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Viewing in the Dark

Toward a Black Feminist Approach to Film

Janell Hobson

In the spring semester of 2000, when I taught my first Introduction to Women's Studies course, I introduced Laura Mulvey's "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" during a unit on images of women in popular culture. To illustrate Mulvey's analysis of the *scopophilic* instinct, in which she defines "looking . . . [as] a source of pleasure," I showed my class a clip from Alfred Hitchcock's *Rear Window*, since she had examined in her essay how the male voyeuristic gaze was used in this film.¹ In a "point of view" shot, the camera's gaze frames a close-up of Grace Kelley as she bends down to kiss James Stewart, the character we assume to hold the point of view. My students at least understood how the "look"—as it entailed the power dynamic of "woman as image, man as bearer of the look"—was constructed in cinema once we established this gender paradigm.

However, when I assigned Julie Dash's groundbreaking black feminist film *Daughters of the Dust* for a screening, my students were unable to comprehend how Dash altered not only the essential gender paradigm but also the racial paradigms of looking relations.² Somehow, they could not interpret Dash's techniques of African aesthetics: her use of visuals and sounds, her focus on images of black people—especially close-ups of African American women—and her revolutionary form of narrative and cinematography that displaced the white male gaze as "bearer of the look." It was not just that Dash removed this privileged gaze from her frame of reference; she also challenged the "visual pleasure" we expect to gain from watching a film. In short, my students, who were primarily white, middle class, and female (give or take three male students) were "visually" challenged by the shift from Hollywood filmmaking models. The three African American female students in this class were an exception; while "confused" by the narrative, they were nonetheless appreciative of the "beautiful" appearances of the black women in this film.

Although I realize that a viewing of *Daughters of the Dust* would have been difficult for any student unused to such projects as Dash's in restructuring the racial and gender hegemonic practices of filmmaking,

I did not prepare them well for Dash's radical departure, even with a feminist film critique such as Mulvey's. While Mulvey's essay provides a convincing feminist analysis of film that moves away from a simple examination of visual images of women and focuses instead on the male-identified gaze of the camera, it falls short of any analysis of racial factors and how they might shape the "looking relations" in cinema. However, therein lies the problem—in "looking." Whereas the construction of the white female body in film can be viewed, studied, and deconstructed, often in Hollywood cinema there *is* no black female body that we can analyze.³ Or so we think.

In her essay Mulvey describes the sexual imbalance that structures the cinematic frame and, hence, the world as we know it. She suggests:

[Pleasure] in looking has been split between active/male and passive/female. The determining male gaze projects its fantasy onto the female figure, which is styled accordingly. In their traditional exhibitionist role women are simultaneously looked at and displayed, with their appearance coded for strong visual and erotic impact so that they can be said to connote *to-be-looked-at-ness*. Women displayed as sexual object is the leit-motif of erotic spectacle: from pin-ups to strip-tease, from Ziegfield to Busby Berkeley, she holds the look, plays to and signifies male desire. (750)

While we may argue that, when black women *are* included in film, they certainly inhabit this function in the same way as their white female counterparts, the "to-be-looked-at-ness" embodied in erotic pleasure functions differently with regard to the racial dynamics of the gaze. For the black female body may incorporate the "erotic pleasure" of the white/nonwhite male gaze through the image of a "Jezebel" or "tragic mulatto," but there is also "displeasure" in such cases as grotesque "mam-mies" and "Sapphires," who functioned in early Hollywood films—and to some extent, in contemporary cinema—as the antierotic and the antithesis to the white female body and, hence, as the signifier for a blackness that shapes a more palatable representation of whiteness.⁴

Nonetheless, what are we to make of their absence, or should I say their "disembodied" presence, since there is still a dearth of images of black women in cinema? For even as Mulvey effectively analyzes how Grace Kelly is framed for the camera's voyeurism in her role as Lisa in *Rear Window*—in which her "exhibitionism . . . establishe[s] . . . her obsessive interest in dress and style, in being a passive image of visual perfection"—she makes no reference to the one instance of the black (female) presence in this film (755).

To be sure, the presence is so fleeting that one would have to be obsessively searching for it, as I began doing while viewing films and detecting the ways in which black bodies surface. Given the brevity of this presence, I cannot criticize Mulvey too severely for failing to comment on it. Perhaps there really isn't anything to say, but having realized that filmmakers—especially one as compulsive and fastidious in his constructions of mise-en-scène and narratives as Hitchcock—do not include diegetic and nondiegetic items in their films accidentally, I feel I must provide commentary. I am referring to a pivotal scene in *Rear Window* when Jeffries (played by James Stewart) makes an urgent phone call to his detective friend Sergeant Boyle. Much to his dismay, Boyle is not available for his call, as is made known to him by Boyle's "babysitter," who answers Jeffries in a voice that is noticeably female, black, and Southern in dialect.

We may well ask why Hitchcock chose to insert this small presence of the black female when he rarely includes black bodies in his films, perhaps with the exception of background servants who function as components of the luxurious surroundings of his middle- and upper-class white protagonists. Moreover, the sound of the babysitter precipitates much of the climactic action that later unfolds in the narrative. It is as if, just as the white characters are jolted into uncertainty and danger, they must be reassured of their racial, class, and gender status through the voice of the black female, comfortably placed (even though we never see her) in a role of servitude. A voice that reminds the characters, as well as the audience, of the dominance and normalcy of whiteness—even when that representation of normalcy takes on voyeurism, burglary, and murder.

Toni Morrison offers a critique of the absence-presence of blackness, which she calls the "Africanist presence," in American culture and literature, in her work *Playing in the Dark*:

There seems to be a more or less tacit agreement among . . . scholars that. . . [white male] views, genius, and power are without relationship to and removed from the overwhelming presence of black people in the United States . . . These speculations have led me to wonder whether the major and championed characteristics of our national literature . . . are not in fact responses to a dark, abiding, signing Africanist presence . . . Through significant and underscored *omissions*, [italics added] startling contradictions, heavily nuanced conflicts, through the way writers peopled their work with the signs and bodies of this presence—one can see that a real and fabricated Africanist presence was crucial to their sense of Americanness. And it shows. (5–6)

Through this Africanist presence, the norm of white maleness is buttressed, as the constructions of race and gender difference reinforce the meanings of whiteness and masculinity. Such a reading then indicates that although visual theory relies on our ability to interpret and deconstruct the visual stimuli created in images and through the gaze, it must also incorporate an analysis of the *invisible*, or the *dark* presence, as Morrison suggests in her critique of literature. Consequently, I advocate a feminist film theory inclusive of race, class, and gender analyses that integrate an examination of "looking relations" with a search for the invisible but *felt* presence that frames the visual and cultural scene.

Although Mulvey's treatment of gender is significant in our feminist analyses of film, I argue that we need to turn our attention not just to "image" and "gaze," but also to sound. In a media-saturated, visually oriented society, we must learn both how to become visually literate and how to move beyond the visual. This literacy calls for our understanding of visual "absence" and auditory "presence," or the "disembodied presence." As such, in our critiques of film, our attention needs to be placed not just on the visual, but also on the unseen and the heard, the Africanist presence that is made known through sound.

For the remainder of this essay, I will consider how the black female body—as represented through her disembodied voice—is used in mainstream cinema by way of supporting and defining the normalized white (male) body. I will further determine how this off-screen blackness shapes and characterizes the dominance and normalcy—even the morality—of whiteness in cinema. I will then conclude by examining the ways in which black women fit into and displace these paradigms in films and, hence, by calling for a black feminist approach that continuously probes these issues of race, gender, and class.

Offscreen Blackness

Although the black female body in American popular cinema is often rendered "invisible," its presence is often detected in subtle ways, through a process perhaps functioning in the realm of the subconscious. When they do appear in film, even in many guises, black women can often fit into two main types: the asexual and nurturing mammy or the tragic mulatto/Jezebel, the sexualized black woman "out of control of her emotions, split in two by her loyalties and her own vulnerabilities" (Bogle 33). The former represents strength and devotion in ways that pose no sexual or emotional threat to the white world, while the latter represents a wildness that signifies the nonwhite,

often read in contrast to the "white," who is orderly, controlled, neat, virtuous, and pure (which of course a "mulatto" is not; and she is "tragic" because she cannot attain such purity).

Certainly, black women's roles have become more complex since early Hollywood cinema with the advent of more black female actors and producers, filmmakers, and writers functioning behind the cameras. However, the industry still continues to be predominately male, white, and upper class, a fact which has limited the growth and depth of such roles in film and, more important, the existence of such roles.

Yet even when she is not in a film, the meanings ascribed to the black woman's body are so inherent in supporting notions of whiteness and masculinity that her presence can be clearly invoked. One example that comes to mind is Terry Gilliam's 1991 *The Fisher King*. An eccentric comedy starring Jeff Bridges and Robin Williams, the film tells the story of a successful New York City radio DJ named Jack (played by Bridges), who makes his living insulting people on his radio show. Inevitably, he loses his soul, so to speak, and Perry (played by Williams), a college professor who is now homeless as a direct result of a tragedy spawned by Jack's callous remarks to an emotionally unbalanced caller, will help him recover it.

Even this morality tale of class oppression and urban isolation functions through the Africanist presence of the dark, dirtied, chaotic world of "blackened" homeless white males, first signified by the early appearance of a homeless black man rapping earnestly on the window of Jack's limousine to panhandle. In this simplistic shot, when Jack does not open his window, we are to understand that he is a cold, unfeeling man of wealth. It is only when he is toppled "from the top" and wallows "at the bottom" that he begins his journey of recovery.

Because in Hollywood movies black male bodies are relegated to minor roles—either homeless men or, in *The Fisher King*, the super of a decrepit building where Perry dwells—they alone function as the Africanist presence, often rendering the black female invisible, since the quota of racial inclusiveness is already filled through the black male. In the case of *The Fisher King*, it was only when I asked myself, "Where are the black women?" that I found them. They were *offscreen*. With the exception, in one shot, of an extra whose role was that of a nurse/*mammy* wheeling a disabled elderly white woman on a city sidewalk (interestingly, both bodies are usually invisible in film and relegated to the background, though here they significantly enhance the plot of the "wounded" king motif in the movie title), black women are the "voice" of this film.

The voice is captured in the refrain of the song "I Got the Power," as the black female vocalist in the rap group Snap belts out this phrase in the movie soundtrack during significant scenes in which Jack has "power" that he is using either destructively or ineffectively. An example of his destructive use of power comes when Jack's angry, insulting radio "voice" instigates a violent confrontation in a trendy restaurant—during which Perry loses his wife and ultimately his mind. His ineffective use of power is illustrated in a scene where Jack has the opportunity to intercede on behalf of a transvestite "queen" (played by Michael Jeters) who is facing arrest.

What is clear from Jack's actions—or his lack of action—is that Jack has the power and the "voice of authority" to influence events. What is also clear is that Jack's voice of authority is supported by and contrasted to the "disembodied" voice of the black female, the "voice of soul" in the "I Got the Power" refrain. In both instances of this refrain, Jack fails to listen to the voice that says, "I got the power," and so the film renders this voice as ironic. Interestingly, we may assume that this voice is Jack's inner voice or subconscious, while we—the viewers—realize it is the nondiegetic voice of the soundtrack, coming from a black female body. Another refrain on the soundtrack is the chorus, sung by black female backup singers, of Ray Charles's "Hit the Road, Jack," which again highlights the black female voice as the singers provide the emotional and "soulful" track of the narrative of the white male protagonist in search of his soul.

The use of the black female voice as a literal and figurative "sound-ing board" for the white male protagonist who struggles toward emotional and morally grounded decisions further implies how the black woman's presence ensures the identity of white masculinity. Her invisible blackness signifies in polarity with his visible whiteness, as Morrison suggests, "the projection of the not-me" (38). As his racial and sexual "Other," she symbolizes what is most foreign to him—both in embodiment and in behavior. Such contrast further reflects his internal struggles and the contradictions of his hegemonic status.

Another illustration of the disembodied black female voice, though quite brief, comes in the pivotal scene in Stephen Spielberg's 1993 *Schindler's List*. The turning point for Oscar Schindler, who makes the life-changing decision to use his money to save as many Jews as possible from the death camps of World War II, is dramatized in a scene of contemplation. After lovemaking, we are led to assume, as his blonde white female partner lies asleep in bed, partially nude and serving as a "sex object" for the camera, Schindler gazes out the window while listening to the diegetic sound on the radio of Billie Holliday's sad,

meditative "God Bless the Child." Holliday's voice in this scene serves two purposes: to sexualize the white woman in Schindler's bed with sultry vocals and to raise the conscience of Schindler himself, as Holliday sings a song of salvation and self-reliance.

In such ways, the voice of black women can serve as a sort of Greek chorus, the background array of characters in ancient Greek theater representing the everyday people who narrated or "translated" for the audience the actions of the main characters. Ironically, this is not far from Disney's interpretation of the Greek chorus as the "Gospel Chorus" of black women seen in Disney's 1997 animated film *Hercules*. In animation, or caricature, the women's corporeality is still displaced from the screen, and they exist primarily as cartoon voice-overs.

Even when black women do appear on screen as a Greek chorus-turned-hip-hop group in Warren Beatty's 1998 *Bulworth*, they function as satirical caricatures, the ghettoized hip-hop backup singers to Bulworth's outrageous "rap" at a political fundraiser. Their bodies literally disrupt the organized conservative affair, as much as does the profanity and slang in Bulworth's lyrics. They also rejuvenate the title character, another white male (played by Beatty) who has lost his political "soul" but found it again with a little soul singing and rapping from the young, the black, the female, the poor, and the marginal. In short, he has an opportunity, as a black homeless man (played by Amiri Baraka) admonishes him, "to be a spirit, not a ghost." Or, to be more corporeal and less "white"—to be a "soul."

This enigmatic phrase highlights another aspect of white masculinity, which functions as ghostlike or as "death," in contrast to a black femininity that represents flesh and life. As film theorist Richard Dyer explains:

Death may in some traditions be a vivid experience, but within much of the white tradition it is a blank that may be immateriality (pure spirit) or else nothing at all. This is within the logics of whiteness even if it is not at the forefront of white identity. White people have a colour, but it is a colour that also signifies absence of colour, itself a characteristic of life and presence. . . . If it is spirit not body that makes a person white, then where does this leave the white body, which is the vehicle for the reproduction of whiteness, of white power and possession, here on earth? (207)

To answer Dyer's question, this leaves the white constructed body very dependent on an Africanist presence that has meaning through its very corporeality. The black body as fleshy, sexualized, earthy, and—if feminine—the epitome of womblike "life" polarizes the white body as

spiritlike and deathlike: rigid and divorced from "soul." Hence, Bulworth's process of "descent" and rebirth in South Central L.A. occurs first in an African American church, where he begins to confront political "truths"; he is further rejuvenated by his infatuation with the black female protagonist, Nina (played by Halle Berry).

Ultimately, Bulworth's public display of his affection for Nina toward the end of the film culminates in his assassination. This "kiss of betrayal" (that is, the betrayal of the white race)—no longer "hidden" and contained in the tradition of white supremacist discourse on "miscegenation" but open and witnessed by the flashing bulbs of the media's cameras—indicates Bulworth's symbolic destruction of his status as a "white man." He no longer rigidly upholds the white capitalist patriarchal system, as he embraces the working-class black female body which threatens the very system and his own identity.

The Politics of Visibility

Because the black female body poses such a threat to the white patriarchal system, it has been rendered invisible, for fear that the visibility of a sexually desirable woman would disrupt the accepted constructions of whites as beautiful, as the norm. Ironically, this invisibility began in Western culture with the *hypervisibility* of the black female body: in particular, in the display of the black woman as slave on the American auction block and as Venus figure in European sideshow exhibitions.

Whereas her status as slave relegated her visibility to the "safe" confines of servitude and chattel, her status as "freak"—as embodied in the figure of South African Saartjie Baartman, the "Hottentot Venus," who was exhibited in London and Paris from 1810 to 1815—allowed Europeans to publicly mock and ridicule her body, in the case of Baartman, because of her well-endowed derriere. Furthermore, they reduced Baartman's body to fragments, objectifying her buttocks as grotesque in cartoons and dissecting her genitalia as essentially "different," for scientific preservation and public spectacle.⁵ This refusal or inability to "see" the black female body in its entirety culminates in white discomfort and "displeasure" at viewing her body as holistic or desirable.

Another body publicly displayed and therefore publicly "disruptive" to the white viewing audience was that of Elizabeth Taylor Greenfield, a famous black singer of the antebellum period, who was revered by audiences for her "purity" and beauty of *voice* but was repulsed for the blackness of her body.⁶ As such, she was called such admiring names

as "Black Swan," even as the appellation *black* marked her racial difference, but was also called an "African cow" and a "biped hippopotamus." Carla L. Peterson further notes:

[Greenfield's audience's] solution to this perceived incongruity of body and voice was to *deemphasize* the body. Indeed . . . Greenfield sought to make her body "quiet" . . . For its part, her audience sought to *obliterate* the body altogether: "Upon the suggestion of another, we listened to her without looking toward her during the entire performance . . . and were at once and satisfactorily convinced that her voice is capable of producing sounds right sweet." (124) [*Italics added*]

What distinguishes Greenfield from Baartman—who, although considered a "freak" because of her "protruding buttocks," never provoked any of her audience members to "look away" or obliterate her body—is the "voice." Baartman also sang and performed with musical instruments during her exhibition, but her audience accepted her performance as an ethnological construction of her racial, sexual, and cultural "difference."

Greenfield, by contrast, sang classical music from the Western tradition and had a voice that was classically trained. As such, her voice *transcended* her status as a black female, and it is this transcendence that her audience found threatening. Hence, to contain her within a white patriarchal hegemony, her voice had to be disembodied from her blackness—thus inviting the audience to accept the voice but to render the body invisible.

Cinematic "Pleasure" and the Black Feminist Gaze

In examining this history of visualizing and erasing black female bodies within the politics of "visual pleasure," we may come to understand how cinema adapted similar attitudes into their own practices. Subsequently, those of us who study film and wish to incorporate black feminist analyses still confront the cinematic construction of black female bodies as stereotyped, marginalized, or invisible. It is because of these challenges that I find it imperative to analyze beyond the visual and consider all the elements within the cinematic frame—especially when the voice of the black female, disembodied as it may be, can be found outside the visible while maintaining significance to the film narrative. Nonetheless, as we begin to explore these issues in black feminist film criticism, we are still faced with the dilemma of redefining

cinematic pleasure and restructuring the cinematic gaze—both of which have been shaped by white male hegemony.

Because of this hegemony, black feminist film theory and practice must function in opposition, or as bell hooks has suggested, through an “oppositional gaze,” which she declares has the ability to convey “Not only will I stare. I want my look to change reality” (116). Hooks further asserts:

It was the oppositional black gaze that responded to [white supremacist] looking relations by developing independent black cinema. . . . Black looks, as they were constituted in the context of social movements for racial uplift, were interrogating gazes. We laughed at television shows like *Our Gang* and *Amos 'n' Andy*, at these white representations of blackness, but we also looked at them critically. Before racial integration, black viewers of movies and television experienced visual pleasure in a context where looking was also about contestation and confrontation. (117)

Here hooks suggests that black (and) feminist viewing combines visual pleasure with confrontation and interrogation. Such viewing practices resist the construction of what Mulvey describes as the scopophilic act of the audience, in which the viewers are relegated to the role of voyeur, looking at the screen with pleasure but rarely with any criticism. This look merely serves to objectify, whereas the “oppositional gaze” that hooks advocates confronts for subjectivity.

Hence, the visual pleasure of the “oppositional gaze” does more than replicate voyeurism; it probes, revises, and inspires to see differently. It hints at the possibilities of interpreting the world, and in this context, the world of cinema—as white identified and male oriented as it often is—through an empowered sense of pleasure and looking. Here the black female spectator repositions herself as a viewer and critic by centering black female subjectivity in the arena of visual pleasure. However, the black female filmmaker can advance this position even further once she gains authority behind the camera to reshape the gaze and redefine such pleasure for her audience.

Giving Body to the Voice

One of Julie Dash's earlier films, her 1983 short *Illusions*, reflects the black feminist goal of repositioning for black female subjectivity. Dash not only achieves this objective through her short, but also manages to restore the visibility of the black female body to its vocal presence, thus uniting corporeality and voice while rejecting the mainstream cin-

ematic practice of obliterating the body as it maintains the diegetic or nondiegetic black female voice.

In the narrative, Dash goes behind the Hollywood scene of the 1940s and inserts two black female protagonists in her fictional revision of the classic Hollywood era. One character, Ester Jeeter, represents the traditional displacement of the black female body in the industry, as she is hired as a singer to overdub a musical voice-over in place of a white woman. Through her juxtaposition of Ester, emerging from the dark in the backdrop as she prepares to provide sound to the image, with the white female body on screen, Dash refocuses the black female body, in particular through her camera close-up on Ester. She also confronts what Gwendolyn Audrey Foster calls the "common practice" in the '30s and '40s of synchronizing the black female voice with the white female body in cinema, thus relegating women as "substitutable fragmented constructions" (45). In this practice, the sensuality of the black female voice is appropriated, as Foster notes, "to construct the female sexuality of the white singer," not unlike the ways in which this voice is often used to construct the moral conscience and emotional feelings of the white male protagonist in contemporary cinema.

The other significant black female character in this short is Mignon Dupree, an executive assistant at the film studio who is light enough to "pass" for white. Her motives for passing, however, differ significantly from those of other black female characters in Hollywood "passing drama" films, such as *Imitation of Life* and *Pinky*. Whereas the passing-for-white heroines in these dramas transgress the color line for love and acceptance in the white social world, Mignon seeks to pass in order to participate in the power structure of the Hollywood film industry. Hers is not the goal of submerging her identity in the limited role of passive white female. Rather, she passes to transcend both her race and her gender as she works side by side with Hollywood's "big-wigs," even rebuffing the sexual advances of white men. In these ways, Mignon represents the filmmaker Dash herself, as Mignon accuses the Hollywood film industry at the end of the film by commenting, "Your scissors and your paste methods have eliminated my history, my participation in this country," and as she resolves to correct and revise this erasure.

In her first feature-length film, *Daughters of the Dust* (1991), Dash's efforts to reclaim black women's history and black female bodies are signified in every scene through the theme of loss and recovery. The opening sequences not only reclaim earth-mother archetypes through images of black female hands holding the earth or the matriarch of

the Peazant family, Nana, washing fully clothed in a stream, but the ancient text of *Thunder: The Perfect Mind*—a Gnostic gospel recovered in the twentieth century—is invoked in a female voice-over. The text itself invokes the feminized Savior, speaking with ambiguity in such phrases as “I am the First and the Last. . . I am the honored one and the scorned one.” That the speaker of this text is usually recognized as female further supports Dash’s attempts at refocusing the cinematic text on black femininity, especially as she glamorizes the image and the sensuality of the black female body, young and old, impoverished and bourgeois, pregnant and childless.

Toward the end of the film, as the main character, Eula, pulls the women in the family together and urges them to confront their judgments of the “ruint” woman in the family, named Yellow Mary, she argues, “If you love yourself, love Yellow Mary ‘cause we’re *all* good [women].” Such a statement radically defies not only the tradition of rendering the black female invisible in film but also the judgments often made of black women in public, which tend to devalue our bodies and our character. Ten years later, Dash’s first feature film still stands unrivaled in American cinema for its complex and profound depictions of sensual and diverse black female bodies.

Conclusion

While *Daughters of the Dust* continues to be a groundbreaking black feminist film, Dash certainly operates within a tradition of black female filmmakers, and some have gone on to success, such as Kasi Lemmons with her 1997 film, *Eve’s Bayou*.⁷ Yet even these small successes are not enough to cause a shift in mainstream cinema. As America’s film industry continues to measure the “success” of a film by the size of the audiences it attracts rather than by its artistic achievement, marginal filmmakers who choose to film marginal stories and images face a long struggle in earning support for their craft, as this particular art requires an immense amount of money just to sustain itself. This reality must also be analyzed in our assessment of films, as the number of filmmakers who are women, people of color, and representatives of other marginal groups is limited by the difficulty of raising funds to film a project. As much as Dash received success with her first feature film, it took her more than ten years to make *Daughters*, and even then, she was told by those who control film finances that “there was no market for the film” (Dash 16).

As Audre Lorde asserts, even choices of art are based on economics: she recognizes that such an art form as poetry proves the “most

economical" craft, thus accounting for the numerous women, people from the working class, and people of color who have access to writing this genre (116). Lorde's point about choice suggests that those of us in film studies and women's studies must constantly confront economics and issues of class in our film criticism as much as we analyze artistic constructions of race, gender, and sexuality. Consequently, I envision a black feminist approach to film that raises issues not only of the use of visual pleasure and invisibility in cinema, but also of the politics and economics behind the filmmaking process, in terms of whose films get made and how such films are received.

I imagine that the next time I teach *Daughters of the Dust*, I will continue to illustrate Mulvey's points in clips from *Rear Window*, but I will also have to include the scene featuring the diegetic sound of the black female voice. Juxtaposing the visible white female body with the invisible black female body may enable students to appreciate the efforts Dash makes in her films. They may also appreciate the struggles that she faced in making a film over the space of ten years—and for less than one million dollars—that resists mainstream cinematic models, compared with the efforts of her white male counterparts, who can gain access to millions and produce films with less artistic vision, in just one year.⁸

Perhaps it is the "market" that governs the Hollywood filmmaking hegemony, but as feminist scholars and instructors, especially those of us venturing to find a larger audience beyond the classroom through film festivals and the like, are able to influence that market, we may encourage radical ways in which spectators can look at a film. Not just for "visual pleasure" but also for interrogation.

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Diary of an African Nun. Short. 1977.
Four Women. Short. 1975.
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The Colored Conjurers. Feature film.
Digital Diva. Feature film and interactive CD-ROM.
Enemy of the Sun. Feature film.
The Reader. Feature film.

NOTES

1. I would like to thank Robin Blaetz for modeling similar teaching strategies with these texts while I served as her teaching assistant in an Introduction to Film class at Emory University in the spring semester of 1999.
2. In preparation for the screening of *Daughters of the Dust*, I tried to give my students some perspectives in feminist film criticism, thus beginning with the canonical essay by Laura Mulvey. I used various film clips to illustrate the male gaze and female image, from classic Hollywood films to recent mainstream films. What I had hoped my students would notice is the normative construction of white bodies in film, and, in comparison, recognize what Dash was doing differently with her own film.
3. This is not to suggest that racial analysis cannot be employed in the absence of nonwhites in cinema. On the contrary, some film theorists, such as Richard Dyer have contributed significant analyses of the hegemonic construction of whiteness in film.
4. Such figures as "mammies" and "Sapphires" did provide pleasure but in the context of ridicule and mockery or comfort. Even as there was supposed to be no "erotic pleasure" in looking at these figures, as they were traditionally defined as "asexual," the emphasis on their sexual parts, such as enormous breasts and buttocks, basically rendered such display of exaggerated female sexuality as nonthreatening because of their racial difference and, hence, because such bodies need not be taken seriously.
5. Saartjie Baartman was a Khoisan woman (called Hottentot by her European contemporaries) who was brought to London in 1810 at age twenty to be exhibited because of her "protruding buttocks," a condition considered pathological by the Europeans and referred to as steatopygia. Baartman was displayed in sideshows in both England and France, and when she died in Paris in 1815 at age twenty-five, a natural scientist, George Cuvier, took a plaster cast of her body and dissected her sex organs, which became the subject of a thesis that he wrote and that formed the basis for much of race science. Her genitalia were placed in

a bell jar and remained on public display at the Musée de L'homme in Paris until the 1970s.

6. I am grateful to Kimberly Wallace-Sanders at Emory University, who, in her spring 1998 graduate seminar *The Black Female Body in American Culture*, first introduced this historical figure to me and made this analysis of the dichotomy between Greenfield's body and voice.
7. This tradition can be traced back to 1922 when Tressie Souders became the first African American filmmaker with her silent film *A Woman's Error*. The work of black women filmmakers is documented by Yvonne Welbon in her forthcoming film *Sisters in Cinema*. See Welbon's Web site www.sistersincinema.com for additional information.
8. This struggle continues as Dash's attempts to follow up on the success of *Daughters* have resulted primarily in the relegation of her subsequent film projects to cable television.

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