book review

Gillespie, Michael. **Film Blackness: American Cinema and the Idea of Black Film**. Duke University Press, 2016

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Preeminent cultural theorist Stuart Hall once wrote, "popular culture, commodified and stereotyped as it often is, is not at all, as we sometimes think of it, the arena where we find who we really are, the truth of [the black] experience"(1997, 134). Though Hall believed that popular culture was incapable of arriving at a "truth," he argued that there is value in "the experiences that stand behind them"(1997, 128). In Film Blackness: Cinema and the Idea of Black Film, Michael Boyce Gillespie continues in this vein with an expressed disinterest in critiquing black film through the lens of authenticity. Instead, his purpose is to examine the myriad of methods in which blackness is expressed on the silver screen, to broaden our conception of the term black film, and to interrogate black film for its artistic merit. In this way, Gillespie's guiding question is: "What if black film is art and not the visual transcription of the black lifeworld?" (2016, 157)

Skirting the topic of authenticity, Gillespie also seems unconcerned with mainstream films, seeing as the discussion of typical, big-budget Hollywood fare is absent in Film Blackness. He centers his study around four relatively obscure films: Ralph Bashki's infamous animated film *Coonskin* (1975), Wendell B. Harris's virtually unseen *Chameleon Street* (1989), actor-director Bill Duke's neo-noir *Deep Cover* (1992), and *Moonlight* (2016) director Barry Jenkins' first film *Medicine for Melancholy* (2008).

Gillespie's textual analysis of *Coonskin* in Chapter 1 is particularly intriguing given the film's infamy. Much of the discourse on *Coonskin* revolves around the mainstream resistance to its screening, which Gillespie briefly addresses. Gillespie identifies what can be discerned from the film's racial grotesque: "*Coonskin* reanimates the iconography of anti-black visual culture as a meta-picture that cogently contests the rendering of blackness, national mythology, the circuits of pop culture, and cultural memory in the key of the racial grotesque" (2016, 26). He contrasts this film to Disney's equally maligned *Song of the South* (Wilfred Jackson and Harve Foster, 1946), essentially arguing that *Coonskin* functions as "a disobedient adaptation" of Joel Chandler Harris's collection *Uncle Remus: His Songs and Sayings* upon which the former is based (2016, 75).

In Chapter 2, Gillespie shifts from the trope of racial grotesque to that of black perfomativity. The object of inquiry is *Chameleon Street* (1989), a fairly obscure film by Wendell B. Harris based loosely on the life of William Douglas Street, Jr., who, for nearly 20 years, criminally impersonated several people. The film's obscurity, despite winning the 1990 Grand Jury Prize at the Sundance Film Festival, is interrogated here. Indeed, as Gillespie indicates, *Chameleon Street* debuted amidst a proliferation of black film. Therefore, its virtual `absence in theaters—due to a lack of favorable reviews leading

to short runs and relegation to art houses—is telling. Gillespie argues that its failure to transgress is because it "did not comply with the ideas of black film advanced by the industry and film press"(2016, 75). The film, with its art house aspirations and aesthetics, drew comparisons to Robert Mulligan's *The Great Imposter* (1963) and Woody Allen's *Zelig* (1983), which Gillespie disavows.

Gillespie dedicates his third chapter to genre study, which focuses on the gritty detective film *Deep Cover* (Bill Duke, 1992), perhaps the most popular film he discusses. In this way, he addresses the film's place in classical noir, foregrounding the genre in "its consistency as a racialized mode of white masculinities in crisis" (84). He uses *Deep Cover* to engage with film scholar James Naremore's thesis: "history of an idea" from *More Than Night: Film Noir in its Contexts* (1998), in which he challenges the unacknowledged role of racial ambiguity in film noir.

The final chapter of *Film Blackness* addresses the critical role that black absence plays in *Medicine for Melancholy* (Barry Jenkins, 2009), the story of a one-day fling between a black man and a black woman living in San Francisco. Gillespie effectively argues that the film's location—a city where gentrification continues to dwindle the black population—is key in what he deems "a meditation on romance, place, and ruin"(2016, 155). He intertwines the importance of space with considerations of quietness, desire, and cultural awakening. The chapter serves as an effective conclusion as it draws together the contentions made in the previous chapters.

All told, Gillespie's text is well-reasoned and compelling. However, two issues arise. First, for a text concerned with refuting the notion that film can or should reflect a "black experience," *Film Blackness* relies on the existence of a "black lifeworld" outside of it. Given the influx of work theorizing post-blackness and post-raciality—particularly in the wake of Barack Obama's presidency—the lack of engagement with those ideas is surprising. Granted, the notions of post-blackness and post-raciality are often contested and refuted, but some interaction with those notions seems warranted.

The other manner in which Gillespie's text is troubled is in its film selection. Gillespie's focus on the obscure may lead one to question the degree to which his contentions are true for the visible. In other words, are the subjects of his inquiry so rare that they are anomalies? Moreover, the affinity between the filmic choices overrides their varying degrees of obscurity: none of the films are directed by black women and all are centered on male protagonists, save for Medicine for Melancholy. One could easily see a film, such as Dee Rees's *Pariah* (2011)— centered on a teen attempting to negotiate between two ostensibly conflicting identities of being black and queer—complementing this text nicely.

Film Blackness begins with several important questions: "What if black film could be something other than embodied? What if black film was immaterial and bodiless? What if black film could be speculative or just ambivalent? What if film is ultimately the worst window imaginable and an even poorer mirror? What if black film is art or creative interpretation and not merely the visual transcription of the black lifeworld?" (Gillespie 2016, 5). To be sure, Gillespie provides a compelling reflection upon—if not necessarily concrete answers to—these questions.

References

Hall, Stuart. 1997. "What Is This 'Black' in Black Popular Culture?" In *Representing Blackness: Issues in Film and Video*, edited by Valerie Smith, 123-134. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press.