African Americans in American Cinema: An Alternative History

A Visual Guide

Early African Americans in Cinema

To better understand the history of American Cinema, you must not forget an important aspect of American filmmaking that sometimes goes underappreciated. African American's in Cinema played a significant role in the way films reflected our society, our culture, and our understanding of films effect on society.

One of the first notable African Americans in Cinema goes back to 1915 with George and Noble Johnson and the production company they started. Their production company was the first of its kind owned by African Americans.

Films as a Moral Parameter

Throughout the early 20th century, filmmaking and what scripts were made into films often times reflected what the current state of national opinion was about certain issues. One of the most obvious issues was the role of black men and women in our societies. With very early films such as *Birth of a Nation* (1915) showing an opinion of blacks that is downright disgusting, to films such as *Look Who's Coming to Dinner* (1967) which display an attitude much differently toward interracial marriage and acceptance. Although many of the topics in films regarding blacks were progressive at the time and sometimes not well received, it still set a certain precedent for what was expected and respected in our society.

Look who's coming to Dinner (1967)

Here's a short clip from *Look Who's Coming to Dinner* starring
Sidney Portier.

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mbv41abhC3c

Blaxploitation Films

After the liberating 1960s and African Americans in America regaining cultural pride, the audience for black films skyrocketed and in turn produced a number of films targeted at a solely black audience for the first time in history.

One of the most notable films was *Shaft* (1971), was a film about a detective working to bring down the corrupt gangsters in Harlem and the surrounding Italian neighborhoods.

These films had a very unique style about them, usually involving action, heavy dramatic one liners, and campy disco music. It truly was a sign of the times.

Here is a scene from one of the most famous Blaxploitation films *Blacula* (1972).

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nV7caPeKQdE

Modern African American Cinema

After the 70s, African American Cinema took to the streets with its independent films, lead by critically acclaimed New York based director Spike Lee. Spike Lee and John Singleton were the new faces of African American filmmakers and for the first time, the black filmmakers was now receiving the same acclaim as the black actors. This was a turning point for the artistic integrity the film industry was granting the actors and directors. Pictured to the right, Singlet

In Conclusion

It's important that as filmmakers and dreamers, we don't neglect to understand all aspects of cinema's history. We must all keep a fresh perspective of our heritage and the struggles many races went through to even get a fighting chance in the film industry. The rich and talented history of African American Cinema cannot be forgotten. As the 21st century approaches we are seeing an unprecedented amount of excellent roles being given and appreciated toward hundreds of actors and actresses that encourage us to believe that this century is starting out on a note much brighter than the last for African American's in cinema.