



PROJECT MUSE®

Visual Culture and the Black Masculine

Keith M. Harris

Wide Angle, Volume 21, Number 4, October 1999, pp. 2-5 (Article)

Published by Johns Hopkins University Press

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/wan.2004.0002>



➔ *For additional information about this article*

<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/170729>



Fig. 1. D'Angelo performing in *Untitled*, music video directed by Paul Hunter. Video frame enlargement.

Visual Culture and the Black Masculine

by Keith M. Harris

In 1991, *Wide Angle* published the very successful volume entitled “Black Cinema.”¹ Though it was not the first such publication dealing specifically with black film, the essays collected in that edition set a standard of scholarship on black film. This scholarship served to situate black film as a dialogic, intertextual medium, rich in its aesthetic, historical and political legacies. The current issue of *Wide Angle* exploring visual culture and black masculinity emerges from these legacies. Let me elaborate.

Contemporary black film and scholarship on black film has broadened the horizon of what is discussed as film. Indeed, questions now exist as to what is black film, what is the “black” in black film, what do we talk about when we talk about black film. These questions are deliberate, and at times contentious, but informative of the current issue on black masculinity and film. For, to speak about black masculinity in film is to speak about the aesthetic, historical and political legacies of the medium itself and the cultural context in which the medium is produced and in which it circulates. Furthermore, when one considers these legacies, one must ask if it is enough to speak solely of film. A term of preference, especially when discussing questions of gender and race, is visual culture. The idea of visual culture embraces the span of

Keith M. Harris is a graduate in Cinema Studies at New York University. He is an assistant professor in the School of Interdisciplinary Arts, School of Film and Department of African American Studies at Ohio University. His areas of specialization include film, African-American and Africana Cinema, gender studies, and queer theory. His recent research and writing interests primarily concern masculinity, performance and gender(s) as ethical constructs within performance and cultural production. He is currently completing the manuscript *Boys, Boyz, Boies: An Ethics of Masculinity in Popular Film, Television and Video* and editing the proceedings from The Commemorative Symposium: Black Cinema Aesthetics: Issues in Black Film for a special edition of *Black Praxis*.

black film, the questions it raises, and the issues of concern. Positioning black film as part of a broader black visual culture, indeed, allows for a greater understanding of the intertexts and dialogues of black film.

The next question may be, why black masculinity? On the one hand, black masculinity is provocative and timely; on the other hand, interrogating notions of black masculinity raises even broader questions of femininity and the construct of blackness. In other words, black masculinity as a topic is one of many starting point. As such, one can speak of not only race, masculinity and femininity, but also aesthetics, politics and history. In doing so through the spectrum of visual culture, one can determine how film as a medium circulates with other media such as video, performance art and photography. Furthermore, one can determine the relations between film, masculinity and the various “ethos” of blackness such as gangsta, hip-hop, homo thug, post-soul, post-black, etc. Finally, by examining masculinity and black film as part of black visual culture, one can discern the continuous, and often discontinuous and ruptured, historical relations among race and gender and representation.

The essays in this issue of *Wide Angle* are few but wide ranging. David Gerstner’s “Other and Different Scenes” provides a provocative addition to the growing body of scholarship on the work of Oscar Micheaux. Gerstner’s focus on the use of parallel editing in both Micheaux and D. W. Griffith reveals that all is not the same, at least not ideologically so. Gerstner’s examination of Micheaux’s use of parallel editing, on the one hand, implicitly critiques Griffith construction of a “White structure of feeling” through editing, and, on the other hand, provides an understanding of Micheaux’s editing as a discursive aesthetic impulse which serves to project visions of the struggles of African American men and women. In “An Aesthetic Appropriate to Conditions,” Paula Massood re-visits *Killer of Sheep* (Charles Burnett 1977) and the LA Rebellion. Massood considers the impact of the social and cultural context on aesthetic choices, placing *Killer* in an aesthetic dialogue with (Neo)Realism and Griersonian documentary. Furthermore, Massood gives a close reading of the main character, “Stan,” a reading which reveals the character to be an allegory, of sorts, for the condition of African Americans in post-industrial Los Angeles. The essay by Celine Parreñas Shimizu, “Master-

Slave Sex Acts,” re-works criticism of *Mandingo* (Dino De Laurentis 1975). By re-framing the object under the lens of sex, sexuality and the sex act, Parreñas Shimizu shifts the focus of discussion of *Mandingo* to one of the paradox of master and slave in racial subjection as this paradox constitutes the “technology of racial domination.” Parreñas Shimizu’s essay is a marked change in scholarship on black film in that it takes on the bad object choice as a way of asking very political questions about violence and pleasure. Finally, my essay, “‘Untitled’,” moves away from film properly and examines the influence of film on music video. In this essay, masculinity and blackness are presented as discourses of morality and performance. Through formal analysis, I observe the ambiguity of black masculinity as erotic object and fetish in D’Angelo’s video “*Untitled*” (Paul Hunter 1999). All of the essays in this issue follow Manthia Diawara’s lead in that they theorize blackness as a humanistic discourse.² In addition, gender in these essays is theorized as a humanistic discourse. In theorizing race and gender as humanistic discourses, both race and gender are destabilized as fixed identity constructs and revealed as fluid, dynamic, and malleable subjective formations. Moreover, film and visual culture form the field of cultural production in which these subjective formations negotiate and circulate.

In closing, I would like to thank Dr. Ruth Bradley for giving me the opportunity to edit this special issue and for her patience. I would also like to thank Dr. Mia Mask for her support. And I would like to thank the authors for their speedy turn out.

Notes

1. *Wide Angle* 13, nos. 3 and 4 (1991).

2. Manthia Diawara, “Cinema Studies, the Strong Thought, and Black Film,” *Wide Angle*, 13, nos. 3 and 4 (1991): 10.