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Spike Lee on set

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Black Hollywood: Blaxploitation and Advancing an Independent Black Cinema

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[25 June 2009]

In recent history, the myriad commercial and social reactions to so-called Blaxploitation films made feasible the rise of a robust, intelligent, and independent black cinema in the US.

By [Thomas Britt](#)

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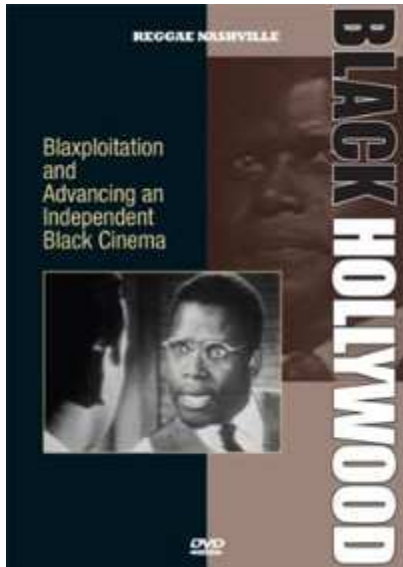
In 1919, Oscar Micheaux directed *Within Our Gates*, a powerful response to D.W. Griffith's Klan-exalting *Birth of a Nation*. Micheaux's film and subsequent career were dedicated to the restorative representation of the "New Negro" through film, and his life was a testament to the virtues of self-determination and enterprise. He did not wait for the market to come to him. Micheaux was an artist who made it so, and he used his hard-won business opportunities to advance an important social mission.

Ninety years later, viewers are able to turn to VH1 and follow the ongoing adventures of Tiffany "New York" Pollard. "New York" has starred on numerous reality shows for VH1, most notably on *Flavor of Love*, which disturbingly features a meat market of women who are given new names and branded and demeaned in various ways before being sent home.

The highest prize of this minstrel show is the affection of Flavor Flav. "New York", however, has parlayed her success on the show into various other programs on the network, all of which revolve around supposedly risqué sexual competition and conquest, but in fact resemble the exchange of human chattel.

That we have descended from the "New Negro" to "New York" over the better part of a century is indeed a sign of the overall coarsening of the culture. It is important to note that neither of the examples entirely defines its era, and that one could point to a range of alternatives that upset the comparison.

However, as it concerns the visibility and economic power of the black performer, "New York" has become, for many, an ideal. That VH1 continues to give Pollard opportunities (more on her latest show a bit later) is a sign that there is power in her brand, as there once was for Micheaux's performers.



Black Hollywood: Blaxploitation and Advancing An Independent Black Cinema

Director: [Howard Johnson](#)

Cast: Oscar Williams, Jim Brown, Rosalind Cash

(US DVD: 19 May 2009)

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All artists and actors want an audience for their work, but Howard Johnson's *Black Hollywood: Blaxploitation and Advancing an Independent Black Cinema* questions whether the available jobs are worth having at all. What is the value of being “seen” if one has to sacrifice his/her spirit?

Shot in 1984, the documentary preserves a too-brief moment in time, when the myriad commercial and social reactions to so-called Blaxploitation films made feasible the rise of a robust, intelligent, and independent black cinema in the United States. As actor Jim Brown says in an interview, Blaxploitation films were successful because they catered to the hunger of black actors and audiences. The cultural impact of such works might not have been redeeming, as they featured already well-worn stereotypes about pimps, prostitutes and gangsters.

The films' popularity, however, proved that there was plenty of “business” to go around, and that it was possible to employ and entertain often-neglected performers and consumers. If such films provided at least a decisive foot in the door, then an entire body of minority-friendly film should have naturally followed.

Black Hollywood reveals that, unfortunately, the popularity of black exploitation films did not translate into lasting economic power for black artists. In a series of compelling

interviews, occasionally highlighted with footage from related films, the interviewees take stock of their contributions to, and place within, the American film industry.



Tiffany Pollard in her Marilyn Monroe getup.

Filmmaker Oscar Williams discusses how economic protectionism is primarily to blame for keeping black artists (as well as women and young white artists) out of the system. His straightforward allegation that Hollywood prizes its “hold on the established order” carries not a hint of paranoia or sensationalism. By framing his argument as that of an insider/ outsider—an industry underdog—Williams makes several convincing points about the self-defeating risk aversion of the film business.

One of his most entertainingly stated (though sadly accurate) remarks in the documentary is that sociological assumptions influence the reception of films with a mostly black cast. He says no one calls *Little Caesar* an inherently violent film, but with a black cast it would be labeled as such, and that “if you had a black cast in *The Deer Hunter*, it would have been called Black Exploitation”.



Kasi Lemmons on set

Blaxploitation: A Missed Opportunity

There has arguably never been a better time to reassess these issues, as a show like *New York Goes to Work* would have to represent the nadir of modern black exploitation. Jim Brown expands on that critique, as he intelligently evaluates attempts to change the balance of power as well as perceptions at large. He contends that the emphasis on separatism as a rejoinder to the established order (on a large scale, beyond Hollywood) was misguided, because such movements actually had a diluting effect. The foremost solution, he argues, would be the establishment of economic and political power bases that exist within the established orders. Blaxploitation, in his mind, was a missed opportunity, because the producers of those films kept the profits in order to make what he describes as more “lily-white” entertainment.

Despite well-presented evidence of injustices, the participants in the film do not seem bitter or too focused on past ills. In fact, *Black Hollywood* has a good sense of humor as it wrestles with the predicaments at hand. From time to time, the talking heads will cut to a stand-up act by the incomparable Paul Mooney. His uninhibited assessment of art and culture emphasizes the points made by those interviewed in the documentary.

At one point, actress Vonetta McGee talks about Hollywood’s flagging interest in Blaxploitation and embrace of the decidedly white-bread disaster/fantasy film. Mooney’s act hilariously reinforces her point by turning the definition of a “fantasy film” on its head, citing the racial components of *Rocky* and even *E.T.* as belonging only in a fantasy world.

Mooney and Brown also react in an emotional way to the impact of films such as *Birth of a Nation* and *Gone with the Wind*, questioning their enduring reputation as classics. The documentary uses this discussion of the character types that flow throughout such films as part of a greater historical examination of black misrepresentation that includes Mantan Moreland, Hattie McDaniel, and Stepin Fetchit.

Although these visibly insulting examples are placed within a historical context, the film also addresses how little Hollywood has evolved in creating complex black characters. Actor Joel Fluellen, who provides some analysis of *Birth of a Nation*, makes the point about Dorothy Dandridge that she was given the chance to succeed because she was not “discernibly black”, and trailblazing publicist/union head Vincent Tubbs states that Hollywood only rewards black actresses when they take on demeaning roles.

Perhaps the documentary’s most fascinating exploration is that of the psyche of the black actress. The actresses that appear in the film are very candid about their experiences within the industry and the mindset that moves them forward as artists, despite the considerable uphill climb.

Rosalind Cash discusses the paradox of being so grateful to receive a role—any role—yet inevitably being embarrassed to watch her own performance onscreen, because the role is most likely one that perpetuates a black stereotype. She also notes that, as was the case with Jane Fonda in *Klute*, white actresses are often considered for the more humanized version of a character type that would be paper thin if written for a black actress. Cash’s increasing refusal to portray the “crude image” might mean she books fewer roles, but the viewer understands that the sacrifice allows her to maintain her integrity.

Vincent Tubbs expresses what is perhaps the documentary’s overarching theme: To acquiescently “be a black artist” is not sufficient, particularly if one has a shot at mainstream success. The positive example he offers is Sidney Poitier, whom Tubbs describes as having built on his personal narrative of transcendence with a level of talent and honor that would be admirable in any artist, regardless of race. Had Poitier compromised his standards, what effect might that have on the success of black artists with similar aspirations in the future?

No one argues that black artists should have to work twice as hard their white colleagues, but the interviewees are realistic about the specific difficulties they face within the industry. The implicit message is that performers in their position must often prove themselves to a higher degree, and for that reason it is important to maintain high principles. They speak of their opportunities for advancement with a spirit of reverence that is largely lost amongst many of today’s performers.

Current luminaries, however embraced they might feel at the moment, could learn a lot from the attitudes and experiences of the generation that appears in *Black Hollywood*. In recent weeks, GRAMMY Award winner Kanye West has described himself as “a proud non-reader of books”, and Academy Award winner Halle Berry lasciviously fondled and made out with Academy Award winner Jamie Foxx onstage at the Spike TV “Guy’s Choice” Awards as he presented her an award called Decade of Hotness.

Not to be uptight or hidebound, but have they forgotten the value of dignified self-representation? Do they realize, as their predecessors so eloquently state throughout *Black Hollywood*, that no one else is working to positively portray them, especially in an industry where a decade of “hotness” might be considered a lifetime achievement?

It would be unfortunate if the hard work and sacrifice of the *Black Hollywood* generation receded into history, yet mainstream film and television in 2009 appear to stand at odds with the best efforts of Williams, Mooney, Tubbs, Brown, McGee, Cash, and others who appear in the documentary. There are, of course, artists who have kept their spirit alive in the post-Blaxploitation era: Orlando Bagwell, Bill Cosby, Spike Lee, Tim Reid, Julie Dash, Kasi Lemmons, and Lee Daniels, to name a few. But as production and distribution models rapidly change and create a new frontier, it's crucial that such filmmakers recognize the fresh opportunity to further establish artistic and economic bases within the tenuous industry and culture.



Paul Mooney

There has arguably never been a better time to reassess these issues, as a show like *New York Goes to Work* would have to represent the nadir of modern black exploitation. The show might be outwardly less offensive than Tiffany Pollard's other programs for VH1, until one considers that the premise of the show is how outrageous a spectacle it is for this black woman to simply go to work. There is perhaps no more brazen example of the racism of lowered expectations.

While "white" television offers the same revolving series of idols, bachelorettes, celebutantes, housewives, survivors, and cougars, there exists an opening for black artists to take the high road. After all, the lesson of Oscar Micheaux is to be excellent, not simply equal. *Black Hollywood* might inspire disappointment that the dreams of a generation didn't quite pan out, but it also offers a blueprint for reengagement with an art

and culture that aren't so much defined by cowardice with regards to race, as they are by coarse complacency.