

LEFT-HAND HATE KO'ED BY LOVE

BLACK CINEMA OF THE 1990S

CUFA FILM CLUB WEEK 7



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FILM
COMPANY

OUR STORIES HAVE NEVER BEEN TOLD

It is undeniable that much of film history has been dominated by white narratives, particularly in the USA. While there have always been black filmmakers, the visibility and opportunity provided to them has been historically little to none.

However, the 1990s was a golden age for black cinema. Sparked by the work of Spike Lee and an interest in Hip Hop and Black culture, opportunities for black filmmakers grew exponentially; an article from the time observes that "just about every studio in town has a project in development with a black director ... or wants to."

While this golden age was largely dominated by Black men such as Spike Lee and John Singleton, there were also queer and female voices, including Cheryl Dunye, Leslie Harris, and Julie Dash.

Unfortunately, this golden age was not to last. Black directors, particularly women and queer filmmakers, were blacklisted from the industry for speaking out against racism, sexism and homophobia. Others saw opportunities dry up as studios demanded greater profits and works that appealed to the broadest demographic. As the British Blacklist observes, " what we need is not just a renaissance period of black cinema and TV that lasts for a brief moment, but instead a cultural movement that lasts throughout the ages."

Read more about black cinema of the 90s here:

<https://www.nytimes.com/2019/07/03/movies/black-directors-1990s.html>

WHO'S WHO: DIRECTORS OF BLACK 90S CINEMA

SPIKE LEE



Perhaps the most prominent figure in modern black cinema, Lee burst onto the film scene with his debut feature *She's Gotta Have It*. Since then he has made many masterpieces, including *Do the Right Thing*, *Malcom X*, and *Blackkklansman*.

JOHN SINGLETON

With his breakout film *Boyz n the Hood*, Singleton became the first black man and youngest person ever nominated for Best Director, receiving the nomination at just 24 years old. He continued to have a prolific career, releasing films such as *Baby Boy*, *2 Fast 2 Furious*, and *Poetic Justice*.



JULIE DASH



Upon the release of her film *Daughters of the Dust*, Dash became the first African-American woman director to have their film widely released in the USA. Despite this achievement, Dash was unable to make a second feature, as she struggled to get funding. Nevertheless, she continues to work successfully in TV and commercial projects.

CHERYL DUNYE

The first black lesbian to direct a feature film, Dunye is part of the *Queer New Wave* of 90s filmmakers. Since her seminal work *The Watermelon*, Dunye has directed for film and television, including her feature *The Owls* and episodes of *Lovecraft County*.



NOW ON TO THE FEATURED MOVIES!



DO THE RIGHT THING

Year Released: 1989

Directed by: Spike Lee

Country of Origin: USA

Available on: Netflix

Running Time: 120 min

*CW: racial slurs, violence,
sexual content, nudity*

On the hottest day of the year, in a neighbourhood in Brooklyn, racial tensions simmer and boil. Mookie, a young pizza delivery man, witnesses as these long-withheld tensions finally explode.

One of the most popular and celebrated films by a black director, Do the Right Thing is a modern classic. Spike Lee interrogates the racial dynamics of the USA through the lens of a single neighbourhood, asking difficult questions and offering no easy answers, presenting characters that are flawed, complicated human beings. What is most unsettling about the film is that, 32 years since its release, much, if not all, of the racial injustices Lee addresses are unnervingly, frustratingly still prevalent, proof that the film remains essential viewing to this day.

JUST ANOTHER GIRL ON THE I.R.T.

Year Released: 1992

Directed by: Leslie Harris

Country of Origin: USA

Available on: Amazon (Rental £2.49)

Running Time: 92 min

CW: sexual content, nudity,
graphic depictions of childbirth

Chantel is not like the other girls in her Brooklyn high school. She's smart, she has a job, she's going to go to college and become a doctor....that is, until an unplanned pregnancy threatens to derail her future.

Described by Leslie Harris as "A Film Hollywood Dared Not Do," *Just Another Girl on the I.R.T.* is truly a unique piece of cinema. As film writer Richard Brody notes, the film is "an outward view of the inner life of a young black woman—of a person who, by the sheer fact of those three descriptors, is subjected to relations of power and of control." Yet even as she explores these complexities, Harris makes room to show that ultimately Chantel is just a girl, her friendships and relationships all portrayed with a raw truth and joyful energy that makes it a rarity even now.

THE WATERMELON WOMAN

Year Released: 1996

Directed by: Cheryl Dunye

Country of Origin: USA

Available on: Free on YouTube, MUBI, BFI Player

Running Time: 85 min

*CW: racial and homophobic slurs; nudity;
sexual content*

Cheryl, a worker in a video store, decides to make a documentary uncovering the story of the elusive and unnamed "Watermelon Woman," a black actress who featured in classic films of the 1930s and 40s as a stereotypical "mammy."

The first feature film directed by a black lesbian, The Watermelon Woman is funny, stylish, and a powerful reminder of the importance of representation. Early on Cheryl discovers that the watermelon woman was a lesbian, and becomes desperate to learn everything she can about this woman who is so much like herself. Cheryl's documentary, as well as her romantic relationships, constantly reveal the still-present prejudices of the film industry and society at large.

MORE \$TUFF!

OTHER FILMS TO CHECK OUT:

Daughters of the Dust (USA, 1991)

Boyz n the Hood (USA, 1991)

Malcom X (USA, 1992)

Candyman (USA, 1992)

Hoop Dreams (USA, 1994)

Eve's Bayou (USA, 1997)

OTHER ARTICLES TO READ:

A Golden Age - The Black Renaissance in 90's Film & TV:

<http://thebritishblacklist.co.uk/a-golden-age-the-black-renaissance-in-90s-film-tv/>

Why Spike Lee's Masterpiece Remains Essential Cinema 30 Years Later:

<https://www.indiewire.com/2019/06/do-the-right-thing-spike-lee-30-anniversary-1202154208/>

The Still Astonishing "Just Another Girl on the I.R.T.":

<https://www.newyorker.com/culture/the-front-row/the-still-astonishing-just-another-girl-on-the-irt>

The Watermelon Woman - Who Are We Forgetting? (Brows Held High):

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FFdsT5roD4Y>

The Watermelon Woman at 25:

<https://www.bfi.org.uk/features/watermelon-woman-cheryl-dunye>