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African Americans After World War II

Although slavery ended with the Civil War, progress toward racial equality was slow, especially because of the so-called Jim Crow laws enacted to maintain white supremacy (see "The South"). African Americans made some progress over the eighty years following the Civil War, but it took the total-war environment of World War II—"requiring black assistance, against an enemy that led U.S. elites to stress their more egalitarian principles, reinforced by internal pressures to live up to those principles" (Klinkner, 73)—to set in motion major changes in society.

However, the process was still a slow and difficult one. The milestones are well known today: President Truman's executive orders prohibiting discrimination in employment and integrating the armed forces (1948); *Brown vs. Board of Education* (1954); the Montgomery bus boycott sparked by Rosa Parks's action (1955); federal troops helping integrate a school in Little Rock, Arkansas (1957); the March on Washington (1963); the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965; race riots (1964–68); and the assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. (1968). The process may not yet be complete, but few would deny that enormous strides were made in a relatively short period, as if to make up for nearly two centuries of neglect (see "Civil Rights").

Post-World War II Hollywood was not unaware of the gradual move toward social justice and racial equality, but neither could it ignore the resistance to this movement in some segments of the population. Consequently, the African American image in films underwent a

variety of changes that were not necessarily synchronized with the slow but fairly steady progress being made in society.

Although the most offensive black stereotypes generally vanished from Hollywood movies after World War II, filmmakers were slow to replace them with positive images. Major African American roles in the 1950s and 1960s were largely but not exclusively restricted to "message films" in which race played an important part in the film's plot. The 1970s saw the reemergence of films with predominantly African American casts, but—whether "serious" movies or the so-called blaxploitation genre productions—these movies were, like the black-cast movies of the 1930s and 1940s, primarily intended for African American audiences. Mainstream Hollywood began to introduce African American performers and themes into its productions. These included "color-blind" parts for black professionals, black policemen, and so forth, in which a character's race was not relevant to the plot; the presence of these minority roles signified a desire for a more realistic portrayal of a multiethnic America. Major films with African American stars or costars were also produced, and these were expected to appeal to audiences white and black. This three-way split continues to the present: mainstream movies with African American performers, serious films about the African American experience (some of which have a chance of becoming "crossover" hits), and popular films aimed at a predominantly African American audience (which only rarely find a broader audience).

Social Problem Films

In the early 1940s, as the world crisis drew closer to the shores of the United States, it became obvious that all Americans would have to cooperate if the forces of democracy were going to prevail against the totalitarian aggressors. Still, it took the threat of a massive protest march on Washington to prompt President Franklin D. Roosevelt to sign, in June 1941, an executive order prohibiting racial or religious discrimination in defense industries. When war came, African Americans served in the armed forces and worked on the home front, although often in segregated positions and frequently in the face of prejudice.

The need for a united front during wartime translated to the Hollywood screen. Immediately before and during World War II, a handful of films made a particular point of including atypically strong and admirable African American characters. For instance, *In This Our Life* (1942) features an African American law clerk (Ernest Anderson) who is framed by the unsympathetic protagonist (Bette Davis) for a hit-and-run accident. In *Syncopation* (1942), a young white musician learns jazz from an African American trumpeter (Todd Duncan). Other movies, notably *Bataan*, *Sahara*, and *Crash Dive*, were clearly an attempt to illustrate and foster national solidarity during wartime.

Ironically, one of the first postwar films with a major African American role almost completely reversed this trend and prompted numerous protests as a result: one historian indicates the film was "picketed more heavily than any film since *The Birth of a Nation*" (Leab, 37). This movie was *Song of the South* (1946), a part-animated, part-live action film from the Disney Company, starring James Baskett as Uncle Remus, who tells stories to entertain and educate a young white boy. The paternalistic "Uncle Tom" stereotype, while not without its positive aspects, offended many African Americans. Although it was not the last such holdover from prewar Hollywood images, *Song of the South* was one of the most

egregious examples, and has been called "a great leap backwards" (Nestey, 228).

More in line with trends in society as a whole were the "social problem" films produced later in the decade. In addition to pictures dealing with anti-Semitism (*Gentleman's Agreement* and *Crossfire*, 1947), mental illness (*The Snake Pit*, 1948), and juvenile delinquency (*Knock on Any Door*, 1949), the issue of racial equality was also addressed. These films were undoubtedly produced for a variety of reasons, not all of them altruistic, and they are more well intentioned than realistic or groundbreaking, but the very fact that they were made suggests a growing awareness of the societal problems that needed to be addressed.

The reason for the "social problem" films of the immediate postwar years is varied. The race hatred of the Nazis and its horrendous results were widely known, as were the contributions of African Americans to the war effort. Furthermore, almost as soon as the war ceased, the NAACP began a series of lawsuits challenging legalized discrimination and segregation. In December 1945, President Truman formed the Committee on Civil Rights; its report, issued the following October, condemned racial injustice in the United States. World War II had made racism undesirable, at least in principle.

The most noteworthy of the postwar era films with racial themes are *Home of the Brave* (1949), *Lost Boundaries* (1949), *Pinky* (1949), *Intruder in the Dust* (1949), and *No Way Out* (1950). *Home of the Brave*, directed by Stanley Kramer, deals with Peter Moss (James Edwards), an African American soldier who was stricken with hysterical paralysis after a wartime mission in the Pacific. A sympathetic psychiatrist discovers that Moss feels guilty for abandoning a fellow GI who had called him "nigger" to the advancing Japanese. The doctor shocks Moss into walking by repeating the slur and says that a history of social injustice predisposed the soldier to react as he did. The film was released two years after President

Truman's order mandating equality of treatment in the armed forces, a belated tribute to African American fighting men during war. It was not until October 1954, however, that the last all-black unit was disbanded.

Intruder in the Dust, based on a novel by William Faulkner, was shot on location in Mississippi and contains a fairly realistic portrayal of conditions in the South at the time. Lucas Beauchamp (Juano Hernandez) is accused of shooting a white man. Lucas is proud and stubborn, and he knows what to expect from the white man's justice. However, a coalition consisting of a white teenager, his African American friend, the white boy's lawyer uncle, and an elderly white spinster manages to prevent Lucas from being lynched and proves his innocence.

Lost Boundaries and *Pinky* both deal with light-skinned African Americans who "pass" as white. The first film, based on an actual case, tells the story of a doctor and his family who live and work in a white community in the North, where they are assumed to be white (the doctor's children are not even aware that they are African American). There is some controversy when the truth comes out, but the film's conclusion—which leaves a number of issues unresolved—suggests that in this particular case, the family's race is irrelevant to their friends and associates. However, earlier scenes did clearly show that discrimination and prejudice were still present in the United States. *Pinky*, directed by Elia Kazan, was a major studio (Twentieth Century-Fox) production with a "name" star (Jeanne Crain) in the title role. *Pinky* is a light-skinned African American who attended nursing school in the North. After a white doctor proposes marriage, *Pinky* goes home to the South to think things over. Her grandmother (Ethel Waters) criticizes *Pinky* for "passing," feeling it is wrong to deny one's identity and live a lie. *Pinky* inherits a mansion from the white Miss Em, whom she nursed in the older woman's final days; she decides to stay in the South and open a clinic and nursing

school in the house. As with *Lost Boundaries*, there are scenes that overtly depict discrimination and prejudice; however, the issue was once more personalized, suggesting that racism could be overcome with good intentions and that institutional racism was vanishing (*Pinky* wins a court case against Miss Em's white relatives).

No Way Out was the last major entry in the first wave of racially oriented social problem films. Sidney Poitier, in his screen debut, plays Luther Brooks, a newly certified doctor who loses an emergency patient in a hospital prison ward and is accused of murder by the dead man's virulently racist brother, Ray Biddle (Richard Widmark). Biddle foments a race riot (interestingly enough, the African American targets of the planned attack stage a preemptive strike rather than wait passively to be assaulted). In the end, Brooks proves his moral superiority by refusing to kill the racist when he has the chance, even after he is shot and wounded himself. While Ray Biddle's racism is explained away as a result of his "sick mind" (he is also referred to as a "mental case"), the bitter and hostile actions of other white and black residents of the city (one woman spits in Luther's face and says "keep your black hands off my boy") are not as easy to overlook. Nonetheless, the film does portray some open-minded and reasonable characters of both races, and the scenes of Luther and his family were a rare Hollywood glimpse into middle-class African American life.

Hollywood's brief flirtation with liberal causes faltered in the face of economics (the challenge of television to some extent influenced the types of films being made, and socially aware movies became somewhat more rare), and the emergence of more pressing issues (the Korean War, McCarthyism). While images of African Americans did not revert to prewar stereotypes, major movies about race relations in the United States, or even those with significant African American characters, became scarce, if not nonexistent. A handful

of sports films exalted the prowess of boxer Joe Louis (*The Joe Louis Story*, 1953), baseball player Jackie Robinson (*The Jackie Robinson Story*, 1950), and the Harlem Globetrotters basketball team (*The Harlem Globetrotters*, 1950; *Go, Man, Go!* 1953). Although they contained positive images of African Americans, these films were not aimed at a mass audience: only a limited number of whites with special interests would be expected to view these pictures, in addition to African American filmgoers.

This relative eclipse came at a time when legal barriers to equality were beginning to fall, although not without considerable resistance. *Brown vs. Board of Education*, the landmark Supreme Court decision declaring school segregation unconstitutional, was heard in May 1954. Within a few months, school systems around the country were forced to desegregate, a process that led to the use of federal troops in September 1957 in Little Rock, Arkansas, where local officials refused to comply. The same year saw the passage of the Voting Rights Act. In 1955 and 1956 the first wave of sit-ins and boycotts protesting discriminatory policies and laws took place. These steps irrevocably altered the United States, but the change did not come overnight. Understandably, the controversy was frightening to Hollywood: although they were in favor of "equality" and "brotherhood," the studios saw nothing to gain from making films about the civil rights struggle. Motion pictures produced in this era dealt with race obliquely, if at all.

A number of movies did prominently feature African Americans, but these films generally fell into two categories: mainstream movies with Sidney Poitier (or perhaps Harry Belafonte), and specialty pictures such as *Bright Road* (1953), *Porgy and Bess* (1959), and *Carmen Jones* (1954). The latter two pictures were major studio productions (MGM made *Bright Road*, but on a low budget) with serious, respectful depictions of African Americans, but in terms of their place in the overall

scheme of Hollywood productions they were little more than updated versions of prewar black-cast movies such as *Green Pastures* or *Cabin in the Sky*.

Sidney Poitier, on the other hand, played roles in films that could not have been released before World War II. Many of his films dealt overtly with racial issues, including *The Defiant Ones* (1958), *A Raisin in the Sun* (1961), *In the Heat of the Night* (1967; five Academy Awards, including best picture), and *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner* (1967). Nonetheless, he was generally cast as such exceptional individuals that his race was, if not irrelevant and never ignored, then certainly subordinate to his characters' other traits. Poitier earned a place in mainstream Hollywood never before achieved by an African American actor, but also a certain amount of hostility from members of his own race: "At the height of his star power . . . Poitier's 'ebony saint' image was increasingly wearing thin for African Americans; it did not speak to the aspirations or anger of the new black social consciousness that was emerging" (Guerrero, 72).

One of Poitier's most famous roles—Dr. John Prentice in *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner*—illustrates both aspects of the controversy. Prentice is black, and the film's *raison d'être* hinges on his race, but he is also a world-famous surgeon who lives in Switzerland. His engagement to the white Joey Drayton (Katharine Houghton) shocks both her parents and his parents, but the only argument against the marriage is patently specious—namely, that they are of different races. John and Joey are culturally compatible, and because they plan to live in Switzerland after they are married, even the argument that their lives would be difficult in racially intolerant America is irrelevant. The film thus boils down the racial issue to its lowest, most superficial level (skin color), while at the same time ignoring many real questions about race relations in the United States.

Perhaps in response to comments from the African American community, Poitier tried a



FIGURE 24. *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner* (1967). Actor Sidney Poitier was at the height of his appeal and craft in this landmark 1960s film about racial tolerance. Joey (Katharine Houghton) shows Dr. John Prentice (Poitier) photographs depicting her idyllic family, an example of how the film skillfully deflects attention from important racial issues. Courtesy Columbia Pictures.

few change-of-pace roles such as the romantic *For the Love of Ivy* (1968) and *The Lost Man* (1969), a remake of *Odd Man Out*, substituting Poitier for James Mason and black militants for the Irish Republican Army. By shedding his "ebony saint" image, Poitier also gave up mainstream stardom, and since the 1970s he has appeared in relatively few movies (he also started directing films, which has occupied much of his time).

Aside from Poitier, Harry Belafonte was the only other African American performer who even came close to sustained leading-man status before the 1970s. After roles in *Bright Road* and *Carmen Jones*, Belafonte appeared in three major movies (the latter two produced by his own independent company) that, while using his race as a plot point, were not overt "social problem" movies. *Island in the Sun* (1957), set on a Caribbean island, stars Belafonte as a politically ambitious young man in love with a rich society woman, played by Joan Fontaine. Although this film broke the interracial-romance barrier (another "mixed" couple is also featured in the movie), setting it in an exotic locale diffused the impact considerably. In *The World, the Flesh, and the Devil*

(1959), Belafonte, Inger Stevens, and Mel Ferrer are the only three people left alive on the earth after an atomic disaster. The racial symbolism was obvious but muted, subordinate to the romantic triangle (Stevens meets Belafonte first and falls in love with him, which causes trouble when Ferrer shows up, but in the end they manage to work out their differences). Belafonte's third starring film in a row—and his last for over a decade—was *Odds Against Tomorrow* (1959). Slater (Robert Ryan), a racist southerner, and Ingram (Belafonte), a middle-class African American with gambling debts, are hired by a third man (Ed Begley) to carry out a robbery scheme. The heist fails due to Slater's racist attitudes, and he and Ingram are incinerated in a climactic explosion.

As the civil rights struggle continued in the latter part of the 1950s and throughout the 1960s, a handful of films emerged that began to look at the issue of race or featured predominantly black casts, including *Take a Giant Step* (1958), *Nothing but a Man* (1964), and *Hurry Sundown* (1967). One interesting independent production was *Black Like Me* (1964), an adaptation of a nonfiction book by John Howard Griffin. John Horton (James Whitmore) is a white Texas journalist who undergoes medical treatments to change his skin color because "I want to find out what it's like to be a Negro in the South" (his publisher's response is "You're kidding!"). Although Whitmore never really looks like an African American (especially when he shares the screen with actual African American actors), the film is undeniably powerful in its depiction of racism. After weeks of discrimination and abuse, Horton is touched by the slightest example of fair-mindedness he encounters from a Southern white man, but this is an extremely rare event: the film's white characters are overwhelmingly overtly hostile, condescending, or fearfully apologetic but unwilling to break the color barrier. *Black Like Me* makes it clear that "it doesn't matter who you are or what you are, the color of your skin is all that matters."

Black Exploitation and Black Filmmaking

After the landmark legal rulings, laws, and civil unrest of the 1950s and 1960s, the civil rights movement seemed to fade into the background in the 1970s. Progress was still being made but much more slowly and without the fanfare that had accompanied earlier efforts, and there were some who believed momentum had been lost: "In spite of all the court decisions, the sit-ins, marches and boycotts, the average black American was disillusioned with his status in American society, for he still found himself . . . segregated and discriminated against . . . in all walks of American life" (Hornsby, xxxiv). The racial unrest of the late 1960s and the burgeoning "black militant" movement came about after the major laws and court decisions of the 1950s and 1960s, suggesting the process of achieving equality was far from complete.

Similarly, the African American image in Hollywood films continued to evolve. The blaxploitation films of the early 1970s may be viewed as an outgrowth of the civil rights movement: Hollywood was aware of the potential African American audience, and this audience was waiting for films specifically tailored for it. Ironically, these movies were often made by white film-industry veterans, and the profits went back to the Hollywood establishment. One exception was *Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song* (1971), directed by Melvin Van Peebles, an independent production usually cited as the film that signified the existence and box-office potential of an urban, minority audience. *Shaft* (1971) and *Superfly* (1972) were also made by African American directors (Gordon Parks and Gordon Parks Jr., respectively), but for major studios. Dozens of other, lesser films followed, mostly adhering to "the central narrative ingredients of the blaxploitation formula: violent expressions of black manhood or womanhood, and a black-white confrontation that ends with the oppressed black coming out spectacularly victorious" (Guerrero, 110). These films created their own



FIGURE 25. *Black Like Me* (1964). Too risky and daring for Hollywood, this story, adapted from John Howard Griffin's nonfiction book, could be made only as an independent production. Investigative journalist John Horton (James Whitmore) changes skin color to be confronted with despicable and vicious racism, a concept many Americans, especially Southerners, had yet to confront. Courtesy The Hilltop Company.

set of stereotypes, particularly the African American superman (or, more rarely, superwoman), capable of defeating (mostly white) oppressors and performing prodigious feats of lovemaking. However, less admirable stereotypes also abounded in these films, including gangsters, pimps, and women utilized as sex objects. A few of these films managed to cross over to whites, but the blaxploitation genre was largely aimed at a minority audience.

At the same time, mainstream Hollywood continued the gradual integration of its casts, and even a few "serious"—or at least non-blaxploitation—films about black topics were produced, often by African American filmmakers. These include *The Learning Tree* (1969), directed by Gordon Parks; Sidney Poitier's directorial debut, *Buck and the Preacher* (1972); *Sounder* (1972), directed by Martin Ritt; *Aaron Loves Angela* (1975), directed by Gordon Parks Jr.; *Cornbread, Earl and Me* (1975), directed by Joe Manduke; and *Cooley High* (1975), directed by Michael Schultz. Though well received critically, these films failed to attract a significant crossover audience, suggesting that whites were willing to ac-

cept African Americans in significant roles in mainstream movies but were not particularly interested in viewing films with predominantly black casts. Ironically, later in the decade, *Roots* (1977) would earn record-breaking ratings during its eight-night run on ABC television, with nearly half the country (100 million people) watching the final episode.

During the presidencies of Richard Nixon and Gerald Ford, there were few major breakthroughs in race relations, and the topic ceased to be of major interest to Hollywood. During the Carter administration, "President Carter's gestures . . . were not only hampered by a slow economy, but also by a growing white backlash against affirmative action" (Hornsby, xxxix). During the two terms of President Ronald Reagan, the administration's conservative judiciary helped codify this opposition to programs and policies like affirmative action. Ironically, it was during this period that African American performers achieved an unprecedented prominence in mainstream Hollywood productions.

The Rise of the African American Crossover Star

Sidney Poitier—and, to a much lesser extent, Harry Belafonte and even Sammy Davis Jr.—had crossed over to stardom in mainstream Hollywood, but their successors were not immediately forthcoming. Bill Cosby achieved considerable success on television, but his film career was insignificant. Jim Brown became a leading player in action films of the late 1960s but was rarely asked to carry a film as the star until the blaxploitation era. The first African American performer to sustain crossover success in the 1970s was Richard Pryor. After an apprenticeship in supporting roles, Pryor first achieved mainstream attention as Gene Wilder's costar in *Silver Streak* (1976). Over the next few years he alternated appearances in predominantly black-cast pictures such as *The Bingo Long Traveling All-Stars and Motor Kings* (1976), *Car Wash* (1976), *Which Way Is Up?*

(1977), *Greased Lightning* (1977), *The Wiz* (1978), *Some Kind of Hero* (1981), and *Bustin' Loose* (1981), with roles—generally paired with white actors—in mainstream films such as *Blue Collar* (1978), *Stir Crazy* (1980), *Superman III* (1983), *Brewster's Millions* (1985), and *See No Evil, Hear No Evil* (1989). Pryor's most successful films at the box office were his crossover pictures, where he was either supported by or in support of white performers. Pryor did not have a single, signature screen persona, which allowed him to avoid stereotyping, although his quick wit was often used to portray him as street-smart, particularly in contrast to naive white characters.

Eddie Murphy, like Pryor a comedian before he became an actor, followed Pryor into films. His first movie was *48 Hours* (1982), a mainstream "buddy" film teaming convict Reggie (Murphy) with police detective Jack Cates (Nick Nolte). *Trading Places* (1983) featured another white-black combination, Murphy and Dan Aykroyd. In *Beverly Hills Cop* (1984), Murphy was elevated to stardom, with white actor Judge Reinhold playing a supporting role. Even more than Pryor, Murphy capitalized on a brash, smart-aleck persona, in some ways a version of the folktale "trickster" who mocks, fools, and manipulates his victims. Murphy's film career faltered for a time, and his mere presence could not guarantee a film's success. *The Nutty Professor* (1996), *Dr. Dolittle* (1998), and *The Nutty Professor 2: The Klumps* (2000) were crossover hits, but *Metro* (1997), *Holy Man* (1998), and *Life* (1999) were relative failures.

A third African American performer who achieved mass-market popularity in the 1980s was Whoopi Goldberg. Although best known for comedy, Goldberg had major dramatic roles in a variety of films, most notably *The Color Purple* (1985), *Ghost* (1990)—for which she won an Academy Award—*The Long Walk Home* (1990), *Sister Act* (1992), and *Sarafina!* (1992). Several of these films dealt with racial issues or the African American experience, but Goldberg usually works in mainstream films

where her race is not an issue. She often plays outspoken, brash characters. Goldberg has also appeared in a number of mainstream films as housekeepers (*Clara's Heart*, 1988; *Corinna Corinna*, 1994) or nurses (*Girl, Interrupted*, 1999) who are employed by, or care for, whites. Regardless of the thrust of these films and the strength of Goldberg's characters, some might consider such roles as throwbacks to older Hollywood images of African Americans. Conversely, Goldberg's role as a maid in *The Long Walk Home* is justified by the historical context and the film's plot, set during the 1955 bus boycott in Montgomery, Alabama.

In the 1990s and beyond, a number of African American actors have risen to positions of prominence. Rapper and TV sitcom star Will Smith transferred his hip, urban image to a number of popular films, including *Independence Day* (1996), *Men in Black* (1997), *Wild Wild West* (2000), *Men in Black II* (2002), and *Ali* (2001). Smith seemed to have become a bankable star, but even his presence in *The Legend of Bagger Vance* (2000) could not help that film—about an African American who helps a World War I veteran regain his lost golfing prowess—find an audience or turn a profit. Danny Glover achieved stardom with *Lethal Weapon* (1987) and its sequels. Denzel Washington has forged a career in mainstream films as a handsome leading man, but it is interesting to note that pictures such as *The Pelican Brief* (1993), *Crimson Tide* (1995), *Fallen* (1998), *The Bone Collector* (1999), *Remember the Titans* (2000), and *Training Day* (2001) do not present him in "romantic" leading man roles, and thus the issue of an interracial romance is never raised. Samuel L. Jackson, Morgan Freeman, and Wesley Snipes have also starred in films intended for a mass audience. All of these actors have also worked in serious "black" movies.

Mainstream Films and the African American Experience

Since the 1980s, a three-way division in films about or starring African Americans has been

evident. There are mainstream Hollywood films starring African Americans but aimed at the mass audience, films about the African American experience or other racial topics that are expected to cross over to the mass audience, and movies produced specifically for the African American audience. Each of these types of films contains a variety of images of African Americans.

Mainstream films such as *Men in Black*, *Lethal Weapon* and its three sequels, *Kiss the Girls*, and *Enemy of the State* feature African American stars or costars, but for the most part these films are color-blind—the plot and characterizations may take notice of the race of the performers, but this is not a significant aspect of the film. A movie such as *The Bodyguard* (1992) may star a white actor (Kevin Costner) and an African American actress (Whitney Houston), but the interracial component of their romance is most definitely not the focus of the film; either of the two major stars could have been replaced with a performer of another race and the film would have been essentially the same. The actress Halle Berry has similarly crossed over into color-blind romantic roles such as in *Swordfish* (2001) and *Die Another Day* (2002), though her Academy Award-winning role in Marc Forster's film *Monster's Ball* (2001) certainly made ethnicity an issue.

In the past several decades Hollywood has produced a fair number of films dealing with racial themes and intended for a mass (white as well as black) audience. It may be significant, however, that a number of these movies are period pictures—thus avoiding a direct discussion of the state of current race relations in the United States. Examples include *The Color Purple* (1985), *Driving Miss Daisy* (1989), *Glory* (1989), *Ghosts of Mississippi* (1996), *Rosewood* (1997), *Amistad* (1997), and *Beloved* (1998). Most of these films were directed by whites: whether the race of the director influenced the portrayal of African Americans in these films is open to debate, but the fact re-

mains that most African American directors work in the third category, films aimed at African American audiences.

Whether serious dramas—*Daughters of the Dust* (1991), *Malcolm X* (1992), and *Eve's Bayou* (1997), for example—or commercial action films and comedies, one writer argues, "Hollywood makes these modestly budgeted black features with the expectation of recovering the capital invested and turning a profit from the black audience alone" (Guerrero, 166). Only rarely does one of these films cross over to the white audience. The most prolific African American filmmaker today, Spike Lee, has had very little success with white audiences, *Do the Right Thing* (1989) excepted. Films such as *She's Gotta Have It* (1986) and *School Daze* (1988) explore the African American experience in terms that may be too nuanced for whites: *School Daze*, for example, is set at an all-black university and highlights the competition between "jigaboos" and "wannabes," cliques of students defined by their skin color and hairstyles, which signify their degree of cultural "blackness."

Features made by African American filmmakers display their own sets of stereotypes, including rappers, "gangstas," sexually objectified women, and "buppies" (black urban professionals) in popular films such as *I'm Gonna Get You Sucka* (1988), *House Party* (1990), *Boyz N the Hood* (1991), *Menace II Society* (1993), *Booty Call* (1997), *Next Friday*

(2000), *Scary Movie* (2000), *The Original Kings of Comedy* (2000), and *Barbershop* (2002). Images that might be perceived as racist if produced by white filmmakers are more acceptable if created by African Americans for an internal audience because the motivations and portrayals originate in, and are intended for, a different cultural context. Spike Lee's *Bamboozled* (2000) nonetheless drew considerable criticism for its resurrection of black stereotypes from the minstrel show and early Hollywood eras, even though the director used these offensive images to make a satirical and political point.

Reluctant Progress

Since World War II, the visibility of African Americans in motion pictures has increased significantly. Although Hollywood is still reluctant—with very few exceptions—to produce big-budget films with predominantly black casts, this appears to be a function of the (perceived or real) limited audience for such movies, rather than a decision based on racist motives. African American performers are regularly cast in major roles, and race stereotyping is extremely rare. The debate may now be between proponents of "color blindness" in films and those who want greater attention paid to African American subjects. Although the struggle for absolute racial justice has not concluded, in Hollywood movies as in real life, significant progress has certainly been made.

References

Filmography

- Aaron Loves Angela* (1975, F)
- Ali* (2001, F)
- Amistad* (1997, F)
- Bamboozled* (2000, F)
- Barbershop* (2002, F)
- Bataan* (1943, F)
- Beloved* (1998, F)
- Beverly Hills Cop* (1984, F)
- The Bingo Long Traveling All-Stars and Motor Kings* (1976, F)

- Black Like Me* (1964, F)
- Blue Collar* (1978, F)
- The Bodyguard* (1992, F)
- The Bone Collector* (1999, F)
- Booty Call* (1997, F)
- Boyz N the Hood* (1991, F)
- Brewster's Millions* (1985, F)
- Bright Road* (1953, F)
- The Brother from Another Planet* (1984, F)
- Buck and the Preacher* (1972, F)
- Bustin' Loose* (1981, F)
- Carmen Jones* (1954, F)