relate to identity, the post-Renaissance debates shift to concerns with politics and identity. The Victorian aesthetics of W.E.B. DuBois and Alain Locke no longer seemed relevant to discussions of black creativity. “Black is beautiful” is less an aesthetic proclamation than a political one. The notion of a “Black Aesthetic” evolving during the post-Renaissance years also gave “soul” its political power. The civil rights movement, the decline of Jim Crow, and other political and social changes set the stage for soul's aesthetic development. The question, “what does black presence on-screen evoke” became less relevant than the question, “How does black presence on-screen reflect the experience of black audiences?” Beauty itself became an embattled figure in a binary operation. As Madhu Dubey points out, “The nationalist definition of blackness as an integral, beautiful, natural value was indisputably a powerful oppositional gesture

¹ Gladstone L. Yearwood, *Black Film as a Signifying Practice: Cinema, Narration and the African-American Aesthetic Tradition* (Trenton: Africa World Press, Inc., 2000), 102-103.

² Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: a Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste*, trans. Richard Nice (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1984), 41-42.

against Western constructions of blackness.”³ All previous aesthetic concepts were now open for re-elaboration.

If one of the motifs of soul is black soul-as-a-style, this idea would seem to open out to a poetics of style. How does the politicization of this style complicate such an analysis? One aesthetic re-elaboration takes the form of what Yearwood identifies as an “indexical” approach” when looking at different criteria for defining black cinema. Yearwood’s critique of this indexical approach can also be generalizable, particularly when critical attempts to define black aesthetics use an artist’s “socio-cultural background,”⁴ shifting “discussion away from the art work to sociological criteria.”⁵

The Black Arts Movement that organized around this new aesthetic definition is actually rooted in developments preceding the politicization of the late 1960s. Growing out of the opportunities presented during the Negro Renaissance, painters, writers, musicians, and other artists continued to move into the mainstream art world. Individual art exhibits, plays, novels, and musicians found some success, after initial support during the 30s and 40s through government works programs,

Nevertheless, it wasn’t until the protest spirit of the Civil Rights movement that a collective of black artists decided to organize and promote its work together on the basis of political response and responsibility. Artists with various abstract and figural styles, including Norman Lewis and Romare Bearden, formed the Spiral Group in 1963. Similar

³ Madhu Dubey, *Black Women Novelists and the Nationalist Aesthetic* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994), 28.

⁴ Gladstone Yearwood, “Towards a Theory of Black Cinema Aesthetics,” *Black Cinema Aesthetics: Issues in Independent Black Filmmaking*, ed. Gladstone L. Yearwood (Athens: Center for Afro-American Studies - Ohio University, 1982), 69.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 69.

groups developed over the next few years, including the Association for the Advancement of Creative Musicians in Chicago in 1965. This group committed to creative expression, particularly through a new experimental approach to jazz, included Muhal Richard Abrams, Lester Bowie, Rosco Mitchell, and Anthony Braxton. It spawned several ensembles, including Creative Construction Company (Braxton's group), and the Art Ensemble of Chicago. William L. Van Deburg finds expression of a "soul" aesthetic at work in these new collectives. "Speaking the language of the palette easel, black visual artists recalled tales of Afro-America's confrontation with oppression. Although there was no single 'soul style,' much of this creative expression had a hard edge."⁶

The development of soul or "blackness" as a new, political "Black Aesthetic" parallels the rise of a new generation of politically-minded, stylistically innovative black independent filmmakers. What are the contemporary problems of writing about black film after the encounter with "black art cinema?" This chapter examines the effect this "indexical" political aesthetic has had on the way black films are produced and studied, and on the prospects of a poetics of soul in black cinema.

Malcolm X's assassination in 1965 inspired more organized activities. By the time the Black Panthers began in Oakland (1967), artists and critics had begun the task of honing the new aesthetic's definition to address issues of the day. Addison Gayle's literary anthology *The Black Aesthetic* defines it as "a corrective -- a means of helping black people out of the polluted mainstream of Americanism, and offering logical, reasoned arguments as to why he should not desire to join the ranks of a Norman

⁶ William L. Van Deburg, *New Day in Babylon: The Black Power Movement and American Culture, 1965-1975*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 230.

Mailer or a William Styron. To be an American writer is to be an American, and for black people, there should no longer be honor attached to either position.”⁷ Like the popular political manifestos of the day, Gayle laid out the task of black writers, and “the responsibilities of black audiences” in a ten-point list:

Black artists must refuse to accept the American definition of reality and propose a Black definition instead.

Black Art must offer alternatives to the stereotypes of Blacks created by white Americans and validated in the works and critical offerings of black fellow travelers.

Black Art must emphasize those paradigms of the Black past that enabled Black people to survive the American nightmare.

Black Art must create images, symbols and metaphors of positive import from the Black experience.

Black Art must be written for, by and about Blacks and the Black American condition.

Black Art must redefine the definitions handed down from the Western world.

The objectives of Black Art must be to inculcate the values of communality between one black person and another.

Black Art must be critical of any and all actions detrimental to the health and well-being of the Black community.

Black Art must divorce itself from the sociological attempts to explain the Black community in terms of pathology.

Black Arts must be in continual revolt against the American attempt to dehumanize man.⁸

For most black aesthetic proponents, such demands were intended to make black art relevant to a black working class, rooted more in the folk interests of Langston Hughes

⁷ Addison Gayle, *The Black Aesthetic*, ed. Addison Gayle, Jr. (New York: Doubleday and Company, Inc., 1971), xxiii.

⁸ Addison Gayle, quoted in *African-American Literary Criticism: 1773 to 2000*, ed. Hazel Arnett Ervin (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1999), 15-16.

than in Du Bois's bourgeois aesthetics (despite his radical politics). Prescriptive and dogmatic, Gayle's list is representative of the shift in black aesthetic concerns. As Dubey writes, "In retrospect, the Black Aesthetic discourse on blackness takes on an almost scriptural authority, suppressing literary explorations of the internal differences that striate black identity."⁹ The intense drive of black nationalist writers like Gayle "bristles with a sense of the sheer possibility of blackness."¹⁰

Houston Baker, Jr., writes of his own encounters with soul and the black aesthetic in the 1960s, "We ... credited our precursors with a rather more elusive quality called 'soul.' 'Soul' was the most ubiquitous term of the Black Aesthetic era. 'Blackness' and 'soul' came to compete, in fact, as signs for an ineffable 'something' that made black American creativity Not-Art."¹¹ Soul, then, as a non-artistic creative expression, or aesthetic, from the beginning suggests a series of philosophical puzzles.

For instance, how can a poetics of soul-as-style proceed if soul's most identifying factors remain ineffable, or depend on vaguely essentialist cultural identifications for legibility? This was the problem Baker and black aesthetic critics faced when establishing a black literary poetics in the 1960s. In their case, the dominating critical approach was New Criticism. New Criticism failed as a model for black critics because "the very orientation of New Criticism consciously excluded expressive traditions grounded in folklore, history, and psychobiography. The utterances of a new generation of black writers that included Amiri Baraka, Larry Neal, and Addison Gayle, Jr., were

⁹ Dubey, 29.

¹⁰ Ibid., 29.

¹¹ Houston A. Baker, Jr., *Afro-American Poetics: Revisions of Harlem and the Black Aesthetic*, (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1988), 13.

declarations of war against such exclusion.”¹² And in this war, the politics of representation, and the conflation of art and politics became the analytical weapons of choice. As Baker describes his attitude during that period, “Along with other Black Aestheticians, I came to regard art as both a product and a producer in an unceasing struggle for black liberation. To be 'art,' the product had to be expressivity or performance designed to free minds and bodies of a subjugated people.” And, he continues, this was also the task of the black critic, “Which is to say, we of the Black Aesthetic temper rewrote 'art' to mirror the role we had set for ourselves. Deeming ourselves members of a Black Power or Black Liberation cadre, we believed we could be articulate spokespeople to and for the masses.”¹³

The contradictions and puzzles surrounding these issues were, according to Baker part of the larger competing claims for black strategies at the time:

Civil Rights vs. Black Power, Black Capitalism vs. Black Utopianism, Black Studies vs. a “Black University,” “Negro” vs. “Black,” American Reform vs. Black Revolution. In harmony with the competing ideologies and ambivalent orientations of its era, the Black Aesthetic represented a politically interested demand for “engaged” literature. It was also a clarion call for a firmly socio-historical criticism.¹⁴

For Baker, however, it was soul itself which could provide the stylistic framework to work through these contradictions. Soul, in this case is defined as “a unique style of expression...”¹⁵ He uses “sound” as his figure for identifying soul. For example, when analyzing the work of Harlem Renaissance author Jean Toomer, he writes, “The implicit

¹² Ibid., 13.

¹³ Ibid., 13.

¹⁴ Ibid., 13-14.

¹⁵ Ibid., 166.

goal ... is to capture the sound of a racial soul and convert it into an expressive product equivalent in beauty and force to Afro-American folk songs, or ecstatic religious performances.”¹⁶ Working primarily as a literary critic looking for vernacular models, Baker shared some of the suspicions of Henry Louis Gates Jr., and Gladstone Yearwood mentioned in the previous chapters. All three, though fluent in poststructural vocabulary, object to black critics who look “to Western discourse rather than their own soulful valleys of sound.” Baker argues instead that for the critic of black literature, “it is ... at the level of soul, cultural spirit work, or genius that comprises a black cultural geography. It is at this level alone, for example, that the efforts of writers such as Jean Toomer and Countee Cullen can be effectively reexamined.”¹⁷ This attention to vernacular forms provides some specificity to an otherwise ineffable, and at worst vague, notion like soul. But despite Baker’s brilliant close-readings, “the sound of a racial soul” suffers from ill-defined socio-political and nationalistic aesthetic criteria when one ventures to apply it outside of vernacular literature.

And despite these specific defining vernacular tendencies, soul-as-black aesthetic maintains an elusive, almost mystical identity. As Dubey observes, this identity often seems limited and essentialist.

Reversing white culture’s zero image of blackness as absence involved investing blackness with presence, a countermove that has elicited the strong disapproval of recent critics of Black Aesthetic theory. The most famous of these is Henry Louis Gates’s quarrel with the Black Aesthetic’s “metaphysical concept” of blackness as presence, which, instead of supplanting an essentialist notion of identity, merely installs blackness as “another transcendent signified.”¹⁸

¹⁶ Ibid., 101.

¹⁷ Ibid., 97.

¹⁸ Dubey, 28-29.

She argues that it is precisely this proclivity for mystique which gives soul its rhetorical power. "As a condensed expression of 'the unconscious energy of the Black Experience,' the concept of soul was intended to name the essential, authentic, and ineffable quality of blackness."¹⁹ But as she points out, this rhetorical power depends on its ability to define whiteness in "black nationalist neo-mythology" as "always aligned with mechanism, sterility, and effete decadence."²⁰

The dependence on culturally nationalistic binary oppositions, a key factor when understanding the "Not-Art" position of black aesthetics, also sets predefined limitations on the "firmly socio-historical criticism" of a poetics of soul. As Clyde Taylor explains:

What gave the formulation "Black Aesthetic" its force was that like its parallel concept, "Black Power," it had the effect of a profanity screamed in a chapel, a disruptive challenge to orthodoxy and tradition. Like "Black Power," it was "unspeakable." To base an aesthetic on Blackness was to situate the classically unaesthetic in the place of "the best that has been thought and said in the world."²¹

This binary opposition pulled black aesthetics in the sociological direction. Beauty is not simply an aesthetic concept, but a social one as well. Soul, becomes something you either have or don't. And at the heart of the debate around sociologically determined cultural criticism was Amiri Baraka. Baraka exemplified the rapid transformations forging new black identities during this period.²²

¹⁹ Dubey, 27.

²⁰ Ibid., 27.

²¹ Clyde Taylor, *The Mask of Art: Breaking the Aesthetic Contract—Film and Literature* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press), 1998, 4.

²² Greg Tate writes, "During the high period of Black cultural nationalism, when Amiri Baraka was out to purge himself of all his past associations with white people and white art movements, a certain anxiety over influence, plus anti-intellectualism and countersupremacy, surged up in ways that made white influences nearly taboo." See Greg Tate, *Everything But the Burden: What White People are Taking From Black Culture* (New York: Broadway Books, 2003), 11.

Though starting out as LeRoi Jones, writing jazz and blues inspired poetry, drama, and jazz criticism, alongside other Beat writers, Baraka became increasingly drawn to black cultural nationalist issues, changing his name to Amiri Baraka in 1967. Baraka was a formidable figure in the Black Arts Movement, setting up a series of institutions: street theater, writing workshops, lectures, art exhibitions, and by 1969, most of these activities were organized under the roof of his Black Arts Repertory Theater School.²³ It is his writing on music that I want to turn to here, as an example of the shifting aesthetic debate and the privileging of indexical authority, or authenticity.

Possibly his most well-known polemic essay on jazz is “The Burton Greene Affair,” Baraka's observations on a performance at the Jazz Art Music Society in Newark in 1966, with pianist Burton Greene, Marion Brown, alto saxophonist, and Pharaoh Sanders, tenor saxophonist. Before his review proper, Baraka contemplates the place of the newly politicized soul in the discussion of jazz:

The quality of being is what soul is, or what a soul is. What is the quality of your being? Quality here meaning, what does it possess? What its being doesn't possess, by default, also determines the quality of the being -- what its soul actually is.

And let us think of soul, as *anima*: spirit (*spiritus*, breath). As that which carries breath or the living wind. We are animate because we breathe. And the spirit which breathes in us, which animates us, which drives us, makes the paths by which we go along our way and is the final characterization of our lives. Essence/Spirit. The final sum of what we call being, and the most elemental. There is no life without spirit. The human being cannot exist without a soul, unless the thing be from evil-smelling freezing caves breathing high-valence poison gases now internalized into the argon-blue eyes.

What your spirit is is what you are, what you breathe upon your fellows. Your internal and elemental volition.

²³ Houston A. Baker, Jr., *Afro-American Poetics: Revisions of Harlem and the Black Aesthetic* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1988), 130.

....

I want here to list some observations I made of the existence of soul and anti-soul or the spiritual and the anti-spiritual ... how they do exist.²⁴

This preoccupation with the issue of soul at the beginning of a jazz review will make more sense with a little context. *The Cry of Jazz*, Edward O. Bland's 1959 independent film, makes the claim that jazz embodies the soul or spirit of African American life. Going further, he argues that white Americans had no soul. According to Baraka, "I think what *The Cry of Jazz* did ... was plant the seeds in some of our minds of what the aesthetic of our music was."²⁵ Lorenzo Thomas argues that "*The Cry of Jazz* stimulated a more self-conscious sense of racial identity in Baraka's own work."²⁶ This influence goes some way to explain Baraka's treatment of Burton Greene's performance:

But the sound he made would not do, was not where the other sound was. He beat the piano, began to slam it open and shut slapping the front and side and top of the box. The sound would not do, would not be what the other sound was.²⁷

According to Baraka, Greene's failure was not due to lack of technique, but a deeper cultural lack. And as Fred Moten notes, Baraka's real subject here is "being and blackness."

Baraka talks about being by way of the music and within what he comes to figure as an "other" tradition (one that values a certain understanding and embodiment of improvisation, one that respects and theorizes totality in the

²⁴ LeRoi Jones (Amiri Baraka), *Black Music* (New York: William Morrow, 1967), 136-137.

²⁵ Baraka quoted in Lorenzo Thomas, "Communicating by Horns': Jazz and Redemption in the Poetry of the Beats and the Black Arts Movement" in *African American Review*, Vol. 26, No. 2, Poetry and Theater Issue (Summer, 1992): 292.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 292.

²⁷ Jones/Baraka, *Black Music*, 138.

work of art and in the artwork's self-deconstructive relation to the everyday).²⁸

Edward O. Bland has commented on the controversy over the issue of soul as a figure of “ethics,” “It was a common observation among Chicago blacks in the 1930s and 40s that whites were soulless people.... It struck me as a kind and gentle rebuke given Black history in the US.”²⁹ The film itself met mixed reactions among the cultural establishment. “It was considered the work of madmen. Black racists.... Unfair to jazz, because we made jazz a political act.”³⁰ It gained respect and popularity among the New York avant-garde and experimental circles, including Baraka, Jonas Mekas, Emile De Antonio, and Robert Frank. Significantly, Bland notes “Ralph Ellison, James Baldwin and Nat Hentoff, hated it.”³¹

The Cry of Jazz is Edward O. Bland's manifesto on the future of black musical expression. The film mixes documentary and essay forms with scenes of actors carrying on a discussion about the definition of jazz. The discussions take place after the racially integrated “Parkwood Jazz Club” meets. In answer to the question, “what is jazz?,” the voice-over explains, “Jazz is the musical expression of the triumph of the Negro spirit.” From there the film begins to slowly take away layer upon layer of preconceptions, primarily those of the club's white members.

²⁸ Fred Moten, *In the Break: The Aesthetics of the Black Radical Tradition* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003), 123.

²⁹ Edward Bland interviewed by Damon Locks on *The Population*, “The Cry of Jazz Q&A with Director Edward Bland,” <http://thepopulation.wordpress.com/2009/04/10/the-cry-of-jazz-q-a-with-director-edward-bland/>

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Ibid.



Figure 3-1. Sun Ra's Arkestra in *Cry of Jazz* (Edward O. Bland, 1959).

The film's essay sections generally consist of a voice-over, accompanying either documentary footage of Chicago slums or staged performance footage of Sun Ra and his Arkestra³² (fig. 3-1). The film's most persuasive arguments reduce jazz to a formula: the essence of jazz is contradiction, brought about by the musical extremes of restriction and freedom. The repetitive chorus and rhythms are counter-balanced by the freedom of improvisation and innovation, a “constant creation of new ideas.” At one point artistic improvisation is linked to the “improvisational life of the Negro.” Creativity and freedom are at the heart of jazz's spirit.

Negro life, then, created through jazz, is a contradiction between the worship of the present, freedom and joy, and the realization of the futureless future, restraint and suffering, which the American life has bestowed upon the Negro.

As the discussion grows more contentious, one of the club's white members complains, “You act as if we're not human.” To which one of the black members

³² When asked his opinion of Bland's thesis about jazz, Ra simply replied “[Bland] was wrong.” See John E. Szwed, *Space is the Place: The Lives and Times of Sun Ra* (New York: Pantheon, 1997), 163.

responds: "Are you human? The Negro is the only true human American." She replies: "I am too human! I've got eyes, hair, nose, and a face, just like you."



Figure 3-2. "Oh Alex! You know we've got souls!"

Alex, the main character, and narrator, pushes the confrontation further: "It takes more than a face, a nose, or hair to be human; it takes a soul." To which another club member reacts, "Oh Alex! You know we've got souls!" (fig. 3-2).

Alex: "You wiped out our past, we have no yesterday to look back on. With slavery you wiped out our today, and the present day savagery is intended to deprive us of our tomorrow."

Another club member asks: "Well then, how does the Negro survive?" Prompting Alex to explain, "Through spirituals, through the blues, then through Jazz we made a memory of our past, and a promise of all to come." Yet, when asked about the future of jazz, he says simply: "Jazz is dead."

Alex: "The jazz body is dead, but the spirit of jazz is alive.... The body is dead because inherently the material of jazz does not allow for future improvement.... If any attempts are made to develop the form or the changes, the swing or the spirit of jazz is lost. Since the jazz body cannot grow, it can only repeat itself. In so doing it is stagnant. In so doing it is dead."

Finally, when asked the question: “What will follow jazz?,” Alex replies, “the spirit of Jazz will remake serious music, but the sounds of jazz will not be used.” This argument for the essential links between black experience and black creative expression is central to the political transformation of soul as aesthetic expression.

It comes as no surprise that Ralph Ellison would take issue with Bland's thesis. Ellison famously charges Baraka with similarly reducing the blues to an ideological cultural practice. He slyly writes, “The tremendous burden of sociology which Jones would place upon this body of music is enough to give even the blues the blues.”³³

Baraka's first collection of music essays, *Blues People*, presents a political and sociological history of black music. He paints a complex portrait of black creative expression, always rooted in larger social and economic contexts. For Ellison, Baraka ultimately misses the elements that give the blues character and impact.

Jones attempts to impose an ideology upon this cultural complexity, and this might be useful if he knew enough of the related subjects to make it interesting. But his version of the blues lacks a sense of the excitement and surprise of men living in the world -- of enslaved and politically weak men successfully imposing their values upon a powerful society through song and dance.... It is unfortunate that Jones thought it necessary to ignore the aesthetic nature of the blues in order to make his ideological point, for he might have come much closer had he considered the blues not as politics but as art.³⁴

Ellison implies that such an aesthetic approach would still require sociological knowledge.

For Baraka and other cultural nationalists, the stakes of the Black Arts Movement were high. The indexical criterion, here exemplified as an identity politics, was a

³³ Ralph Ellison, *Living With Music: Ralph Ellison's Jazz Writings*, ed. Robert G. O'Meally (New York: The Modern Library, 2001), 123.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 131.

strategically re-imagined or re-positioned aesthetic. For example, Clyde Taylor suspects that too much attention to black film stylistics has ironically led to aesthetic misreadings. When faced with vernacularly specific cinematic stylistics (roots in oral tradition, the use of musical forms to organize narratives, different time sensibility), critics have been “unsympathetic.” He describes these critics as “culture gate-keepers who read such differences as failures to grasp the vocabulary of cinema literacy, misconceived introduction of sociology into art, indulgence in narrow, ethnic self-celebration, in short, failure to conform to the cultural inheritance embodied in the aesthetic.”³⁵ As we will see, independent black cinema remained faithful to the cultural nationalist ideal, which gave the indexical criterion even greater appeal as an interpretive tool, even as it took on philosophical complexities missing in previous black aesthetic analysis.³⁶

But, like the Harlem Renaissance, the politicized soul aesthetic of the 1960s, and the Black Arts Movement it inspired, could not be sustained for long. Social pressures, police and government repression and disruption led to the demise of many political and cultural organizations. The mid-1970s recession hit many black communities hard, and lessened their ability to support the arts. Pullback of government funds from anything but the safest artwork also ended many more organizations. The parallel black feminist movement also challenged some of the male-centered, misogynist criteria of the Black Arts Movement.

³⁵ Taylor, Clyde, “Black Cinema Aesthetics” in, *A Companion to African-American Philosophy*, ed. Tommy Lott and John Pittman (Malden: Blackwell, 2003).

³⁶ Consider positions on identity politics like Stuart Hall, rooted in *Négritude*, Frantz Fanon, and post structuralism: “Cultural identities are the points of identification, the unstable points of identification or suture, which are made, within the discourses of history and culture. Not an essence but a *positioning*. Hence, there is always a politics of identity, a politics of position, which has no absolute guarantee in an unproblematic, transcendental 'law of origin'.” See Stuart Hall, ‘Cultural Identity and Diaspora’, in *Identity: Community, Culture, Difference*, ed. Jonathan Rutherford (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1990), 226.

The black aesthetic remains part of a smaller set of dialogues, though in the end, no *one* black aesthetic emerged. And as Dubey points out, “The essential blackness celebrated in these writings emerges ... not so much as a settled, naturally given value but as a hard-won linguistic achievement, a testament of visionary political desire.”³⁷ Soul-as-folk-aesthetic quickly found itself swallowed by larger entities like the music industry. But just where was the independent black cinema component of the struggling movement? And why did the indexical criterion dictate critical responses to them for so long?

Children of Aesthetic Resistance

Black filmmaking in the 1970s started out independent (Melvin Van Peebles’s *Sweet Sweetback’s Baadasssss Song* was released in 1971) and quickly began to fill the vacuum left by the drop in major studio production. These films developed a close relationship with the now thriving soul music industry. Even the Godfather of Soul (James Brown) made his soundtrack debut in 1973 with the music from *Black Caesar*. Though produced as a low budget independent feature, *Sweetback* is credited with convincing Hollywood that money could be made by making action pictures and exploitation films geared toward black audiences.

But as Nelson George points out, *Sweet Sweetback* also prefigures the post-civil rights expression of a post-soul cinema. As I argued in Chapter One, no clear breaks exist between the “soul” and “post-soul” era. But by the early 1970s some things had clearly changed. The new black action films were contemporary with the black power

³⁷ Dubey, 29.

and black arts movement. And the success of these films fueled the criticism of the new scholarly production concerning blacks in film.

Contemporary with blaxploitation films were the new black independent filmmakers, many associated with the LA School and their counterparts on the east coast. These “art filmmakers” include by Bill Gunn, Julie Dash, Larry Clark, Haile Gerima, Zeinabu irene Davis, Camille Billops, Charles Burnett, and Ayoka Chenzira, and many others. Their films were heavily influenced by the earlier black independent documentary tradition that paralleled the 1960’s social problem films. They were part of a larger movement of movies shown in the newly formed academic film studies environment, and in art houses and ciné-clubs. In the 1970s and 1980s, these filmmakers often worked in explicit opposition to Hollywood, developing their own low-cost production methods and independent distribution networks (mostly tied to academia, government and corporate sponsorship, and festival circuits).

Unlike blaxploitation films, which only referred in passing to the black power and black arts movement, these filmmakers saw themselves as part of these movements. As Dubey argues, though hindsight reveals the “prohibitive impact of Black Aesthetic theory on later black writers (and on black women writers in particular), it also tends to obscure the remarkable imaginative power of the nationalist “Will-to-Blackness” when it was initially formulated.”³⁸ For example, the use of African music and dress in Alile Sharon Larkin's *A Different Image* (1982) is part of that film's *mise-en-scène* and political expression. As Clyde Taylor points out, these filmmakers explicitly searched for

³⁸ Dubey, 29.

a black cinema aesthetic, and inadvertently, all the problems that came with aesthetic concerns:

This search would have powerful effects in cinema, as in drama, fiction, music, and visual arts. While on the one hand, the declaration of a new aesthetic mandate had an invigorating effect on the production of new and powerful works, this success clouded another perception: that the aesthetic itself had become a moribund category of knowledge, an obstacle to liberative energies, if not in the sphere of specific art practices, then in the wider struggle for cultural and societal emancipation.³⁹

In the early 1990s, before I had the opportunity to actually view black independent films produced by students coming out of Los Angeles and New York in the 1970s and 1980s, I came across a book, *Blackframes: Critical Perspectives on Black Independent Cinema* (1988). This small book, edited by Mbye B. Cham and Claire Andrade-Watkins, covered a range of films from the United States and Britain. The writing was both historical and theoretical. With James A. Snead's "Images of Blacks in Black Independent Films," Manthia Diawara's "Film in Anglophone Africa: A Brief Survey," and Teshome H. Gabriel's densely layered "Thoughts on Nomadic Aesthetics and Black Independent Cinema," I felt myself entering into an expanding cinematic world. But, of the collection's seven essays, none affected me as strongly as Clyde Taylor's "We Don't Need Another Hero: Anti-thesis on Aesthetics." And nothing about the essay struck me as powerfully as its choice of frame enlargements.

³⁹ Taylor, *Mask of Art*, 7.



Figure 3-3. *Child of Resistance* (Haile Gerima, 1972).

In particular, the enlargement (fig. 3-3), from Haile Gerima's *Child of Resistance* (1972), has become a permanent part of my image-repertoire, to borrow Barthes's phrase. Even after extensive reading about, and viewing black independent films, this image continues to be *the* image of radical, independent, black cinema: grainy, direct, defiant, and active (as the hand reaching for the lens is blurred with motion). Taylor's "anti-thesis on aesthetics" is rooted in political activism, offering examples of black films exemplifying sympathetic commitment to ideological critique and resistance to unconscious acceptance of aesthetic norms. He calls for a post-aesthetic critique and cinematic practice, manifest in the work of Gerima and others.⁴⁰

Taylor's argument is also direct, the bombast of its tone matching the urgency of Gerima's image: "Aesthetics, which is, of course, synonymous with western aesthetics, was concocted in the 18th century as an instrument of ideological control for the comfort

⁴⁰ Clyde Taylor, "We Don't Need Another Hero: Anti-thesis on Aesthetics," *Blackframes: Critical Perspectives On Black Independent Cinema*, ed. Mbye B. Cham and Claire Andrade-Watkins (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1988), 80.

of the first-world class.”⁴¹ He calls for resistance against aesthetics’ historical philosophical dogmas and assumed universality.

The institutionalization of aesthetics by Western Philosophy reached its peak in the 18th century, though traces can be found in classical Greek thought. Plato famously separated aesthetic realms into social and ideal categories, privileging the Ideal. Neoplatonists in 17th-century England and Germany expanded on these ideas. In the later part of the century, the Earl of Shaftesbury made aesthetic investigations, followed by the important work of Alexander Baumgarten, who separated logic from aesthetic concerns. The rise of empiricist philosophy, particularly in the 17th-century provide the foundation for 18th-century philosophers David Hume and Edmund Burke, whose work on the beautiful and the sublime greatly influenced Immanuel Kant.

Kant’s major text on aesthetics, 1790’s *Critique of Judgment*, was a synthesis of the *Critique of Pure Reason* (1781, exploring sense experience and categories of understanding), and the *Critique of Practical Reason* (1788, exploring reason, desire, and morality). The third critique focused on the judgment of taste and feeling.

Kant identified two major types of judgments: cognitive (conceptual) and reflective (non-conceptual) judgments. The latter judgments are the realm of aesthetics. According to this approach, beauty is not a concept. It is subjectively experienced, understood cognitively, but not reducible to a stable concept. “The beautiful is that which, apart from a concept, is cognized as object of a necessary delight.”⁴² Taste meets a similar fate, resolved ultimately by defining the concept “taste” as indefinite:

⁴¹ Ibid., 80.

⁴² Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, trans. by J. H. Bernard (New York: Hafner Press, 1951), 85.

The principle of taste, therefore, exhibits the following antinomy:

(1)Thesis. The judgment of taste is not based on concepts; for, if it were, it would be open to dispute (decision by means of proofs).

(2)Antithesis. The judgment of taste is based on concepts; for otherwise, despite diversity of judgment, there could be no room even for contention in the matter (a claim to the necessary agreement of others with this judgment).⁴³

Such antinomies were reflected in the various ways Kant's aesthetic philosophy dominated subsequent European aesthetic debates. In the post-1968 context, Kant became a major target of the critics of aesthetics. From Bourdieu to Derrida to Lyotard, a critique, deconstruction, or re-writing of Kant was part of the political cultural shifts of poststructuralist criticism. As I will explore at the end of this chapter, Roland Barthes re-appropriation of "taste" alone invites uncomfortable shifts in the classic understanding of interested and disinterested aesthetic judgments.

Though seeking some distance from poststructuralist critiques, Clyde Taylor expresses similar concerns over the dominance of Kant's aesthetics. "The premises of the aesthetic raise it above ideology. Among these premises are the assertion that the work of art is autonomous and autoelic on the one hand and universal, transcending geography and history on the other."⁴⁴ But he defends himself against charges of "die-hard anti-westernism (and hence anti-intellectualism)," declaring,

Why is it that this question always comes up? Once it is clear a fundamental critique of Western iconography is underway, solicitous concern for the critic's rational balance prompts the query: but you wouldn't dismiss all Western knowledge, would you? ... In fact, the critique of aestheticism does not impugn the humanity of relevance of White people, merely the universality of their cultural speculation. The critique provokes

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 206.

⁴⁴ Taylor, *Mask of Art*, 15.

this question because of the prerogative inherited by Western humanism to serve as the generic model of the species.⁴⁵

He proposes an “ongoing deconstruction of aestheticism simultaneous with a protracted and collective reconstruction of cultural knowledge, with the aim of establishing radically wider cultural democracy than now exist.”⁴⁶

Taylor’s 1989 essay “Black Cinema in the Post-aesthetic Era” continues to explore these ideas. “Post-Cartesian aesthetics is a late humanist system taken over by the bourgeoisie from aristocratic beginnings for the control of knowledge, specifically of the ‘beautiful’.”⁴⁷ In opposition,

Post-aesthetics implies a conscious realization of the need to orchestrate one’s efforts against cultural imperialism and bourgeois cultural elitism, and therefore against the rationales for these ideological agencies embedded in aesthetics. As it moves into the post-aesthetic era, the creative direction of black cinema, already alert to the dangers of cultural imperialism and dominative elitism, may increasingly avert the seductions of aesthetics in favor of liberative strategies.⁴⁸

One question the frame enlargement suggests is, “how do I address the *effect* of the image without addressing the seductions of film,” even one as “post-aesthetic” and “political” as *Child of Resistance*?

When I finally saw the film, it matched my frame-enlargement-derived image of what it would be. Yet, I must admit, though I enjoy some of its cartoonish didacticism (characters sitting at a bar wearing slave-era chains around their necks, representing continuing political and social enslavement by other means), the frame enlargement

⁴⁵ Ibid., 302-303

⁴⁶ Ibid., 304.

⁴⁷ Clyde Taylor, “Black Cinema in the Post-aesthetic Era,” *Questions of Third Cinema*, ed. Jim Pines and Paul Willemen (London: British Film Institute, 1989), 91.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 105.

remains more effectively didactic, and in its own way, more aesthetically seductive *and* politically urgent than the film itself. Is this subjective observation at all promising?

Taylor makes his most seductive and politically urgent case against cinema aesthetics in his essay “Black Cinema Aesthetics,” his most damning critique of aesthetic theories and black film stylistic analysis.

[B]lack cinema has profited more from the politics of representation than from the theories of aesthetics. The most refined models and theories of aesthetics would remain useless in a climate where films made in interest of a developing African American film culture are not supported through production, or where the *lingua franca* of movie screens remains exploitive images of black people filtered through a prism of cultural colonization.⁴⁹

Traditional cinema aesthetics fails to adequately address issues of black screen representation. His verdict is harsh. The claims of aesthetic disinterestedness and objectivity haven't “impeded the barrage of animalization and deformation of black people in Hollywood's era of classic cinema.”⁵⁰ In particular he points to the aesthetic interpretations surrounding D. W. Griffith's *Birth of a Nation*.

A full arsenal of aesthetic interpretation arose surrounding this film, to the extent that the vocabulary of aesthetic cinema studies finds this film foundational and canonical. At same time cinema aestheticism has worked to soften or obscure the film's heavy commitment to racism and fascism. The assertion that Leni Riefenstahl's *Triumph of the Will* (1935) is the most powerful example of screen propoganda does injustice to Griffith's epic of bigotry. In instances such as this, the discipline of US cinema studies has shown a firmer commitment to the aestheticization of its field than to humanist pedagogy. Aesthetic discourse, we may conclude, composes an ideological screen of apology and glorification for a cultural regime that has remained indifferent or inimical to the rewarding development of non-white cinema.⁵¹

⁴⁹ Taylor, Clyde, “Black Cinema Aesthetics” in, *A Companion to African-American Philosophy*, ed. Tommy Lott and John Pittman (Malden: Blackwell, 2003), 401.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 400.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 400-401.

This same aesthetic discourse establishes the framework for judging black cinema stylistics as plot deficient, narrow in appeal, too political, and thematically retrograde.⁵² As Bourdieu also points out, “art and cultural consumption are predisposed, consciously and deliberately or not, to fulfill a social function of legitimating social differences.”⁵³ For Taylor, the persistent cultural-disconnect reflected in these judgments “goes far toward justifying the need for a 'black film aesthetic,' just as the misperception of African-American literary values earlier provoked the creation of a self-determining cultural outlook.”⁵⁴ Here Taylor explicitly links the desire for a more politically relevant approach to black cinema with the concurrent evolving debates around identity politics. Though, he is quick to point out that he is not suggesting essentialism: “The relation between an “aesthetic” or cultural style and a social identity group is confused if that relation is thought of as genetic.”⁵⁵

Indexical criteria remain at the heart of debates around identity politics and aesthetics. And as Linda Alcoff has argued, there are problematic positions taken by proponents and critics of identity politics. Both sides have produced a glut of books defending their positions. In her own study of identity politics she writes, “Like 'essentialism,' identity politics has become the shibboleth of cultural studies and social

⁵² Ibid., 401.

⁵³ Bourdieu, Pierre, *Distinction: a Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste*, trans. Richard Nice (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1984), 7.

⁵⁴ Taylor, “Black Cinema Aesthetics,” 401.

⁵⁵ Ibid., 401. He elaborates, “The search for a feminine aesthetic in literature or painting, or a gay aesthetic in classical music, is bound to be fruitless if one is looking for some essentialized quality that emerges from an inherent source within the group.” See Taylor, “Black Cinema Aesthetics,” 401.

theory, and denouncing it has become the litmus test of academic respectability and political acceptability.”⁵⁶ In a rare bit of historicizing the actual concept, Alcoff writes:

One of the problems is that identity politics is almost nowhere defined -- nor is its historical genesis elaborated -- by its detractors. Identity politics is *blamed* for a host of political ills and theoretical mistakes, from overly homogenized conceptions of groups to radical separatism to the demise of the left. But what are its own claims? In what is undoubtedly its locus classicus, the Combahee River Collective's "A Black Feminist Statement" of 1977, identity politics emerges as a belief in the general relevance of identity to politics.... Such a claim does not assume that identities are always perfectly homogenous or that identity groups are unproblematic. The very formation of the Combahee River Collective was motivated by the founders' concerns with the racism in the white-dominated wing of the women's movement, the sexism in the male-dominated wing of the black liberation movement, and the heterosexism that was virulent everywhere. They knew that social identities are complex entities and that identity groups are always heterogeneous, but they argued that, in their experience of political work, identities *mattered*.⁵⁷

Identifying themselves in support of socialist critiques of capitalism and imperialism, and solidarity with progressive black men, Alcoff argues that the collective sought not separatism but “specific analysis.”⁵⁸ She wonders, “How did the legitimate concern with specific instances of problems in identity-based movements become a generalized attack on identity and identity politics in any and every form?”⁵⁹ My own concern is less to simply defend or dismiss identity politics than to understand its influence on current discussions of black film poetics.

Taylor's analysis explicitly invokes indexical criteria, arguing “the identity of a work is impacted by the cultural frame of the author's supposed background plus that

⁵⁶ Linda Alcoff, *Visible identities: Race, Gender, and the Self* (New York: Oxford University Press 2006), 14.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 15.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 15.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 16.

culture's repertory of symbolic knowledge, as seen in that culture and by outsiders," a framing so controlling it "almost acts as a character or a collaborating author."⁶⁰ Again, for Taylor, attention to representation provides more valuable information than aesthetic judgment and stylistic analysis. "The principle contribution to knowledge from the experience of African Americans with cinema lies in this arena of the politics of representation, both in the examples of ethnocentric distortion that American cinema generously provides, and through the counter-efforts of black people to challenge the imbalance of screen power."⁶¹ The subtle prohibitions against addressing certain aesthetic concerns remain evident in contemporary black film scholarship.

I've quoted Taylor at length in this chapter because in the field of black film studies, he is the most consistent critic of aesthetics. Since part of my project is a re-evaluation of aesthetic concerns, I feel the need to engage with his work. Also, I'm in agreement with many of his arguments, particularly those presented at the close of *The Masks of Art*. "The engaged deconstruction of art-cult propaganda involves the reformatting of knowledge, redesign of categories and revised understanding of roles and activities. Part of the work of deconstruction is denial of the narrative coherence of the Western canon of knowledge..."⁶² Taylor's project is ultimately a call for a broad intertextual engagement with black cultural production, rooted in an activist framework. But the indexical criteria guiding these intertextual engagements are often complicated and contradictory. As such, they remain problematic if one approaches black film

⁶⁰ Taylor, *Masks of Art*, 184.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 401.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 304.

poetics as a set of non-contradictory, unambiguous, objective selections of stylistic choice.

How then, could such a difficult-to-grasp conception as “soul” contribute to black film analysis? If we wish to pursue a cinematic poetics of soul, perhaps we need to start with a more specific cultural idea of soul. As noted in Chapter One, Nelson George dates “Soul” culture's death as 1972⁶³. Most historians date the birth of the soul aesthetic to innovations in black music style going back to, at least, the 1940s and 1950s, when artists broke down barriers between gospel music and rhythm and blues. This was a folk aesthetic, popularized early on by former jazz pianist Ray Charles's 1954 hit “I Gotta Woman.” Little Richard took the same folk sources, and helped create what would become rock and roll in the mid-50s. By the 1960s, identifiable “soul” variations surfaced in several cities, reflecting regional and house styles. “Soulful” performers emerged from Detroit and Motown Records (The Funk Brothers, Marvin Gaye, The Supremes, Smokey Robinson, Stevie Wonder, and Gladys Knight); from Memphis and Stax Records (Sam and Dave, Booker T. and the M.G's, Otis Redding, and Isaac Hayes); from Chicago (Jerry Butler, Curtis Mayfield, Gene Chandler, and the Staple Singers); from Philadelphia (The Delfonics, Teddy Pendergrass, The O'jays, and Solomon Burke). Artists ranging from Wilson Pickett, Bobby Blue Bland, Sam Cooke, James Brown (Soul Brother Number One), and “First Lady of Soul,” Aretha Franklin transformed soul's style into a sublime art form.⁶⁴

⁶³ Nelson George, *Buppies, B-Boys, Baps and Bohos: Notes of Post-Soul Black Culture* (New York: Harper Collins Publishers, 1992), 2.

⁶⁴ See Burton W. Peretti's *Lift Every Voice: The History of African American Music* (Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield, 2009), 141-143.

Sociologist Michael Haralambos has studied soul's stylistic development. Since poetics is concerned with issues of style, several of Haralambos's points are valuable. His analysis of blues structure provides a useful model of stylistic analysis. The basic twelve-bar blues structure has changed little since it developed around the late 19th century.⁶⁵ Standard views on life and death cycles in music style contend that once a style's boundaries are set, and rules for variation are agreed upon, development ceases, and the style simply repeats itself until its demise.⁶⁶ Haralambos finds this view too constraining, "In practice, a style never becomes completely formalised. It never reaches a point where it can only vary, that is, rearrange fixed units, but continues to develop until it ends. The development of a style means changing the definition of its boundaries."⁶⁷ This question of boundaries is key. The changing definitions make innovation possible. The continuum of border crossing connects work songs to spirituals, to gospel, to blues, to rhythm and blues, to rock and roll, and to soul music. It is not the formalization limited by rigid borders that lead a style to its death. Haralambos predicts the death of blues style to make his point.

If present trends continue, blues will die out in black America. It will neither have exhausted its potential for development as a style, nor will there be a dearth of singers who can perform in terms of it. It will die out simply because nobody wants to listen to it. A style therefore ends because, for some reason or other, it no longer meets the needs of its audience.⁶⁸

As we will see, the needs and fluid tastes of the audience often determine the final word on style effectiveness for both music and film. For example, William Grant stresses that

⁶⁵ Michael Haralambos. *Soul music: the birth of a sound in black America* (New York: Da Capo, 1974), 9.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 8.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 8.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 9.

for black filmmakers, “Issues of representation and style become central, especially as they affect the failure or success of films in reaching or finding an audience.”⁶⁹ Soul as a style, it would seem, would indeed need to “reflect the experience of black audiences” to be effectively recognized as a figure of blackness. That said, Haralambos argues against a “mutually dependent relationship of music and society”⁷⁰ thesis.

Like any other aspect of society, music is both cause and effect. It is both a product and a producer of the society of which it is a part. We cannot, therefore, point to some or one part of society as the exclusive agent for change of the whole. However, we can argue that certain factors are more important than others in effecting change, and still retain our model.⁷¹

A poetics of soul reveals the limited benefit of arguing that style and context are necessarily tied to social situations on a one to one basis. Though soul's relationship to the surrounding social context is undeniable, “when that context changes, the style will continue,” and for Haralambos, this continuity “assumes that performers and audience become committed to a particular style, and this commitment overrides changes in the social situation.”⁷² Ultimately, it is this stylistic and contextual flexibility that deepens the historically hybrid nature of soul both as a music style, and as a cultural and aesthetic phenomenon.

Haralambos identifies four factors making this hybrid style possible. These factors include practical, social, and stylistic considerations. How, for example did gospel get

⁶⁹ William R. Grant, *Post-Soul Black Cinema: Discontinuities, Innovations, and Breakpoints, 1970-1995* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 4.

⁷⁰ Haralambos, 7.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 9.

⁷² *Ibid.*, 7. Haralambos elaborates, “civil rights issues were not specifically mentioned in soul music until the late 1960s, over ten years after concerted civil rights activity was under way. We can make a strong case for this innovation in the words of soul music as being a product of the civil rights struggle. However, we can also reasonably argue that songs advocating civil rights feed back upon the activity which produces them, and so reinforce it.” See Haralambos, 9.

incorporated into soul music? Availability is the first factor he notes. “As an important musical tradition, [gospel] was understood and appreciated and could serve its new purpose without a radical musical re-training of those who were to sing soul music.”⁷³

The second factor is gospel's utopian outlook, with references to “jubilation” and “anticipation.” He explains, “The themes are structured on the same basic equation, the opposition of present and future, or pain and joy.... The future orientation, the hope and the promise of gospel music all fit the expressive needs of the '60s and '70s.”⁷⁴ The third factor, he identifies as gospel's ethical stance, a moral position stating “the way things ought to be.”⁷⁵ The fourth and final factor is unity, or togetherness. This is incorporated both thematically and structurally as harmony and improvisational performance.⁷⁶ These four factors became key identifiers of the larger concept of soul as a cultural and political aesthetic.

Another key stylistic factor for identifying soul's style is “specialization,” or the limits of an individual singer's range, and how this might come into play.⁷⁷ Like jazz, soul develops much of its expressive power from the improvisational conversations between individual musical statements. In film studies, auteurism might be the closest parallel for analyzing individual expressions and specialization within an essentially collaborative art form.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, 131.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 131-132.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 132.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 135.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 7.

By focusing on the impact of cross-stylistic incorporations, the role of audience taste in stylistic life and death cycles, and the significance of individual expressions, Haralambos's stylistic poetics provides a general guide to cultural and stylistic elements underlying the soul-as-black aesthetic doxa. Consider Jacqueline Bobo's stylistic analysis of Julie Dash's 1992 film, *Daughters of the Dust*. Bobo provides a close reading of the film's techniques and cultural references. She also performs a limited audience analysis, looking at the way a group of black women responded to the film.

Dash, justifiably, refuses to accept the film's designation as an experimental, avant garde, or art house film, labels that attempt to distance the film from its desired audience. Dash conceived the film as one that would be accessible to the primary audience at which she aimed it -- black women. She does not demean the film's audience by assuming a condescending stance or presenting images beyond viewer's range of historical memory.⁷⁸

The question of the audience (in this case, an ideal black female audience) inevitably brings us back to both iconic and indexical considerations: "what does black presence on-screen evoke" and "how does black presence on-screen reflect the experience of black audiences?"

Daughters of the Dust is often described as visually rich, and beautiful, filled with lush imagery and a complex soundtrack. But talk of complexity and richness of the soundtrack could only benefit from detailed analysis, as one would analyze a piece of music. The film's overall attention to image and sound details threaten to overpower the broad political statements that exist in the work, making it difficult to reduce a technique (like the separation of elements) to a Brechtian debt. The narrative is so dense that it is able to contain more than explicit politics. Bobo notes, "Some critics found ... moments

⁷⁸ Jacqueline Bobo, *Black Women as Cultural Readers* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1995), 195-196.

in the film unnecessary, irrelevant, and tedious. Examples include the many long takes of black women interacting with one another, the slow-motion camera shots of black women gambling on the beach, (See fig. 3-4 to 3-6) and the portraits of the various groupings coupled with the intensity of the women's actions. However, the women I interviewed considered the scenes memorable and evocative.”⁷⁹



Figure 3-4. Daughters of the Dust (Julie Dash, 1992).



Figure 3-5. Step-printing abstraction.

⁷⁹ Bobo, 84.



Figure 3-6. Manipulation of time and light.

The beauty and density of a film like *Daughters of the Dust* are as seductive as anything Brecht's alienation effects have ever fought against. But it would be hasty to deny the remaining political content, and the political use of alternative narrative strategies. For Patricia Mellencamp, the film's beauty goes beyond simple *photogénie*:

An aesthetics of history is inscribed on bodies that dance, stroll, gesture, talk, and listen -- a choreography of grace-filled movement, poetic voices and words, one group leading to another, then shifting the players. The beauty is a remarkable achievement in twenty-eight days of "principal photography shot with only nature sunlight," and 170,000 feet of film edited in Dash's living room. The film is lush with group shots and closeups of beautiful African-American women, talking listening, laughing.... The film caresses these faces of many styles and ages, taking time to let us see them, to cherish their presence and experience what they might be thinking.⁸⁰

But this remark raises the question of the subjective nature of this level of cultural appreciation and recognition, a subjective set of criteria that speaks of taste (recognizable beauty) as much as representation (positive and negative images). But how could the idea of a "black aesthetic" *not* have always already been, in part, a

⁸⁰ Patricia Mellencamp, in *Redirecting the Gaze: Gender, Theory, and Cinema in the Third World*, ed. Diana Robin, and Ira Jaffe (Albany: SUNY Press, 1999), 113. See also Karen Alexander's "Daughters of the Dust: Julie Dash Talks About African American Women's Cinema and Images from Her Film," *Sight and Sound*, V3 N9 (Sept 1993):20-22.

question of taste? Does the pertinent indexical question become, “How does black presence on-screen reflect the experience and taste of black audiences?” Can a narrow political criterion like representation handle the aesthetic socio-cultural excess of taste?

Walter Benjamin once wrote: “Investigate why the concept of taste is obsolete.”⁸¹ He continues, defining the figure of the critic: “Regarding the terrible misconception that the quality indispensable to the true critic is ‘his own opinion’: it is quite meaningless to learn the opinion of someone about something when you do not even know who he is.” The “great” critic’s task becomes clear: “Instead of giving his own opinion, a great critic enables others to form their own opinion on the basis of his critical analysis. Moreover, this definition of the figure of the critic should not be a private matter but, as far as possible, and objective, strategic one.”⁸² His essay “The Author as Producer” suggests a generative task for the author:

An author who teaches writers nothing teaches no one. What matters, therefore is the exemplary character of production, which is able, first, to induce other producers to produce, and second, to put and improved apparatus at their disposal. And this apparatus is better, the more consumers it is able to turn into producers -- that is, readers or spectators into collaborators.⁸³

He encourages writers to take advantage of commodity forms, like the newspaper, where distinctions between genres, writer and poet, scholar and popularizer, and author and reader are recast.⁸⁴ For Terry Eagleton, Benjamin’s critique

⁸¹ Walter Benjamin, “The Task of the Critic,” *Selected Writings: Volume 2, 1927-1934*, ed. Michael W. Jennings, Howard Eiland, and Gary Smith, trans. Rodney Livingstone and others (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999), 548.

⁸² *Ibid.*, 548.

⁸³ Benjamin, Walter. “The Author as Producer,” *Selected Writings: Volume 2, 1927-1934*, ed. Michael W. Jennings, Howard Eiland, and Gary Smith, trans. Rodney Livingstone and others (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999), 777.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 772.

of aesthetics “conjures a revolutionary aesthetics from the commodity form itself.”⁸⁵ This revolutionary aesthetic critique leaves little room for questions of taste.

Are critics immune to the subjective excess of taste? Imagining a practice beyond traditional criticism, Barthes invokes a plurality of entrances,⁸⁶ including a plurality of bodies: “Which body? We have several.”⁸⁷ And for Barthes, taste figures the body, which guides the poetics of a “writerly” practice. He writes:

I like, I don't like: this is of no importance to anyone; this, apparently, has no meaning. And yet all this means: my body is not the same as yours. Hence, in this anarchic foam of tastes and distastes, a kind of listless blur, gradually appears the figure of the bodily enigma, requiring complicity or irritation. Here begins the intimidation of the body, which obliges others to endure me liberally, to remain silent and polite confronted by pleasures or rejections which they do not share.⁸⁸

Is this an uncritical use of taste? Pierre Bourdieu distinguishes between three “zones of taste” related to social class and consumer choice: 1. Legitimate taste (the taste for legitimate work); 2. Middle-brow taste (the taste for minor work with the major arts); 3. Popular taste (the taste for work devalued by popularization).⁸⁹ For Bourdieu, taste is naturalized: “The ideology of natural taste owes its plausibility and its efficacy to the fact that, like all the ideological strategies generated in the everyday class struggle,

⁸⁵ Terry Eagleton, *The Ideology of the Aesthetic*. Cambridge: Basil Blackwell, 1990, 326.

⁸⁶ Barthes writes, “the writerly text is ourselves writing, before the infinite play of the world... is traversed, intersected, stopped, plasticized by some singular system (Ideology, Genus, Criticism) which reduces the plurality of entrances, the opening of networks, the infinity of languages” (See Roland Barthes, *S/Z: An Essay*, trans. Richard Miller (New York: The Noonday Press, 1974), 5.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 60-61.

⁸⁸ Roland Barthes, *Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: The Noonday Press, 1977), 117.

⁸⁹ Bourdieu, 16.

it naturalizes real differences, converting differences in the mode of acquisition of culture into differences of nature.”⁹⁰

From a different perspective, Terry Eagleton argues that taste has a particular relation to rationalist thought. “That which is purely residual to bourgeois rationality, the *je ne sais quoi* of taste, now comes to figure as nothing less than a parodic image of such thought, a caricature of rational law.”⁹¹ This parodic image complicates any naturalization or rationality of taste.

But, for Barthes, even more is at stake here. Taste is related to politics, again through the body. Writing about his relationship to the politicized practices of his friends at *Tel Quel*, Barthes asks himself: “Then why don’t you do the same thing? -- Precisely, no doubt, because I do not have the same body that they do; my body cannot accommodate itself to generality, the power of generality which is in language ...

The body is the irreducible difference, and at the same time it is the principle of all structuration (since structuration is what is Unique in structure). If I manage to talk politics with my own body, I should make out of the most banal of (discursive) structures a structuration; with repetition, I should produce Text. The problem is to know if the political apparatus would recognize for very long this way of escaping the militant banality by thrusting into it -- alive, pulsing, pleasure-seeking -- my own unique body.⁹²

Do these bodies remain multiple? If so, should we consider that tastes are multiple as well? (Is Bobo’s analysis of “black women as readers” not in some way an argument of difference and taste?) From this perspective, tastes are about places, location, not a singular body (or a singular politics). It is located in an “atopia” For

⁹⁰ Ibid., 68.

⁹¹ Eagleton, 88.

⁹² Barthes, *Barthes by Barthes*, 175.

Barthes, “Atopia is superior to utopia (utopia is reactive, tactical, literary, it proceeds from meaning and governs it).”⁹³

What may eventually be useful is to recast the relationship between tastes and production. Instead of a strictly functional approach, the relationship can be recast as a generative, unpredictable one. Where “An author who teaches writers nothing teaches no one,” and what is generated is not a critique, but another text: Barthes writes, “[T]he goal of literary work (of literature as work) is to make the reader no longer a consumer, but the producer of the text.”⁹⁴

Taste is the cultural correspondent to aesthetics, what viewers bring with them when they watch a film. Thinking back to the film still from *Child of Resistance*, I am reminded of Barthes admission of his “resistance” to cinema. In “The Third Meaning,” one of his few film centered essays, where he explains his decision to analyze isolated film stills from Sergei Eisenstein’s *Ivan the Terrible*, rather than analyze the film as a whole. He writes:

For a long time, I have been intrigued by the phenomenon of being interested and even fascinated by photos from a film (outside a cinema, in the pages of *Cahiers du cinéma*) and of then losing everything of those photos ... when once inside the viewing room -- a change which can even result in a complete reversal of values. I at first ascribed this taste for stills to my lack of cinematic culture, to my resistance to film.⁹⁵

Rejecting the reduction to simple resistance, or to the still’s opposition to movement, “the sacred essence of cinema,” he proposes that the “specific filmic (the

⁹³ *Ibid.*, 49.

⁹⁴ Barthes, *S/Z*, 4.

⁹⁵ Roland Barthes, “The Third Meaning”, in *Image-Music-Text*, trans. Stephen Heath (New York: Hill and Wang, 1977), 66.

filmic of the future)” exists in an “inarticulable third meaning,” and what is needed is a productive “theory of the still.”⁹⁶

The still, then, is the fragment of a second text whose existence never exceeds the fragment; film and film still find themselves in a palimpsest relationship without it being possible to say that one is on top of the other or that one is extracted from the other.⁹⁷

In the following chapters, I propose my own productive theory of the still. I argue that not only the body appears with taste, but also the “soul,” figured in this case by moments of cinematic excess. What will a theory of the still tell us about the souls of black film? If iconic and indexical criteria continue to lurk mischievously at the edge of black film poetics, can attention to excess foster another way to think about black cinema aesthetics? The stakes of these questions are aesthetic *and* political, even if, as Barthes writes, this is a politics of the future:

A new-rare-practice affirmed against a majority practice (that of signification), the obtuse meaning inevitably appears as a luxury, an expenditure without exchange; this luxury does not yet belong to today’s politics, though it is already part of tomorrow’s.⁹⁸

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 66-67.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, 67.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, 56-57

CHAPTER 4 THE PLEASURES OF BLACK CINEMA

Excess

I want the viewer to participate. We should believe in debate and find our errors and solutions there. In making a film I try equally to combat an aesthetic that is enslaving human beings by, for example, violating the codes of cinema, and, at the same time, creating a structure in which the spectator can become an active participant.

--Haile Gerima¹

In [Jean-Luc Godard's] *Numero deux*, the main character Sandrine asks herself: "Why do you listen to music?" She answers, "To see with wonder. What's wonder? What you don't see."²

Haile Gerima's *Bush Mama* (1976) exemplifies early, post-'68 African American art films, and as such is an excellent place to begin thinking about writing practices that re-address aesthetics and politics. Gerima's work embodies the dialectical relationships between what Peter Wollen calls the "seven deadly sins" and "seven cardinal virtues" of cinema.³ These strategies, represented by "Hollywood-Mosfilm" and their revolutionary, materialist alternatives, are central to Wollen's conception of post-'68 counter-cinema, competing avant-gardes, and art cinemas. Gerima's films share this concern with film production strategies, aesthetic practices, and ideology.

¹ Haile Gerima quoted in Tony Stafford and William Triplett's "Haile Gerima: Radical Departures to a New Black Cinema," *Journal of the University Film and Video Association* 35, no. 2 (1983): 61.

² Kaja Silverman and Harun Farocki, *Speaking About Godard* (New York: New York University Press, 1998), 147.

³ Peter Wollen lays out these strategies in a table, see Peter Wollen, *Readings and Writings: Semiotic Counter-Strategies* (London: Verso Editions, 1982), 79:

Narrative transitivity	Narrative intransitivity
Identification	Estrangement
Transparency	Foregrounding
Single diegesis	Multiple diegesis
Closure	Aperture
Pleasure	Un-pleasure
Fiction	Reality

Where do we begin analyzing such intentionally politically charged films? The previous chapters have explored soul's aesthetic development. We've noted the limitations of iconic and indexical analysis when faced with the unpredictable effects of *photogénie* and excess. This chapter suggests paying attention to cinematic excess complements the priority of critique, enriching our understanding of soul in black cinema, beyond intentional criteria, by emphasizing a different approach to writing about films.

Michele Wallace warns against the lure of conventional close reading:

If the “close reading” of Afro-American literature or culture is thus attempted by black feminists, it becomes impossible not to draw upon the relationship of the text to other texts that precede and surround it in a web of signification and “history,” as Barthes reads Balzac in *S/Z* but with “race,” class, gender included this time. Yet the “close reading” should not be employed as the automatic first move, but rather as the subsequent stage of an institutional, theoretical and political critique that leaves textual issues unresolved. If after one has demystified issues of production and how and where the audience receives or views the text, there is still a “text” remaining, then the “close reading” can and should be employed as a means of further investigation and analysis.⁴

Here we see the tension between politicized critique and an attention to critical excess.

Wallace suggests, “The point ... is not only to write such cultural criticism but also to promulgate ‘cultural reading’ as an act of resistance.”⁵ Unfortunately, the “remaining text” is rarely read at all.

Very little has been written on excess, aporia, and black cinema. Anna Everett’s essay “Lester Walton’s ‘Ecriture Noir’: Black Spectatorial Transcodings of ‘Cinematic Excess’” stands out as an exception. Walton was the silent era film critic for *New York*

⁴ Michele Wallace, *Dark Designs and Visual Culture* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004), 244.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 244.

Age. Most of Everett's observations cover Walton's analysis of black misrepresentation in white productions. In his writings, she discovers evidence of what she calls "transcodings" at work in black spectator enthusiasm for early film. Walton's attention to the contradictory position many black spectators take mirrors the experience of black audiences at large. These transcodings allow them to "locate unanticipated points of critical textual entry to facilitate their attenuated specular pleasures."⁶ Everett argues that cinema's unpredictable, uncontrollable excess encourages these "counterhegemonic" interpretations and experiences.⁷

Writing about excess, black pleasure, and black joy in black popular culture, Gina Dent finds an enigmatic example in a photo of jazz singer Maxine Sullivan. The photo shows Sullivan leaning back, standing with her arms raised, bent at the elbow, and her hands open, palms forward. Her mouth is open in a singing/smiling gesture. Her eyes look up (fig. 4-1). Dent compares the ambiguity in the image to Bernini's *The Ecstasy of Saint Theresa*, central to Jacques Lacan's discussion of feminine *jouissance*.

What is she signifying that we cannot know, in the sense that it will always exceed the words we have to describe it? It is something always outside, but that we move closer and closer to incorporating. Or, rather, it is inside, an interior knowledge that we must struggle to bring into use. We have always recognized it in our experience of black music. We are only just

⁶ Anna Everett, *Returning the Gaze: A Genealogy of Black Film Criticism, 1909-1949* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2001), 31. Everett links this process to Kristin Thompson's writing on cinematic excess, which I discuss later in this chapter: "To indulge in this new pleasure and refuse the painful old stereotypes, black spectators were required to transcode these early filmic texts precisely because blacks were positioned outside the textual contract between ideal author and ideal reader for these films. Moreover, as Kristin Thompson has pointed out, the 'excessive' or unruly nature of cinematic signification can never really exert a totalized or completely unified meaning over any film image. Black spectators could therefore exert their own ...interpretations over the seemingly preferred meanings encoded in these texts," See Everett, 31.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 31

beginning to feel its effects, and the resistance to them, in literature and film and the other arts.⁸



Figure 4-1. Maxine Sullivan still from Greta Schiller's *Love To Be in Love* (1991).

“How do we recognize ‘it’ when we find it?” How, she asks, is such an experience translated? For Dent, naming it black pleasure or black joy seems as dangerously essentialist as naming feminine *jouissance* “women’s pleasure.” It risks misunderstanding the possible political significance of *jouissance* for women. “It is a question of love, of ethics, and not of sexual difference.... *Jouissance* is not the complement to sexual pleasure; it is its supplement. It is not only oppositional but alternative.”⁹ What is important here is Dent’s conviction that to discuss black pleasure and joy requires continually shifting between ethics and politics: This is her context for

⁸ Gina Dent, “Black Pleasure, Black Joy: An Introduction,” *Black Popular Culture*, ed. Gina Dent, (Seattle: Bay Press, 1992), 10.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 10.

discussing black pleasure and *jouissance*.¹⁰ “It is to shift between the material domain in which our identities are constructed for us and where we play them out, and that ‘other side’ where we play with the many possibilities of identification, where we possess the secret of joy.” Ethics, she argues, is an ephemeral concept, “we can experience it, but we cannot know it.”¹¹

But the potential for ethical love takes us outside of the circuit of oppositional practices and give us a hint of that other knowledge, the erotic, propelling us back into action. Remembering that the move from pleasure to joy takes us from the notion of political agency to an examination of how we come to know, to decide, and to act, we reinvestigate the grounds of consciousness and address not only the subject matter of black life, but also its modes, aesthetic and cultural.¹²

For Paul Gilroy, it is important to understand the rhetorical power of black popular culture in the context of sublimity and soul:

[T]he word soul was a useful way of talking about precisely those communicative qualities that exceed the power of language to recapture. That’s true when we sing and play and it’s true when we try to talk about it. You can be technical and say, well we’re talking about melisma and all the old examples come out, like James screaming “Please” or Jackie Wilson filling the word love with fifty-two different syllables and notes and yes folks, that’s the referent. But I think it’s also the site of a kind of ambivalence about the memory of slavery and the desirability and the obligation to forget things which are difficult. Soul suggests that this suffering is without redemption. I don’t understand for a moment the kind of complicated psychosexual mechanisms which result in being transported into those democratic, antiphonal performances, and I’m sure that lots of people think that those precious aesthetic and social moments aren’t there at all, that we

¹⁰ Also, consider Barthes’s observations on *jouissance* and desire: “Addendum to *The Pleasure of the Text*: *Jouissance* is not what corresponds to desire (what satisfies it) but what surprises, exceeds, disturbs, deflects it.” See Roland Barthes’s *Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes*, *Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: The Noonday Press, 1977), 112.

¹¹ Dent, 11.

¹² *Ibid.*, 11.

all imagine it. And yet, we know that we don't imagine it. It is our open secret."¹³

Dent and Gilroy find support in filmmaker Arthur Jaffa's call for a full-scale analysis of "black pleasure" in black popular culture. He asks, "How does [black culture] generate Black pleasure?"¹⁴ Specifically, he looks at black music as a model. "How do those strategies in Black music play out the rupture and repair of African-American life on the structural level?" Jaffa suggests music provides models of multiplicity (which he calls "polyventiality) that generate pleasure: "Polyventiality' just means multiple tones, multiple rhythms, multiple perspectives, multiple meanings, multiplicity."¹⁵ And he asks two important questions: "Why do we find these particular things pleasurable?" and

How can we interrogate the medium [film] to find a way Black movement in itself could carry, for example, the weight of sheer tonality in Black song? And I'm not talking about the lyrics that Aretha Franklin sang. I'm talking about *how she sang them*.¹⁶

For Dent, these questions invite critics to think differently about black popular culture, and black cinema in particular. This move will, she writes, "enhance our ability to make use of all of the sources of our hybrid tradition, not just those that privilege its western heritage."¹⁷ One still wonders if such a position binds what began as an "unknowable" quality too tightly to an easily delineated (though hybrid) sense of tradition. If so, are the "secrets" of joy and excess no longer such secrets? Maybe they involve, instead, a question of *knowing* the tone or timbre of these secrets: their "how."

¹³ Paul Gilroy interview in "Question of a 'Soulful Style'" *Soul: Black Power, Politics, and Pleasure*, ed. Monique Guillory and Richard C. Green (New York: New York University Press, 1998), 259-260.

¹⁴ Arthur Jaffa, "69," *Black Popular Culture*, ed. Gina Dent, (Seattle: Bay Press, 1992), 253.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 253.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 253.

¹⁷ Dent, 12.

Realism, Automatism, and Cinephilia

Bush Mama's main characters, Dorothy, T.C., and their daughter Luann, are struggling with black urban life in Watts in the mid-seventies. Shot by Charles Burnett and Roderick Young in a style reminiscent of Cuban, Senegalese, and other contemporary cinemas, the film mixes neorealistic, documentary, political, experimental, and counter-cinematic techniques. T.C. is placed in prison for a crime he didn't commit. Meanwhile, the Welfare office threatens Dorothy's benefits if she doesn't have an abortion. Luann's friend Angie brings back posters from local demonstrations. These posters eventually help politicize Dorothy. In the last section of the film, a police officer rapes Luann. Dorothy catches him in the act and kills him. She is taken to prison where she is beaten and has a miscarriage. That is the film's most basic plot breakdown. Clearly there is more to the film than this story.

Clyde Taylor's analysis of *Bush Mama* is rooted in his analysis of the New Black Cinema as a phenomenon. Of the core defining aesthetic principles, he identified three: the roots in Afro-American oral tradition, the connections with black music, and the "realness dimension."¹⁸ The criteria for the realness dimension, the closeness of the on-screen representation to the social space and experience of black audiences, he argues, "establishes only the slightest, if any departure from the contiguous offscreen reality."¹⁹

For example, the most famous scene in *Bush Mama* is as non-diegetic as it gets (fig. 4-2). After the title sequence, we dissolve to a handheld shot of two black men

¹⁸ Clyde Taylor, "New U.S. Black Cinema" in *Movies and Mass Culture*, ed. John Belton (London: Athlone, 1996), 233.

¹⁹ *Ibid*, 233.

(Gerima and a crew member) being stopped and searched by several policemen. The telephoto shot was taken from a safer distance by a cameraperson. The credit-sequence sound track continues over this image. Street noises, the sound of a helicopter, police sirens, multiple voices of male and female social workers asking for financial information, all create a cacophonous overflow.



Figure 4-2. Haile Gerima and crew member are stopped and searched.

The film never identifies the two men. Only anecdotes and production accounts reveal Gerima's situation during production and his decision to include it in the film. Does this shot stand out? Other shots share a similar documentary style. The non-diegetic nature might also be explained by the film's famous narrative experimentation and nonlinearity. Several scenes function as separate sequences, this opening scene being one of them. Yet there is something about the shot that seems *supplemental*. Defining this quality raises questions about motivation and excess, realism and automatism, and how to write about such things.

For Taylor, the relationship between this scene and the film's larger thematic concerns is obvious.

These shots make a fitting prologue because *Bush Mama* is about the policing of the black community by school officials, in and out of uniform, who intrude their behavioral directives into the most intimate reaches of its resident. From such a documentary beginning, one is more easily convinced that the daily actions of its inhabitants are constantly policed in the sense that all actions are regarded with hostility and suspicion except those that reproduce the cycles of victimization and self-repression.²⁰

Mike Murashige proposes a similar reading of this scene. He argues that the opening scene's purpose is to link, through montage, the policing and regulating of Dorothy and the larger community.²¹

After the title sequence, and the stop and search, the next scene is a street montage. There is very little time to focus on anything: time and place, clothing, stores are all documented through quick pans. As the camera pans the surroundings, usually focusing on people walking down the sidewalks, it occasionally registers the shops on the block, particularly wig shops (Fig. 4-3 and 4-4).



Figure 4-3. Early street scene.

²⁰ Ibid., 233-234.

²¹ Mike Murashige, "Haile Gerima and the Political Economy of Cinematic Resistance," *Representing Blackness: Issues in Film and Video*, ed. Valerie Smith (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1997), 190-191.



Figure 4-4. Wig shops are introduced.

Initially, we seem to be looking at random people walking down the block. But slowly, the scene's motivation develops, as it introduces the theme music, and eventually the main character, Dorothy. By introducing her with the wig advertisement above her head, the film subtly sets up a thematic element that will culminate in Dorothy's last voice-over. Wigs function symbolically at several points during the film (fig. 4-5).



Figure 4-5. Wig shop and Dorothy on-screen together.

The contemporary audience might have experienced a sense of recognition. But in general, the standard cue for this scene is its documentary feel. And, since the street

montage follows the stop and search, which seems more “authentically” documentary, it carries over the film’s initial allusions to realism. Throughout, the film deploys an interplay between reportage-like shots, staged, though realistically-shot scenes, and much more staged, or experimental shots and scenes.

Take, for instance, the dancing scene in Dorothy’s apartment. This scene works on different levels. On the obvious or literal level, T.C. tries to get Dorothy and Luann to celebrate life and share in his newfound optimism. On the symbolic level, this is another scene that emphasizes the symbolism of Dorothy’s wig. As T.C. tries to get her to dance, her wig almost comes off, and she begins to resist enjoying the moment.

The scene is shot in one take, with a hand held camera that seems to participate in the dancing and pulling. The camera randomly focuses on the three characters as they dance around the cramped space. But when Dorothy’s wig loosens, the camera stays on her reactions (fig. 4-6). The narrative detail has been emphasized here on literal and symbolic levels.

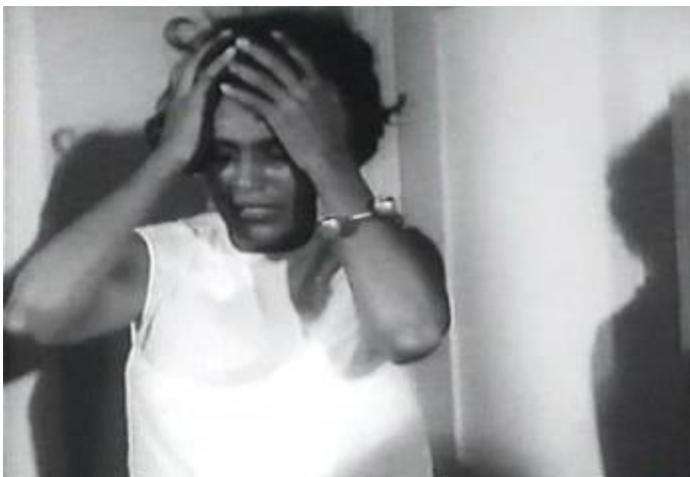


Figure 4-6. Dorothy frets over her loose wig.

What happens next is just as interesting, as T.C. continues to pull Dorothy back into the dancing fun, she keeps pulling away. To explain his joyous mood, she accuses

T.C. of being drunk. The scene's tension builds, and the camera records her dissatisfaction and unwillingness to participate. But the camera, which has continued to pan and move back and forth throughout the scene, while capturing the key narrative moments, focuses for a brief moment on the daughter Luann's face staring directly into the lens in a way that feels completely out of character, briefly breaking the illusion of the scene's "realism" (fig. 4-7).



Figure 4-7. Luann's look.

This look into the camera seems spontaneous, unscripted, possibly, even a mistake. In a film where characters often address the camera, you would think one more direct address, no matter how brief would make no difference. But this brief look functions differently, seems less controlled. This shot may be useful when thinking about the automatism of the camera, and stressing the fictional aspect of the film, which can still be interrupted by the documentary aspects of the medium. This might also reflect on issues of finance, and the difficulty of shooting more than one take. Since it is a one-shot scene, cutting the "look" out would have been disruptive.

The scene fascinates me in general. It supports several plot points: the past alcohol problems; Dorothy's resistance to enjoying life; the intimacy of this family unit;

and the symbolism of the wig. When the actress Susan Williams (Luann) looks at the camera, she seems to display her own enjoyment during the shooting of the scene; or perhaps there *was* a mistake blocking the scene, which she found amusing. Either way, it stands out less as a technical mistake than as a brief documentary moment of the production, like the opening “stop-and-search” scene. Luann’s look helps place that earlier shot within a larger series of “realistic” interruptions of the narrative’s fiction.

The subjective nature of my analysis highlights one of Christian Keathley’s observations about analyzing excess as it relates to cinephilia:

Though we may locate qualities of excess at every turn in a motion picture, not every point of excess provokes the epiphanic frisson that so marks the experience as being of that special class of excess, cinephiliac moments. Indeed, it is at times less the quality of the image itself that is excessive than the cinephile’s response to it.²²

Paul Willemen describes this subjective tendency as a cinephiliac selection of “good objects.” The selection is different among the cinephiles, but in each case “The difference in selection is less important than the fact that you are signaling the relationship of pleasures generated between you and the screen.”²³ The idea of a subjective, pleasurable relationship to screen images also recalls Gina Dent and Arthur Jaffa’s discussion of black pleasure and black joy, adding a larger, “cultural” identification to this “subjectivity.” The ability to generate such subjective, or transcoded responses from the “documentary-like” scenes is a testament Gerima’s dialectical approach.

²² Christian Keathley, *Cinephilia and History: The Wind in the Trees* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2006), 32.

²³ Paul Willemen, *Looks and Frictions: Essays in Cultural Studies and Film Theory* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994), 233-234.

Christian Keathley's *Cinephilia and History: The Wind in the Trees* raises interesting questions about the problems of excess and critical writing on cinema. He borrows the term "cinephiliac moment" from Paul Willemen. For Keathley, "the cinephiliac moment may be understood as a kind of *mise-en-abyme* wherein each cinephile's obsessive relationship to the cinema is embodied in its most dense, concentrated form."²⁴ Starting from this concept of cinephiliac moments, and fetishistic attention to excessive moments in films, he makes an argument for a different approach to writing about films and writing film history.

Keathley skillfully weaves together some of the key elements in the debate around cinephilia. He touches on the importance of the French Impressionist filmmakers and their theories of *photogénie*. Like cinephilia, *photogénie* describes detailed, enigmatic moments, unique to cinema, partially because of the experience of motion. Although the Surrealists often worked in opposition to the theoretical and formal concerns of the Impressionists, they shared an interest in the seductiveness of enigmatic cinematic moments. For the Surrealists, these moments enabled experimentation and research, and thus, Surrealist writings about film are themselves histories of cinephiliac experiences. Keathley also takes into account the connection between André Bazin's cinematic ontology and the Surrealists' championing of automatism. For Bazin, this mechanical, automatic process gives film and photography a unique relationship to realism. For both Bazin and the Surrealists, this automatism

²⁴ Keathley, 32.

radically changes the definition and role of the artist. Cinephilia feeds off the camera's ability to capture chance elements regardless of the cameraperson's intentions.²⁵

Throughout the book, Keathley constructs an "ideal" set of elements needed to get the most out of a practice of writing based on cinephiliac and panoramic perception.²⁶ These elements develop from his reassessment of the theories of Bazin and the *auteurist* approach of François Truffaut and the critics at the *Cahiers du cinéma*.

1) *The cinephile as an ideal viewer, one who possesses certain skills, and who has a particular relationship to cinema.* By reestablishing the sometimes-misrepresented influence of Bazin on the younger *Cahiers* critics, Keathley is able to reassess *mise-en-scène* as "a particular director's way of looking."²⁷ This allows him to make a close analogy between the cinephile's way of seeing and the definition of *auteur* criticism.

2) *An ideal cinematic approach, style, or aesthetic, one ontologically tied to film.* For years Bazin had been criticized and ignored by semiotic film theorists. He was characterized as a theorist who mistook realism as the result of recording rather than coding. He was also criticized for ontologizing film techniques and genres. But Keathley argues that, "While it is true that Bazin's history of style encroached on connoisseurship in that it clearly privileged one stylistic tendency (realism) over others, that privilege was rigorously justified in terms of film's ontology, and not just according to his individual taste."²⁸

Do cinephiliac moments, at their best, resist Hollywood narratives? Or does the heavily coded Hollywood narrative have its own special relationship to *photogénie*? David Bordwell has asked: "Is there anything in a narrative film that is not narrational?," concluding, "Any image or sound can contribute to narration, but we can also attend to

²⁵ Ibid., 64-65.

²⁶ Keathley's other key concept is "panoramic perception," a term borrowed from Wolfgang Schivelbusch's *The Railway Journey*, an historical account of the shift in perception brought about by modernism and the phenomenological effects of rail travel. One important feature of panoramic perception is "the inclination to fix on irrelevant details in the images or landscape that pass before the viewers eyes," See Keathley, 44.

²⁷ Ibid., 139.

²⁸ Ibid., 15.

an element for its sheer perceptual salience.”²⁹ *Bush Mama* is filled with deliberately stylized, adventurous scenes that don’t always deliver on excess. More often, they seem more controlled than the “documentary-like” scenes. But, the sheer repetition of some of their elements begins to produce “uncontrollable” effects, beyond intention.

Roland Barthes’s 1970 essay, “The Third Meaning: Research Notes on Several Eisenstein Stills,” looks at the problem of excess in Sergei Eisenstein’s *Ivan the Terrible* by focusing on film stills. Barthes identifies three levels of meaning: the first two, the informational and the symbolic meanings, and the “third,” which Barthes argues, “structures the film differently, without subverting the story ... and for this reason, perhaps, it is at this level, and only here, that the ‘filmic’ at last appears. The filmic is what, in the film, cannot be described, it is the representation that cannot be represented.”³⁰

Barthes ability to find obtuse meanings in such an “impoverished” (in this case, heavy-handed, and politically-coded) cinema as Sergei Eisenstein’s opens up large possibilities for cinephiliac moments. *Bush Mama* is similarly “impoverished.” The challenge may lie in finding a technique as radical as Barthes’s use of film stills to sever the image from its communicative context, however coded or unambiguous it may be. The question then becomes: to what end? How will third meanings be used?

Kristin Thompson closes her 1981 book-length neoformalist analysis of Eisenstein’s *Ivan the Terrible* with a chapter exploring the concept of cinematic excess. She begins by quoting Barthes on the third meaning: “Analytically there is something

²⁹ David Bordwell, *Narration in the Fiction Film* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1985), 53.

³⁰ Roland Barthes, “The Third Meaning”, in *Image-Music-Text*, trans. Stephen Heath (New York: Hill and Wang, 1977), 58.

absurd about it.”³¹ And, after demonstrating the film’s “organized structures,” she turns to those “almost undefinable” elements of the film that resist traditional analysis.

Critics usually flounder when trying to explain the qualities *Ivan* has: its beauty, its strangeness, its overwhelming density of textures. These attributes can hardly be fully explained by any analysis of motifs, spatial patterns, acting styles, and the rest, however detailed.³²

She traces attempts to deal with such attributes to critical work inspired by the Russian Formalists. These critics analyze cinematic discontinuities in the context of contrasting stylistic devices that nonetheless establish their own unifying systems and structures.

Yet for Thompson, “Outside of such structures lie those aspects of the work that are not contained by its unifying forces -- the 'excess'.”³³

Next, she distinguishes between Stephen Heath’s uses of the term “excess” and Barthes’s “Third Meaning.” Heath ties his term to tensions between the effect of homogeneity and the material practice that produces this effect. Heath is also dealing with classical Hollywood films, which typically minimize excess by establishing cues and motivation. Thompson reminds us that films outside this tradition may depend less on “apparent motivation” and “make their potentially excessive elements more noticeable.”³⁴ On the other hand, she finds Barthes’s use of the term “meaning” misleading, particularly since he describes aspects of the film that exceed narrative and

³¹ Barthes quoted in Kristin Thompson, *Eisenstein’s Ivan the Terrible: A Neoformalist Analysis* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1981), 287.

³² *Ibid.*, 287.

³³ *Ibid.*, 287.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 288.

symbolic meaning. In the end, both Heath and Barthes write about the possibility that a cinematic image can signify beyond the narrative.³⁵

Thompson finds Barthes's attention to "the physicality of film as the source of its excess" applicable to film analysis proper, despite his specific focus on still photographs. She compares his analysis of certain image qualities that "cause [his] reading to skid," with the Formalist "staircase construction" metaphor that describes narrative delaying devices.³⁶ But Barthes is clearly looking beyond narrative devices. Thompson argues that though few critics would look only at these moments of excess, there is a need to "talk about those aspects of the work that are usually ignored because they don't fit into a tight analysis."³⁷ I take her to mean that we're talking about different layers of excess: the excess within the film, and the analysis of excess as exceeding the goals of traditional criticism. She explicitly aligns the latter position with the neoformalist thesis guiding her book. "For, while the Formalists did not come up with the idea of excess as such, they did move in a direction that strongly implied it."³⁸

She explicitly addresses the question: How will third meanings be used? She starts by examining the difficulty of even broaching the topic: "Of course no element in a work is strictly excessive to the degree that it has *no* connections to other elements...This is one reason why excess is so difficult to talk about: most viewers are determined to find a necessary function for any element the critic singles out."³⁹ If the

³⁵ Ibid., 288.

³⁶ Ibid., 290.

³⁷ Ibid., 291.

³⁸ Ibid., 291.

³⁹ Ibid., 292.

novelty of excess and third meanings necessarily escapes analysis, what does one make of Barthes's attempts to write about it? Thompson writes,

[A] discussion of the qualities of the visual figure at which we look seems doomed to a certain subjectivity. We may not agree that the texture of Efrosinia's skin has a "heavy, ugly dullness." The fact, however, that we can agree that it has some texture opens the possibility of analysis. Critics and their readers must resist the learned tendency to try and find a narrative significance in every detail, or at least they must realize that a narrative function does not exhaust the material presence of that detail. Our conclusion must be that, just as every film contains a struggle of unifying and disunifying structures, so every stylistic element may serve at once to contribute to the narrative and to distract our perception from it.⁴⁰

Problems arise because "Excessive elements do not form relationships beyond those of coexistence," and Thompson calls upon the Russian Formalists to find the most basic foundation to begin analysis: motivation.⁴¹ Motivation typically guides formalist analysis by making visible the very codes Willemsen mentions and tying them to systems of causality.

But at other times, a lack of these kinds of motivation may direct our attention to excess. Thus excess seems to be a portion of artistic motivation, that general category which includes all devices with neither realistic nor compositional motivation.⁴²

Stressing the point, Thompson adds: "More precisely, excess implies a gap or lag in motivation."⁴³ She describes (at least) four ways "in which the material of the film exceeds motivation."

First, narrative function may justify the presence of a device, but doesn't always motivate *the specific form that individual element will take*.

....

⁴⁰ Ibid., 292.

⁴¹ Ibid., 293.

⁴² Ibid., 293.

⁴³ Ibid., 293.

Second, the medium of cinema is such that its devices exist through time. Motivation is insufficient to determine *how long* a device needs to be on the screen in order to serve its purpose.

....

Third ... a single bit of narrative motivation seems to be capable of *functioning almost indefinitely*... This redundancy does not advance the narrative in every case; rather it tends to expand the narrative “vertically.” After a point, the repeated use of multiple devices to serve similar functions tends to minimize the importance of their narrative implications; instead, they become foregrounded primarily through their own innate interest.

....

Fourth and last, a single motivation may serve to justify a device that is then repeated and varied many times. By this repetition, the device may far outweigh its original motivation and take on an importance greater than its narrative or compositional function would seem to warrant.⁴⁴

After analyzing examples of excess in *Ivan*, she admits, “I can do no more than indicate; a systematic analysis is impossible.” She then answers our nagging question: “Why then bother with excess at all? What is its value? Beyond renewing the perceptual freshness of the work, it suggests a different way of watching and listening to a film.”⁴⁵

I take seriously Gladstone Yearwood's call for revitalized questions in black film studies:

Film scholarship dealing with the black experience ought to pose questions that frame black cinema in new and exciting ways. A carefully elaborated theory of black cinema can provide a critical framework that finds aesthetic value in filmic elements other than the tight dictatorial structures of the Hollywood classical narrative film and elements of style not necessarily as an element of narrative but as a filmic element in and of itself.⁴⁶

⁴⁴ Ibid., 294-295. Italics in original.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 300.

⁴⁶ Gladstone L. Yearwood, *Black Film as a Signifying Practice: Cinema, Narration and the African-American Aesthetic Tradition*, (Trenton: Africa World Press, Inc., 2000), 64-65.

Rather than simply reading what has been repressed in a text, the aporetic discourse I propose pays close attention to “third meanings,” which lie outside articulated language, and for my study, are not easily located within “the black cultural tradition.” This chapter explores two specific aporetic borderlines, where questions of authorial intent, and narrative guideposts like motivation no longer supply guarantees or fit dictatorial structures. What can we learn from exploring the fundamental aporia surrounding the iconic and indexical images of blackness? What can be learned from looking at motivation and excess at work in an African American art film like *Bush Mama*?

Motivation and Excess

In defense of black avant-garde cinematic practice, bell hooks has argued that, “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.”⁴⁷ *Bush Mama* has a plot. What gets complicated is the manner in which this plot unfolds.

Take for example the first scene where T.C. directly addresses the camera from prison. The dialogue is supposed to be from a letter he wrote Dorothy, but Gerima chooses to relay the letter’s content by a soliloquy-like scene. But as T.C. stares at the camera from behind bars, the camera slowly tracks to the right, down the row of prison cells. This long take moves from T.C. to show several other prisoners who stare at the camera (though one prisoner has his back turned) as T.C. continues to speak. (Figs. 4-8 to 4-13.) Robert Stam and Ella Shohat have described Gerima’s similar use of this technique in his film *Sankofa* (1993). They relate it to an idea of a community of gazes.

⁴⁷ Bell Hooks, *Reel to Real: Race, Sex, and Class at the Movies* (New York: Routledge, 1996), 102.

“Gerima repeatedly pans over friezes of Black faces, evoking an ocular chorus, bypassing an individualizing point-of-view structure to evoke a community of the gaze.”⁴⁸ Spike Lee has used similar techniques, most recently in *25th Hour* (2002) and *She Hate Me* (2004). (I will discuss this question of gazes and looking below.)



Figure 4-8. T.C. behind bars sets the pan in motion.



Figure 4-9. The pan slows down briefly to focus on each prisoner’s gaze.

⁴⁸ Robert Stam and Ella Shohat, *Unthinking Eurocentrism: Multiculturalism and the Media*, ed. Ella Shohat and Robert Stam (New York: Routledge, 1994), 296.



Figure 4-10. The pan continues from prisoner...

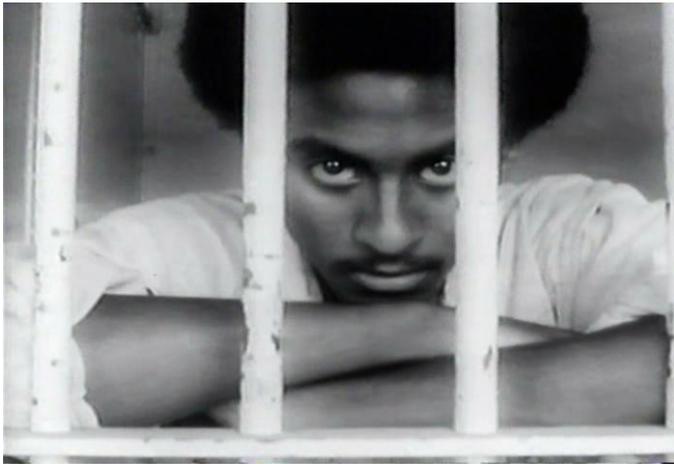


Figure 4-11. ... to prisoner...



Figure 4-12. ...from look to look...



Figure 4-13. ...until a prisoner's back interrupts the pattern.



Figure 4-14. The cut to Dorothy's close-up.

The pan over the men's faces ends with an edit to a close-up of Dorothy looking through a window (fig. 4-14). The chronology of this close-up is ambiguous. Instead it functions stylistically: She *too* looks directly at the camera, and the edit implicitly associates her with the men in prison. This of course foreshadows her eventual fate in the narrative. But it is the scene's relationship to all of the other direct addresses, and their relationship to other manifestations of looks and looking that, I argue, overpowers their narrative status. These shots begin to exceed attention to realism and autonomy, and stress their large-scale motivational purpose: Who is addressed in these looks?

The filmmakers? The audience? Which audience? How is the audience cued to understand these images? How do they function scene by scene? How do they function in the film as a whole? What is their ultimate effect?

One minor, but interesting scene takes place after Dorothy visits a friend who offers her a slice of pie. This eating scene brings to mind Kristin Thompson's description of one way films exceed motivation, the second out of her list of four: where a device is on screen longer than it needs to serve its narrative purpose. This scene goes on for a long time, for no obvious reason. We could speculate on Dorothy's financial situation, and her need for food, but neither problem is ever explicitly stated, other than by her initial claim to want to take half of the pie home to Luann. We just watch her sit and eat (fig. 4-15). It becomes another situation where we simply look at Dorothy. The looking motif repeats to the point of fitting Thompson's description of the fourth way films exceed motivation: repetition that outweighs initial motivation or compositional function.⁴⁹



Figure 4-15. Dorothy eats the pie.

⁴⁹ Thompson, 294.

The shot continues for an extended, non-motivated amount of time. But this phenomenon doesn't stand out, because throughout most of the film, we as viewers are positioned to stare at Dorothy on the screen, sometimes motivated by voice-over narration, sometimes not. Sometimes, as in this case, we stare for an almost uncomfortable amount of time. But the repetition of the looking motif is beginning to exceed motivational limitations. This motif inevitably brings up one of film studies's cornerstone concepts and critiques: Laura Mulvey's analysis of the gaze (specifically, male) in cinema, and questions of fetishism.

Mulvey's "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" was a watershed event in film studies. The influence of that essay has marked all discussions about looking in relation to the motion picture screen, and the ideological, psychological effects of these gazes. In "Visual Pleasure," Mulvey identifies Hollywood looking relationships as controlling and male, while women are positioned as objects to be looked at. Within these relationships, she analyzes the implicit psychoanalytical operations of fetishism and scopophilia.

Michelle Wallace, who acknowledges Mulvey's influence on her thinking about the problem of the visual in black popular culture, finds other problems to consider. She argues, "when posed in psychoanalytic terms in which the formation of the subject is not historicized, the problem of the gaze has become a source of irritation to those who wish to propose alternative subjectivities on the grounds of race, ethnicity, sexuality, or class."⁵⁰ Wallace suggests examining more than looks that seek to master images. Her

⁵⁰ Wallace, 224.

desire is to “open up a space or an aporia” where such theorization can take place.⁵¹

Take for example, her descriptions of Spike Lee’s visual approach:

The singular importance of Spike Lee’s films has to do with the astounding uniqueness (given its context in the history of Hollywood films) of its vision of black people. *Do The Right Thing* or any other of Lee’s films ... are first and foremost about looking at black people before they are about anything else. Second, they are about black people finally seizing the means of imagining their own image.⁵²

Throughout *Bush Mama*, close-ups of black people linger, and the looking relationship is reciprocated through extensive use of direct address. The whole question of the gaze is doubled in these shots. The following series of close-ups of Dorothy, though sometimes accompanied by voice-overs, appear at different points in the film. Yet, they have no other chronological or definitive context (Fig. 4-16 to 4-20). Again and again, through seemingly random shots, Dorothy looks *while* being an object of the gaze.



Figure 4-16. Some of Dorothy’s looks are direct addresses.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 225.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 308.



Figure 4-17. Other shots are more voyeuristic.



Figure 4-18. Some images accompany voice-overs.



Figure 4-19. Other images appear as parts of montage sequences.



Figure 4-20. All of the preceding examples lack strong narrative motivation.

One close-up in particular stands out. Dorothy stands by a window, as the curtains blow gently, and light plays against her face (fig. 4-21). It brings to mind similar shots of Dorothy's face covered by the curtain shadows, as she stands by windows (fig. 4-16 and 4-17, among others). But, *photogénie* is strongest in this shot than any other moment in the film.



Figure 4-21. The *photogénie* close-up.

The question of looking and being looked at is addressed directly in one of the film's most interesting scenes. Through a series of crosscuts, Dorothy examines a poster in the room. The eyes of the woman in the poster look directly out from the

picture. This phenomenon causes the familiar illusion that wherever one goes in the room the eyes in the picture seem to follow you with their gaze. Dorothy walks back and forth, and the poster seems to follow her, refusing to look away from her (figures 4-22 to 4-26). This scene sets up a critical counter-example of audience looking relations.



Figure 4-22. Dorothy looks at the poster...



Figure 4-23. ...and begins to suspect she is being stared at...



Figure 4-24...by the gaze of the woman in the poster.



Figure 4-25.The interaction ends in extreme close-up...



Figure 4-26. ...strongly linking the two women's images.

And, the interplay between Dorothy and the woman in the poster is finally solidified in the scene where Dorothy kills a police officer she discovers raping Luann. Involving the tension between realism and stylization, the rape scene is shown through high contrast, slow motion, stepped-optical printing. This process slows down our viewing. It is only when Dorothy begins to stab the officer with her umbrella that the film print returns to normal. She repeatedly stabs him, while the lighting highlights the poster on the wall, keeping both in the frame for most of the shot until the camera zooms in on Dorothy's hands as they stab (fig. 45).



Figure 4-27. Dorothy kills the policeman.

On the politics of looking, bell hooks writes, "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."⁵³ And with Gerima's images fetishized, overvalued, and over-determined, meanings double and exist in tension. These images embody both

⁵³ Bell Hooks, *Reel to Real: Race, Sex, and Class at the Movies* (New York: Routledge, 1996), 72-73.

negation and affirmation, and one occasionally calls upon the filmmaker's intent to determine if a film favors one interpretation over another. But can, or should, these determinations be completely successful? And in the case of *Bush Mama*, formal qualities sometimes challenge traditional narrative structures, mixing avant-garde filmic practice with documentary forms, not letting one overpower the other.

Attention, looking (or the cinematic gaze), as concepts, do not belong to one particular theoretical approach. Laura Mulvey, Michele Wallace, and Kristen Thompson all have varied approaches to looking-relations. For Mulvey, the female spectator should turn to the enigma of the screen, not to the enigma of the "woman."

I have argued recently that the concept of female spectatorship should be theorized to include the drive of curiosity as a critical response to the lure of voyeurism. The image on the screen becomes an enigma to decipher: "why these sounds and these images?"⁵⁴

These questions, "why these sounds, why these images?" bring up issues around iconic criteria. It is possible to see the importance of analyzing the black image on screen in all its aporetic glory. The image from this perspective is not simply the object of gazing, but the received subject of curiosity and attention.⁵⁵

Excessive Pleasures: To See With Wonder

When Du Bois spoke earlier in the century about the protocol of "double consciousness," he was gesturing toward a duality of cultural fields metamorphosed by "African" and "American." Though the former term had been used in self-reference to the American Negro long before Du Bois's era and would be again in our own, Du Bois was working under the assumption that "Africa" more than vaguely signaled the origins of black culture. It is also noteworthy that his provocative claims, barely elaborated beyond that short paragraph that the student knows virtually by heart, cross

⁵⁴ Laura Mulvey, "The Hole and the Zero: Godard's Visions of Femininity," in *Jean-Luc Godard: son + image, 1974-1991*, ed. Raymond Bellour, Mary Lea Bandy, Laurence Kardish, Barbara London, Colin MacCabe (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1992), 40.

⁵⁵ *Theoria* in the greek sense of witnessing or seeing (receiving).

their wires with the specular and the spectacular -- the sensation of looking at oneself and of imagining oneself being looked at through the eyes of the other/another is precisely performative in what it demands of a participant on the other end of the gaze.... It was not enough to be seen; one was called upon to decide what it meant. To that degree, Du Bois's idea posed a route to self-reflexivity.⁵⁶

My analysis of the soul of black cinema as excess might be, in some small way, an example of what Noël Carroll calls "demonstrative criticism." Using Bazin's analysis of deep focus cinematography as an example, he writes, "The point of demonstrative criticism is to call attention to the variables that make aesthetic experiences possible. The idea is that by encouraging audiences to dwell on certain features of the work in a certain way, audiences will undergo the relevant experiences."⁵⁷ Bazin's analysis guided viewers in their appreciation of neorealism, Jean Renoir, and Orson Welles. And what about aporia? Can aporia be understood as a particular type of film experience? As Derrida asks, "Is an experience possible that would not be an experience of the aporia?"⁵⁸

Though my aporetic analysis shares little with conventional psychoanalytic film analysis, it remains open to the same criticisms. For example, Carroll identifies "a conceptual constraint on psychoanalysis; it is restricted to dealing with phenomena that cannot be explained by other means."⁵⁹ Theorists of all stripes have debated this claim, and I'll leave it to them for now. But, consider Sarah Kofman's analysis of the sophists

⁵⁶ Hortense J. Spillers, *Black, White, and in Color: Essays on American Literature and Culture* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), 397.

⁵⁷ Noël Carroll, *Beyond Aesthetics: Philosophical Essays* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 42.

⁵⁸ Jacques Derrida, *Aporias*, trans. Thomas Dutoit (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1993), 15.

⁵⁹ Noël Carroll, "Prospects for Film Theory," *Post Theory*, ed. David Bordwell and Noël Carroll (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1996), 65.

use of aporetic discourse as an alternative to both psychoanalysis and demonstrative criticism, and an introduction of pleasure and wonder to the task of the critic:

When they relate to the sensible world, these aporia are false wonders, childish difficulties which are easily resolved. But when the contradictions of the one and the many are applied at the level of ideas themselves, the aporia are true wonders. They are wonderfully stupefying, seem to be inextricable, and give rise to endless discussion.⁶⁰

Neither aporia nor excess belong to singular theoretical discussions or philosophical approaches. Critics and theorists as diverse as David Bordwell and Stephen Heath have found valuable ways to approach excess.

Is the third meaning a theory of a particularly extreme type of film experience? How do we avoid folding a third meaning back into representation, ignoring aporetic effects? Do we want to keep the obtuse meaning from becoming another obvious meaning in another narrative (or written discourse) like a term in a dialectical chain? What have we learned from looking at *Bush Mama* in this fashion? I believe much can be learned from work on the edge of the “black tradition,” where difference is marked by what Jaffa calls “polyventiality,”⁶¹ without denying the influence of African antecedents, or romanticizing a stable, always articulated, always identifiable autonomy. By exploring the issue of soul as pleasure in critical and cinematic excess as an approach to black art films, I am also interested in an improvising, evolving, signifying, alive, and unfinished black aesthetic: aporetic, and filled with wonder.

⁶⁰ Sarah Kofman, “Beyond Aporia?,” *Post-Structuralist Classics*, ed. Andrew Benjamin (Routledge, London, 1988), 13.

⁶¹ Arthur Jaffa’s term, mentioned earlier, for “multiple tones, multiple rhythms, multiple perspectives, multiple meanings, multiplicity”, Jaffa, 253.

CHAPTER 5
ALTER-DESTINIES



Figure 5-1. John Cage Meets Sun Ra (Meltdown Records, 1986).

An Aporetic Discourse on African American Art Cinema

“The Potential”

Beyond other thought and other worlds
Are the things that seem not to be
And yet are.
How impossible is the impossible
Yet the impossible is a thought
And every thought is real
An idea, a flash of intuition's fire
A seed of fire that can bring to be
The reality of itself.
Beyond other thought and other words
Are the potentials...
That hidden circumstance
And pretentious chance
Cannot control.¹

¹ One of the poems read by Sun Ra on Christmas Day, 1976 on Pennsylvania's radio station WXPB. Quoted in John E. Szwed's *Space is the Place: The Lives and Times of Sun Ra* (New York: Pantheon, 1997), 326.

Like the collaborative pairing of Ornette Coleman and Jacques Derrida that began Chapter One, the 1986 performance featuring Sun Ra and John Cage provides me another moment of reflection (fig. 5-1). This project has been guided by certain encounters and juxtapositions, arguments, debates, observations, and conversations, sometimes brought together by chance, sometimes linked by motivic chains of thought and theory. Like Coleman and Derrida, Ra and Cage share certain aesthetic and philosophical concerns. These include shared interests in the generative power of chance, the blurred distinctions between audience and performer, the social impact of art, and an appreciation of surprise and mystery.²

Free Jazz and European inspired experimental music developed side by side on New York's Lower East Side, and it seems inevitable that the two phenomena would occasionally share the stage. In 1986, John Cage and Sun Ra were invited to the Coney Island Museum to perform at a benefit for a new record label, Meltdown Records. As John Szwed describes, the two “musical architects who independently invented modern noise” were perfectly matched. “Beyond what they shared in their roles in musical history, Cage and Sun Ra were both great talkers, masters of anecdotal wisdom, as well as self-mystifiers and priests of small but very influential musical cults.”³ Though they had not met before, Ra had once described Cage as “the most important Euro-American composer,” and Ra's music was recommended to Cage by friends.⁴ On stage at the same time, for the most part, they took turns performing. Ra played

² Szwed, 232.

³ *Ibid.*, 356.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 356-357.

keyboard, read poetry, and only briefly played behind Cage. Later, when asked about performing with Ra, Cage replied, “they had not played together.”⁵

This separateness gives the recorded performance a collage feel. This spirit of collage has been a guiding force in the previous chapters. Though juxtaposing discourses is a common research strategy, I propose, however, to further tap the potential of the soul motif, pushing the juxtapositions to the point of aporia, where they no longer comfortably “play together.” If the previous chapter points out the limits of “excess” for black film analysis, this chapter asks, “if excess *can* have limits (borderlines, aporia), is there *more*, beyond excess?” Two particular research questions arise: 1) can an aporetic discourse be applied to a black film? 2) what knowledge would this discourse contribute to black film studies?

In his discussion of plural figures of aporia, Jacques Derrida describes one figure as “the impossible, the impossibility, as what cannot pass [*passer*] or come to pass [*se passer*]: it is not even the *non-pas*, the non-step, but rather the deprivation of the *pas* (the privative form would be a kind of *a-pas*).”⁶ Sun Ra often expressed an interest in the “impossible,” “the void,” and pushing against the limitations of what's possible. Since the 1950s, his “intergalactic Arkestra,” pushed against the limits of jazz music. He also pushed against the limits of categories. A composer, band leader, keyboardist, poet, and to some a philosopher, as well, Sun Ra also claimed to be an extraterrestrial from Saturn, calling his music “Space music.”

⁵ *Ibid.*, 356-357.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 23.

Sun Ra's "Alter-Destiny" motif⁷ also challenges categorical limits and path constraints. Graham Lock defines "Alter-Destiny" as Ra's vision of the future, which Lock describes as an "alter(native) destiny to the Christian notion of heaven."⁸ "Alter" is of course Latin for "other." One could read Alter-Destiny as "another destiny," or as the "destiny of the other," or possibly as the site of the possibility of the impossible, the void, or the unforeseen from which the Other emerges. If motivic-chains use motifs to conduct research directions, I wish to think of Alter-Destines as possible spaces (or sites) for fruitful research.

For example, suppose we revisit Haile Gerima's *Bush Mama* in search of other spaces, other points of entry, sites of the "possibility of the impossible." Gerima named his theoretical approach "Triangular Cinema." Triangular Cinema consists of three levels:

1. Community (audience)
2. Storyteller
3. Activist

He writes,

[T]he achievements of the sporadic, spontaneous creative outburst of the 60s and early 70s will be endangered, becoming static, without any guarantee of their perpetuation. There cannot exist an African American cinema aesthetic without the realization of this evolutionary dynamic, and without any dialectical relationship between storyteller, audience and activist.⁹

⁷ See, for instance, Sun Ra's, "I Am the Alter-Destiny," from the *Space is the Place: Soundtrack*, Evidence Records, 1974. Ra also repeats this phrase several times in the film, *Space is the Place* (John Coney, 1974).

⁸ Graham Lock, *Blutopia: Visions of the Future and Revisions of the Past in the Work of Sun Ra, Duke Ellington, and Anthony Braxton* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1999), 33.

⁹ Gerima, Haile, "Triangular Cinema", in *Questions of Third Cinema*, ed. Jim Pines and Paul Willemen (London: British Film Institute, 1989), 69.

Gerima's concern with questions of form and aesthetics as they relate to political and social concerns is clear. In this triad, the storyteller must innovate and experiment "in order to achieve a higher aesthetic transformation." Creating a synthesized, collective, "communal cinematic language" is the goal of his "positive dialectic."¹⁰ But, if the triangular relationship between community, storyteller, and activist is non-oppositional, the innovation and experimentation is in definitive opposition to commercial, hegemonic film industry and film language. The community is viewed as "Hollywood's" victim of industrial practices. He calls for "a deliberate and calculated separation from the established film industry," and "ideological clarity among the African American film community..."¹¹ But, taking into account figural issues, how calculated can Gerima ultimately be, how controlling?¹²

In *Bush Mama's* final scene, after killing the police officer, Dorothy stands in front of the poster of an Angolan woman looking at the camera, holding a gun and a child in her arms. Dorothy looks directly into the camera (the poster, slightly out of focus behind her, figured prominently in several earlier scenes) (fig. 5-2). The wig Dorothy wears throughout most of the film has come off during the struggle. In a voice-over, Dorothy reads a letter she has written to T. C., we infer, after *she* goes to prison. "The wig is off my head, T.C. The wig is off," she says, signifying the symbolic importance the Gerima

¹⁰ Ibid., 69.

¹¹ Ibid., 70.

¹² Mark A. Reid has noted this purposeful open-ended quality in Gerima's work. "*Bush Mama* resists conventional closures that would reunite Dorothy's family or would permit her to escape her socioeconomic conditions. The film expresses the sentiment that permanent changes in the social system cannot take place within a fictional narrative." See Mark A. Reid, *Redefining Black Film* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993,) 129.

placed on wig motifs throughout the film. Here the absence of the wig symbolizes her political growth.



Figure 5-2. Dorothy in focus with the poster out of focus behind her.

She criticizes T.C. for writing letters in the past that were written in a language she had difficulty understanding. She asks him to “talk to me easy, T.C.” In relation to Gerima’s Triangular Cinema concept, this moment suggests an analogy to the way black filmmakers should approach the question of their work's accessibility to black audiences.

The film freeze-frames, and in a way, the film begins to operate *as if* it were a poster, a direct form of communication (fig. 5-3). In the film's narrative, the poster represents a larger world of political activism, brought into contact with Dorothy, the way T.C. came into contact with books in prison.



Figure 5-3. The camera racks focus, sharpening the poster's image and pulling Dorothy out of focus, as the frame freezes.

Mike Murashige interprets the freeze-frame as the image of Dorothy's completed transformation, "we see how Dorothy herself becomes the photographic evidence embodied in the poster ... a further image of resistance."¹³ Gerima's techniques, Murashige argues, rather than attempting simple documentary realism or abstract experimentalism, "disrupts the audience's tendency to assume the functioning of dominant cinematic codes of representation. Wedged into the gap between documentary and fiction, *Bush Mama* questions the validity of the construction of a monolithic reality."¹⁴

What different "communicative" readings can one get from this final freeze-frame?

1. Scene of consciousness raised.
2. Identification/analogy. (Between Dorothy and woman in the poster. Between audience and Dorothy.)
3. An image frozen for contemplation-control?

¹³ Mike Murashige, "Haile Gerima and the Political Economy of Cinematic Resistance," *Representing Blackness: Issues in Film and Video*, ed. Valerie Smith (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1997), 201.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 201.

4. An art film tradition, *a la* Truffaut's ending in *The 400 Blows*. Or, even better, the freeze frame at the end of Sembene's *Xala*?

These are all recoverable meanings, what Roland Barthes would call first and second meanings. In "The Third Meaning," Barthes explicitly states his lack of interest in the story details, intertextual significations, or narrative connotations, except to the degree that they represent only the obvious and symbolic levels of meaning. Instead, he focuses on those points that exceed obvious or symbolic meaning, named interchangeably third meanings or obtuse meanings. He writes, "I even accept, for this obtuse meaning, the word's pejorative connotation: the obtuse meaning seems to extend beyond culture, knowledge, information."¹⁵ Admitting the ridiculousness of third meanings, and its limited use for conventional criticism, he associates them with "the family of pun, buffoonery, useless expenditure."¹⁶ Indifferent to both morality and aesthetics, they are carnivalesque.

He describes the third meaning as "a signifier without signified," keeping his reading "suspended between the image and its description, between definition and approximation. If we cannot describe the obtuse meaning, this is because, unlike the obvious meaning, it copies nothing: how to describe what represents nothing?"¹⁷ The third meaning's value for criticism is constantly complicated by Barthes who writes, "what the obtuse meaning disturbs, sterilizes, is meta-language (criticism)."¹⁸ He continues, and I find this point to be key,

¹⁵ Roland Barthes, 55.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 55.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 55.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 55.

Everything we can say about *Ivan* or *Potemkin* can be said about a written text (which would be called *Ivan the Terrible* or *The Battleship Potemkin*), except this -- which is the obtuse meaning.¹⁹

Is there little wonder, then, that more than thirty years later, very little work in film studies has followed this path, which Barthes claimed addressed “a major problem of our time”?²⁰ Is it any wonder that very little work on black cinema has found this path worth considering? Yet, as I've argued in the previous chapter, Gerima's formal and theoretical approaches invite third meanings, even as his narratives seek to guide the viewer in certain directions politically. His films are marked by levels of figuration that cannot be reduced to articulated language, or to simple conflicts of motivated interests. One approach to third meanings is consider them aporias, puzzles. But first, we should distinguish between aporias as puzzles, and conventional critical problem solving methods common in film analysis.

Stephen Prince's critique of psychoanalytic film theory is instructive. Instead of subject position driven theories, Prince proposes research based on attention and attentiveness, writing “Conceptualizing attention as a multilevel process and researching spectatorship from that angle, rather than in terms of a unifocal drive, can help bring our theories more in line with the available empirical evidence on film viewing.”²¹ Inspired by Frank Biocca's psychological studies,²² Prince suggests tracking the viewer's “multiple levels of information processing” and consequent “interpretive

¹⁹ Ibid., 64-65.

²⁰ Ibid., 62.

²¹ Stephen Prince, "Psychoanalytic Film Theory and the Problem of the Missing Spectator," *Post Theory*, ed. David Bordwell and Noël Carroll (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1996), 78.

²² See Frank Biocca, “Viewers' Mental Modes of Political Messages: Toward a Theory of the Semantic Processing of Television,” in *Television and Political Advertising*, vol. 1, Psychological Processes, ed. Frank Biocca (Hillsdale, N.J.: Lawrence Erlbaum, 1991), 27-89.

moves.”²³ Ultimately arguing that even though other theoretical approaches may pay close attention to detail, they also lack precision:

By employing the constructs of “attention” and “attentiveness,” film scholars can formulate investigable problems. Indeed, we ought to stipulate as a criteria of future theory building that postulated theories be able to generate researchable questions.... [M]any film scholars employing psychoanalytic theory seem interested in abstract and ideal, as opposed to actual, viewers.²⁴

Certainly, Prince would conclude my approach lacks such precision as well. Fortunately, there *are* “multiple levels of information processing” and consequent “interpretive moves.”: in this case, leading toward figuration, curiosity, puzzlement, or aporia. After reading the first (informational) meaning and the second (symbolic) meaning, Barthes asks himself, “Is this all? No, for I cannot yet detach myself from the image.”

Here is the first puzzle: what remains of *Bush Mama's* last scene? Intertextuality: that extra-textual boundary that often guarantees meaning or reference, if only located elsewhere, can also invite aporia by the inherent possibility of indifference. Let's consider the poster, the woman with the gun and the child, ostensibly the “bush mama” of the film's title. We've already considered the literal and symbolic meaning represented, which includes the intertextual context of the liberation struggles still active at the time of the film's production.

Yet, an additional level of information remains for me. This poster is seen several times throughout the film, its meaning sometimes mysterious, or playful, as the woman

²³ Prince, 79.

²⁴ Ibid.,

in the poster seems to watch, and at times judge the film's characters (fig. 5-4). Sometimes, she is becomes the subject of conversation (fig. 5-5).



Figure 5-4. The poster appears frequently in *Bush Mama*.



Figure 5-5. Angie and the poster.

But, for me she is also a background “character” in another film altogether. This same poster appears several times in Larry Clark's *Passing Through* (1977) (Fig. 51-52). What to do with this information? We could start with the obvious. The films were produced around the same time. Gerima and Clark were classmates at UCLA. The posters were available to activists and others in Los Angeles (Angie, Luann's friend gives them the poster after going to a protest rally), and may have in fact been

ubiquitous in certain circles. The poster was a convenient way to dress up the locations with political and cultural iconography. Symbolically, the poster's appearance extends both plots' intertextual politics. All these things are obvious possibilities and probabilities.



Figure 5-6. *Passing Through* (Clark, 1977).



Figure 5-7. The poster reappears in *Passing Through*.

Yet, the poster distracts me in *Passing Through*. It remains background material, never entering the storyline proper, but insistently present as reference to *Bush Mama*, indifferent to the filmmaker's intent either way. The poster remains a point of curiosity for me in *Passing Through* even as it serves as a major metaphorical object in *Bush Mama*,

henceforth a bit unstable yet present. A completely subjective puzzlement, offering useless, perhaps unresearchable, questions. An excess, though not really a third meaning.

So what do we make of even more esoteric images? Take for example, the image of Dorothy standing by the window as the wind blows through the curtain (fig. 53). I noted in the last chapter the image's *photogénie*. Though it is accompanied by voice-over, the image's quiet visual power remains excessive or narratively supplemental. For me it is one of the film's strongest cinephiliac moments.²⁵



Figure 5-8. Aporia and photogénie.

There is urgency in black film criticism that finds such “useless expenditures” unattractive. But can black film criticism really afford to ignore the untidy aporetic, signifying, and figural elements that exist when viewing films? Even when an African American is responsible for producing the images, does “black art” stop where meaning

²⁵ The documentary “effect” in film encourages cinephiliac explorations of the images themselves, without the feeling of overt guidance by the filmmakers. (Though only the most naïve audience members would mistake this “feeling” with true freedom to navigate the image: all films are framed, or controlled to some degree, in the act of photographing them, no matter how much automatism is inherent to the medium.)

is obtuse; at the point Barthes describes as “filmic ... where language and articulated metalanguage cease”?²⁶

Here is another puzzle: I turn to the heart of the matter, the ultimate intentional aporia, black cinema itself.

The Black Film Does Not Exist

Cinematic representation is inherently problematic in at least two senses. To describe the first sense, one can take the appearance of the “black image” to be paradigmatic of the cinematic image. Each appearance of a black image to an eye is an appearance of every black insofar as “black identity” is a historical project predicated upon a substitution that implies an aporia. A present perception of a black tends toward cliché because each appearance of a black to an eye is recognized as an appearance of the Black, a memory-image commonly available to memory during perception. The problem that the Black *is* is common sense. Cinema and cinematic processes make this historically unprecedented mode of subject predication, that of the Black, into a general condition of existence. Each appearance of an image to an eye is a “problem,” perceptible as common sense. In this case, the problem is that of representation.²⁷

There have been several important texts addressing the difficulty defining black film: Thomas Cripps's *Black Film as Genre*, Mark A. Reid's *Redefining Black Film*, Tommy Lott's “A No-Theory Theory Of Contemporary Black Cinema,” Gladstone Yearwood's “Towards a Theory of Black Cinema Aesthetics,” and Clyde Taylor's “Black Cinema Aesthetics.” All argue against biologically determined definitions in favor of ideologically constructed criteria.²⁸ And, for the most part, these writers agree on open-ended definitions, approximate rather than definitive. Yet, one is left wondering: is “what

²⁶ Barthes, 64.

²⁷ Kara Keeling, *The Witch's Flight: The Cinematic, the Black Femme, and the Image of Common Sense* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007), 43.

²⁸ Tommy L. Lott associates this skepticism with DuBois: “For DuBois, the problem stems from the fact that there is no agreement about how best to define a black person, although there is some sense in which we all operate with some ideas about what constitutes black identity.” See Tommy Lott's “A No-Theory Theory Of Contemporary Black Cinema.” *Black American Literature Forum*, Volume 25, Number 2 (Summer 1991): 230.

is black film?” even the right question to ask? As Tommy Lott muses, “I suspect that film criticism has not offered much assistance in clarifying the concept *black cinema* because there exist no uncontested criteria to which an ultimate appeal can be made to resolve these underlying issues.”²⁹

As I point out in Chapter One, Yearwood argues that confronting definitional concerns must precede theorizing black cinema aesthetics. He identifies three common definitional dead-ends: iconic criteria, indexical criteria, and intentional criteria. All, he argues, fail to sufficiently ground black films aesthetically. In the previous chapters, I have added my own analysis and critique to his definitional review, suggesting ways they might contribute to an understanding of soul in black cinema by emphasizing their more excessive possibilities, and internal contradictions. Yearwood's own proposed theoretical foundation for black cinema, and black cinema aesthetics, utilizes evaluative criteria grounded in the long history of semiotic film theory.³⁰

Yearwood, as I note in Chapter One, readdresses the debate around black film aesthetics by exploring the usefulness of Gates's analysis of signifying practices for theorizing black films. Yearwood argues that contemporary film theories of signification, though prominent, have found little use in signification's history as a two centuries old black vernacular tradition.³¹ Applying Gates's theory in conjunction with semiotics is one strategy for studying signification in black cinema. Yearwood's primary interest in semiotics revolves around the idea of signs as cultural phenomena, suggesting, “the

²⁹ Ibid., 201.

³⁰ Yearwood, “Theory of Black Cinema”, 70.

³¹ Gladstone L. Yearwood, *Black Film as a Signifying Practice: Cinema, Narration and the African-American Aesthetic Tradition* (Trenton: Africa World Press, Inc., 2000), 115.

criteria for understanding the signs within a particular culture are properly located within that culture.”³²

Yearwood warns against relying on conventional criteria when studying black independent films. Instead, evaluation must address “the cultural context of African American history and culture, its signifying processes and its idiosyncratic strategies of narrative construction.” In this way the criticism will be grounded in “the material conditions of a culture especially as they provide formal parameters for the production of meaning.”³³ But, he also stresses that culture and tradition are dynamic processes. Semiotics can examine these “signs-in-process” and the “ever shifting relationship between signifier and signified.”³⁴ Both Gates and Yearwood understand signifying practices through a practice of close reading.

It is an ambitious and illuminating bridging of formalism and cultural identity. For Yearwood, black film is:

Any film whose signifying practices or whose making of symbolic images emanates from an essential cultural matrix deriving from a collective black socio-cultural and historical experience and uses black expressive traditions as a means through which artistic languages are mediated. These said traditions are transformed in the artistic process and only serve as a point of departure for the artist. Essentially, this definition claims that a black film must develop out of a black socio-cultural experience which is not only formal but substantial; and must emerge out of a historical experience. Only through a focus upon the film itself, and its process of production can one truly find black cinema. There is a rejection of simple iconic criteria and an affirmative of the importance of the material conditions of black cinema.³⁵

³² Ibid., 117.

³³ Ibid., 117.

³⁴ Ibid., 119.

³⁵ Yearwood, “Theory of Black Cinema”, 70-71. Italics in original.

To accurately assess this definition, we must first clarify what he means by “signifying practices.” He explains, “Signifying practices is the process through which the symbol is constructed and elaborated as language. It is the way in which we make our films, the sum of cinematic languages, aural and visual languages, languages of color, and languages of imagery.”³⁶ These signifying practices reveal social relations. This makes them an important part of an oppositional concept of black film.³⁷

Next, we take a closer look at the “symbolic images” that will construct black films as he sees them. Many of these will be drawn from “black folk traditions,” poetry, and music.³⁸ These are the same sources that attracted Langston Hughes and other young Harlem writers and visual artists. Yearwood notes that these are also the sources the black middle class shy away from (think of DuBois reaction to Hughes and the *Fire!!* contributors). This privileging of “symbolic images” does beg legitimate questions: Does a particular folk tradition dominate? Does it limit the perspective on a complex notion of “black culture”? And, when does the fear of stereotypes hold merit here? Is there only room for jazz influences that swing? Who decides which struggle for “survival”³⁹ is to be allowed recognition as part of the symbolic images of “black culture”?

Though both Gates and Yearwood acknowledge certain degrees of indeterminacy (which Gates relates to the figure of Esu in Yoruba mythology, a model for critics in the black tradition) and “textual remains,” both seem to depend on the

³⁶ Ibid., 73.

³⁷ Ibid., 73.

³⁸ Ibid., 79.

³⁹ Clyde Taylor's understanding of soul-as-black aesthetic, see “Ain't We Still Got Soul?,” *Soul: Black Power, Politics, and Pleasure*, ed. Monique Guillory and Richard C. Green (New York: New York University Press, 1998), 273.

hermeneutic of the black tradition to clean up all textual untidiness, excess, or remains, through recourse to intertextuality -- the meaning is out there, elsewhere, even if it is difficult to define within the text -- or through an analysis of double meanings, or irresolvable binaries. But, as I've suggested with my analysis of *Bush Mama* and *Passing Through* above, I am also interested in different levels of indeterminacy, an indifferent intertextuality associated with excess and Barthes's third meaning.

Yearwood successfully utilizes the rich history and practice of semiotics in film studies. But he doesn't explore the long history of theorizing figuration in film studies. And, my own desire to explore the similarities and differences between Gates's use of figuration and figuration's historical role in film studies, is not to find some close analogy, but to see if the juxtaposition of such varying ideas about figuration can provide me with a fresh utilization of figuration for film studies beyond what Yearwood seemed willing to risk.

These symbolic images complement aesthetic concerns. As we've seen, Clyde Taylor remains suspicious of apolitical aesthetic criteria. Lott also questions the process of identifying "black aesthetic" criteria.

Incorporating aesthetics into a more politicized account of black filmmaking practices would seem to allow critics to evade the narrowness of the essentialist view, but there is some reason to wonder whether this move toward aesthetics would allow the accommodation of a strictly cultural criterion for the definition of black cinema without invoking a notion of "black aesthetics," upon which come reconstituted version of biological essentialism may again be reinstated.⁴⁰

The most interesting role in all of these definitions always falls to issues of reception and the tastes of "black audiences." Yearwood, having established a semiotic approach,

⁴⁰ Lott, 222.

theoretically strong enough to ground an aesthetic practice, suggests that ultimately, the audience must confirm or deny “the efficacy of black cinema.”⁴¹ The relationships between the points in Gerima’s Triangular Cinema (filmmaker, critics, and community) are far from ideal. Lott highlights this tenuous dialectic.

Although some film commentators have attempted to acknowledge the disparity between the aesthetic values of black audiences and the aesthetic values of filmmakers and critics, film criticism generally tends to adhere to a top-down view of aesthetics, as though audiences have no role to play in the determination of aesthetic values. What the black audience appeal of blaxploitation films (old and new) indicates, against the wishes of many film critics, is that it is misguided to suppose that a filmic work of art, or entertainment, has black audience appeal simply because it aims for a black audience by promoting certain black aesthetic values.⁴²

Lott's definitional approach, his “no-theory theory” addresses the aporia of “black film.” He writes,

I call this a no-theory theory because I see no need to resolve, on aesthetic grounds, the dispute over what counts as blaxploitation. Neither do I see a need to choose between realist and avant-garde film techniques.” I am more interested in understanding how any aesthetic strategy can be employed to challenge, disrupt, and redirect the pervasive influence of Hollywood's master narrative. To accomplish this decidedly political objective, black filmmaking practices must continue to be fundamentally concerned with the issues that presently define the political struggle of black people. Hence, I want to advance a theory of black cinema that is in keeping with those filmmaking practices that aim to foster social change, rather than participate in a process of formulating a definition of black cinema which allows certain films to be canonized on aesthetic grounds so as to occupy a place in the history of cinema. The theory we need now is a political theory of black cinema that incorporates a plurality of aesthetic

⁴¹ Yearwood, “Theory of Black Cinema,” 81.

⁴² Lott, 228. He elaborates, critiquing the elite status of black art cinema, “How can we best understand the fact that films which aim to present a more authentic black aesthetic are largely ignored by and unknown to black audiences, while being extremely well-received in elite white film circles? Despite their admirable political orientation, such films seem to have achieved the status of art-for-art's sake, with mainly an all-white audience appeal,” 228.

values which are consistent with the fate and destiny of black people as a group engaged in a protracted struggle for social equality.⁴³

This open-ended definition is tempered by the political determinism of its “no-theory.” Even the call for “a plurality of aesthetics” is vulnerable to Clyde Taylor's assertion that “we can see how the apparently progressive notion of multiple aesthetics only perpetuates a system where some institutionalized thought systems are allowed to go unmarked as general, even universal concepts, while branches are allowed as intellectual colonies, whose fates are determined by the 'mother idea.'”⁴⁴ In the end, Lott's definition doesn't fundamentally differ from that of Cripps, Reid, Taylor, or Yearwood. The question really is less “what is black cinema,” than “how do black filmmakers participate in the politics of representation.” Aporia, it seems, only gets in the way, as Clyde Taylor so eloquently writes, confronting the dilemma:

On scrutiny, the indeterminacy around concepts of black cinema is readable as intrinsic to its situation. This instability of definitions and theoretical paradigms reflects the political instability of African-American society. The multiple overlaps and loose ends of its parameters are little different than the contradictions quietly overlooked in the case of national definitions like “American cinema.” The tension between those who feel empowered to articulate and practice “black cinema” as opposed to those who exploit blackness in films merely rehearses an internal dialectic likely to occur among minority or marginalized groups anywhere. Thus is repeated the circumstance that the target of discrimination must carry the burden of representation.⁴⁵

Where does one go from here? “[B]lack is ... black ain't.” This famous phrase from Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* provides the perfect figure for the aporia of black

⁴³ Ibid., 232.

⁴⁴ Taylor, *Masks of Art*, 98.

⁴⁵ Taylor, “Black Cinema Aesthetics,” 405.

cinema.⁴⁶ The “ain’t” in black is ... black ain’t is the negated half of a fragmented figuration of blackness. This negation should be kept in play, keeping the “is” from being so easily agreed upon. This open-ended figuration suggests an experimental, aporetic “identity politics,” based not on absolute knowledge, but on mystery (aporia as “puzzle”) and exploration. But this aporetic identity politics should not be taken as an oppositional position. I’m largely in agreement with, and sympathetic to the writers above. What I propose here is an alternative, an alter-identity politics, where black cinema’s indeterminacy *gives* it a future, an alter-destiny.

The Souls of Black Film: or The Poetics of Black Cinema

In 1973, Donald Bogle, published *Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies and Bucks*. William R. Grant, in his book *Post-Soul Black Cinema: Discontinuities, Innovations, and Breakpoints, 1970-1995* describes Bogle’s book as a watershed moment. “His work can be viewed as the foundation for the critical study and reconstruction of Black cinema history.”⁴⁷ Though more a pop cultural study than an academic analysis, Bogle’s book prefigured the general approach of the scholarship on black film that followed.

Peter Noble’s 1948 book *The Negro in Films* may have been the first extended study of black film, but after Bogle, scholarly work on black film paralleled the growing number of films with black subjects, and/or directed by black filmmakers. 1973 also saw the publication of James P. Murray’s *To Find and Image: Black Films from Uncle Tom to Super Fly*. Also there was Gary Null’s *Black Hollywood: The Negro in Motion Pictures* and Daniel Leab’s *From Sambo to Superspade: The Black Experience in Motion*

⁴⁶ Ralph Ellison, *Invisible Man*, (New York: Random House, 1952), 9.

⁴⁷ William R. Grant, *Post-Soul Black Cinema: Discontinuities, Innovations, and Breakpoints, 1970-1995* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 10.

Pictures both from 1975, and Thomas Cripps's groundbreaking *Slow Fade to Black* in 1977 and *Black Film as Genre* in 1978. Add to these publications the growing number of black students entering the university system, some choosing film studies and film production as their major, and you have the birth of an institutionalized, academic black film studies. Clyde Taylor observed, "By the mid-70s, Black independent cinema, which had experienced a revival in the United States in the 1960s, began searching for a Black cinema aesthetic."⁴⁸ Most of the books published in the 1970s make little to no mention of the contemporary black independent scene and their aesthetic pursuits. Not until the 1980s do we find critical work on the filmmakers's larger aesthetic concerns and suspicions.

What are the consequences of the complementary development of black films and black film studies? In this study, African American "art films" include those independent films by Bill Gunn, Julie Dash, Larry Clark, Haile Gerima, Zeinabu irene Davis, Camille Billops, Charles Burnett, and Ayoka Chenzira, and many others. Much has been written about these hybrid, avant-garde films. Their marginal status results partly from their institutionally limited distribution situations: film festivals, classroom screenings, art house screenings, or worse, rarely screened at all because no new prints or adequate video or DVD transfers exist.

Black film scholars do write about the status of, and general lack of public access to these films. Scholars also grapple with parallel concerns about writing accessibly on non-commercial, often adversarial films. I take seriously arguments defending the importance and necessity of low-cost filmmaking, as well as the belief that all films need

⁴⁸ Taylor, *Mask of Art*, 7.

frames of intelligibility or cultural contexts to have meanings. Black film scholars share a long history of political commitment with many African American art filmmakers. And as writers and scholars they often play an institutionally supportive role.

As black “art film” productions decrease, and are over shadowed by both the success of commercially viable black productions, and the growing low-budget, though conventionally structured straight-to-video/DVD, or online market, how have black film scholars adjusted their perspectives on issues of access, among others? Filmmakers like Julie Dash and Charles Burnett have provided bridges in their aesthetic, and professional careers. If there is still an African American art film, avant-garde, or African American “Third Cinema” anymore, does it matter at all? And what happens to them *now?*

How does the current situation invite new research and writing possibilities for black film studies? bell hooks writes, “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.”⁴⁹ She warns, “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.”⁵⁰ A bold claim, but what are the stakes, really? As a filmmaker, this dissertation has been my attempt to find out.

⁴⁹ Bell Hooks, *Reel to Reel: Race, Sex, and Class at the Movies* (New York: Routledge, 1996), 103.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 105.

It might be useful to turn to Paul Gilroy's writing on black avant-gardes, and Janet Lyon's work on manifestos and their relation to political and aesthetic practice. Manifestos seem to open up spaces for the momentary necessity of formulating "racial," "gendered," and "sexual" place within the space of an avant-garde artistic movement. Manifestos, particularly declarations are a figuration of a public body (or action), or body in action.⁵¹ Avant-garde work, like the manifesto, points to the limitations of the hegemonic/dominant discourse.⁵² It should be noted that the future orientation of manifestos is utopian, and very different from, say, Derrida's take on politics and the future.⁵³

If there is an avant-garde black film, given our aporetic understanding of "black cinema," could it be that it exists in part to challenge the formal assumptions of the adaptation of dominant discourse? Could it also challenge the notion that content or politics alone matter, and all other concerns are irrelevant or untimely? What continues to be an issue is the question of authenticity, even in otherwise post-colonialist, postmodern contexts. I'm interested in addressing "avant-garde practice" (particularly African American variations) to discover if hybridity calls into question assumed or violently imposed homogeneity. Does it call into question binary oppositions and hierarchies and certainty, yet allow for exploring difference and "sameness"?

To reinvigorate the discourse on African American cinema from a perspective of difference, hybridity, and avant-garde practice as a model, and mode of research (a set

⁵¹ Lyon, Janet. *Manifestoes: Provocations of the Modern* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1999), 27.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 3.

⁵³ See Jacques Derrida's *Politics of Friendship*, trans. George Collins (New York: Verso, 1997).

of puzzles?) is a clearly romanticized notion. The goal (if there is one) should not be to valorize avant-garde practice, which remains problematic. Instead, it might be an opportunity to look ahead (*providere*) to a future.

Clearly, what one needs here is a critique, or deconstruction of two varieties of essentialism: Paul Gilroy discerns one as ontological, and the other as strategic: “The ontological essentialist view has often been characterized by a brute pan-Africanism. It has proved unable to specify precisely where the highly prized but doggedly evasive essence of black artistic and political sensibility is currently located...”⁵⁴ He also relates this to a social realist approach that sidesteps the philosophical problems inherent to artistic representation.⁵⁵ He proposes instead “the theorization of creolisation, métissage, mestizaje, and hybridity.”⁵⁶

From the viewpoint of ethnic absolutism, this would be a litany of pollution and impurity. These terms are rather unsatisfactory ways of naming the process of cultural mutation and restless (dis)continuity that exceed racial discourse and avoid capture by its agents.⁵⁷

It could be argued that Gilroy over-privileges music over textual models. He argues that musical culture “provides a model of performance which can supplement and partially displace concern with textuality.”⁵⁸ It remains to be seen if Gilroy can successfully subordinate the “textual model,” or if his apprehension of it maintains coherence. His model performs, instead, a politics of transfiguration (fueled by utopian

⁵⁴ Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993), 31.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 31.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 2.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 2.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 36.

desires) that “necessitates a hermeneutic orientation that can assimilate the semiotic, verbal, and textual.”

The politics of transfiguration strives in pursuit of the sublime, struggling to repeat the unrepeatable, to present the unrepresentable. Its rather different hermeneutic focus pushes towards the mimetic, dramatic, and performative.⁵⁹

For Gilroy, there remains a desperate element, necessarily involved in Black Atlantic critical, aesthetic practice. The desire for tradition holds on tight. He writes, “In particular, the invocation of tradition becomes both more desperate and more politically charged as the sheer irrepressible heterology of black cultures becomes harder to avoid.”⁶⁰ But he goes on to argue that “the black Atlantic [is] a non-traditional tradition, an irreducibly modern, ex-centric, unstable, and asymmetrical cultural ensemble that cannot be apprehended through the Manichean logic of binary coding.”⁶¹ This definition of tradition, in conjunction with the futural politics of the manifesto helps us imagine an black avant-garde practice, radically separate from a simplified idea of authenticity.⁶² “If it can be called a tradition at all, it is a tradition in ceaseless motion—a changing same that strives continually towards a state of self-realization that continually retreats beyond its grasp.”⁶³

By combining discourses and motivic-chains around the motif “soul,” I’ve tried to increase the possible directions, and destinies of black cinema production and

⁵⁹ Ibid., 38.

⁶⁰ Ibid., 194.

⁶¹ Ibid., 198.

⁶² As Bell Hooks writes, “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.” See Hooks, 72.

⁶³ Gilroy, 122.

scholarship. The economy of this “soul” exists in the potentials and pleasures found in attention to aporia. If there is a future to black cinema, let alone an avant-garde one, then, at least, it already includes, or better yet, cannot exclude that which cannot be foreseen, programmed: the interruption of improvisation, and the useless expenditure of excess and obtuse meaning. This attention to the impossible is at least already an echo of the dynamic, productive future, the soul-call, the aporia we dare not, cannot, refuse.

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Franklin David Cason Jr. was born in Winton, North Carolina. In May of 1991, he completed work for the degree of Bachelor of Arts from the School of the Art Institute of Chicago. He continued his graduate studies at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, earning his Master of Fine Arts degree in 1998. While completing his dissertation, he has taught at Hunter College and Queen's College in New York City, as well as Temple University in Philadelphia. Over the years, while developing as a scholar, he has continued his work as an artist, writer, filmmaker, and musician.