

Womanism in Film

Or Why the Technicolor Dream is Still in ~~Black and White~~

“Womanism” is a term used to refer to a movement similar in nature to feminism, except that it attempts to address issues unique to women of color. The fault that many womanists found with feminism was that it tried to speak for every woman when in reality it evolved into a white middle class movement with white middle class leaders, writers and thinkers. Womanism in film, then, is the voice through which many African American filmmakers address issues unique to the experiences of African American women, or address issues through the eyes of African American women.

The problem seems to arise in the mainstream filmmaking culture’s unwillingness to undertake the projects of African American women—especially when they are sincere attempts to make a statement about an experience that could make white audiences (read: producers) uncomfortable. Ally Acker (1991) writes, “For the filmmakers who also happen to be women of color, even when they have made attempts to break their silences, the culture says, if we don’t acknowledge you, then your experience cannot really exist.”

The primary avenue then left available to African American women who want to present their own authentic views on film is independent filmmaking. The challenges are not small: funding must come from oneself, one’s friends and family, and sometimes outside donors and finding help on both sides of the camera requires uniquely dedicated people willing to donate their time and energy to a cause that is important to them. But still the independent filmmakers are out there, trying to change consciousness in as much of the world as they can reach with their underpublicized vehicles.

The best known of these, though perhaps more for her poetry than for her filmmaking, is Maya Angelou. She was the first African American woman to script and write the musical score for a produced motion picture (*Georgia, Georgia* [1972]). She speaks out on issues relevant to understanding between races and sexes and to the advancement of African Americans in the larger culture. For instance, many people view the blaxploitation films of the early 1970s as the first African American films, as their lead characters were supposedly strong people of color. But Angelou vociferously criticized them on several occasions. One of these was in a 1979 *New York Times* interview:

The “blaxploitation” films of the early seventies were not black films. They had nothing to do with being black for the most part, they looked inside the black community, found the lowest elements and emboldened them. Distorted them! The result of that distortion has been a confirmation in the minds of most whites that our people are thugs and exploiters—loveless, lustful and shallow as hell (Acker, 1991).

The image of African Americans held by Hollywood producers fourteen years later seems to buy into these and other stereotypes, if they bother to endow their African American characters with any personalities at all rather than placing them as warm bodies on the screen. The majority of current African American characters are rap artists crossing over into film in the wake of Ice T, and their films seem to perpetuate these stereotypes even more in some cases. The only two well-publicized African American leading women in recent memory are Whitney Houston (*The Bodyguard* [1992]) and Whoopi Goldberg (*Sister Act* [1992]). Spike Lee, the most popular African American filmmaker yet, has been accused of misogyny in several of his films by many womanists (McAlister, 1992).

Euzhan Palcy is one director who reacted to negative stereotyping by deciding to make films herself "to tell the truth about [my] people on the screen." A native of the West Indies, she became the first African American woman filmmaker to direct a feature-length film through the Hollywood system: *A Dry White Season* (1989). The film centers around Ben, a white Afrikaner high school teacher and his black African gardener, Gordon, and their families. Gordon's son is killed in the aftermath of the Soweto uprising while trying to help a wounded girl. Gordon is tortured to death by the Special Branch (kind of a South African Gestapo) when he tries to locate his son's body, and it is at this point that the previously apolitical Ben becomes involved. He, too, is martyred in the film.

Probably because apartheid had become quite a fashionable cause by the late 1980s in the United States, especially among liberal whites, the movie got tremendous amounts of reviews in the popular and political press. Some of these were more positive than others. Proponents of the film agreed that while it may have been a bit predictable, it illustrates the inevitability of everyone being affected by the situation in South Africa, of everyone being involved, and perhaps of the violence there touching every South African (Klawans, 1989). Critics charge that it is melodramatic, pompous and preachy (Blake, 1989). One *proponent* also criticizes its spotlight on a white character and not giving the same depth of range to the script of the black characters (Klawans, 1989). The harshest criticism came from John Simon of the *National Review*, who wrote that the scene in which the villain Afrikaner Special Branch torturer is so easily gunned down by a cab driver/activist "cheapens the small, hard-won advances some few have actually been able to gain" (Simon, 1989).

Filmmakers outside Hollywood have also enjoyed some commercial and critical success. Independent filmmaker Michelle Parkerson's *But Then, She's Betty Carter* (1980), was featured in the 1981 Berlin Film Festival and aired on American public television. Other films by Parkerson have aired on public television and have won awards in this country and abroad. Parkerson is also active in community efforts: she co-chairs the National Coalition of Black Lesbians in Washington, DC, and instructs at several major universities, including Howard University. Saundra Sharp is another independent filmmaker with active community ties: her filmmaking career unfortunately suffered some obstacles from her work with the Black Anti-Defamation Coalition, which she helped form in 1980 to protest the network miniseries *Beulahland* (Acker, 1991).

There are as many different themes running through womanist films as there are filmmakers to make them, but the one that intrigues me the most is the definition of beauty. Our culture has mandated certain boundaries of what is beautiful and what is not, and often women of color do not fit neatly into those boundaries. While white women spend hundreds of dollars

every year on spiral permanent waves to make their hair full, frizzy and curly, African American women have been ignored if not ridiculed because of their hair unless they straighten it. Saundra Sharp's *Back Inside Herself* (1984) and Ayoka Chenzira's *Hairpiece: A Film for Nappy Headed People* (1982) are two wonderful examples of African American women affirming the beauty of their own race and rejecting the rigid rules to which the mainstream (white/male) would-be trendsetters would have us all adhere:

The pioneer Kathleen Collins found Hairpiece important because of its redemptive nature--"important in that her desire to reclaim black women, in a sense, reaffirms black women of their own beauty" (Acker, 1991).

So what is the meaning of all of this, in the grander scheme of academic and personal inquiry into the popular culture of African Americans and their role in the popular culture of America-at-large (which is unquestionably dominated by whites)? A thought has been running through my head during the course of the semester, as I delve deeper into my attempt to understand the history and culture of African Americans and the nature of the oppression their race has undergone—and continues to endure—even in what we consider to be a progressive age. That thought is that I, as a woman who is *not* an African American, am perhaps out of bounds in attempting to write about the African American experience. I am earnest in my desire to understand what I can about this culture which is so different from mine in so many ways, and yet there is a sense in which I know that there are limitations on my ability to understand it. Because culture is such a peculiarly individual and experiential concept, one can never really expect to be able to know anything about a given culture beyond intellectual facts and relating that culture to one's own in some way. It seems to me that there is no way for an individual to escape one's own paradigms, to be able to step outside of one's background far enough to look at a culture from any perspective except that of self-as-standard.

Ironically, as this thought began to take a discrete form in my mind, growing and adapting to new ideas and feelings I gained through this independent study as well as through readings done on my own (a shady line, admittedly), I began to hear other women saying similar things—not about themselves, but about me. Or rather, about the racial group to which I belong: white. Maya Angelou told John J. O'Connor in a *New York Times* interview nearly fourteen years ago that while she doesn't believe that whites should have no control over black images in film, she values the unique insights of African Americans into their own experience:

I don't believe that control of black films must always be in a black person's hands. But any white person involved in a black story should be respectful of the black person's sensibilities on the subject (Acker, 1991).

I suppose my own internalization of this idea is this: while it is all right for me as a white woman to try to learn about the experiences of African Americans, and perhaps even acceptable for me to write and speak about my own understanding of these things, it would not be right for me to try to interpret those experiences for others as something I can really understand fully, as if I were an expert, simply because I have never had those experiences. In her essay "White Privilege and Looking Relations: Race and Gender in Feminist Film Theory," Jane Gaines quotes Marilyn Frye, who says that "middle-class feminists have

historically [tried] to assume responsibility for everyone. To take it upon oneself to rewrite feminist theory so that it encompasses our differences is another exercise of racial privilege" (Frye, 1984; Gaines, 1990a).

For me, this is more than mere academic ethical inquiry. It is a redefinition in my own mind of what is appropriate for me to claim to understand. I cannot claim fairly to understand what it is like to be an African American woman, though I can understand what it is like to be a woman. I think the mistake of many feminists--and others--is to try to claim that their experiences are transferable in significance and meaning to others around them, even within their own demographic group definition.

What does all this mean for anyone else? Well, it means that if anyone--including African American women themselves--is to be able to even approach understanding what African American women experience, African American women are going to have to tell the story themselves. I cannot learn the facts and then try to give some sort of "expert opinion" on their behalf--or I could, but it would not be doing justice to the reality of life. In *Reel Women: Pioneers of the Cinema 1896 to the Present*, Ally Acker (1991) writes,

As every oppressed group eventually learns, the only way for the truth of history to be told is for the oppressed to break their own silence. Because the film industry has been primarily run by the privileged class, people of color--and women of color more particularly--have been ostracized from the means with which to speak.

Aggressive, assertive, and self-affirming and -examining filmmaking can only help promote the advancement of African American women—and therefore all African Americans and all women--in the future. African American women are in a unique position to know about oppression and to tell the stories in a meaningful and important way. Prominent, positive African American women like Oprah Winfrey and Maya Angelou can only improve the image of African American women (and again, therefore, all African Americans and all women), in the eyes of both other African Americans and other racial and ethnic groups. They can serve as role models for young women aspiring to great things who might be discouraged by some of the realities around them. But succumbing to white/commercial pressures by accepting typecast, stereotyped roles can only move the race and the sex backwards in time, reinforcing crippling negative images held by people with the power to change things and by people who are working hard to gain that kind of power.

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