Reclaiming Black Film and Media Studies

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Historically, the study of the idea of black film has been a fraught, insightful, and generative enterprise—be it a matter of industrial capital and its delimitation of film practice in terms of profit, or the tendency to insist that the “black” of black film be only a biological determinant and never a formal proposition. In many ways, the black film as an object of study mirrors the history of America, the history of an idea of race. While the field continues to shift and change, and the study of black film becomes more common, it is often still tokenized by the industry. Discussion about black film and media is booming in academic programs (e.g., American Studies, Women and Gender Studies, English) and in Film and Media Studies, but it is doing so even more in nonacademic spaces, with blogs, podcasts, and think pieces proliferating at a rapid pace. We offer our manifesto, recognizing that film manifestos never whisper. Their messages envision political, aesthetic, and cultural possibilities. They demand and plot. They question and insist. What follows are expectations bundled as concerns for not only the renderings of black film to come but, as well, the thinking on blackness and cinema that we hope will thrive and inspire future discussions. We are devising new terms of engagement with current developments in mind.

We must remember that traditionally the field of film studies was designed around the centering of heterosexual white men. This forms the bedrock of the film industry and of film studies.

This means that the study of black film, however one defines black film, has as a practice and a product often been treated as additional or derivative rather than integral (e.g., the infamous “race week” in any Intro to Film/Media course). We must learn, acknowledge, and teach that blackness has been central to the history of film since the birth of the medium, not just starting with The Birth of a Nation (D. W. Griffith, 1915). We must teach Oscar Micheaux, but also the Lincoln Motion Picture Company, and the long histories of early and nonexistant black film that scholars like Jacqueline Stewart, Pearl Bowser, Allyson Nadia Field, and others have endeavored to bring to light. Furthermore, greater focus on the work of black women and queer filmmakers will further the necessary decentering of film studies’ perspectival tendencies and ultimately dispute the narrow categorical meanings attributed to black film. The study of black film must always be a rebel act.

We must stop referring to every significant black film or media text as “first,” thus erasing the labor and intellectual contributions of all who came before.

The excitement around films such as Get Out (Jordan Peele, 2017), Moonlight (Barry Jenkins, 2016), Black Panther (Ryan Coogler, 2018), and, most recently, Sorry to Bother You (Boots Riley, 2018) tends to produce a discourse of exceptionalism, of “firsts” (“first film to do X”). Critical discussion around the films tends to tacitly frame them in terms of a white film landscape, suggesting that their worth rests in their ability to look and sound like standard (i.e., white) films, severing their ties to black film history and distancing them from “unexceptional” black films in the present. As a final note, the vibrant and insightful work of the New Negress Film Society, a collective of black women filmmakers (Frances Bodomo, Dyani Douze, Ja’Tovia Gary, Chanelle Aponte Pearson, and Stefani Saintonge), thrives in ways counter to the tacitly industry-minded insistence on black cinema exceptionalism.¹

We must be critical and suspicious of academic essays, panels, and other activities about black film that do not substantially engage with or cite film and media studies scholarship.

How is it possible to discuss black film without regard to the debates and inquiries that continue to provide the critical momentum that is black film and media discourse? The universal experience of watching film gives the false impression that we are all equally knowledgeable about film’s histories, theories, and contexts. Moreover, this practice renders invisible the existence of cinema studies, turning film into something that anyone can “do.” Having an opinion about a film does not constitute film and media training.

We must insist on being attentive to issues of film form as opposed to focusing on content alone.

Focusing on the conventions of Disney/Marvel cinema might help us appreciate how Black Panther revises and perpetuates
comic superhero cinema. Thinking through the modalities of black speculative fiction and Afrofuturism in *Sorry to Bother You* helps to ground the film’s trenchant and absurdist critique of capital, race, and class. What does it mean to understand *BlacKkKlansman* (Spike Lee, 2018) as Blaxploitation fantasy and visual historiography of American cinema? The thinking to come on Barry Jenkins’s *If Beale Street Could Talk* (2018) as a film adaptation that visually renders James Baldwin’s text must also consider how this rendering occurs with a consequential sonic component. It’s important to think about the formal principles across experimental/avant-garde work (e.g., Kevin Jerome Everson, Cauleen Smith, Christopher Harris, Ephraim Asili) to appreciate the range of aesthetic capacities evinced by the idea of black film. Terence Nance’s *Random Acts of Flyness* (2018) models an alternative sense of anthology-television seriality, a production that flourishes on formal experimentation and collectivity. It restages the late-night variety television conceit with an absurdist cycling across formats and modalities. The inventiveness of Yance Ford’s *Strong Island* (2017) requires appreciating how the film redefines documentary form with its exquisite building of an archive and Ford’s direct address. Moreover, the film remains immune to humanist or sentimental recuperation in its consideration of familial grief, injustice, and the antiblack ways that whiteness always operates as the arbiter of truth.²

**We must** go to film festivals. We must follow film programmers.

Black film thrives in arenas other than the standard cineplex. What might it mean to give as much attention to this context as to the industrial/commercial buzz? This is especially the case for 2018, with the Flaherty Seminar programming of Greg De Cuir and Kevin Jerome Everson; Maori Karmael Holmes’s continued brilliance directing the seventh edition of the BlackStar Film Festival in Philadelphia; the continued circulation of the “Black Radical Imagination” touring program of experimental/avant-garde shorts cofounded by Erin Christovale and Amir George and currently programmed by Darol Olu Kae and Jheanelle Brown; the Smithsonian’s African American Film Festival; Ashley Clark’s film programming at the Brooklyn Academy of Music.³ In particular, Clark’s programs this year have been generative and collaborative opportunities to expansively appreciate cinema. The “Fight the Power: Black Superheroes on Film” series framed the then-impending release of *Black Panther*, the BAMcinématek and the Racial Imaginary Institute’s “On Whiteness” series was tied to the Whiteness Symposium at the Kitchen, and the “Say It Loud: Cinema in the Age of Black Power (1966–1981)” series was tied to the “Soul of a Nation” exhibition at the Brooklyn Museum.

**We must** stop championing representation as a marker of racial progressiveness, and instead begin concentrating on
the themes and ideas with which those representations engage.

For far too long, both the academic and popular study of black film and media studies has focused too narrowly on the mere presence of black bodies both in front of and behind the camera. Black bodies do not equal blackness. Blackness does not necessarily equal black liberation or recuperation. A study of black film and media that merely equates the inclusion of black makers and characters with revolutionary cinematic practice will never truly effect change, but rather, will simply instantiate a history of black bodies labored by and laboring for whiteness on ideological and formal levels (e.g., blackface, social-problem cinema). Black film historiography does not have to be a progressive fantasy. Perhaps, ambivalence might be a good place to start.

If the representation debate revival must occur, then at least reread Stuart Hall.

Notes
1. For more information on the New Negress Film Society, see https://newnegressfilmsociety.com/.
3. For more on Black Radical Imagination, see http://blackradicalimagination.com; and Tiffany Barber and Jerome Dent, “Urban Video Project: Interview with Curators of Black Radical Imagination,” LightWork, March 20, 2015, www.lightwork.org/tag/black-radical-imagina
tion/.

MANIFESTO

A Queer(’s) Cinema

Manuel Betancourt

“We are children of straight society. We still think straight: that is part of our oppression.”

Queer cinema, no matter how rebellious, is the child of straight cinema—its bastard child, perhaps, but its progeny no less. Queer cinema must push against decades of tradition to create itself anew. Borrowed genres and hand-me-down narratives have served their purpose. If the (curated though not novel) propositions and (recent though not unique) examples that follow point anywhere, it is to a still-to-be-imagined future where queer cinema can continue to expand while never ceding its right to be “niche” in order to serve those it portrays.

“I hate straight people who think stories about themselves are ‘universal’ but stories about us are only about homosexuality.”

Queer cinema is not universal. Nevertheless, the question of how to reconcile the specificity of queer storytelling with the universalizing effect that cinema can perform is at the heart of its project. But to aspire to universality is to risk losing the particular. There is no single queer narrative, except that of oppression—and even that is so frustratingly varied, changing from country to country, gender to gender, body to body, person to person. There is no “one-fits-all” narrative to queer life.

“We believe that sexual politics under patriarchy is as pervasive in Black women’s lives as are the politics of class and race. We also often find it difficult to separate race from class from sex oppression because in our lives they are most often experienced simultaneously.”

Queer cinema is intersectional. Its politics force audiences to see how oppression operates in competing and complementary ways. If white, cisgender characters have long held the monopoly on on-screen queer representation, a recent wave of films by and about the queer experience have finally begun righting that myopic purview. In the past decade alone, audiences have met a black Brooklyn teenager searching for her sense of self in Pariah (Dee Rees, 2011), a pair of trans sex workers wreaking havoc on Christmas in the L.A.-set Tangerine (Sean Baker, 2017), and even a pansexual at risk of losing her memories in Janelle Monáe’s dystopian “emotion picture,” Dirty Computer (Andrew Donoho, Chuck Lightning, 2018).

“WAKE UP! We can’t let straight society appropriate our language, artistry, physicality, bodies, and culture to profit and buttress their own communities.”

Queer cinema is fabulous. Its bold style is rooted in joyous possibility. To reduce queerness to a sexual orientation is to miss the aesthetic sensibility that runs through queer life. It’s the gleint of glitter at the balls, the feel of leather at the bars,