



AFROPOLITAN

LITFIE

BOSTON'S 1989
CELEBRATION OF
BLACK CINEMA
BY CAMERON BAILEY

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OSTON — On a crisp spring evening six days before the marathon, a whole lot of impassioned black people descended on Boston.

The Celebration of Black Cinema (C.B.C.), as this congregation is officially known, was going into its sixth year having stirred up a critical storm in 1988 with a bunch of black British films and filmmakers that held no undue reverence for the struggles of their American colleagues. Coming out of an environment of British film theory neck deep in Lacan and Althusser, these filmmakers, mostly members of London's Sankofa collective, took that shit and remade it their own. Black and proud and young and gifted and vocal, C.B.C. V saw them staking their ground in the colonies.

C.B.C. VI promised more of the same. More films by young black Europeans, and more juicy, joyous conflict. This (post-immigrant?) generation was bent on giving a decidedly Afrocentric spin to the stuff they swallowed in the art schools and café culture of the dimming continent, not in rejecting everything European from the get go. The focus of this year's festival was supposed to be Caribbean cinema, but by some hidden imperative, many of the filmmakers present were actually living in Paris or Amsterdam or Berlin. Some even showed from New York. Mostly aware of what colonialism has wrought (including their own desire to set up in European capitals), these filmmakers work out of a productive combination of European and Antillean cultures. Amsterdam-based Felix de Rooy best expressed this new energy when he declared, "I see myself as a colonial orgasm."

On first sight, Boston hardly seems the place for orgasms of any sort. To these Canadian eyes it appeared aggressive but unappealing, characterised best perhaps by the hard, historical buildings that sit in parkspace downtown like rich, disapproving old bastards, reeking the power of genealogy. Boston police wear black leather jackets and silver badges ordered from a Hollywood costume house. Or so it seemed.

To these black eyes Boston was a troubled paradise. Bluebloods may rule the Bay area, but in Roxbury it's strictly African-American. And don't let Nightline tell you this is a ghetto. Roxbury is a Boston neighborhood composed mostly of working class and poor black people (though yuppies dog the outskirts for real estate deals) with

a strong sense of itself. Lately, an infusion of West Indian immigrants has added cricket matches and roti palaces to the cultural stew. So strong is Roxbury's social autonomy that recently, in the face of blatant municipal neglect of the area, local people launched a widespread (but ultimately unsuccessful) movement to secede from Boston and rename the place Mandela.

One of my strongest memories of Boston remains the Museum of African American Art in Roxbury, where the selection of the permanent collection on display was dominated by Bryan McFarlane's *The Artist Eating Paint*, a powerful blue canvas that for no clear reason seemed oddly confrontational.

One afternoon during the festival I found myself driving through Roxbury in Curt's BMW. Curt teaches economics at Wellesley College outside Boston, and knew which businesses in this black district were black-owned (next to none), and what happened to Boston's black middle class (they gone, and now white yuppies are seeping in to do the renovation thing). As we drove along under a rusted, abandoned rail line, the Temptations's "Ball of Confusion" played on the Blaupunkt. This was one of the trip's many unplanned ironies.

Curt says that Harvard requires a photograph to be included with each application, then follows that factoid up with the remarkably low African-American enrollment at the university. Curt, a diplomat's son and a model buppie, makes his points indirectly.

Curt represents only one element of the black academic class in Boston, but nowhere in the city's popular reputation as America's brain central is the fact that Boston's dozens of colleges and universities harbour cadres of African-American scholars bent on questioning canons, reshaping curricula, and expanding what institutions like Harvard, M.I.T., Wellesley, Northeastern, U Mass, Boston U and Brandeis take for knowledge. The Celebration of Black Cinema, run by sometime film professor Claire Andrade-Watkins, is by no accident based here.

The five nights of C.B.C. VI screenings were augmented this year by two panels

Bryan McFarlane, *Artist Eating Paint* (1986).
Collection National Center of Afro-American Artist, Boston.



where filmmakers, academics and rabblers came together to discuss the "Production, Reception and Impact of Caribbean Film" one afternoon, and "Film and Literature in the Caribbean: Social and Aesthetic Perspectives" the next. All but the first day's events were held at the Institute of Contemporary Arts, a white-walled mixed-media spot predictably staffed by pale, low-paid art students wearing eggplant hair. The place was almost always packed, packed with filmmakers and critics and writers and artists and students and bystanders, most of them black, and all of them ready to be surprised. Sometimes, it happened.

Disregarding the festival's few outright duds (an alarming proportion of which were American), most of the work at C.B.C. VI can be categorised as what I'll call fables of colonialism. In widely different ways, Lennie Little-White's *Children of Babylon* (1988), Willy Rameau's *Lien de Parente* (1985), Agliberto Meléndez's *Un Pasaje de Ida* (1988), Euzhan Palcy's *Rue Caisse Negre* (1983) and Felix de Rooy's *Almacita Di Desolato* (1986) all mine that nexus of politi-cultural power relations for dramatic material.

Two of the best documentaries at the festival also showed in their approach traces of the need to redress what colonialism has wrought. Horace Ové's made-for-B.B.C. *King Carnival* traces the specifically African elements of contemporary Trinidadian culture; and Elsie Haas' *La Ronde de Voodoo* (1986) uses a reserved camera style and interviews with Haitian academics and clergy to remove voodoo from the realm of cheap Halloween imagery and situate it within a range of African faiths.

And two films, both made by women within the new black British collectives, provided an example of the breadth of black feminist filmmaking. But yoking Elmina Davis's *Omega Rising: Woman of Rastafari* (produced within the Ceddo Film and Video Workshop) and Maureen Blackwood's *Perfect Image?* (produced by Sankofa) together by gender and means of production doesn't quite work: the two films are vastly different in style and subject.

Omega Rising (1988) gets its title from Ethiopian emperor Haile Selassie I and his wife, referred to by some Rastafarians as the Alpha and the Omega. A straightforward but spiritual documentary, it relies on interviews with a wide spectrum of rural and urban Rasta women in Jamaica and the U.K. — dancers, capitalists, mothers, mystics and Judy Mowatt — talking about the space they are creating within Rastafarianism for women's experience. The film spends little time comparing these women to Rasta men, and is careful never to exoticise them: Davis shoots her subjects in their own contexts, and the interviews are long and full enough to allow for multi-dimensional characters to emerge. To use Alice Walker's distinction, the subjects seem for the most part womanist rather than feminist. One says, "If a woman put onna dread it is in defiance of whatever has been deemed beautiful, clean, upright," only to be followed by a

"I see myself as a colonial orgasm."

Alternately known as the Poitier Principle, this syndrome has a talented young black male taking on the problems and the promise of His Race by going all stoic in the face of torrential setbacks.

sister offering some words on the responsibilities of a good — she didn't say submissive — wife.

Blackwood's *Perfect Image?* has the heart of a rock video and the mind of a particularly hip intellectual; it's a 30-minute jet-tour of black women's feelings about self-image, a self-image governed and governed again by everything the media and our grandmothers taught us about "good" hair and "fair" skin and narrow noses. Using two women — one light-skinned, one dark — *Perfect Image?* manages to invoke both Laura Mulvey and the Wee Papa Girl Rappers, and has one of the most sophisticated systems of spectator address I've ever seen. And unlike previous work from Sankofa, it's *funny*. Having mastered any number of film styles, Blackwood shifts from one to another effortlessly, and the audience moves with her. The crowd in Boston ate it up, giving the film the warmest response of any that week. From just about any point of view, it was the best film of the festival.

Lennie Little-White's *Children of Babylon*, while not clearly the worst, served as an exact opposite to Blackwood's film: sloppy and overlong where hers is assured, and in place of joyous feminist filmmaking, rank pornography. Its screening was sold out.

The story of a privileged Jamaican "graduate student" whose Jamaican lands her in a series of sexual clutches with a pseudo-sensitive artist and a rough Rastafarian, *Babylon* dresses up soft-core porn in thin social comment. Once secluded at the artist's country house, the "graduate student" repeatedly squirms out of her panties for the camera; initially frosty, she turns out to be a sex monster. The older white woman who owns the house flies in from Europe and also turns out to be a sex monster. The Rasta rapes the housekeeper, then transfers his affections to the "graduate student," fucking her while gazing at a portrait of Selassie.

A little more than halfway through the film many of the white women in the audience start to leave. It's about at this point that it occurs to me that the Ryerson-educated Little-White may be attempting some sort of social satire, with the house serving as a microcosm of Jamaica. A Rasta, a bourgeois artist, a servant class woman, a left-leaning intellectual and an absentee landlord engaged in rounds of sexual exploitation. Hmmm. Now the white women in the theatre are making for the exit, having given up rationalising. If the film had a plan, it lost it.

Noxious as it often is, *Children of Babylon* marks an attempt to use film narrative to examine postcolonial Caribbean society. Like many of the films that take up that challenge, it chooses to allegorise. Meléndez's *Un Pasaje De Ida* (*A One-Way Ticket*) uses an actual event to comment both on the desire of the colonised for the ways of the coloniser, and the experienced of colonisation itself. In this the first feature film produced in the Dominican Republic, a group of men desperate to reach New York stow away on a docked ship. Through a series of large and small treacheries, they find themselves drowning in a locked bilge

tank.

Rameau's *Lien de Parente* (*Next of Kin*) opts for the candy colours of postmodern melodrama in its recasting of a central colonial drama — miscegenation. In this case, an old provincial French man more or less inherits a distant grandson in England. He goes to collect the young man and discovers — he's black! Once back in rural France, Black Man becomes the village object of desire. Old and young, women and men all want him. Working in the territory of Percy Adlon and Pedro Almodovar, Rameau skillfully blends fish-out-of-water conventions with a wry nod to westerns and pop trash. *Next of Kin's* irreverence doesn't encourage sober reflection, but as swivel-tongued as it is, it does clearly celebrate beating the master's plans through trickster-science.

In the justly-celebrated *Rue Caisse Negre* (*Sugar Cane Alley*), Pally films another colonial drama — the Jesus complex — in full effect. Alternately known as the Poitier Principle, this syndrome has a talented young black male taking on the problems and the promise of His Race by going all stoic in the face of torrential setbacks. Often associated with strong maternal figures, absent fathers and good grades, it produces, in fiction and in life, thousands of buttoned-down messiahs. In *Sugar Cane Alley*, José, having risen from poverty to starched shirts, even washes the feet of his grandmother when she dies. An excellent, subtly perceived portrait of early 20th-century life in Martinique, the film has nevertheless been criticised for a plot that duplicates the colonial imperative: José succeeds when he becomes most like the French. But *Sugar Cane Alley* also foregrounds colonialism to a far greater degree than any of

the other films I've called colonial fables. Ultimately its critique is hardly rigorous, but it does make colonialism a concern throughout.

Felix de Rooy's *Almacita Di Desolato* can only tangentially be called a fable of colonialism, although it is clearly a fable. Set in turn-of-the-century Curaçao in a mythic landscape of gold deserts and hollow-blue caves, it's an amalgam of local stories. Solem, a mute, is responsible for a strange, destructive fruit entering her village. She consorts with a magic figure, a dreadlocked seer with silver eyes and nipple rings, bears a child with him, and ends up expelled from the village. Crossing the desert with the baby and a boy who befriends her, she's plagued by all sorts of traps and visions. One of the most visually sophisticated films in the festival (especially given the simplicity with which so many Caribbean films are lit), it was shot by Ernest Dickerson (*Do The Right Thing*, *Brother From Another Planet*) to evoke mystery in the landscape. Not entirely connected to a real world, *Almacita* flings itself into an interpretive whirlpool, where it can be taken as a parable about nearly anything. Money? Pleasure?... Colonialism?

During the first panel discussion de Rooy confessed that the film's indeterminacy mirrored his own. Tracing his blood lines in half a dozen different directions and announcing himself a hothouse bisexual, he came across like a hothouse flower in an English garden. He summed up his biography by remarking, "I felt that my deviation was my strength."

From *Children of Babylon* (1988) by Lennie Little-White.





From *Almacita Di Desolato* (1986) by Felix de Rooy.

Most of the other filmmakers' stories were familiar to anyone who's spent any time with an independent filmmaker, differing only in being remarkably unselfpitying. Elsie Haas admitted that legendary ethnographic filmmaker Jean Rouch had lent her his editing room to complete her first film. But she steered clear of him after that because "he's really a big papa." Lennie Little-White, a thick-set man with sleepy eyes and a disturbingly seductive air, noted that Jamaican filmmakers were historically directed towards making documentaries rather than fiction films, a comment that falls tenderly on Canadian ears.

Speaking at a later session (she missed her flight from the coast) Euzhan Palcy used obstetric metaphors to describe her experience of filmmaking. Making an independent film is like struggling to have a "bébé," she said, and having to resort to artificial insemination. Making a studio picture is like surrogate motherhood. You carry the bébé to term and "when you give birth you have no control over it. It's taken away from you." A small woman in tailored clothes, she had just the day before finished post-production on her new toddler, *A Dry White Season*. She spoke of studying film in France, and of receiving a grant from Aimé Césaire to complete *Sugar Cane Alley* (no mention of his papa potential). Leaving the theatre, she dons a black bomber jacket that reads in red letters on the back: "Cosby Show 100th Episode."

It was the "Film and Literature in the Caribbean" panel where things got tricky. Michaëlle Lafontant, a large woman with a sly way and loads of information, began uneventfully by recounting the history of film in Haiti. In 1899, the films of the Lumière brothers were first seen on the island. That same year, representatives of the Lumières travelled to Port-au-Prince and photographed a fire. Lafontant noted as an aside that arson is a frequently used political tool in Haiti. Then in 1960 (making this jump she barely betrayed a smile), the first Haitian-produced film was made, a documentary on a pan-American festival of tourism.

The smooth-edged Keith Warner followed. A Trini-born, Paris-educated

Ionesco scholar now teaching in the U.S., he did the English translation of the novel *Rue Caisse Negre* and spoke about translating creoles and patois in Caribbean literature. This too was uneventful.

It was left to Jamaican academic Michael Thelwell, also based in the U.S., to stir up shit. A long-faced man wearing a small ivory mask on a thong over his turtleneck but under his bush jacket, Thelwell wandered into an attack on "inorganic" concerns for Caribbean filmmakers. He went on to take a couple of shots at Europe and inaccessible European "modernism," and finished with a flabby defense of "populism" in the face of European high art. For a trained scholar to speak in the fatuous generalities of a back-row undergrad — "inorganic?" — was bad enough, but Thelwell seemed genuinely pleased with his analysis of how European and West Indian cultures do and should interact.

A number of people in the audience were visibly disgusted, but when a woman got up to ask a question, she shifted tack. Do the panelists have any opinions on how sexuality functions as an arena of colonialism, particularly how third world women are twice colonised? Further, what are their opinions on how colonisers use the bodies, particularly the sexual bodies of their victims to enforce colonialism? Silence.

Then Thelwell draws charmingly, "Well, I make it a point never to talk about gender in public, and I only talk about sexuality in private, so that almost disqualifies me from answering the question." He goes on to offer a few patronising platitudes on the order of, "well of course black women have it tough." No one else on the panel chooses to speak.

This break in the otherwise smooth flow of the festival signaled two things. First, that the "Celebration" in the Celebration of Black Cinema is still paramount. Either the structure of the discussions or the panelists involved almost prohibit critical debate. Too often the audience displayed a more comprehensive understanding of colonialism than the panelists were willing to, and were frustrated because they couldn't get their concerns addressed. Too often the panelists displayed what may

have been a generational squeamishness when it came to issues of gender and sexuality. (Felix de Rooy is the flagrant exception.) And too often there wasn't enough time.

Second, the problem of Europe remains the key issue in any discussion of colonialism and culture. How it is approached, whether in Thelwell's monolithic manner or in the more considered work of the new black European filmmakers, will necessarily determine in what state we emerge from the struggle with it.

Slamming European culture as inorganic for black Caribbean artists is as dangerous as it is seductive. The premise it assumes, that there exists in the Caribbean a pure "organic" African culture on which to draw, is clearly limited. And it ignores the productive engagements of African with European culture that have resulted in everything from steel bands to Fanon. Thelwell forgets that the scavenger is sometimes a revolutionary.

Although image reproduction is universal, film production, on both technical and economic levels, is governed by western models. The fact that nearly all the filmmakers present in Boston received their training outside their home countries is only one symptom of that. A "purely" African film culture (sidestepping for the moment the question of the value of any "pure" culture) cannot exist because at no time in the historical development of filmic conventions and film technology were African forms or modes of production drawn upon.

All this makes the work of the latest generation of Caribbean filmmakers all the more interesting. In Boston, *Perfect Image?*, *Lien de Parente* and *Almacita Di Desolato*, because they engage with colonialism as both metaphor and material, because they are Afro-centric but not Afro-nostalgic, because they show neither prudery about mining European sources nor slavish devotion to them, provided something of a guide to progressive scavengery. All three quite consciously acknowledge their hybridity. It's difficult to tell whether my preference for their strategies stems from my own ingestion of western cultural models — probably it does — but I can find no more challenging, productive, models for black filmmaking in them than the practices these films represent.

The past two years at Boston's Celebration of Black Cinema have highlighted the urgency of this debate about the European problem, and the sort of films it can produce. The festival has recognised that on the level of independent black cinema, much of the most provocative work is now being made outside the United States, deep in the clotted hearts of Empire. But Boston, with its past anti-Brit uprisings and present race resentments has worked colonialism from both sides of the fence. It's a fine place to watch the parade unfold.

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