

*Redefining Black Film* describes two interrelated histories: that of black independent film production and that of black participation as writers and directors in three different genres of black-oriented films controlled by whites. Even when commercial films are made by black writers and directors, a black perspective that acknowledges differences of race, class, gender, and sexuality rarely surfaces. Therefore, a history of black film must employ critical tools that speak to these differences and do not concentrate only on one of these issues. I also argue that the history of African-American film must include a discussion of black independent films. In this book, I show how black independent film differs from black commercial film and argue that the two forms must not be discussed as though they were identical. Many earlier books that document this area define black film too broadly and presume that any film with black characters is a black film. Other works identify black film as those works written or directed by blacks, and some texts use subjective criteria such as aesthetics or a black perspective to define black film. I find that these faulty or limited definitions do not describe the formal aspects of black film.

Film books that discuss African-American films use critical approaches that emphasize white-directed, -written, and -produced films about black America. For example, the black-image approach has generated almost three decades of black-oriented film books: Peter Noble's *The Negro in Film* (1948), V. J. Jerome's *The Negro in Hollywood Films* (1950), Edward Mapp's *Blacks in American Films* (1971), James Murray's *To Find an Image* (1973), Lindsay Patterson's *Black Films*

and *Film-Makers* (1975), Donald Bogle's *Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies, and Bucks* (1973), and, to a lesser extent, Daniel J. Leab's *From Sambo to Superspade* (1975) and Thomas Cripps's *Black Film as Genre* (1978).

In contrast, this book presumes that American film criticism must be augmented and corrected by descriptions and analyses of films produced by black people and of filmmaking in which black people controlled the key creative aspects of production. Present and future film histories must emphasize the innovations of black filmmakers and black screenwriters as well as discern the difference between black commercial filmmaking and black independent filmmaking.

This book *uncovers* the black film history that other critics and historians, inadvertently or by design, have helped to bury by selectively focusing on major studios and their films about, but not by, blacks. These interpretive histories, like the films they discuss, perpetuate dominant assumptions by avoiding serious historical issues and ignoring the polyphonic forms of black subjectivity. I want to disrupt the prevailing approach to the study of blacks in American film by providing critical analysis of a more than seventy-year-old film practice.

In distinguishing black commercial film from black independent film, I establish my own definition of "black independent film": a film that focuses on the black community and is written, directed, produced, and distributed by individuals who have some ancestral link to black Africa. I describe the rejuvenation of black independent film that resulted from the 1960s civil rights movement, the emergence of black consciousness, the War on Poverty programs, and the resurgence of feminism in black cultural production. All of these forces broadened the opportunities for black participation in the film and television industries.

By discussing specific examples of three major film forms—comedy, urban action, and black family films—I show how major studio-distributed black films present tendentious images of blacks, especially black women. (The term tendentious refers to images that objectify and ridicule blacks for the benefit of a viewer or listener.) I argue that this tendentious quality also occurs in films such as Melvin Van Peebles's *Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song* (1971) and Spike Lee's *She's Gotta Have It* (1986), which are performed, written, directed, and produced by African-Americans. Thus, a valid examination of black film must separate the black commercial film from the black independent film in order to examine what types of films blacks create when they retain control over the distribution of their films.

Film histories that fail to distinguish black commercial films from black independent films tend to focus entirely on the commercial films. Consequently, they bury black film history by analyzing it according to "rele-

vant” theoretical criteria that are not applicable to black independent film. They also do not consider the particular cultural experiences of African-Americans. Other well-meaning critics analyze black-oriented films according to the popular Marxist, feminist, and psychoanalytic approaches that appeal to the widest reading audience—white male and female middle-class intellectuals. This hegemonic critical triumvirate attempts to subsume—that is, colonize—black film scholarship under the aegis of one of the three critical stances. Such appropriation of black film history and theory minimizes the importance of racial difference as a valid critical approach and, thereby, implies an imaginary America in which problems related to race are less important than those related to class or gender. I do, however, argue for a gender-class-race analysis that also examines black film in relation to its political and cultural context in African-American history. Therefore, my critical approach will engage a feminist-Marxist-black cultural reading of African-American film production and reception.

### **“Race” and “Gender” as Functions of Ideology**

Feminists have developed theories of spectatorship that engender Marxism with a gynocentric notion of ideology. Using Louis Althusser’s Marxist analysis of ideology, Teresa de Lauretis indicates the shortsightedness of orthodox Marxism:

When Althusser wrote that ideology represents “not the system of the real relations which govern the existence of individuals, but the imaginary relation of those individuals to the real relations in which they live” and which govern their existence, he was also describing, to my mind exactly, the functioning of gender.<sup>1</sup>

An engendered space is negotiated within Althusserian Marxism, one of the most humanistic branches of Marxist thought. Here, *negotiation* describes the process of including a formerly excluded concern. For example, conventional Marxism does not consider gender concerns to be as important as those of class affiliation. Therefore, Marxist feminists must negotiate for the inclusion of gender (an engendered space) within conventional Marxism. One such feminist is de Lauretis, who is aware that her feminist entreaty will receive a cold welcome from orthodox Marxists. She rebuts their imagined discourse: “But, it will be objected, it is reductive or overly simplistic to equate gender with ideology. Certainly Althusser does not do that, nor does traditional Marxist thought, where gender is a somewhat marginal issue, one limited to ‘the woman question.’”<sup>2</sup>

Traditional Marxism argues that there is a constant struggle between the owners of production and the workers they employ. Such Marxists should welcome those who desire to incorporate feminism and race as functions of ideology. The women's movement has sought to articulate a feminist approach to the practices of Marxism. People of color have introduced theories that include "race" in the debate over the function of ideology in Marxist, Freudian, and feminist circles. Marxist and Freudian approaches recognize the relevance of gender, but continue to deny the importance of race in their theoretical practices. Surely, a race-class-gender analysis would provide Marxism and psychoanalysis with a more inventive analytical strategy than the reigning dualism. A few critics have pursued such work while borrowing insight from the Marxist debates on questions of gender and ideology.<sup>3</sup> To this end, Teresa de Lauretis gives an engendered reading of the function of ideology in Althusser:

Reading on in Althusser, one finds the emphatic statement "All ideology has the function (which defines it) of 'constituting' concrete individuals as subjects." If I substitute gender for ideology, the statement still works, but with a slight shift of the terms: Gender has the function (which defines it) of constituting concrete individuals as men and women.<sup>4</sup>

I propose that *race* functions to constitute concrete individuals as white and black. Here the movement from subjects to men and women, to black and white, not only "marks the conceptual distance between two orders of discourse, the discourse of philosophy or political theory and the discourse of 'reality,' " it marks the conceptual distance of race and the race-oriented forms of popular culture.<sup>5</sup> In this construction, race informs a progressive Marxism that previously integrated only class- and women-centered theories of spectatorship and postulated an engendered, yet raceless subjectivity.

For the purposes of clarity, the black commercial film is limited here to any feature-length fiction film whose central focus is the Afro-American community. This film is written, directed, or produced by at least one black person in collaboration with non-black people. Films included in this category are distributed by major American film companies.

The black independent film is defined as any feature-length fiction film whose central focus is the Afro-American community. Such films are written, directed, and produced by Afro-Americans and people of African ancestry who reside in the United States. These films are not distributed by major American film companies.

I use the phrase "black mode of artistic production" to identify a filmmaking process in which blacks have written, directed, and pro-

duced their films without financial control by major American commercial film producers, distributors, or exhibitors. The phrase does not describe or evaluate the films' aesthetic representation of African-American life or ideology.

During the period covered in this book, 1900–1990, the major commercial distributors, include the post-1930 Mischeaux Film Corporation, Allied Artists, American International (AIP), Atlas Films, Avco-Embassy Pictures (Embassy), Columbia Pictures (Columbia), Cinema 5, Cinemation Industries (Cinemation), Cinerama Releasing Corporation (Cinerama), Fanfare Films, Hammer Brothers, Island Pictures, Metro-Goldwyn Mayer (MGM), National General Pictures (NGP), New World Pictures (NWP), Paramount Studios (Paramount), Samuel Goldwyn, Jr., Twentieth Century-Fox (Fox), United Artists (UA), Universal Pictures (Universal), and Warner Brothers (Warner).

The first chapter presents the earliest practitioners of black-controlled independent filmmaking and focuses on their work in comedy, family melodrama, and action films. This chapter provides a framework to discuss black-oriented film genres in later chapters on African-American comedy, black family film, and black action film.

The African-American comedy film genre comprises black-oriented fiction films whose casts include popular black comedians and whose primary purpose is to amuse its interracial audiences through the use of hybrid minstrelsy and social satire. The comedy may employ the elements of sex and violence, but these elements are not vehicles to create or alleviate the audience's anxieties.

The black family film genre is a black-oriented fiction film whose action takes place within a typical black family whose narrative function and ideological aim is the restoration of the family. Thus, if the narrative of a family film uses humor, it is only to develop themes and issues of secondary importance to the reestablishment of the family circle. For example, *Gone Are the Days* (Hammer, 1963) and *Five on the Black Handside* (UA, 1973) both feature black family units, but the former is a black comedy film because its narrative primarily generates the comic form of satire, and the latter film is a family film whose comic elements function to ameliorate and unify the family rather than (as in *Gone Are the Days*) to criticize racism.

The black action genre includes black-oriented feature-length fiction films whose narratives may use a combination of the following elements: sexually explicit scenes, physically or psychologically aggressive acts that result in violence, and fearful or horrifying characters or events. These elements usually limit protagonists to mythic or superhuman roles. This genre includes various subtypes like the horror film, the Western, and the gangster-detective film. This book, however, limits analysis to urban

action films because they can present controversial themes and provoke violent urban funk. One needs only to recall the violence that occurred outside film screenings of John Singleton's *Boyz N the Hood* (Columbia, 1991). Chapters five, six, and seven critically assess how recent black filmmakers and their films simulate certain forms of black "reality" while they avoid dramatizations of sexism, homophobia, and classism within the black community.

Chapter five provides an ideological analysis of Spike Lee's three independently produced, studio-distributed urban black comedies and his failure to create empowered black female characters. Chapter six moves from the issues of race and black masculinity to a discussion of these issues within a black feminist context.

A contribution to nascent black feminist theory of film production and audience reception, chapter six presents an Afrocentric feminist interpretation of two aspects of black independent filmmaking. The chapter includes a description of black womanist film production and possible forms of its reception. This black feminist reading is a two-fold form of resistance to a raceless feminism and a phallogentric pan-Africanism. To provide an example of black feminist perspective, I analyze three black-oriented films made by women who have a racial connection to black Africa.

The seventh chapter returns to my initial focus on the late 1960s and early 1970s. I describe that period's renaissance in independent black filmmaking and critically assess the films of a few African-American men who employ a black feminist perspective. Throughout this book, and particularly in chapters six and seven, I argue that socioeconomic factors and sociopsychic desires conjoin and pressure black writers and directors to avoid portraying controversial topics. Consequently, few studio-distributed films portray interracial intimacy as meaningful and successful. Black women are passive victims or wanton waifs, and black gays and lesbians are ridiculed in films that depict them as members of the black community.