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Bell Hooks

Conceiving of his work in independent filmmaking as counter-hegemonic cultural production, Oscar Micheaux worked doggedly to create screen images that would disrupt and challenge conventional racist representations of blackness:

> I have always tried to make my photoplays present the truth, to lay before the race a cross section of its own life, to view the colored heart from close range. My results might have been narrow at times, due perhaps to certain limited situations, which I endeavored to portray, but in those limited situations, the truth was the predominant characteristic. It is only by presenting those portions of the race portrayed in my pictures, in the light and background of their true state, that we can raise our people to greater heights. (3)

Though Micheaux aimed to produce a counter-hegemonic art that would challenge white supremacist representations of "blackness," he was not concerned with the simple reduction of black representation to a "positive" image. In the spirit of oppositional creativity, he worked to produce images that would convey complexity of experience and feeling, arguing that, "before we expect to see ourselves featured on the silver screen as we live, hope, act, and think today, men and women must write original stories of Negro life" (3). Though he did not conceive of his work as documentation, as though all he hoped to make the camera do was mirror life, he did want black folks to see images on the screen that were not stereotypes or caricatures. Micheaux endeavored to go beyond the realm of the ordinary, and it is this vision that gives his films an element of intrigue and delight that fascinates.

Ironically, his use of melodrama has been misunderstood by contemporary viewers, who believe this style undermines the

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cinematic capacity to convey complexity. Micheaux did not suffer from an error of insight. Laura Mulvey explores the subversive possibilities emerging from the location of melodrama, drawing on Peter Brooks's *The Melodramatic Imagination*:

> Peter Brooks shows how the melodrama's aesthetic strength lies precisely in its displacement of the power of the word. This "low cultural" form could reflect on human struggle with language and expression and thus influence the development of romantic theatre. The aesthetics of the popular melodrama depend on grand gesture, tableaux, broad moral themes, with narratives of coincidence, reverses and sudden happy endings organized around a rigid opposition between good and evil. Characters represent forces rather than people, and fail to control or understand their circumstances so that fate, rather than heroic transcendence, offers a resolution to the drama. . . . While the aesthetics of melodrama evolved for a non-literate audience, the style throws doubt on the adequacy of speech to express the complexities of passion. . . . A whole terrain of the "unspeakable" can thus be depicted. (72)

Micheaux used melodrama in precisely this way, and approaching his work from this standpoint enables the contemporary viewer to see more clearly how his films work to transgress boundaries, offering perspectives, "takes," on black experience that can be found/seen in no other cinematic practice during his day. Critic Marilyn Jimenez says of Micheaux's films:

> There is in them the true mark of the "auteur," the unmistakable stamp of a personality, the obsessions of a visionary: this all generally under the surface, for the distinctive mark of a Micheaux film is the relationship between text and subtext, between what the film says and what it really says. In so doing, Micheaux, more than any other filmmaker, embodies the ancient characteristic of black artistic creation: the trope of reversal, the use of "indirections to find directions out." (1)

Micheaux, fascinated by what I will call "a politics of pleasure and danger," focused on both racialized sexual politics as they informed the construction and expression of desire within black heterosexual couples, as well as interracial sexual bondings. Though he was involved in a romantic liaison with a white woman in South Dakota, Micheaux felt marriage to her was tantamount to a betrayal of his race. A constant theme in his films, desire, expressed sexually, becomes a site where loyalty and solidarity are tested. Much of his work explores passions aroused in response to acts of betrayal. Attempting to express and convey the particular forms desire and courtship take within a racial context of color caste, a society in which black male and female sexuality is constructed as dangerous, threatening, Micheaux's work "exploits" conventional constructions of good and bad sexuality as he simultaneously "toys" with the idea of transgression.

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The 1932 Micheaux film *Ten Minutes to Live* problematizes the location of black heterosexual pleasure within a rigid color caste system that makes the desired object the body most resembling whiteness. Challenging assumptions that whiteness/light skin should be interpreted as signifying innocence in a series of narrative reversals, the question of who is good or bad is rendered far more complex than the issue of color. Calling into question the Western metaphysical dualism which associates whiteness with purity and blackness with taint, the subtext of Micheaux's seemingly simple melodrama interrogates internalized racism and the color caste system.

Superficially, *Ten Minutes to Live* conforms to the cinematic paradigm already set by Hollywood and gives his audience a bad guy. Addressing the black public's need to have race movies reproduce aspects of that white mainstream cinema which denied their presence, Micheaux incorporates into his work familiar melodramatic narratives. Just as the white "master" narratives of cinema insisted that plots be structured around conflicts between good and evil, this became the usual ground of conflict in race movies. Responding to what Clyde Taylor calls an insistence on "the sense of the presence and identity of corruption" which then "embodies the need for a menacing Manichean adversary" (103), Micheaux used this model to generate suspense, that cinematic tension that fascinated audiences.

Ironically, even though *Ten Minutes to Live* interrogates the audience's need for a "bad guy," Micheaux structures the film's opening scenes so that they stimulate the audience's interest in identifying a villain. First, we are shown the image of a distressed black woman, the glamourous Letha, boarding a train. A male voice-over poses the question "What mystery here? Why has this beautiful girl been put on the spot?" The film proceeds to explain the scenes we have just seen. Initially jolted into a state of defamiliarization, the audience sees images that they know but whose meaning in the film's context cannot be discerned. Micheaux works to establish film as a site for the production of narratives that are structured to be more compelling than ordinary life: After all, race movies were, like their Hollywood counterparts, about business; audiences had to be captivated so that they would return to see more. Using the camera to disrupt fixed notions of subject and place, to create an aura of intrigue, Micheaux aggressively insists that viewers be "glued to their seats" if they want to solve the mystery. (His shooting of this scene is really technologically spectacular when viewed within the context of early film production.) Disrupting the

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audience's capacity to "read" familiar signs, Micheaux delights in the pleasure of manipulation, excessively subordinating everything to the narration. Though a race man, eager to work for the uplift of black people, he refused to accept the notion that black cultural production should simply be a response to white representations of blackness and, thereby, only portray blackness in a positive light. Insisting on diversity and complexity of image, his films set an example.

After the train scene, which opens the film in the middle of the story, strategically shifting the focus away from linear narrative, Micheaux breaks with convention and lets the audience know from the onset who the villain is. Identified by a snapshot from a police blotter, he, Marvin, is described as "40, deaf and mute—but cunning, formerly an actor known on the stage as the 'escape' king due to his ability to pick any lock, open any door . . . lost his voice and hearing about 5 years ago and developed strange hallucinations." Though appearing to "identify" the bad guy, this description does not really say what crimes have been committed. Presented as official information even though it says nothing specific, this representation undercuts the stereotype of the black male as criminal, hinting at the possibility that all representation is subject to manipulation (Marvin as actor), and that nothing is as it appears.

Unable to speak or hear, Marvin must rely solely on sight as a means to perceive reality. Concurrently, since he has no voice (a symbolic mirroring of the voicelessness of black masculinity in racist culture during the 1930s), he must think and feel through the body. Richard Dyer's critical assessment of Paul Robeson calls attention to the way representations of black folks in the white imagination are a "site where the problem of the body is worked through":

> Representations of blacks . . . function as the site of *remembering and denying* the inescapability of the body in the economy[:] . . . on the one hand, the black body as a reminder of what the body can do, its vitality, its strength, its sensuousness; and yet, simultaneously, the denial of all that bodily energy and delight as creative and productive . . . . (139)

Conversely, in order to subvert the negation of the black body that is imposed by white supremacy, representations by black people claim that creative potential, glorifying it. Even though the fair-skinned, handsome Marvin is the bad guy, his body is constructed as the object of a desiring black female gaze. Challenging dominant cinematic practices that position woman as the objects of male gaze, Micheaux acknowledges female desire, exploiting it to create interest in Marvin's character. His body is

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excessively objectified, all the more so because he does not speak. Asserting a masculine presence that is profoundly physical, embodying a sense of threat and menace, he is a seductive villain.

Micheaux both critiques and celebrates this black male physicality. Beginning his professional life as a Pullman porter, respectable employment (the train scene represents the inclusion in the film of his personal history), Marvin is identified with that organization of black men who militantly resisted racist discrimination in the work force. Yet Micheaux knew all too well that it was easy within a racist society for black men to fall into disrepute, to end up like Marvin on the chain gang. It is only when the film is about to end that we learn from a letter Marvin's mother writes rebuking him for persecuting the beautiful Letha that he has been on the chain gang, a site where white domination over the black male body is expressed by excessive exploitation of blacks' physical labor. Many chain gangs composed solely of black men did the arduous labor on railroads—laying tracks, making repairs. Micheaux inclusion of these historical references (that would have been immediately understood by his audience) situate representations of black male "criminality" in a social and political context, contesting notions of inherent biological propensity toward evil perpetuated in racist ideology—and in white cinema.

Even though Marvin is a sympathetic character, he is depicted as dangerous, exhibiting all the characteristics of "the demon lover." He has returned to old haunts to kill the woman who betrayed him by turning him over to the authorities. Robin Morgan's description of "the deadly hero" in *The Demon Lover* could be a profile of Marvin:

> Valorous, abnegating his own selfhood and severed from that of others, disconnected from a living logic and the pathos of emotional commitments, recognizing only the redeeming ecstasy of a tragic death, *the hero already lives as a dead man*. As a dead man he is fearless, because as a dead man he is unconquerable by any life force. (63)

Throughout *Ten Minutes to Live*, Marvin resurfaces as though from the dead. His inability to speak, to communicate, reinforces the sense that he has no ties with the human community, as it is language that affirms this bonding. Able to express himself to others only by writing, he terrorizes Letha by sending her threatening messages, "death warrants," to let her know that she is his prey, hunted by an old love who intends to show no mercy. Inverting the popular myth of embittered, revengeful womanhood betrayed and scorned by man, Micheaux implies that it is really

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the black male, personified by Marvin, who will be betrayed and manipulated.

In keeping with his critique of a color caste that sees fair-skinned black women as more desirable and worthy of love, Micheaux's "vamp" Charlotte could pass for white. Jewish American actress Theda Bara, whose real name was Theodosia Goodman, brought the image of the vamp to Hollywood and popularized it. Woman as "vamp" was depicted as an adventuress—alluring, enticing, dangerous. Vamp was short for vampire; she had the power to seduce and destroy men. In *Girls on Film*, Julie Burchill critically examines the cinematic portrait of woman as vamp, emphasizing that this character was often portrayed as dark, in contrast to white:

> The vamp was a beacon and a blessing in the cinema, the apex of what a woman on the screen can be. The vamp was beautiful *and* strong; she made helplessness, which previously and ever since has been the desirable norm for girls on film, look insipid and uninspiring. She came from nowhere and she walked alone. The vamp was rhapsody and a revolution. (15)

Micheaux offers his viewers images of woman as "vamp" and as helpless damsel in distress in *Ten Minutes to Live* via his juxtaposition of the characters Charlotte and Letha. Again as though to counter the racism of mainstream cinema, his vamp is the fair-skinned white-woman-look-alike.

Marvin's inability to distinguish between Charlotte and Letha, to know which woman is vamping and betraying him, is Micheaux's way to once again problematize the question of representation and our capacity to know reality via the senses. How can we judge good and evil if so much that appears to be one thing is really the other? His answer, of course, is to sharpen and intensify one's capacity for perception, to learn to be more aware. Employing diverse images of black womanhood, Micheaux encourages audiences to resist the urge to construct a totalizing vision of woman, one that sees the female as embodying all that is evil, licentious, and morally corrupt. An advocate of rights for women, Micheaux created a space in cinema in which black women could be portrayed as desiring subjects; he countered the demeaning images of black femaleness in Hollywood cinema. In his films, black women's bodies are celebrated: Plump or thin, light or dark (though they are never "too" dark), they are sensual and desirable.

Careful in *Ten Minutes to Live* to distinguish between the image of woman as the "vamp" who uses her body as a seductive weapon to exert power over men and the representation of a liberated image of the sensual/sexual black woman who is at

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home in her body, Micheaux remains one of the few filmmakers to portray black women's bodies in a manner that does not invite a phallocentric, violating gaze. Without allying himself with idealized representations of "innocent" womanhood, he portrays Letha as a virtuous woman who is also glamorous, and therefore desirable. Annette Kuhn offers this account of glamor's allure:

> Glamour is understood generally to imply a sense of deceptive fascination, of groomed beauty, of charm enhanced by means of illusion. A glamourous/glamourised image then is one manipulated, falsified perhaps, in order to heighten or even to idealise. A glamourous image of a woman (or an image of a glamourous woman) is peculiarly powerful in that it plays on the desire of the spectator in a particularly pristine way: beauty or sexuality is desirable to the extent that it is idealised and unattainable. (12)

Micheaux employs this notion of glamor in his representation of Letha. One of longest scenes in *Ten Minutes to Live* shows Letha returning to her bedroom in a boarding house to change clothes. There, fully made-up, gazing at herself in the mirror of her vanity table (all images that identify her as using cosmetics to create glamor), attired in beautiful lingerie and dressing gown, she dresses for an evening out. Unself-consciously adorned, Letha maintains an aura of naïveté even though she is not innocent. That aura is not disrupted by the presence of Marvin, who has entered her space, violating her privacy, for she does not know that her integrity is threatened until the front door slams as he escapes.

Fully adorned, the glamorous Letha meets her current, dark-skinned male admirer Anthony in a nightclub. She shows him another terrorizing message from Marvin, one that says she has only "ten minutes to live." That they should go nightclubbing when her life is endangered seems outrageously melodramatic, yet Micheaux's tactic is always to reproduce an image of the real in the context of the bizarre. Intrigue requires a combination of the ordinary and the fantastic. In his films, nightclubs are the perfect settings to introduce this mixture, representing as they do sites of transgression, existing on the boundaries of morally sanctioned social life. Seeing nightclubs as non-hegemonic, non-homogenous spaces where class/caste barriers were crossed in the realm of pleasure, Jimenez comments:

> The song-dance sequences in black films lifted the film out of social reality, relieved the tensions of having to maintain racial consciousness, and broke the chains of unrealistic, narrative developments. The night-club was a play-space, a dystopia, not a space that was no-where, but a dis-associated, dis-continuous real. (2)

In *Ten Minutes to Live*, Micheaux includes a song-and-dance sequence in the nightclub scene that at first glance seems in no

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way connected to the suspenseful drama. It is, however, as much a clue hinting at the film's subtext as any other scene in the movie.

In the nightclub Letha talks quietly to Anthony, encouraging him to wait, even though they are waiting for death. He replies, "Are you mad to think I'm going to sit here and let you, the woman I love, the woman I've always loved, be killed by this madman?" This melodramatic, passionate declaration and its underlying eroticism can be expressed in the nightclub setting, since the sexual tension it arouses, the desire, can be displaced onto the dancers. Letha and Anthony's passionate talk is interrupted by the master of ceremonies' announcement: "And now we introduce you to a little bit of the jungle—'Spirit of the Jungle.' " Suddenly, skimpily dressed black women of all sizes and varying shades appear and begin to dance. Their body movements resemble those of Josephine Baker, calling attention to their breasts, legs, and asses. Yet this display does not evoke pornographic gazes from folks in the nightclub; it is presented not as exposure of taboo sexuality but as comfortable expression of bodily delight. Like Baker, Micheaux saw the black body as a site where nakedness, eroticism was not considered a shameful reality to be hidden and masked.

Though Phyllis Rose's biography of Josephine Baker assaults her life and work, now and then it offers tidbits of useful information. This is particularly so in passages that address Baker's theorizing of the body and its relation to eroticism. Attempting to describe Baker's sense of the body, particularly the rear end, and documenting Baker's words, Rose comments:

> She handled it as though it were an instrument, a rattle, something apart from herself that she could shake. One can hardly overemphasize the importance of her rear end. Baker herself declared that people had been hiding their asses too long. "The rear end exists. I see no reason to be ashamed of it. It's true that there are rear ends so stupid, so pretentious, so insignificant that they're good only for sitting on." With Baker's triumph, the erotic gaze of a nation moved downward: she had uncovered a new region for desire. (24)

Rose lacks the knowledge of black culture that would have enabled her to decode the subtext of Baker's comments, as well as an informed perspective on race that would have enabled her to understand that "asses" have always been eroticized in black sexual iconography, that within black folk culture the asses that are ridiculed and mocked are those of whites, called by names like *ironing-board butts*. Hence, only the gaze of the white segment of the nation was transformed by Baker's assertion of bodily passion in dance.

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Though associated with the "jungle," all the dancers in Micheaux's sequence are light-skinned, some light enough to pass. Yet by connecting this image with a jungle experience, Micheaux affirms an unbroken diasporic bond with Africa that has not been severed by assimilation. Atavism, as expressed in this dance routine, glorifies the connection to Africa. As Dyer puts it, atavism is often rooted in "the idea of the black race as a repository of uncontaminated feelings" (89). Though Dyer acknowledges that the atavistic image in the white imagination is similar to that in black folk culture, as a "sign" it has different meanings in the black context. In the black imagination, atavism was primarily connected to a counter-hegemonic sense of history wherein the African past white supremacy had taught blacks to despise was revered, seen as a site for "the recovery of qualities and values held by one's ancestors" (Dyer 89).

After the dancers evoke an atavism that is about ancestor acknowledgment, Letha emphasizes her familial legacy. She explains to Anthony that she has received spiritual guidance from her mother in a dream:

> Last night, I dreamed of mother, my poor dear mother, who is dead. She came to me in my sleep and told me not to run away. "Be calm, my baby. Place your trust in God. Something terrible is going to happen. Have faith, my daughter. Have faith."

Trusting in the wisdom of her mother, Letha refuses to listen to either the patriarchal voice that threatens her or the one that encourages her to flee, offering to Anthony a paradigm for romantic love that is rooted in trust.

Contrary to the Freudian conceptualization of subjectivity wherein, as Jane Gallop describes it, "universal ambivalence toward the mother is made up of a universal primary attachment to the mother as nurturer and universal disappointment in the mother" (60), Micheaux's drama suggests that only by maintaining connection to the mother is one not tainted by suspicion, that the adult child receives the mother's unmediated wisdom and guidance. Both Letha and Marvin are rescued after they listen to the mother's voice. The possibility of disappointment rests not with the mother, but with the child, who may lack the ability to recognize "truth," and therefore reality. Marvin's mother informs him that Charlotte is the vamp who has betrayed him for monetary rewards even as she castigates him for being a "fool."

As in other Micheaux films that have feminist implications, his representations of maleness in *Ten Minutes to Live* challenge the patriarchal construction of masculinity as powerful and all-

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knowing. The men in the film lack insight. They can only apprehend the world fully, grasp the true nature of reality, by learning from women. Letha and Marvin are spiritually renewed when they listen to the mother's voice. Escaping after he has revenged himself against Charlotte, Marvin writes a note of apology to Letha. This expression of regret enables him to reconnect with the human community. His representation as "villain" is mediated by his confession of wrongdoing.

Ten Minutes to Live exploits all the conventions of simplistic melodrama even as it interrogates on multiple levels issues of representation. Nothing appears on the screen to be as simplistic as it often seems in everyday life. The capacity of individuals to discern good and evil, to distinguish that which is desirable and that which threatens, is interrogated. Micheaux lets the audience know how easily perceptions can be manipulated. Representing the ultimate villain, Charlotte, who is white enough to pass, in contrast to the romantic, trusting lover Anthony, who is dark-skinned, Micheaux subtly urges black spectators to reevaluate the internalized racism that leads them to respect white or light skin and devalue blackness. Simultaneously, he urges us to claim the past, symbolized by the body of the mother—the mother tongue, the mother land. It is a call for a celebration of blackness in all its diversity and complexity—for that level of collective self-recognition that brings clarity, and insight, that allows for reunion and reconciliation.

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