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with a passive crowd, soothed by the music, acquiescent in their delusion. Both the music and the final image are overwhelming, and Altman's link of pop culture with mass sleep-walking carries a great deal of truth. However, some core of meaning continues to be missing. Can pop artifacts and images have the power to spontaneously and independently enslave us? Here Altman needs some perspective on the way institutions operate. What interests and forces lie behind political sound tracks and recording sessions?

Altman has provided us in the film with a drunken monologue on the Kennedys, references to race and Vietnam, a dangerously manipulative and mesmerizing popular culture, but no synthetic vision to make sense of it all. But that's no matter--his images are rich, exciting and suggestive, and if his ideas boldly stated seem flat and unoriginal (an America all fetishes and tawdry illusion)--there is genuine pain and anguish at the heart of the film.

## **SLOW FADE TO BLACK: A REVIEW**

Weldon D. Jolly

*Weldon D. Jolly is a Ph.D. candidate at Oklahoma State University in Stillwater, Oklahoma. In February 1917 he presided over a workshop on Black film at the annual O.S.U. Filmathon.*

Until recently, there were only three substantial studies of Black participation in the American film industry: Peter Noble's The Negro in Films (1947); Donald Bogle's Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies, and Bucks (1973); and Daniel Leab's From Sambo to Superspade (1975). Now there is a fourth, which, by virtue of its accuracy, attention to detail, and profuse documentation, seems destined to fill the gaps left by the currently available histories. Indeed, Slow Fade to Black: The Negro in American Film, 1900-1942 by Thomas Cripps is a veritable feast of information.

Engaged in some twelve years of research, Cripps seems to have made use of sources and information unnoticed or at least unnoted by his predecessors. With each added detail, eyewitness account, or iconoclastic anecdote, he seems to have gone that extra mile, investigated that unlikely lead, or simply asked the right question.

A specific comparison should prove illuminating. All four historians examine two films which served as long overdue showcases for some of the biggest black talent of the era, the Fox release, Hearts in Dixie (1929), and MGM's release that same year, Hallelujah! Likewise, all four supply basic data about the two uniquely ethnic and essentially experimental ventures, i.e. information about the directors, principal players, plot, critical reception and artistic worth. But beyond those staples, the historians part company. Peter Noble notes that in addition to Hearts in Dixie, Lincoln (Stepin Fetchit) Perry's credits include The Country Chairman, when in fact Perry was cast in The County Chairman. One might dismiss such an error as insignificant were it not for yet another on the same page. According to Noble, Bill (Bojangles) Robinson was cast in Steamboat Round the Bend, which was not the case (p. 63). One could go on: Noble Johnson was not in a 1922 film release, Robinson Crusoe as Noble claims, but rather in a film called Little Robinson Crusoe, released in 1924 (p. 179).

To be sure, there is much in Noble's book to recommend it, but given such errata, one is hesitant to place much trust in the

material contained within without first verifying it at another source. That source could very well have been Donald Bogle's book, were it not for his failure to supply a bibliography and, in some key instances, any documentation at all. And though Bogle's admittedly personal approach to the history of blacks in the cinema makes Toms, Coons, Mullatoes, Mammies, and Bucks immensely readable, it also makes much of

its pertinent information difficult to pursue. Leab and Cripps both offer numerous citations to substantiate their assertions, and it would be fruitless here to speculate about the net worth of their different perspectives concerning the history of blacks in the motion picture industry. However, the differences are there and may serve to explain why Cripps' Slow Fade to Black provides generally a more detailed account than From Sambo to Superspade. Leab often spends too much time condemning the motion picture industry for its reprehensible treatment of the black man and woman on the set and the screen and his rhetorical tone often leads him to miss the opportunity for more precise observation and, in some instances, complete analysis.

For example, Leab holds that "Even by the standards of its time Hearts in Dixie is a crude movie. . ." (pp. 87-8), and in spite of its technical excellence, "Hallelujah! fell back on familiar stereotypes" (p.90). In contrast, Cripps makes the following observation:

The two studios departed from custom with two well-mounted all-black celebrations of life, Hearts in Dixie and Hallelujah!, each of which was an artful depiction of black southern life and its spoilage by urbanization. These attempts to render black life on the screen increased white awareness of its depths. At their best they cast blacks in tragic terms, and at their least, in winsome fables. In black circles, especially among intellectuals, the films drew forth some of the first forthright principles of black cinema aesthetics, for they helped, through the polarization of this opinion, to define the nature of the black role in movies (p. 236).

Cripps' book is distinguished most by the wealth of sources consulted. For his section on Hearts in Dixie and Hallelujah!, Cripps conducted interviews with King Vidor, director, and Wanda Tuchock, scriptwriter for Hallelujah! and Clarence Muse, who played Nappus in Hearts in Dixie. Though certainly not a novel approach, the importance of these particular interviews lay in the information Cripps managed to ferret out. A black assistant director, Harold Garrison, worked with Vidor, Tuchock, and the rest of the Hallelujah! company--a significant fact not mentioned by Noble, Bogle or Leab. The year was 1929 and the practice of hiring black production personnel was until then unheard of. According to Cripps' account, when the film opened in New York Garrison, who had also doubled as resident consultant on black folk culture, was herded to the Jim Crow gallery. There are many other examples of the intriguing detail in Slow Fade to Black. Whereas Leab, when discussing Hearts in Dixie, refers obliquely to the minstrel tradition, Cripps indicates that the screen treatment for the movie was indeed written by an ex-minstrel, Walter Weems (p. 237).

Other inside accounts are equally as fascinating. According to Cripps, it was the "carelessness and crankiness" of Charles Gilpin which caused him to be stripped of his role as Nappus, but not before the friction which developed tempted one Fox executive, Winfield Sheehan, to "brush" Gilpin with a car fender at the studio gate. Another black actor, George Reed, was considered for the part

but was passed over in favor of Clarence Muse because Reed “lacked the requisite persona and failed to generate a following of black fans, perhaps because he had seemed a part of a plot to dump the more outspoken Gilpin” (pp. 237-8). Just as interesting is Cripps’ revelation that the production crew of Hallelujah! filmed many of their location shots in the Mississippi Delta to the rhythm of a metro-nome. “It was as though a crew of whites learned to shoot and cut on the beat of black music or suffer an impossible chore later in the lab” (p. 247).

One might guess that filming a movie about blacks in the South during 1928 carried with it certain ironies as well as hazards. He would be quite right. Cripps relates a number of incidents in which members of the cast and crew of Hallelujah! were eyed by the locals with a kind of bemused ambivalence and reluctant deference. But the locals were not the only ones baffled by this unusual situation. Often too, black cast members found themselves caught between maintaining a personal sense of pride in direct violation to the existing Southern tradition or bowing to that tradition at the expense of personal pride. Consider the actions of one black actress who barged into a department store and began trying on clothes, but upon returning to her Memphis hotel, took the freight elevator up to her room (p. 245-6). In instance after instance Cripps provides this kind of inside perspective, the product of years of laborious research. Cripps is at work on yet another volume, which will trace the participation of blacks in the film industry from 1943 to the present. Once it is completed, the set should become an essential

and invaluable historical record of one facet of the American cinema. As a first installment, however, Slow Fade to Black is a welcome and fresh view of the struggle of black performers and production personnel to establish a place for themselves in the film community.

## **FILM & HISTORY NEWS**

### **AMERICAN STUDIES FILM COURSE**

The American Studies Association’s Film Committee has attempted to develop a model course in American Studies and Film. The course was not designed to present a history of cinema, but to explore American cultural themes and values reflected in our films. The course considers stereotypes in film (Blacks, women), American humor on film, success in film, film and war, film and the West, film and the cold war. A chronological progression exists, but the main thrust is toward demonstrating that models and topics frequently examined in American Studies could be illuminated by cinematic texts.

The course was taught at Boston College during the spring of 1976-7 by Peter C. Rollins (Oklahoma State University). A profusely annotated syllabus, including information about the procurement of the films used, is available from Ms. Susanne Schall, National Humanities Institute, 53 Wall Street, New Haven, CT 06510. The work behind this fifty-page document was supported by the National Endowment for the Humanities and the American Studies Association.

### **ANTHROPOLOGICAL FILM CONFERENCE**

Temple University will hold its seventh Conference on Visual Anthropology on March 8-11, 1978. The Conference brings together scholars, practitioners, and all people interested in exploring the human condition through visual means.