

Some Films about Racism, Representation, and Critical Reading

Lecture 2/13/07–Tony Zaragoza

At the River I Stand*∞ Presents two events in 1968: sanitation workers strike, Memphis, Tennessee and the assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Shows how the black community and local civil rights leadership mobilized behind the strikers in mass demonstrations and a boycott of downtown businesses. AFSCME supported the strikers. A film by David Appleby, Allison Graham. CN, 1993, 59 min.

Badasssss Cinema Blaxploitation movies took their cue from the Civil Rights and Black Power movements, casting black actors for the first time in starring roles, as heroes instead of victims. These films drew larger African American audiences than any others before or since, yet they have long been relegated to the category of "exploitation" and thus kept outside the canon of cinema history. A bold re-examination of this position, *Badasssss Cinema* combines archival material with footage from black action films such as *Coffy*, *Blacula*, *Superfly*, *Black Caesar*, *Foxy Brown*, *Shaft*, *Sweet Sweetback's Baadass Song* along with many others, to argue that blaxploitation films were in fact complex reactions to social situations and inequalities: works that raveled in the ridiculous and gave relief from rage with powerful imagery and humor. Dir. Isaac Julien, 2002, 56 min.

bell hooks: Cultural Criticism & Transformation* (62 min.) bell hooks makes a compelling argument for the transformative powers of cultural criticism. She demonstrates how learning to think critically was central to her own self-transformation and how it can play a role in the students' quest for a sense of agency and identity. Includes footage from many films and music videos, and news coverage. MEF, 1997.

Black Is...Black Ain't* jumps into the middle of explosive debates over Black identity. *Black Is...Black Ain't* is a film every African American should see, ponder and discuss. White Americans have always stereotyped African Americans. But the rigid definitions of "Blackness" that African Americans impose on each other, Riggs claims, have also been devastating. Is there an essential Black identity? Is there a litmus test defining the real Black man and true Black woman? Riggs uses his grandmother's gumbo as a metaphor for the rich diversity of Black identities. His camera traverses the country, bringing us face to face with Black folks young and old, rich and poor, rural and urban, gay and straight, grappling with the paradox of numerous, often contested definitions of Blackness. Riggs mixes performances by choreographer Bill T. Jones and poet Essex Hemphill with commentary by noted cultural critics to create a flavorful stew of personal testimony, music, and history. The final film by filmmaker Marlon Riggs. CN, 1995, 88 min.

Black Views on Race* Time-Life Films, 3 reels, 16 mm. 1) Ralph Abernathy, Harry Belafonte, Julian Bond, Edward Brooke, H. Rap Brown, James Brown, Jim Brown. 25 min. 2) Stokely Carmichael, Shirley Chisholm, Sidney Poitier. 24 min. 3) Adam Clayton Powell, Jackie Robinson, Bayard Rustin, Bobby Seale, Carl Stokes, Malcolm X. 22 min.

Bontoc Eulogy a haunting, personal exploration into the filmmaker's complex relationship with his Filipino heritage as explored through the almost unbelievable story of the 1100 Filipino tribal natives brought to the US to be a "living exhibit" at the 1904 St. Louis World's Fair. For those who associate the famous fair with Judy Garland, clanging trolleys, and creampuff victoriana, *Bontoc Eulogy* offers a disturbing look at the cultural arrogance that went hand-in-hand with the Fair's glorification of progress. The Fair was the site of the world's largest ever "ethnological display rack," in which hundreds of so-called primitive, savage men and women from all over the globe were exhibited in contrast to the achievements of Western civilization. Marlon Fuentes, 1995, 57 min.

The Bronze Screen 100 Years of the Latino Image in Hollywood honors the past, illuminates the present, and opens a window to the future of Latinos in motion pictures. From silent movies to urban gang films, stereotypes of the Greaser, the Lazy Mexican, the Latin Lover, and the Dark Lady are examined. Rare and extensive footage traces the progression of this distorted screen image to the increased prominence of today's Latino actors, writers, and directors. Susan Racho, Questar, 120 min., 2002.

Edward Said on Orientalism* Edward Said's book *Orientalism* has been profoundly influential in a diverse range of disciplines since its publication in 1978. In this engaging and lavishly illustrated interview he talks about the context within which the book was conceived, its main themes, and how its original thesis relates to the contemporary understanding of "the Orient" as represented in the mass media. "That's the power of the discourse of Orientalism. If you're thinking about people and Islam, and about that part of the world, those are the words you constantly have to use. To think past it, to go beyond it, not to use it, is virtually impossible, because there is no

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knowledge that isn't codified in this way about that part of the world." -Edward Said. MEF, 1998

Hollywood Harems “Tania Kamal-Eldin has once again produced a stunning video, a half-hour documentary, this time taking critical aim at Hollywood's abiding fascination with and fantasies about all things east. Juxtaposing film clips from the 20s through the 60s, 70s, and 80s, Kamal-Eldin explores the organization of gender, race, and sexuality in Hollywood's portrayal of the exotic east an indiscriminate fusion of things Arab, Persian, Chinese and Indian. She argues, convincingly, that in abridging cultural plurality and difference, these technicolor fantasies have worked both to shape and reinforce often derogative assumptions about peoples of the east while at the same time reinscribing the moral, spiritual, and cultural supremacy of the Anglo-European west. ‘Hollywood Harems’ is skillfully crafted, well-paced technically adept production versatile and especially suitable for use in a variety of classroom settings.” Dr Valerie Hartouni, Director, Critical Gender Studies Program, University of California at San Diego

I Call Myself Persian: Iranians in America From the Iran hostage crisis of '79 to the WTC attacks, images of hostile Iranians and Middle Easterners have been well-ingrained in the American psyche, but no informed images come to mind representing Iranians living on American soil. The Iranian Revolution took place in 1979, after which over one million Iranians fled the country. Since then hundreds of thousands of Iranians have been living in the United States. "I Call Myself Persian" lets Iranian-Americans speak of how their identities are affected by being made to feel like outsiders in a country they now call home. TWN, Tanaz Eshaghian & Sara Nodjourni (27 min./Color/2002)

In the Shadow of Gold Mountain Karen Cho, a fifth-generation Canadian of mixed heritage, discovered that half her family wasn't welcome in the country they called home. While Canada encouraged and rewarded immigration from Europe, it imposed laws that singled out the Chinese as unwanted and unwelcome. Cho's film, *In the Shadow of Gold Mountain*, takes her from Montreal to Vancouver to uncover stories from the last living survivors of the Chinese Head Tax and Exclusion Act. This dark chapter in our history, from 1885 until 1947, plunged the Chinese community in Canada into decades of debt and family separation. At the centre of the film are personal accounts of extraordinary Chinese Canadians who survived an era that threatened to eradicate their entire community. Through a rich melding of history, poetry and raw emotion, this documentary sheds light on an era that shaped the identity of generations, with deeply moving testimonials, it reveals the profound ways this history still casts its shadow.

John Brown's Holy War** Martyr, madman, murderer, hero: John Brown remains one of history's most controversial and misunderstood figures. In the 1850s, he and his ragtag guerrilla group embarked on a righteous crusade against slavery that was based on religious faith -- yet carried out with shocking violence. His execution set off a chain of events that led to the Civil War. (From the PBS Series: American Experience)

The Legacy of Malthus* Argues that overpopulation is not the real cause of poverty in India or elsewhere. In this thought-provoking film, Deepa Dhanraj takes on the international population establishment, challenging the entrenched view that overpopulation is responsible for poverty and environmental degradation. In India, peasant farmers are being evicted from their land and then accused of being feckless, poor, irresponsible and unable to feed their families. Dhanraj argues that it's the same process that took place in 19th century Scotland during the Highland clearances. By skillfully intercutting reconstructed scenes from the Napier Commission of enquiry into the Highland clearances, interviews with contemporary Rajasthani village women today, archival US news footage and current day propaganda films warning of the dire consequences of global population increase, Dhanraj argues that nothing has changed.

The Life and Times of Sara Baartman: “The Hottentot Venus”* When 20 year old Sara Baartman got on a boat that was to take her from Cape Town to London in 1810, she could not have known that she would never see her home again. Nor, as she stood on the deck and saw her homeland disappear behind her could she have known that she would become the icon of racial inferiority and black female sexuality for the next 100 years. *The Life and Times of Sara Baartman* is the fascinating story of this Khoi Khoi woman who was taken from South Africa, and then exhibited as a freak across Britain. The image and idea of "The Hottentot Venus" swept through British popular culture. A court battle waged by abolitionists to free her from her exhibitors failed. A Film by Zola Maseko, 1998.

Miles of Smiles, Years of Struggle*∞ chronicles the organizing of the first black trade union - the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters. This inspiring story of the Pullman porters provides one of the few accounts of African American working life between the Civil War and World War II. *Miles of Smiles* describes the harsh discrimination which lay behind the porters' smiling service. Narrator Rosina Tucker, a 100 year old union organizer and porter's

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widow, describes how after a 12 year struggle led by A. Philip Randolph, the porters won the first contract ever negotiated with black workers. *Miles of Smiles* both recovers an important chapter in the emergence of black America and reveals a key source of the Civil Rights movement. CN, 1982

Nat Turner: A Troublesome Property** Nat Turner's slave rebellion is a watershed event in America's long and troubled history of slavery and racial conflict. *Nat Turner: A Troublesome Property* tells the story of that violent confrontation and of the ways that story has been continuously re-told during the years since 1831. It is a film about a critical moment in American history and of the multiple ways in which that moment has since been remembered. Nat Turner was a "troublesome property" for his master and he has remained a "troublesome property" for the historians, novelists, dramatists, artists and many others who have struggled to understand him. CN, 2003.

Oh Freedom After While One wintry morning in January 1939, residents of southeastern Missouri awoke to a startling sight. More than 1,000 sharecroppers - mostly African American but whites too - had camped out alongside two state highways with their families and a few meager belongings. They were taking a stand - against the planters, the federal government, and the desperate conditions of their lives. Their tale, told by interweaving recollections by former sharecroppers, their children and scholars with vivid archival footage and striking Farm Security Administration photographs, encapsulates the saga of rural African American life since Emancipation: how Black farmers' back-breaking efforts to become self-sufficient were continually undermined by patterns of land-ownership, swindling planters and misguided government policy; how a debt cycle induced by sharecropping - explained here more clearly than in any other film - condemned them to wretched poverty; and how attempts by sharecroppers to organize and improve their lot were met with often-bloody white opposition. CN, 1999.

OutRiders: Global Poverty Comes Home* In the heady boom times people at the bottom of the economic ladder are becoming invisible, but a handful of desperately poor Americans refuse to disappear. Fifty of them; infants, teens, mothers, and grandmothers, crowd into a "freedom bus" and criss-cross the United States documenting the effects of "welfare reform" on other poor people. Their mission: to place evidence of growing American poverty before the United Nations. The Outriders know that this trip won't be easy; hardly enough gas or money, cramped on a bus each day and sleeping-out each night. What the Outriders don't know is that this trip will challenge them in unimaginable ways and change each of them forever. This third film in the "Broke in Boom Times" trilogy premiered at the International Peace Conference at the Hague, 1999. Skylight Pictures, 1999.

People Like Us: Social Class in America** This film begins with a discussion of how social class determines opportunity as much as race or ethnicity does. *People Like Us* tackles a question rarely addressed so explicitly in the popular media: Are all Americans created equal – or are some more equal than others? *People Like Us* presents viewers with the chance to see a group of Americans from different locales and diverse socioeconomic backgrounds. PBS, 2001, 124 min. Directors: Louis Alvarez & Andrew Kolker.

Race—The Power of an Illusion* The division of the world's peoples into distinct groups – “red,” “black,” “white” or “yellow” peoples - has become so deeply imbedded in our psyches, so widely accepted, many would promptly dismiss as crazy any suggestion of its falsity. Yet, that's exactly what this provocative, new three-hour series claims. *Race—The Power of an Illusion* questions the very idea of race as biology, suggesting that a belief in race is no more sound than believing that the sun revolves around the earth. Yet race still matters. Just because race doesn't exist in biology doesn't mean it isn't very real, helping shape life chances & opportunities. CN, 3 episodes, 56 min. each, 2003.

The Rise and Fall of Jim Crow* offers the first comprehensive look at race relations in America between the Civil War & the Civil Rights Movement. This definitive four-part series documents a brutal and oppressive era rooted in the growing refusal of many Southern states to grant slaves freed in the Civil War equal rights with whites. A life of crushing limitation for Southern Blacks, defined by legal segregation known as "Jim Crow" - after a minstrel routine in which whites painted their faces black - shaped the social, political & legal history of the period. In 1954, with the Supreme Court decision in *Brown vs. Board of Education*, the Jim Crow laws and way of life began to fall. CN, 2002.

Sankofa “Sankofa” is an Akan word that means, one must return to the past in order to move forward (The Sankofa bird is also the mascot of Evergreen-Tacoma). Mona, a contemporary model, is possessed by spirits lingering in the Cape Coast Castle in Ghana and travels to the past, where, as a house servant called Shola she is constantly abused by the slave master. Nunu, an African-born field hand, and Shango, Sholas West Indian Lover, continuously rebel against the slave system. For Nunu this means direct conflict with her son, a mulatto benefiting from the system as a head slave. Inspired by Nunu and Shangos determination to defy the system, Shola finally takes

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her fate into her own hands. Dir. Haile Germina. Myphed Films, INC. 1995.

The Shadow of Hate: A History of Intolerance in America* Examines 4 centuries of United States history in order to understand the nation's record of intolerance. Includes documentary footage and eyewitness reports. 1995, 40 min.

Standing on My Sisters' Shoulders** In 1965, when three women walked into the US House of Representatives in Washington D.C., they had come a very long way. Neither lawyers nor politicians, they were ordinary women from Mississippi, and descendants of African slaves. They had come to their country's capitol seeking civil rights, the first black women to be allowed in the senate chambers in nearly 100 years. A missing chapter in our nation's record of the Civil Rights movement, this powerful documentary reveals the movement in Mississippi in the 1950's and 60's from the point of view of the courageous women who lived it – and emerged as its grassroots leaders. Their living testimony offers a window into a unique moment when the founders' promise of freedom and justice passed from rhetoric to reality for all Americans. Through moving interviews and powerful archival footage, *Standing on My Sisters' Shoulders* weaves a story of commitment, passion and perseverance and tells the story of the women fought for change in Mississippi and altered the course of American history forever.

U.S.-Mexican War: 1846-1848** This documentary tells the dramatic story of a war in which Mexico lost almost half of its national territory to the United States. Although the war lasted only two years, its outcome not only transformed the boundaries of these neighboring countries, but it also shifted the balance of world powers and shaped the destinies of each nation. This critically acclaimed series explores the events surrounding the conflict between the two neighboring nations struggling for land, power and identity. The educational package covers the dramatic sweep of the war from the multiple perspectives of Americans, Mexicans, and Native Americans, examining the social, cultural, and economic forces that shaped each country and its peoples during that crucial era. The war's events, personalities and themes are explored in a binational, multicultural context. I. Neighbors and strangers -- II. War for the borderlands -- III. The hour of sacrifice -- IV. The battle for Mexico City. Paul Espinosa and Ginny Martin.

The War Against the Indians Story of the impact of European colonization on the native inhabitants of North America. In four volumes, surveys a period of 40,000 years, from the earliest arrivals of native Americans, thru the Columbus "invasion," the Spanish massacres, the destruction of the Huron nation, the near extinction of the buffalo and the 19th century Indian wars, to a modern conflict at Oka, Quebec. Includes interviews with many members of surviving Indian tribes and Inuit peoples as well as archival footage. Illustrated with the art and music of the First Nations.

Western Eyes* In a culture where the standard of beauty is unyielding, what happens to women who feel they don't fit in? What goes on inside a woman who is desperately unhappy with how she looks on the outside? *Western Eyes* examines the search for beauty and racial identity through the eyes of Maria Estante and Sharon Kim, young women contemplating cosmetic surgery. Both of Asian descent, the two believe their looks--specifically their eyes--get in the way of how people see them. Layering their stories with pop-culture references to beauty icons and supermodels, filmmaker Ann Shin takes a hip approach to telling the real-time emotional journeys of Maria and Sharon. Using the camera to look past skin, Shin looks at the pain that lies deep behind the desire for plastic surgery. *Western Eyes* is a brilliant examination of beauty and perception: how we see; how we're seen; how we see how we're seen. FRIF, 2000.

Where do You Stand: Stories From an American Mill∞ is a haunting documentary about the rise and fall of an American town and the epic struggle of the people who live there. In the process it tells the story of dramatic changes in labor and demographics, in the nature of corporations, the rise of multinationals, and changes in the American South in the post-industrial age. 2004, 60 min. Dir. Alexandra Lescaze.

Zoot Suit Riots** In August 1942, the murder of a young Mexican-American ignited a firestorm in Los Angeles. The tensions that had been building up for years between Mexican and white Los Angelenos boiled over. The press claimed Mexican youth--known as "zoot-suiters" for the clothes they wore--were terrorizing the city with a wave of crime. Police fanned out across the city arresting 600 Mexican Americans. Seventeen "zoot-suiters" headed to a trial in which prosecutors had little evidence to present. Nonetheless, guilty verdicts were handed down to all. The tensions the trial inflamed sparked riots between servicemen and the Mexican American community that led to "zoot-suiters" being beaten and stripped of their clothes. Despite vigorous denials from city officials, a citizen's committee concluded the riots had been fired by racial prejudice and encouraged both by sensational news reporting and a discriminatory police department. (From the PBS Series: American Experience), 2002.

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