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AUTHOR	Kelly, Ernece B.
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ABSTRACT

This paper describes how director Spike Lee changed Hollywood's representations of African Americans in a dramatic way. He returned to traditions of early African American filmmakers like Oscar Michaux by casting all-black movies. In his first film, "She's Gotta Have It", he broke with the Hollywood tradition of using a classic beauty type as his leading lady for the character Nola Darling. In a further departure, Darling's role is not a usual one for African American women in Hollywood films: she is not a servant, a doomed mulatto, a victim, nor a "glitzy ornament" snapped to the end of a man's arm. What seemed like a breakthrough for African Americans (particularly female African Americans) collapsed with the succession of "in-the-hood movies" like "Straight Out of Brooklyn," "Hangin' With the Homeboys," and "Juice" which consistently treated women as subordinates. Although women directors first gained institutional support in the 1970s, the Director's Guild of America reported in 1990 that only 5% of the movies under guild contracts were made by women. Outstanding women of color who have begun to make a name for themselves as directors include Euzan Palcy, Julie Dash, Christine Choy, Mari-Carmen de Lara, Camille Billops, and Trinh-T. Minh-ha. English teachers will find the work of these filmakers useful because previously unexplored material can be looked at from new viewpoints. Short films can be seen more than once in a class, or instructors can assign a longer film that is currently showing. (SAM)

KINGSBOROUGH COMMUNITY COLLEGE
of
The City University of New York

English

Ernece B.Kelly

Women of Color in Film & Using Short Film in the Classroom

In a presentation given at a conference on film, the African-American feminist theorist and writer, bell hooks describes her response to Hollywood movies:

> As someone who spent a lot of her life not looking at films...first, I want to say what it means for colonized people to go to movies where you are not there or you are only represented as Other--fundamentally it can only be an experience of pain.

hooks' boycott seems unusual among African-Americans, for overall Blacks attend movies in great numbers. This despite our painful distortion or blatant omission on the Silver Screen.

But it was Spike Lee who changed this in a dramatic way. (Which is not to say Hollywood has changed, but that Lee has created his own niche--one which more authentically dramatizes urban African-American experiences, across class lines.)

In 1986, Lee returned to traditions of early African-American filmmakers like Oscar Michaux in casting all-Black movies. Further, he broke with the Hollywood tradition of using a classic beauty type for his leading lady. In She's Gotta Have It, the lead role of Nola Darling departs so dramatically from the usual mold, that Pauline Kael reviewing the film for The New Yorker, opens with a long paragraph discussing it.

In another departure from tradition, Darling's role is not the usual one for African-American women in Hollywood films. She's not a servant, a doomed mulatto, a victim nor a glitzy "ornament snapped to the end of a man's arm."

Then what seemed like a breakthrough, collapsed with a succession of "in the 'hood" movies like Straight out of Brooklyn, Hangin' With the Homeboys, and Juice which consistently treated women as subordinates. They were put back in their "place" as either ornaments or victims. Even Lee failed to keep the woman-identified promise he showed in She's Gotta Have It with subsequent films.

Commenting on this generally bleak underutilization of women in Black-directed films, Monica Breckenridge, former executive director of New York's Black Filmmaker's Foundation says, "It's very naive of us to expect our brothers to be our allies simply because they are our brothers... All I have to say to them is 'Let me in the game.' Instead of trying to change their minds with words, I want to fight fire with fire, image with image."

Breckenridge's remarks seems to ignore the fact that it was only about twenty years ago--in the mid-1970's that the first institutional support was established for moving women into directing jobs. In 1974, the American Film Institute initiated a workshop specifically designed to increase the number of women directors. Participants included Joanne Woodward, Lee Grant and Anne Bancroft. But they were not the first.

In 1916, Lois Weber was reportedly the highest paid director in Hollywood, and for approximately twenty years she was responsible for between 200-400 movies. After 1934, however, her explicit moralism was apparently no longer attractive to audiences, and she could not longer find work. (Anyone here who watches late night movies might have seen her overheated melodrama, White Heat

starring James Cagney as the psychopathic gangster obsessed with his mother. This was Weber's last film.)

Dorothy Arzner was another early female director, the only one, in fact, to create a body of work--27 movies--within the Hollywood studio system in the 1930's and '40's. She's probably best known for her work with Katherine Hepburn in the 1933 Christopher Strong and with Joan Crawford in The Bride Wore Red in 1937.

Then Ida Lupino, having acted in over 50 films, slid behind the camera in 1949, staying there until 1966 where she directed seven films. Unusual in their almost-documentary feel for place, her movies tackled social issues like rape and unwed mothers.

Despite the exclusion of women of color from the directing workshops of the American Film Institute, Euzhan Palcy, a Martinique filmmaker who studied film in France and had already directed Sugar Cane Alley in 1984, resurfaced five years later with A Dry White Season making her the first African-American woman to direct for a major Hollywood studio, MGM.

Both movies are male-centered although in Sugar Cane Alley, the loving grandmother of the little boy who ekes out the barest of existences in their poor neighborhood shares much of the narrative and camera time. Palcy highlights their mutual love and respect while side-stepping the lure of romanticizing poverty.

A Dry White Season, on the other hand, based on the Andre Brink novel, looks at the horrors of South African apartheid. But that examination is compromised by the larger context which chronicles the molasses-like awakening of school teacher Donald

Sutherland to the government's inhumane treatment of native South Africans.

The next year, in 1990, the Directors Guild of America reported that only 5% of movies made under guild contracts, were directed by women!

Despite the odds against her, not only in terms of gender, but also race, director Julie Dash's Daughters of the Dust was released in 1991. Dash, comes from Queens, New York, but her father's family comes from the Sea Islands and from neighboring Charleston, S.C., the setting for her film. The movie captures the extended Peazant family at the turn of the 20th century when some members of this Gullah family are preparing to leave their land for the promises of the North. But it's more than this too. It's about African-Americans split between wanting what is modern and longing for ancestral roots. Subtly those roots are hinted at throughout the film. A Yoruba master drummer plays messages in Yoruba, saying, "Remember me, remember my name, take me with you, take me where your go."

Unlike Palcy, the movies of Julie Dash have been consistently woman-centered. In 1978, she directed "Four Women" an experimental dance film which uses the Nina Simone song as soundtrack. Then in 1983, she directed "Illusions" starring Lonette McKee in a drama about a woman movie executive. In Daughters of the Dust practically all the principals are female.

Dash comes out of that long-suffering, little publicized group dubbed "independent filmmakers." (Filmmaker, Pam Jones incidentally, rejects the label calling it a "misnomer." She

argues that they would be better called "collaborative filmmakers" since they depend so much on the financial and emotional support of friends, family and the occasional patron. She might add to her list, credit card companies, since by now the stories are legend of how Robert Townsend financed his movie, Hollywood Shuffle and Matty Rich his Straight Out of Brooklyn by running up the debt on their cards.)

Also, in the last fifteen years, other kinds of support mechanisms have been established for the independent filmmaker. Robert Redford's Sundance Festival regularly showcases their work as does Robert DeNiro at his NY-based Tribeca Film Center. And the Black Filmmaker Foundation which operates on both the West and East Coasts assists filmmakers by helping them build audiences and by providing them with critical referrals. In New York City there are groups designed to assist Asian-American and Hispanic independent filmmakers as well.

Who are some of the outstanding women of color who have managed to garner a name for themselves? There's Christine Choy, a Chinese-American who's made over 25 documentaries and videos, including the controversial Mississippi Triangle about the relations between Asians and Blacks in the South.

There's Mari-Carmen de Lara from Mexico who's made most of her five films in collaboration with women's groups. Her 1986 movie no les pedimos un viaje a la luna/We're Not Asking for the Moon looks at what happened to women garment workers in Mexico when the 1985 earthquake trapped them in their workshops which were locked so that management could easily spot latecomers.

There's Camille Billops a visual artist and African-American archivist who also directs films of a very personal kind. My favorite is Older Women/Younger Men which looks at loving relationships between older women and younger men with humor and respect. Her Suzanne, Suzanne looks at child abuse in a middle-class family, while her 1991 film, Finding Christa treats her abandonment of a young daughter and the ambivalent feelings this produced in her and the rest of her family. Serious and straight-forward, its fantasy scene catches viewers off-guard.

And finally, there's Trinh-T. Minh-ha who has directed three films which subvert the conventions of documentary in an effort to show their subjectivity. Two of them are about West Africans and another focuses on Vietnamese women.

Some other women of color directors are listed on the hand-out I've distributed. Which brings me back to you and your classrooms. What are some of the ways in which film can be used there?

Borrowing a phrase from my guru on the NCTE Commission on Media, Jonathan Lovell, we academics are part of the "outlaw tradition" in that we use videos in classrooms in violation of U.S. law. And the fact that many excellent movies have been transferred to video, expands our repertoire significantly.

While most of us can't show a full-length film in class because we're tied to short periods, we can request that some office like Student Life show it a couple of times through the day or, at a resident campus, show it over the weekend. And we can assign it to our students.

Or we can assign a film which is currently making the rounds. If enough students sign-on a group rate is often available, but otherwise, by keeping your book prices as low as possible, you can include the single ticket price as a class-cost.

Short films can be viewed more than once in a single class period. They can be experienced along with the literature which relates to them whether it's the folk legend John Henry with its bittersweet soundtrack by Roberta Flack or Lorraine Hansberry's A Raisin in the Sun or the film version of Baldwin's Go Tell It on the Mountain. Students can be asked to speculate about scenes which are rearranged or missing altogether. They can speculate about new scenes. Seeing film and literature as very different genre, as very different strategies for communicating experiences, is likely to be one student outcome.

Whatever your desired outcome, use of film in our classes is one way of activating the social work axiom about meeting "the clients where they are." For many of out students are voracious consumers of media. And showing films by women of color can introduce subject matter they may not be otherwise getting.

They may also be experiencing an inventiveness which is new to them, for Valerie Smith who curated a recent show at the Whitney Museum ("The Black Women Independent: Representing Race and Gender") says that they are exploring, "new ways of casting, new ways of working with camera angles and new ways of using voice-overs."

In closing, the only accurate generalization I can make about this subject is that no generalization is possible. For the work

of women of color filmmakers ranges widely from reality-based documentaries to fanciful fantasies, from stark black-and-white to sensuous color, from the comic to the serious, and from conventional narratives to reassemblage! And while few are only now getting recognition, many are working unacknowledged behind their cameras while still others plug away in classes at NYU and UCLA.

As UCLA-trained filmmaker Zeinabu Irene Davis puts it, "Julie Dash and Michelle Parkerson were and are big influences on me. We don't even know each other that well, but its's important for us to know we're all out here because people will make you crazy thinking you're the only one."

I think it's important for us as English teachers to know their work exists because much of it does bring up previously unexplored material looked at from new viewpoints.

It's the stuff that can reinvigorate both us and our students.