SLOW FADE TO BLACK

The Negro in American Film, 1900-1942

THOMAS CRIPPS

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Thomas Cripps

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To Alma Taliaferro Cripps

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Preface

Historical facts never speak for themselves, or at least not until the historian has imposed order upon them. Thus there is a constant tension between the fugitive details of history and the historian's urge to impose a systematic meaning upon them. On the one hand, as Werner Sombart has said, where there is "no theory" there can be "no history." On the other, Stendahl tells us that "the truth may be found only in details." This book, like most works of history, falls somewhere in the middle.

In general the book is a social history and proceeds from two distinct perspectives on the history of American culture and society. First, there would be no need for the book were it not for the peculiar American racial arrangements in which a highly visible yet numerically inferior "black" group has been customarily, and often legally, ostracized from, exploited by, and occasionally patronized by, a numerically and politically dominant "white" group. Black history in the American sense, then, is the history of a racial relationship marked by antipathy, antagonistic cooperation, and conflicting loyalties which W. E. B. DuBois once characterized as the "twoness" of American life.

Second, many of the ideas and strategies in the book stem from concepts proposed by historians and critics of popular culture for whom popular art is an expression of deep seated values and attitudes which may be studied variously as social data, collective myths, and artistic genres. Although this book is about the slow growth of Afro-American impact on motion pictures, the fact that most of it is taken up with a *struggle* for hegemony over the medium of film precludes the

formulation of a theory of black genre film. That, it is to be hoped, will be taken up in a later volume. For the moment, suffice it to say that the discussion is informed by a reading of many students of popular culture, the relationship between audience and filmmaker, and the anthropological bases of communication–among them Herbert Gans, John Cawelti, Russel B. Nye, Andrew Tudor, Will Wright, and Christian Metz.

These matters of race and popular culture over a period of three-fourths of a century of interaction between black and white filmmakers and their audiences not only have contributed to a unique American cinema but to an understanding of the breadth of American cultural history. As John Kouwenhoven has said in a book on the arts in America which ends with a provocative chapter on architecture–"Stone, Steel, and Jazz": "We cannot understand either the limitations or the achievements of [American] civilization if we continue to think of it solely as the product of Western European culture, modified by the geography and climate of the New World." In movies too Afro-Americans affected the medium even though they could not control it; that is what the book is about.

Because this book is taken up so much with the *pre*conditions of strong black interest in movies, the growth of power sufficient to alter movie images, and the growth of a cadre of black film creators its emphasis is broadly social rather than focused on the black film genre that would *eventually* emerge. I have tried to borrow concepts from scholars whose work emphasizes the breadth of culture such as Basil Willey's *The Seventeenth Century Background* in which he quotes T. S. Eliot on criticism: "In attempting to win full understanding of the poetry of a period you are led to a consideration of subjects which at first sight appear to have little bearing on poetry."

As this manuscript slowly grew into a book two interesting works on black movies appeared. Donald Bogle's very personal "interpretive" history, *Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies & Bucks* (New York, 1973), although lacking detailed citations, provides a witty portrait of black actors at work in Hollywood. Daniel J. Leab's *From Sambo to Superspade: The Black Experience in Motion Pictures* (Boston, 1975) follows the progress, or lack of it, toward "positive images" of Afro-Americans on the screen. Unfortunately, the timing of the gestation period of the publication of this book prevented me from making use of their ideas.

Acknowledgments

My earliest inquiry into the subject of this book began more than a dozen years ago. Over the years the staffs of many libraries gave generous assistance, among them the Doheny Library of the University of Southern California; the Special Collections and Theater Arts libraries of the University of California at Los Angeles; the Bancroft Library of the University of California at Berkeley; the libraries of Stanford University; the Library of the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences in Hollywood; the Feldman Library of the American Film Institute at Greystone, Beverly Hills; the departments of Manuscripts and Iconography of the Wisconsin State Historical Society; the Lamar Library of the University of Texas at Austin; the Ohio Historical Society; the Chicago Historical Society; Butler Library of Columbia University; Mugar Library of Boston University; Beineke Library of Yale University; and Founders' Library of Howard University.

Certain libraries provided continuing openhanded service over a period of many years so that I must give special thanks to Jean Blackwell Hutson and Ernest Kaiser of the Schomburg Collection of the New York Public Library; Joel Sullivan of the Manuscript Division of the Library of Congress; William Forshaw and Marian Bell of the Enoch Pratt Free Library of Baltimore; Paul Meyers of the Performing Arts Branch of the New York Public Library; and Walter Fisher, Virginia Richardson, and Florine Williams of Soper Library of Morgan State University.

Patrons of film archives impose a burden upon the repositories far greater than that required for using a book or even a manuscript collec-

tion. Each student requires not only personal attention to queries but his research requirements include expensive editing tables and projectors. Nevertheless, film libraries the world over have provided unstinting services for which I am grateful: James Moore of the Motion Picture Section of the National Archives; Dave Chertok of Sherman Grinberg Library; the Fox-Movietone Library; der Staatliches Filmarchiv der Deutschen Demokratischen Republik, Berlin; Erique J. Rebel of Nederlands Filmmuseum; Jacques Ledoux of the Royal Film Archive of Belgium; Per Calum of the Danish Film Museum; Roger Holman and Jeremy Boulton of the National Film Library and the British Film Institute; and Larry Karr and Larry Klein of the American Film Institute.

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I am grateful for permissions to quote verse and lyrics from the following works: "Jazzonia," from Langston Hughes, *The Weary Blues* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, Inc., 1926, 1954); "Lift Every Voice and Sing," words by James Weldon Johnson (Copyright Belwin-Mills Publishing Corp., New York); "Africa Smiles No More," words by Grant Clarke and Walter O'Keefe, from *Golden Dawn* (Copyright Warner Brothers Music, Los Angeles); and "Remember My Forgotten Man," words by Al Dubin and Harry Warren, from *Gold Diggers of 1933* (Copyright Warner Brothers Music, Los Angeles).

There is no way to measure the impact of research and writing upon one's family. My children—Ben, Alma, and Paul—have tolerated my absences, my pursuit of data and movies, and my lone hours at the typewriter with unfailing good will and good humor. My wife, Alma Taliaferro Cripps, has contributed her energy, skill, patience, and loyalty without limit, and without expectation that I could find an adequate way to express my thanks for our life together. Our book is all I have to offer.

T. C.

Baltimore, Maryland
July 1976

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SLOW FADE TO BLACK: AN INTRODUCTION

In the spring of the war year of 1942 a page-one bannerline in the show business trade paper *Variety* proclaimed BETTER BREAKS FOR NEGROES IN H'WOOD. The news marked a watershed in the history of American racial arrangements that would have far-reaching implications for future social change. A century of dominance of Southern racial metaphors in popular entertainment had come to an end. Movies, cartoons, mass-produced graphics, Tin Pan Alley music, and other popular diversions stopped depicting Afro-Americans as accommodating, contented, comic figures. The nation's most persistent social problem would now begin to receive the artistic recognition it had heretofore been denied.

In 1942, after many years' running fight, delegates of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People and the heads of several Hollywood studios met and codified some social changes and procedures. The studios agreed to abandon pejorative racial roles, to place Negroes in positions as extras they could reasonably be expected to occupy in society, and to begin the slow task of integrating blacks into the ranks of studio technicians. The agreement directly affected only a tiny cadre of Hollywood Negroes, but the implications for the future were boundless. This book describes how this historic moment came about by tracing the role of blacks in film over its first half-century. Four themes are interwoven in the text: the survival of black performers within the motion picture industry; the growth of black protest against the worst Hollywood racism; the fitful underground movement to create an independent black cinema; and the movement

to make the art of the film speak forthrightly to issues generated by the dualistic American racial system.

Historians have either studied film as an art pristinely aloof from the society for which it was made or have recounted the "progress" of racial liberalism in Hollywood while ignoring the social reality behind it. Hollywood films were written, directed, and produced to fit current American values and tastes. This whole expensive and complex structure allowed little role for blacks, a relatively small minority in a social system dominated by whites. Related to this was the myth of the "melting pot" that permeated the nation's consciousness before World War II.[1] It was the way that Americans learned to accept and tolerate the ethnic differences of new European immigrants of the turn of the twentieth century. Such tolerance was not extended to the differences of highly visible black Americans; indeed, quite the contrary. Blacks were tolerated only as long as they accepted their inferior status.

From its very beginnings the film sharpened the distinctions between black and white experience and excluded Afro-Americans from the screen. (Only the first primitive movies, which were limited to unedited recording of visual reality, allowed blacks a role.) Three great traditions of American popular culture came immediately to the screen—the western with its roots in wild west shows, the melodrama with its roots in traveling repertory companies, and slapstick comedy with its roots in ethnic vaudeville—all of which allowed only marginal black contributions. Later genres of American cinema—musical comedy, gangster film, and "screwball" comedy—helped perpetuate racial exclusivity in keeping with social custom.

Afro-Americans suffered a major disadvantage during the three decades of silent film. So much black entertainment had a strong musical element and depended upon audience reaction and participation for full effect. The absence of sound restricted the black actor's range. Black movie audiences did try to make up for this lack by rhythmic shouts, clapping, foot-tapping, and yells of encouragement to the heroes on the screen.[2]

Of all the social forces playing upon Afro-Americans the most difficult to weigh (because it is so often denied) was the effect of American liberalism. For all its drift, American democracy held out the promise of a better life for blacks. Conflicts and tensions built because of the persistence of racism and because change was not great enough. Many blacks, especially those who wrote for the popular press, responded in several ways. First, they overestimated the unity of white society that so rarely acted in concert on racial matters. Second, blacks flocking to northern cities brought with them a kind of cynical optimism. In na-

tionwide black organizations there was a strong drift toward embracing American values and a rejection of black nationalism.

In the early twenties Hollywood could offer no mythic or artistic expression to blacks fragmented by the urban experience. Hollywood continued to draw on the old Southern stereotypes of Negroes as happy, lazy workers on the plantation. How were black artists and actors to respond to this situation? Were they to reject Hollywood completely? Or would they try to assimilate and work for the seven-year contract as their white counterparts did? For the most part blacks followed the second course, and black audiences, too, preferred the slick Hollywood product to "race" movies ineptly produced by blacks.

It must be said that black actors in Hollywood were not traitors to the race. The general drift of Hollywood was liberal, and held out a promise of change that blunted black criticism over the decades.

Indeed, by the end of the Great Depression, popular taste had become more sophisticated and no longer was willing to accept so readily the old Southern stereotypes that Hollywood was offering. Black protests against these stereotypes were having their effect, too. Blacks were soon making Hollywood careers as character actors. Progress continued slow, but all-black Hollywood films appeared, and individual black actors gained recognition through excellent parts often relatively free of racist overtones. Each lapse by the studios that followed these advances invoked louder protest, and so the pattern developed, much as the larger Negro struggle developed on the broader national scene.

It must be remembered that the actual social changes in American life lagged behind Hollywood movies. This is why the meetings of 1942 were important: they codified and publicized social gains that had been made in Hollywood.

Such black gains were largely the result of white patronage and white liberalism. Where was the black enterprise to develop its own people's film talents? Such enterprise did exist, but it operated underground, inadequately financed, plagued by technical inadequacies and inexperience, severely hampered by problems of distribution and publicity. The heroes of this movement—the Lincoln Company, Oscar Micheaux, the Colored Players, Reol, Ralph Cooper, and George Randol; their white "angels" such as Harry and Leo Popkin, Bert and Jack Goldberg, Alfred Sack, and Robert Levy; and such white directors as Harry Gant and Harry Fraser of Hollywood, and the German émigrés, Edgar G. Ulmer and Arthur Dreifuss—attempted to speak directly to black audiences.

Unfortunately black audiences failed to respond as black filmmakers hoped they would. The black middle class found their films to be ridic-

ulous in their imitation of white norms of behavior, while many poorer blacks must have strained unsuccessfully for a glimpse of themselves. As they settled in their seats at the Dunbar or the Booker T., they often laughed in the wrong places and itched for the Hollywood feature that would appear in fifty-nine minutes. They knew black sheriffs and millionaires did not exist in real life. Meanwhile in Europe such American expatriates as Paul Robeson, Josephine Baker, and Lewis Douglas appeared in movies that dealt with racism by making Negroes part of an international proletariat nurtured in Marxist dogma. Afro-Americans found little identity in such a role, so these films, too, were rejected by black audiences.

Perhaps the most illuminating element in the black struggle for an indigenous cinema was the attempt of the Negro press to create a black aesthetic. Such writers as Lester Walton, Harry Levette, and half a dozen more wrestled with the duality—the "twoness," as W. E. B. Du-Bois put it—of American racial codes as they impinged on the cinema. Was the Negro to be a unique American with an "eternal tom-tom beating in his breast," or was he to be a "lamp-blacked Anglo-Saxon"?[3] By 1942 the critics had turned away from race movies and now supported Hollywood and the NAACP as the most effective means to bring about proper depiction of blacks on the screen. The keenest of these writers recognized that, for all their symbolic value as black enterprise, race movies tended to acquiesce in segregation, place white cupidity off-limits as a theme, rehash many stereotypes for which Hollywood had been blamed, set black against black, and imitate white movies.[4]

Blacks, thus, demanded to be treated as immigrants rather than as Indians or Orientals. This became the implicit black position by 1942. The last thing they wished was a rash of demands for censorship that would return them to the sterile years of the teens when blacks, like Orientals in later years, disappeared from the movies simply because studios wished to avoid conflict. Asians, save for interludes when war fever heightened fears of "the yellow peril," slipped into a dull run of sentimental celebrations of filiopiety. Indians, too, except for occasional massed attacks on wagon trains and iron horses, passed into noble, dignified oblivion. Perhaps because they bought more tickets than any other identifiable group and because many of them came to own the movie industry, immigrants received a friendly treatment in films, even before America at large accepted them. If there was a failure of cinema art in the years between *The Romance of a Jewess* (1908) and *The Jazz Singer*, which punctuated the end of the silent era, it was in the kindness that strangled any artful rendering of the harshness of urban immigrant life.

In sum, to understand the history of Afro-Americans in the history of the cinema is to see a race in tension with white society, in conflict with itself and its own ideals, in a quest to overcome historic disabilities, and moving slowly toward a viable cinema identity and an honest contribution to Hollywood movies. Its most significant achievement—significant, perhaps, because it was so improbable—came in the summer of 1942. With pejorative images driven from the screen the medium was free to allow blacks to contribute when the old Southern stereotypes of blacks ceased to be accepted as Hollywood practice.

The 1942 agreement accomplished far more than allowing a few blacks to appear in roles that were not overtly racist. It changed the whole tune and nature of Hollywood's response to the Afro-American's role in film and, by extension, in American life as well.

Chapter One

THE UNFORMED IMAGE: THE AFRO-AMERICAN IN EARLY AMERICAN MOVIES

During the first ten years of commercial cinema, starting in 1895, Afro-Americans through luck and accident appeared on the screen in a more favorable light than they heretofore had done in theater or fiction. Indeed, they portrayed a range of roles[1] far more varied than American society would grant them in everyday life. Unfortunately for Negroes, whites slowly acquired technical and financial control over the motion picture industry and combined the many tiny studios into a nationwide system. Blacks soon all but disappeared from the screen.

Most early Negro appearances in film followed the Southern stereotypes of the wretched freeman, the comic Negro, the black brute, the tragic mulatto, in keeping with literary and theatrical tradition. The primitive techniques of early cameras made it difficult to convey these stereotypes, though, and so visual reality often appeared despite the filmmakers. For one thing editorial cutting did not exist until 1903, so there could be no real screen narrative.

Meanwhile in primitive movies some blackface figures made a strong impression. A cameraman "shooting" the 9th Colored Cavalry had no way of cutting to blacks serving mint juleps under a Southern moon. They were black troops and had to appear as such. Location shooting—the filming of pictures on actual sites rather than stage sets—further gave a tone of authenticity to images and prevented distortion.

Years passed before the medium moved beyond simple novelty. Each film of the 1890s was a loop of pliable celluloid about fifty feet in length, fixed upon a series of pulleys and sprockets. The strip was inside a box into which the viewer peered at the "moving" pictures as he

handcranked the mechanism. The earliest subjects provided an exciting glance at something in motion: trained bears, the hustle and scurry of a Chinese laundry, a Sioux Indian dance, Annie Oakley firing a Winchester—anything that provided immediate visual stimulation.[2]

Audiences had been prepared for the cinema by more than a half-century of playing with visual toys and the record of numerous experiments and demonstrations of motion in photography: Eadweard Muybridge's capturing the galloping motion of Leland Stanford's horse in Palo Alto, the Zoopraxiscope demonstrated at the Columbian Exposition of 1893, the projection device presented at the Cotton States Exposition of 1895, and W. K. L. Dickson's experiments at the laboratories of Thomas A. Edison where the Kinetoscope, originally a device to be coordinated with the phonograph, emerged in 1891.[3] In the spring of 1896 it was projected on the screen at Koster and Bial's Music Hall in New York. Gradually the flickering images replaced live vaudevillians in the hearts of audiences.[4]

The urban audiences themselves were as new as the technology. Many of them were recent immigrants who not only carried no baggage of racial lore, but were insulated from Southern literary racism by their own illiteracy, and were receptive to the cinema, which, like vaudeville, demanded little knowledge of English. Cities accommodated to the presence of blacks and immigrants, while the countryside exhibited nativism and condoned lynching. In cities the older forms of entertainment, the minstrel shows and tent shows, slowly declined as movies first merged with, then replaced, vaudeville.[5]

The audiences soon grew to millions. All day in the Lower East Side of Manhattan along Houston Street immigrants trickled into movie houses, while children wheedled tickets from parents and passers-by. Inside they were "rapt and entranced" before the brief screen stories. In the darkness a cry would ring out at Indians on the screen: "Das Wildes und grausames Volk!" Not so far away in Greenwich Village the crowded balcony looked like a "Tuscan Hill town." In the Bowery one resident bought a ticket every night but hated the occasional "dago show" that slipped through the informal censorship of the house managers. The small nickelodeons could run four shows every hour for a thousand viewers, and in some neighborhoods there were rows of them with gaudy fronts and shrill barkers—all largely unavailable to Negroes.[6]

Long before popular journalism accepted the new immigrants, vaudeville was putting forth ethnic characterizations on stage. Vaudeville troupes proudly advertised themselves as "The Two Irish Lords," "a consistent carnival of crisp Celtic comedy," or any one of a half-dozen other ethnic billings. Buster Keaton, Charles Chaplin, Ford Sterling—indeed, most comedians—learned their trade in ethnic theater,

or, like Mack Sennett, whiled away afternoons watching vaudeville and burlesque. So when movies came to the immigrant warrens they drew upon a tradition that contributed to "creating a community of city dweller, by establishing norms of taste and behavior."[7]

Lester Walton of the black New York *Age* noticed early on that Negroes had no such visible past that whites could draw upon. Instead, Southern literary tradition shaped black images, chiefly because whites knew nothing about blacks. It did so through the sentimental racism of popular melodrama, the infiltration of Yankee literary life by genteel Southerners, the sentimental *Uncle Tom's Cabin* road shows, and the early infusion of moviemaking with Southern lore.

Southern black metaphor as it came to the melodrama limited blacks to the roles of venerable retainers, comic servants, clever octoroons, confidantes, bodyguards, boon companions, and obstreperous *enfants terribles*. From Aphra Behn's *Oroonoko* in the eighteenth century to the 1845 production of Anna Cora Mowatt's *Fashion*, blacks acted out the values of the master class, and with Horseshoe Robinson's servant they barked at the Redcoats: "Don't yer come to 'buse me; I am a native American nigger."[8]

Whatever modest power Harriet Beecher Stowe brought to *Uncle Tom*, it served blacks no better. Three generations of sentimental veneer laid on by scores of road companies blurred the Abolitionist message. No Negro played the title role for over a quarter-century after its first performance in 1853. Gimmickry soon replaced black drama. One company manager boasted of his "scenic production" in which "some novelties some good comedy has been written in" along with thirty drops and a "moving river double decked steam boat plantation allegory etc." in a magnificent setting "using no house stuff [*sic*]." By the 1890s Charles Frohman produced *Shenandoah*, David Belasco staged *Heart of Maryland*, and Julia Marlowe appeared in *Barbara Frietchie*, all in the tradition of Southern lore. Some of the most powerful early attempts to deal with race on the screen sprouted from nineteenth-century sources, including Uncle Tom and the star-crossed mulattos of Dion Boucicault's *The Octoroon* and George Sheldon's *The Nigger*.[9] Even the song slides used to encourage audiences to sing derived from "Darkies Dancing by the Light of the Moon" and other Southern lore.[10]

The dominance of Southern themes in drama was matched by a Southern literary revival in New York. Even though the hothouse plant that was the Southern mystique could not survive in antique purity in Northern cities, its purveyors moved there. Thomas Nelson Page, Benjamin O. Flower, Silas McBee, J. C. Hemphill, and other Southern journalists and editors not only lived in the North but moved in

élite circles and served on the nation's genteel magazines. They remembered the Negro only as they had been taught and passed on the lore to their Yankee friends. Before he entered movies, for example, William Selig of Chicago managed "a genuine fast black show" in the South where he met the dignified Negro vaudevillian Bert Williams, whom he recalled only as a "yellow boy" with a "deep, wide, open watermelon expanse of mouth."[11]

At the same time Negroes, both intellectuals and urban masses, shared an indifference to the cinema. Because of their deep puritan fundamentalist roots, black churches eschewed film as needless frivolity. Organized Negro groups such as the Afro-American Council and the American Negro Academy struggled for survival against injustices. Not until the spring of 1909 would fragments of the Niagara Movement and the Constitution League join with other blacks and liberal whites to form the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, and not until 1915 would its house organ, the *Crisis*, speak to a national black audience on the subject of the cinema.

Contributing to the black apathy toward cinema was an apparent lack of a usable past. Even the tradition of minstrelsy gave Negroes no sustenance because white imitators had usurped its forms and cast aside its roots in stick dances, bones, strings, shuffles, "dancing all over," plantation walks, and "patting juba." After Daddy Rice of Louisville popularized minstrels through his traveling blackface shows, only a few famous Negro acts—Josiah Henson, Madame Sissieretta Jones—competed with the large white troupes such as Dan Emmett, the Christy Minstrels, and Lew Dockstader. At the turn of the century the more truly Negro musical comedy of Rosamond and James Weldon Johnson, the Oberlin graduate Will Marion Cook, and Bob Cole appeared in New York. The new format—black and urban—abandoned the stylized turns of white minstrelsy, added a farce plot, and introduced ragtime to the lyrics of Negro writers such as Paul Laurence Dunbar, but it could offer nothing to the silent screen.[12]

In the absence of a usable past blacks depended on urban pluralism and the tolerance it produced, along with the sheer primitiveness of movie technique, to preserve them from distortion at the hands of white producers. For ten years they survived, especially in reportorial footage, suffering less than in other media but unable to create a black cinema from scratch.

This broad black imagery survived only as long as moviemaking consisted of no more than a single camera upon a tripod, recording the objective reality before it without artifice, staging, or editing. Even as rudimentary cutting began to allow characterization, early Negro roles hewed closer to vaudeville depictions than to Southern literary forms.

By any count, the number of blacks on the screen was tiny, but at least for a few years they used the primitive anarchy of the early independent, often piratical, producers as a field for black expression.

Among the first Negroes to appear on film were a group of West Indians who appeared in a series of short pieces shot for Edison Kinetoscopes in 1895. They danced, bathed, and coaled ships in film uncorrupted or altered by editing. Many relatively benign, vaguely anthropological vignettes followed, including a few Indian subjects. Occasionally in the 1890s there were demeaning bits such as Edison's *Watermelon Contest* in which four grinning Negroes wolfed melons and spat seeds with a will.[13]

The Spanish-American War in 1898 brought black soldiers to the screen. In *Colored Troops Disembarking,* black men with weapons in hand marched down a gangplank on their way to Cuba. Another Edison film, *The Ninth Negro Cavalry Watering Horses,* was one of the earliest cinematic records of troops on the march, and one in which Americans saw crisp armed black men outside their prescribed "place." Black troopers in smart order pass before a fixed camera shooting at a cloudless sky broken by a single tall pine. Other catalogues featured *The Battle of Mt. Ariat* with the "famous 25th Infantry, colored," and the *Colored Invincibles* fighting with "as much zeal as their white brothers."[14] Only five years later, by the time the campaign to "pacify" the Philippines caught the attention of Americans, things had changed. To celebrate that aspect of the war Edison reenacted a *Rout of the Filipinos* in which white soldiers bang away at a retreating brownskinned adversary. For blacks who could not find themselves in a campaign in which they actually took part, it was one of the first instances of white editorial control over a filmed racial statement.[15]

In a pet project of Edison a sharper deviation from racial typing appeared, with disarming surrogate Negroes in blackface allowed both aggressive and sexual roles. Edison had hoped to use minstrelsy in a test reel which was to synchronize sound-on-cylinders with film. In one of the reels the blackface minstrels act out the traditional forms, with endmen in striped pants waving tamborines, but in another, *Minstrels Battling in a Room,* a white man in light clothing contrasts with the dark makeup of the minstrels who pummel him with a bottle. In still another, *Sambo and Aunt Jemima: Comedians,* two handsome Negroes coyly kiss without gross racial overtones.[16]

Soon after the turn of the century, films began to grow longer and make use of cutting, selecting, and editing shots for various visual and narrative effects and for simple character developments. Usually dated from the release of Edwin S. Porter's *The Great Train Robbery* in 1903, narrative development had been emerging even earlier, and by

Edison's *The Morning Bath* (© Thomas A. Edison, Inc.), like many topical films, recorded raw unedited reality. (International Museum of Photography at George Eastman House, hereafter GEH)

1905 had become a minor art. As white men learned the craft of the cinema, blacks would find it less hospitable, but for the moment at least there were roles for blacks other than the plantation slavey or the mulatto rotting in freedom. The worst problem for blacks remained exclusion from the seats of power. An aggressive black was usually enacted by a white man.

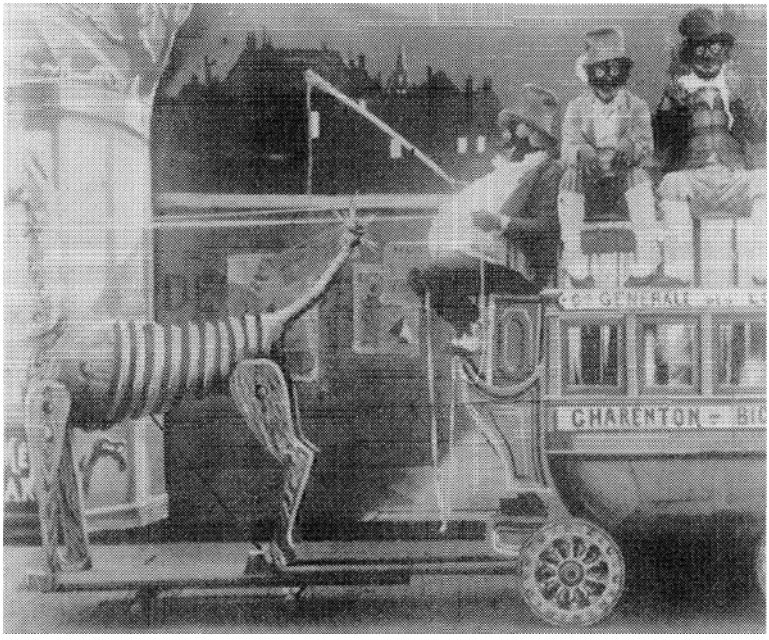
By 1905 the old Negro stereotypes came back to rival the black soldiers of the summer of 1898. Catalogue writers who described the hundreds of films in release described their products as though they had learned nothing and forgotten nothing since the first "darkey" stories. The pages were thick with chicken thieves and crapshooters, and their appeal was to the "proverbial" and the old fashioned, one catalogue urging its wares because "these darkies are of the 'Old Virginny' type." Compared with the days of movie infancy, the films were a deluge. Selig, for example, advertised *Interrupted Crap Game*, a story of "darkies" who neglect their game to pursue a chicken; *Prize Fight in Coon Town*, depicting "two bad coons"; *A Night in Blackville*, "hot stuff" with "two coons" out with their "best babies"; and so on through the pages. *Chicken Thieves* or some variation on the theme appeared in several catalogues, the most typical featuring a "colored dominie" who joined in the feast just before the denouement under the muzzle of a shotgun. Another catalogue entry pleaded authenticity because "all coons like chicken." Worse still, one catalogue listed a movie depicting "the catching, taring [*sic*] and feathering and burning of a

negro for the assault of a white woman." Another catalogue featured Porter's *The White Caps*, a story of hooded vigilantes, "the advance guard of civilization" who preside as "a drunkard and wife beater is given a good coat of tar and feathers." A few of them burlesqued racial violence, reducing it to comic surrealism, as if this would make acts such as lynching somewhat more acceptable. One of them featured a black preacher whose feast on stolen chickens is interrupted by the shotgun blasts of a posse, while another ended with a comic dynamiting. These films presented blackface surrogates for Afro-Americans who bore a striking resemblance to later animated cartoon characters—impervious to explosions, car crashes, and physical abuse. For white audiences, consciously or unconsciously, they provided the opportunity to act out their racial anxieties while remaining aware that these films were not really in earnest.[17]

Nevertheless humane and dignified black figures continued on screen. As technique matured, a few melodramas reached the audience that had been raised on a diet of traveling repertory shows such as *Uncle Tom.* And the continued sales of topical footage preserved blacks as objective reality. Edison's West Indian subjects survived—among them a demure Afro-Carib dance in prim frocks—and in 1903 he released an authentic *Ballyhoo Cakewalk* featuring ten coolly strutting black dancers.[18]

At least one of these early films (according to Georges Méliès's catalogue) used surreal ambience to heighten its black presence. *Off to Bloomingdale Asylum* (1902) suggested a white man's nightmare-confrontation with an allegorical "bad nigger." An omnibus driven by four Negroes is stalled by its bucking horse. The blacks are kicked, fall to the ground, change into white clowns, pummel each other, and at last change into a huge black man. When he refuses to pay his fare the conductor sets fire to the omnibus, and the bulky Negro breaks into pieces, thus saving the white from having to face a self-willed black.[19]

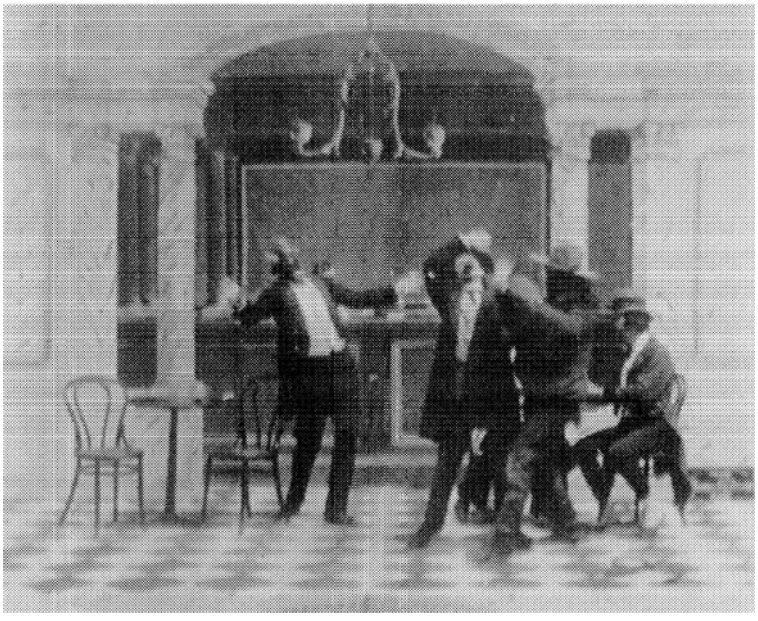
Compared to black roles in other media the range was boundless. Although most films made no demands on their white audiences to accept blacks in any but the most traditional situations, a few went a step further. In a brief Edison vignette of 1903, *The Gator and the Pickaninny*, a patently fake alligator swallows a black child. The surprising ending, not indicated by its cryptic title, has a fatherly black man in makeup chop open the gator with an ax and free the child. In Edison's *A Scrap in Black and White* two boys, one black, one white, pummel each other without a clear decision, although the climax is a knockdown by the black boy, who hovers menacingly over his white victim. By mid-decade some documentaries depicted the masculine figures of black sandhogs entering their airlock to work under a river. In



The stylized clowns of *Off to Bloomingdale Asylum* (© G. Méliès, Inc.), identified in catalogues as "Negroes," reveal the historian's risk in relying uncritically on written documents. (GEH)

a brief bit of Atlantic City ballyhoo a Negro bandmaster led the resort's fiftieth anniversary parade.[20]

But by far the most striking single artifact of the primitive era was the shaping of the old melodrama *Uncle Tom's Cabin* into the first of a number of well-wrought motion pictures. For several years Edwin S. Porter had ground out his quota of footage of fires and hurricanes in the Edison studio. Then he began analyzing the films of Georges Méliès and noticed their narrative use of editing and cutting. He put his observations to work in four close-packed years from 1902 to 1906, creating, among hundreds of titles, *The Life of an American Fireman*, *The Great Train Robbery*, *The White Caps*, and *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. At fifteen minutes, or a thousand feet, *Uncle Tom's Cabin* was one of the longest and most expensive American movies up until that time. Fourteen settings carried the story. Porter's Tom was a white man in



From earliest times *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (© Thomas A. Edison, Inc.) provided a traditional vehicle for bringing black images to the screen. (Library of Congress)

blackface, and his production owed more to sentimental melodrama than to Mrs. Stowe. Yet, there for audiences to see were the cruelties of slavery; a black man's selfless courage in defense of the pregnant slave, Cassie; Tom's familial devotion; and finally a safe prediction that Lincoln would free the slaves.[21]

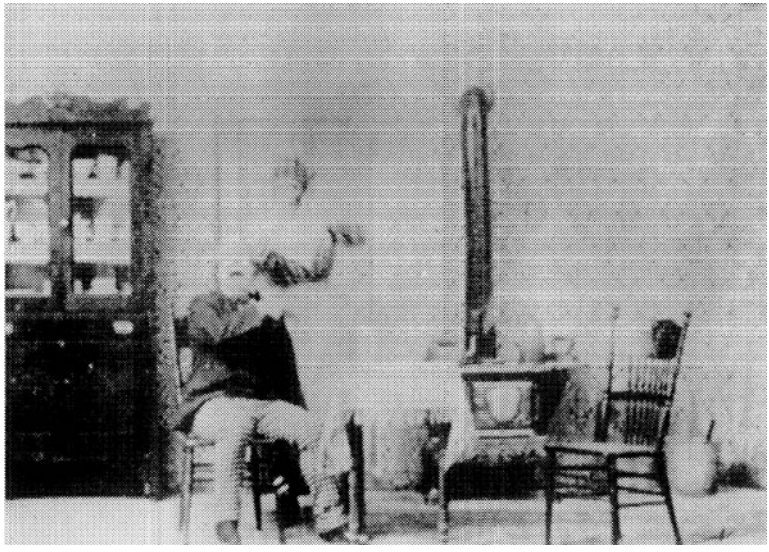
There was no reason to expect the film to take on the values of a black aesthetic, but Porter managed to infuse it with some of the Abolitionist fervor of Mrs. Stowe's original in spite of a *non sequitur* steamboat race between the *Natchez* and the *Robert E. Lee*, and a troupe of cakewalkers, debts to the gimmickry of the old road shows of *Tom.* Most important, it stimulated a run of cinema *Toms* from 1909 through 1927, each one restoring some of the vigor of the original. Sam Lucas, a black actor, performed in one, and finally in Universal's production in 1927 blacks and whites quarreled over Charles Gilpin's unwillingness to read sentimentality into the part, resulting in his replacement by

James Lowe, whose reading restored some element of black manhood.[22]

At its most bumptious the cinema provided the perfect medium for expressing energetic, competitive machismo. The astonishing presence of an occasional black in such a role was a measure, no matter how statistically small, of the breach with traditional black typing. One of them, *Everybody Works but Father* (1905), a vehicle for a Lew Dockstader routine, featured two versions, one black, one white, of a family that rebels against its rocking-chair-bound father.

Imagine a dim room behind a small store front, straight chairs squeaking a bit, a flickering screen, the whirring of a projector—a movie theater in 1904. A gruff Dutchman is seated in a sparsely furnished room. A Negro servant woman enters, carrying a bucket of ale. She pours a glass for the man, and standing behind him, she takes a long swig on the bucket. He turns and angrily hurls his glass at her. In the blink of an eye, no pause to consider consequences, pure rage her only response, she dumps the bucket over the white man's head.[23] Then, after a few dark seconds of intermission as "leader" flows through the projector gate, two smartly dressed black men approach a small cluster of Cau-

A Bucket of Cream Ale (© American Mutoscope & Biograph Co.) derived from vaudeville style, thus permitting black vengeance behind the comic mask. (Library of Congress)



casians as they await their turns at the stall of a sidewalk drink-vendor. They are contemptuously refused service. Later, the second of the blacks, imposing in hat and cape, bribes three kids to blacken the vendor's face as she naps under a kiosk in the parklike setting. As she awakens, passers-by inexplicably laugh at her, spank her, and harry her from the park. The chase builds into a frantic romp through the streets, and ends only when the gleeful whites drench her with seltzer bottle and watering hose.[24] The vendor learns the viciousness of racism by becoming black and experiencing it firsthand. No one knows how popular such films may have been, but they provided a remarkable variety of black attitudes.

Although the fiction film soon resumed traditional forms, the reportorial film continued to offer strong black figures. Two new forms of documentary film made their appearance in the decade after 1905: the boxing film and the exotic travelogue. Both may have enjoyed far more popularity than the first primitive pictures, and both survived the coming of the cinema enactment of the Civil War.

The most exciting black appearances on film were Jack Johnson's boxing pictures. Johnson's presence was a kind of iconic celebration of the "bad nigger" who flaunted white values as he battered a train of white opponents. He provided the excuse for federal attempts to ban boxing films from interstate traffic. Not until the day of Joe Louis would black fans have such an athlete with which to identify. One of the surviving pictures, Johnson's fight with Stanley Ketchell in 1909, set Johnson's effortless, cool right hand against his opponent's flailing, awkward misses. At the knockout Johnson stands, arms akimbo, leaning on the top rope, letting the crowd noise roll over him. Johnson's fights with Ketchell and with Jim Jeffries in 1909 and 1910 touched "racial pride," according to trade papers, and brought a strong black presence to audiences from the inaccessible sites of the bouts. Kalem, one of the earliest studios to produce westerns, added to the Johnson legend with a movie biography "from the baby in his mammy's arms to the full fledged gladiator of the fistic arena."[25] Johnson's prowess triggered the search for a "white hope" to dethrone him, and in turn, a pair of parodies of white ineptitude against black boxers, *The Night I Fought Jack Johnson* and *Some White Hope*. In both the blacks were portrayed by whites, yet in each the overawed white opponents make comic business from their fear of a Negro, one pursuing the referee rather than face Johnson, the other escaping the Negro by being rudely awakened from what was only a nightmare bout.[26]

Generally, topical reportage about Africa rendered black subjects with anthropological detail because the makers had not the benefit of editorial cutting. They faithfully captured not only tribal ritual that

would become a cliché of later movies but the motley look of African towns with their black policemen, bourgeois merchants in fezes, tunics, and frock coats, and a scattering of Islamic turbans. The pictures of the safaris of Theodore Roosevelt and Paul J. Rainey showed blacks and whites alike toting burdens, a distinct breach with social convention of later jungle movies. They were so successful as to stimulate both the contrived movies that exploited the zoo of the Selig Polyscope Company and the faked depictions of Theodore Roosevelt's famous safari in 1909. Racism, when it emerged, was in in the eye of the reviewer such as the *New York Times* man who patronizingly admired the hunting skill of the "savages" in *The Military Drill of the Kikuyu Tribes and Other Native Ceremonies.*[27]

To calculate the impact on the American public of a handful of these films is difficult. There is no sure way to measure frequency of exhibition because film was sold rather than rented; rights to exhibit were sold for unlimited reruns; and piracy further blurred the box office data. Moreover, scholars are not agreed on the effectiveness of film as a teaching medium. Nevertheless these movies did represent a modest breach in traditional Negro stereotypes.

But after 1908 or so conditions within the movie industry changed. Unfortunately for the audiences the range of racial experience depicted on the screen narrowed, perhaps reflecting the continuing inability of filmmakers to render controversial, evolutionary, topical issues on film.

American racial arrangements had never had a completely uniform character. Even during the days of slavery thousands of blacks never experienced the institutional cruelties of the plantation. Many lived on small farms, working in the fields beside their owners, and a quarter of a million of them worked in a factory system. In places such as Baltimore there were more free Negroes than slaves. During postwar Reconstruction racial injustice persisted. For every black representative in Congress or a state legislative there were thousands of ex-slaves who lived in the Carolina lowlands and the Louisiana rice lands in conditions little different from slavery. To this day historians are not agreed on the origins of racial segregation, one group tracing it back to slavery, another finding it a late "capitulation to racism" and a social substitute for bondage.

In the decade bridging the turn of the century Afro-Americans reached the nadir of their fortunes in America. The franchise in the South gradually conformed to the "Mississippi plan," a system of legalistic entanglements that victimized poor, migrant, rural, illiterate blacks by denying them the ballot box. In support of the new arrangements was a covert system of nightriding and terrorism, not under the direction of an omnipotent Ku Klux Klan but merely any casual, mundane

clique of "white caps" avenging a presumed rape or merely burning off the crops of the county's richest black farmer.

But then, coincident with the development of movies, social changes occurred that were difficult to report much less comprehend. Booker T. Washington's Tuskegee Institute, numerous farmers' institutes, and the National Negro Business League, pointed toward a parallel black economic growth under the benevolent tutelage of friendly whites. Through the nadir, black literacy increased, along with property ownership. Republican Party political appointments remained high and probably increased even in the ranks of Southern postmasters, customs collectors, land officers, and internal revenue collectors. The ranks of Tuskegee's commencement speakers were thick with alumni who had scored in the white man's game of temporal wealth. Scattered through the North was a thin network of urban black bourgeoisie faithful to Washington's way. His critics who felt he was selling out the race for short-run economic gain tended to come from an articulate Yankee literati: William Monroe Trotter, editor of the Boston *Guardian;* W. E. B. DuBois, Harvard's first black Ph.D.; and others. But their criticism was blunted by the well-publicized black gains. Black churches grew in numbers and wealth. The black press widened its influence. Lynching and mob violence appeared on the wane. The black migration away from the South held out promise of a better life for Negroes in the future.

The uneven pace of change divided blacks for and against "Bookerism." If lynching declined in incidence, urban "race riots" increased; if black wealth increased, it failed to keep pace with white; if blacks trekked away from Southern oppression, Yankee cities stifled hope in new ways; if political appointments seemed glamorous evidence of Republican goodwill, the two friendliest Republican Presidents, Theodore Roosevelt and William Howard Taft, bent their energies toward building a "lily white" party in the South. That Washington was a celebrity and patronage broker more than a political force may be seen by the events following two bloody racial incidents in the summer of 1906. Republican Presidents had always given jobs to Southern black politicos as a reward for services to the party and as a sign of the party's roots in the antislavery crusade and in the politics of Reconstruction. But in 1906 a severe riot ravaged the black neighborhoods of Atlanta and an unsolved shootout broke the peace of Fort Brown, Texas, where newly arrived black soldiers were quartered. In the first case Roosevelt refused to use the voice of the Presidency to condemn racial violence and in the second case, despite black protests, he and his Secretary of War, Taft, discharged without honor scores of black

troopers who had protested their ignorance of the identity of the bushwackers in Texas. In both instances Washington and his followers were helpless to change the Presidential decisions.

Thus, coincident with the refinement of moviemaking technique great changes had shaken black and white society alike. Gradually the first urban black protest organizations began to contest for ascendancy with Washington's old-style accommodation approach. Washington had frequently participated in ceremonial governors' conferences and meetings with Northern philanthropists, but the new Negro leadership actively worked with white peers in such organizations as the NAACP. The founding of the Urban League testified to the view that new problems—job discrimination, shabby housing, residential segregation—demanded new solutions. But because the sources of movies were nostalgic and because blacks struggling among themselves for hegemony expressed no clear voice, moviemakers continued to derive racial themes from dated white sources.[28]

Indeed, the racial question proved to be the only subject of movies in their second decade that did not accommodate to urban tastes. Some studios—Vitagraph was one—were thought to specialize in capturing city scenes. By 1909 many small companies—Kalem, Biograph, Vitagraph, Essanay, Lubin—took the first step toward breaking Edison's early patent monopoly, toward shaping national distribution systems, and toward squelching foreign competition. Their new Motion Picture Patents Company with Wall Street-backed Biograph as senior partner attempted to control the market, thereby driving their competitors westward to Southern California, where they took advantage of the rough photogenic country, the sunny shooting days, the cheap land dangled by Los Angeles boosters, and proximity to Mexico, where they could flee from police and patent lawyers. The removal westward carried them away from their immigrant roots in Eastern cities and away from the new black ghettos.

As their product improved, studios became more conservative in their artistic perspective because they worked for increased middle-class acceptance, even replacing "nickelodeons" with new theaters so as to win the genteel trade. Indeed, many pioneers never pushed beyond their early creations and never found new sources of inspiration. Instead they clung to melodrama, genteel Shakespearian themes featuring famous actresses such as Sarah Bernhardt, and the handy imagery of minstrelsy.

The first black presence on primitive movie screens resulted from the limits of editorial control over film. After 1908, as filmmakers gained increased control over their material, the role given blacks

changed. Movies still rarely ran for more than a few minutes, but form and content changed as directors became masters of editing, cutting, and rhythm.

Biograph's *The Fights of Nations* in 1907 represented a transition, both in its cutting technique and its depictions of blacks. While certainly not a masterpiece of cutting, it strung together a strand of ethnic pairs who fight in presumably characteristic styles; Latins with knives, Jews with guile and gestures, Scots with highland swords, and so on. The blacks in "Sunny Africa, Eighth Avenue" slash each other with razors over a woman, and pause only to watch what was probably the first authentic filming of jazz dance. Only the Negroes are missing from the finale in which harmony reigns over all groups—even Indians—as they pass under a flag-festooned proscenium. The point is obvious: all are welcome under the American sun except blackfolk. Less obviously, *Motion Picture World* failed to notice the absent blacks and found all the peoples "well represented."[29]

Film now turned more often to heavyhanded old-style race humor and even an occasional location-documentary, such as Edison's *The Pickaninnies* (1905), Essanay's *Dancing Nig* (1907) featuring the "well-known fact" of Negro rhythm, Lubin's *How Rastus Got His Pork Chops* (1908), Pathé's *How Rastus Got His Turkey* (1910), Vitagraph's *A Georgia Wedding* (1909) with its "reasonably true" Negro grotesques, Edison's *Uncle Tom Wins* (1909), and the carefully selected old blackfolk shot in Rome, Georgia, for *King Cotton*. Such traditional black scenes were mentioned in the trade papers: a *Motion Picture World* review in 1909 described a moderately innocent racial incident as "a fat nigger woman slips with a pail of water."[30]

Even so, blacks continued to have a wide range of roles despite the trend. By 1910 Thanhauser and other studios had hired black contract players. And drama and comedy still occasionally turned on the fact of race rather than its burlesque. Edison's *The Colored Stenographer* (1909) milked comedy from a suspicious white wife who brawls with a black charwoman whom her husband has placed at his desk to conceal his blonde secretary. The last Negro troopers to appear in films before World War I were in *The Tennessee Guards*. Black rage was allowed full range in *The Slave's Hate*. And amongst the innocuous servants of *Ruy Blas* and others, Dion Boucicault's famous standard, *The Octoroon*, appeared on film at least twice. If the old melodrama depended on the tragic mulatto stereotype, at least its author, inspired by the success of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, had in 1859 helped invent her from the whole cloth of slavery.

The most striking drift toward a narrow racist approach appeared in films of Africa, largely because editorial control won its battle over

authenticity of location. After 1910, save for a few documentaries such as Gaumont's *Life in Senegal* (1910) with its "little black boys hard at work on their studies," and Pathé's *Tuaregs in Their Country* (1909), which attempted to display "African beauty," the trend was toward drama. The best of them made Africans into variants of Kipling's *Gunga Din*, the Hindu waterboy who gave his life for the British Raj. Griffith himself made *The Zulu's Heart* for Biograph. In it the Zulus are deterred from attacking a Boer wagon when one of their number kills three of his fellows in defense of the whites. The fadeout is on the Zulu, who clasps to his breast a doll given by the grateful Afrikaners. The comic version, *Rastus in Zululand*, enlightens Rastus by having him see the superiority of European culture over African. *King of the Cannibal Islands* sketched another popular theme, the white man who survives the threat of a primitive culture. Gene Gauntier's *Missionaries in Darkest Africa* (1912) for Kalem treated kidnapping, miscegenation, and eventual suicide by a missionary's remorseful daughter. *Voodoo Vengeance* (1913) celebrated the British breakup of a nascent Mau Mau conspiracy. *The Zulu King* (1913) was a comic version of the white god, or henpecked John Smith who becomes king of the blacks while in flight from his wife, thereby getting a laugh because "the white man comes out on top" through "the beautiful stupidity of the aborigines and how easily they were conquered by modern tact and wit." One of the best was *The Kaffir's Gratitude* (1915), whose title character, with no investment in the outcome, saves a white fortune in diamonds from a "social parasite" with the zeal of a slave defending the master's plantation.[31] Even comic intentions would not allow many role reversals such as that in *Queen for a Day*, in which a missionary and his daughter are saved from Zulus when their maid assumes the native throne and helps them escape. The times required that even Othello's "swarthy features . . . not be mistaken for those of the African type."[32]

By 1915 the most striking trait of the jungle movies was the dull impotence of their blacks. In 1914 Edgar Rice Burroughs had responded to studios' interest in his *Tarzan* stories by inserting a movie-rights clause in his book contracts, but his Anglo-Saxon lord of the jungle would have to wait for a postwar revival of African vigor. Meanwhile Louise Glaum and Charles Ray capered through *Forbidden Adventure* (1915) with black boys hunkered down in atmospheric corners as functionless as toadstools. Selig's *A Night in the Jungle* in the same year further betrayed the genre by having the sole aggressive African fall victim to a tame leopard improbably trained to protect whites against black intruders. The European scenes were tinted angry red and the African in passive blue-green.[33]

Between 1910 and 1915 the drift toward older black stereotypes proceeded apace, although the reason was not wholly clear. External relations between the races had begun to rise from the nadir: casual violence declined, indexes of black wellbeing seemed better, blacks organized more effectively, and interracial committees flourished. The sole factor absent from earlier years was the coming Golden Anniversary of the Civil War with its attendant emphasis on reunion and disregard of the Abolition movement.

For whatever reason, the range of black roles contracted to the point that the most obvious black identity was ignored. Some films toyed with the iron taboo of miscegenation through comic cautionary tales that sidestepped the central issue by using trick endings and confused identities. In *Black and White* a white girl darkens a rival's skin with a potion but suffers remorse when she is herself blackened and suffers the advances of a black butler. *The Valet's Wife* was one of many prankish tales hinging on substituting black babies for white. In *Mammy's Child* a jealous white girl on a jaunt to a park trades her doll for a Negro baby, at least until the black mother cancels the deal with a baleful stare. A similar theme ran through *Cause for Thanksgiving*, one of a series of "Sonny Jim" comedies produced by Tefft Johnson. Jim trades his turkey to little black Lily Ann for her baby brother, Rastus, because her family has a surfeit of children but no holiday dinner. Thus the only way to breach taboo was to contrive and to torture ordinary love, hate, conflict, and identity and to rest plots on quirks.[34]

Simultaneously, Afro-American family ties, machismo, and loyalties disappeared from the screen unless as they were connected with whites. A strain of childhood egalitarianism was tossed aside in *Sonny Jim at the Mardi Gras*, in which a black mother whips her daughter after Jim has taken her hand-in-hand through the Luna Park steeplechase to the beach. Black transvestism was the subject of a gaily mounted burlesque, *Florida Enchantment*, in which maids of two families staying at the Ponce de Leon Hotel take magic seeds which change their sex and spoil their family's lives. In the resulting romp only a single actual Negro appeared. *Colored Villainy* by Keystone was no more than a blackface farmer's daughter joke at the end of which a local boy wins the girl from the "colored traveler." In *Swami Sam* by Vitagraph an edge of black masculine aggression is dulled and made comically ambivalent by a fat black matriarch. The swami is a classic ghetto hustler, duping cops and neighbors with equal cunning. In garish robes and turban, surrounded by Tarot symbols, he foils a raid by hypnotizing the cops, exposes a police spy "in drag," and prepares for a final assault with drawn pistols. But in the end he is caught by a tough black laundress

Although some black images in early cinema deviated from Southern lore, films such as Mack Sennett's *A Colored Girl's Love* (© The Keystone Film Co.) revealed the persistence of blackface idiom. (Author's collection)

who barges in fearlessly to claim her past-due bills and drags him off to the terrified police.[35]

Meanwhile Afro-Americans remained powerless as producers became more alert to the opinions of their white audience. Legend had it that the black vaudevillian Bert Williams failed to raise backing for filming his routines, failed to interest bookers in "a few" one-reel experiments, and had a Brooklyn opening blocked by a white mob. In Jacksonville whites threatened to throttle a Kalem production unless the studio ceased making such movies as *Florida Crackers*. And Bill Foster, a legendary black pioneer filmmaker, faltered and sought capital from white sources. The black critic of the New York *Age*, Lester Walton, later Minister to Liberia, bristled at the publicity for a lynching movie: lobby-card copy on Sixth Avenue reading "Hear His Moans and Groans, Price One Cent!" and in the Bowery it was billed as "educational." In both cases he called for a black community protest that never came.[36]

It is difficult to attribute causes to the seeming decline in black for-

tunes after 1910. Harlem and its equivalents elsewhere had only just opened up, and maybe the beginnings of the ghetto system contributed. Perhaps, as many blacks thought, the resumption of Democratic power in Congress in 1910 and in the Presidency itself in 1912 brought a return of Southern values to the national scene. The Golden Anniversary of the Civil War revived old white prejudices, and blacks were seen once more as slaves. Black intellectuals themselves became celebrants of a deeper meaning of the anniversary in pageants of massive proportions. But for most Americans the celebration touched depths of feeling which reinforced their long-founded racial prejudices.

Americans gave homage to a lost pastoral virtue and purity. No better image could be found for depicting rural innocence than the Old South, whose "Lost Cause" had fallen victim to the industrial might of the North. It was an easy step from here to an apology for slavery. Moreover the new Southern gospel came coated in soldierly duty, filiopiety, and personal courage that seemed lacking in the Northern war effort. Recently urbanized Americans celebrated the war through a nostalgic haze that allowed them to believe it had been fought for the abstract principles of union and states' rights rather than for the emotional and moral issue of slavery. The mood appeared on film in the spring of 1909 when President Taft greeted the joint encampments of the Confederate veterans and the Grand Army of the Republic at Petersburg, Virginia.[37]

Intersectional reconciliation became a national theme as the anniversary approached, and accordingly, black roles in the cinema that focused on the Civil War necessarily retraced worn ruts. The acceptable Negro became a loyal slave, the sacrificial goat in the ritual of the reunion of the sections, a wistful icon of old ways, steadfast in the defense of his master's home and family, obligated by the logic of the situation to reject Yankee promises of freedom, and finally, resolute in rejecting black brothers in blue uniforms and those who had fled from farm to town.

Because most movie directors kept abreast of popular tastes, a single figure cannot be isolated as a leader of the trend. But D. W. Griffith fit the role so well it was as though he had been sent from Central Casting. He brought together in one mind an abiding suspicion of city life, a sentimental bias toward "right-thinking Negroes," a childhood love of Victorian narrative, an apprenticeship in traveling stock companies, a reverence for a genuine Southern war hero among his antecedents, a good sense of his mother's Protestant morality, and most of all, a keen feeling for the South, its travail, its burden of race, and its rural inferiority.

Poverty drove Griffith's family from the farm to Louisville and the

young man into an austere life of odd jobs relieved by his attraction to the life of the stage, first by watching Julia Marlowe and other famous performers, then by cadging small roles, and finally by joining the Nance O'Neill stock company. He married an actress and moved to New York, where in 1908 he began writing, acting, and eventually directing for Biograph movies on Fourteenth Street. Like most films, his were short and topical pieces on themes of race, immigration, urban problems, Indians, labor, suffrage, and the place of women, with forays into classics such as *Ramona* and *Trilby*. His heroes were often vague Jeffersonian individualists pitted against officious authoritarian snoops such as cops and reformers.[38]

At first his pictures were indistinguishable from the common run, but soon he synthesized his social and artistic vision into a mature expression that caught the eye of the prestigious *New York Drama Mirror* and provided the occasion for the first movie review ever in *The New York Times*. He borrowed, invented, and learned pacing, strengthened the narrative ability of the medium, and adopted the conventions of melodrama to the grammar of the film. Not that he alone transformed the cinema; his gift for bombast and self-advertisement only made it seem so. Nevertheless, his unique mind-set made him the most credible interpreter of Southern and black experience on film, at least to a generation wanting relief from the clatter of urban change, with the result that the new Negro of the cities was drowned in the martial vision of Griffith's Southland. Five of his last Biograph films were set on plantations, and only two, *The Honor of His Family* and *The House with the Closed Shutters*, in 1910, hinted that Southern legend and reality conflicted. This metaphor of Southern tragedy which he developed and with which he infused his epic, *The Birth of a Nation*, helped to firmly etch the outlines of Negro character in film long after its fidelity to American realities had passed.

The broad outlines of Southern visions of the past were already well known to Northern readers through the dominance of Southern regional writers. It only remained for Griffith, Ince, and other moviemakers to synthesize the Civil War into a cycle of heroic Southern cavalrymen, gentle but iron-willed women, Yankee infantrymen unaware of the chivalric rituals of war, all brought together in the end by an intersectional marriage of former enemies.

"Ben's own life was not worth as much to him as the happiness of Colonel Frazier and his small family." The line might have come from scores of movies, but it was from Griffith's canon of Civil War melodramas released between 1909 and 1911, of which *In Old Kentucky*, *The Battle*, *His Trust*, and *His Trust Fulfilled* typified the genre. *In Old Kentucky* opens on three white men and a blackface butler as a

father and son swear allegiance to the Confederacy while the second son hangs back. The butler rubs his hands with glee as the rebel son thrashes the laggard. Loyalty to family, personal courage, impulsiveness, and love of region are Southern virtues with which the Negro identifies. As the picture enlarges to the wider view of war (with an early "pan" shot) the sons take opposite sides. At the end the wounded rebel son, after eluding certain capture and death, and the returned Union officer hesitantly embrace and shake hands while wrapped awkwardly in the folds of both their flags. In a reprise of the opening the black butler looks on with approval, needing no investment in the situation in order to give his love to whites.[39]

In the two years after, Griffith turned out more than a half dozen Civil War dramas (still a tiny portion of his total output), each one exploring corners of Southern life and moving toward a total vision, with three of them—*The Battle*, *His Trust*, and *His Trust Fulfilled*—serving to rough out trial images, shots, and cuts for his eventual masterwork, *The Birth of a Nation*. Griffith not only played all the Southern chords but added his own flourishes so that a reviewer found *The Battle* "has in a more than ordinary degree that pleasing Biograph characteristic of throwing the spectator into the very heart of things." He opened the war with a big scene, "the dance before the departure," dressed the sets with strong forms and textures, and toned down the florid stage style of acting. He gave strength and bearing to the Southern woman waiting out the battle. The battle itself he fought out behind low redoubts, flags aflutter, preserving the human scale by cutting to a boy who bolts and runs to his mother, who teases him into returning to the smoke of the lines where, among the milling men, he becomes a dangerously exposed ammunition bearer. The last cut is to her, and we know she is proud. Only the black figures remain to be sketched in.

His Trust and *His Trust Fulfilled*, released several months earlier in two parts because of lingering doubts of the staying power of audiences, supplied the black imagery. In keeping with the myth, a Southern officer goes off to war with the field hands cheering and the house in the charge of the dutiful servant, George. After the soldier dies in battle, George hangs his sword over the mantel, thenceforward assuming to a striking degree the white male duties to home and family, even at great personal risk defending the homestead against rude Yankee marauders who put it to the torch. George saves widow, daughter, and sword from the flames, takes them into his own house, and with "his savings" continues protecting them, "true to his trust." His wickedest enemies are Griffith's favorite bugbears, the rowdy town blacks of Reconstruction, grinning under their high hats. At the fadeout the

His Trust and *His Trust Fulfilled* (© American Mutoscope & Biograph Co.) were among several early exercises by D. W. Griffith derived from his childhood exposure to Southern lore. (Library of Congress)

daughter is safely educated and married off to an English cousin, and George, bent and woolly-headed, receives for his lifetime of toil a single grateful handshake from a white man.

Apart from the veiled and probably unconscious sexuality in George's behavior, his fealty, his ardor in the absence of personal gain, and his treasuring of white expressions of gratitude, all formed the outline of blacks on screen for years to come. More than any other director Griffith gave future moviemakers a model, a cinematic language, and a rich romantic tradition that would define an Afro-American stereotype. He was the bridge between nineteenth-century Southern melodramatic and literary tradition and the new art of the cinema. The cycle of Civil War movies to which he contributed narrowed the range of black roles on the screen because his special blending of Southern mystique and the craft of cinema eventually moved motion pictures from their old anarchy toward a centralized system of art and industry that Negroes could not penetrate. Porter, J. Stuart Blackton, Thomas

Ince, and other innovators who might have contributed a converse black imagery burned themselves out while Griffith remained at the height of his powers.

For Afro-Americans nothing could have been worse than the reunions, intersectional lovers, grizzled veterans, intertwined flags, blue and gray bunting, and loyal darkies. Every trait seemed an abandonment of the Abolitionist heritage and the legacy of the Republican Party to sectional harmony graced by approving hat-in-hand Negroes. The rush of movies commemorating the Civil War destroyed the chance for a humane treatment of Negroes on the screen. Instead, they restored Southern lore to the screen and taught a new urban generation a false nostalgia.

Varied plots ended in ritual sameness. In *The Empty Sleeve; Or, Memories of By-Gone Days* a one-armed veteran in the Grand Army of the Republic daydreams of the war, "and as a fitting climax we see a Union and Confederate soldier clasping hands." In another the Southern maiden knows "her brother leads the grays" as surely as "her lover leads the blues," and at the end there will be an embrace when the Yankee "returns for his Dixie girl." *A Reconstructed Rebel* fights against Honduran rebels in defense of the American consulate with the same vigor he brought to the Lost Cause. In *Days of War* two brothers, wartime enemies, embrace. In *A Flag of Two Wars* an old Confederate dies penniless, leaving his sword and flag to his son, a hero in Cuba whose troops "salute the two flags with equal reverence." *The Suwanee River* offers the mood of the popular song cast over the era of Reconstruction as a "fiery" Southern lad and a Northern girl on adjacent plantations meet clandestinely with the aid of a black "uncle." A last reunion comes when the boy returns, rich, to redeem the estate from the auctioneer's gavel.[40]

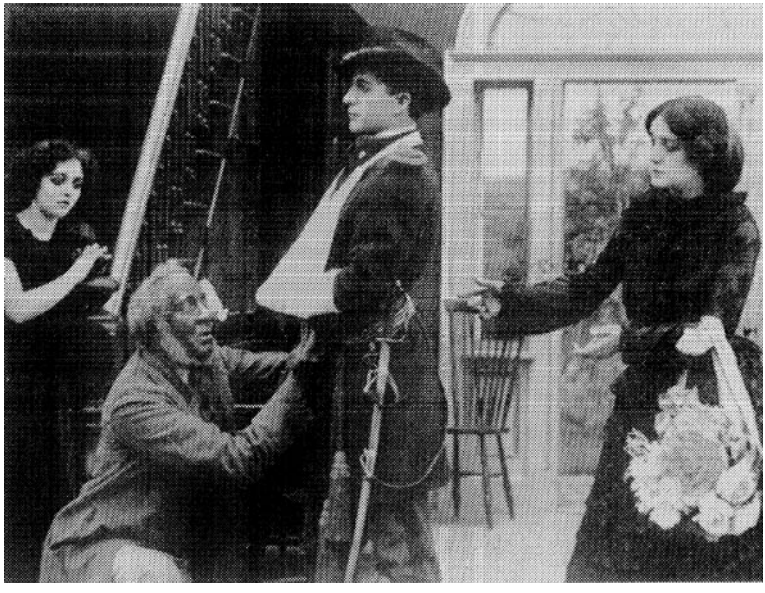
The steady stream of films reassured audiences of the sincerity of the Southern cause by presenting it in sacrificial terms. *A Girl Spy* "consecrated her entire life to the cause of her beloved Southland." Another girl shoots her Yankee lover *For the Cause of the South.* Death sanctified loyalty in such images as "the vacant chair" in *The Soldier Brothers of Susannah* and its variation in *The Only Veteran in Town.* Some of these were filmed in the homey air of the South, such as Photoplay's *The Littlest Rebel* and five Gene Gauntier pictures.[41]

Black characters gave their lives and fortunes for the cause of scores of white Southerners. *The Confederate Spy* set the mood. It opened on a pastoral plantation homecoming as slaves, "happy, contented, and well cared for . . . joyous as a bunch of school children," led by old Uncle Daniel, greet their new mistress coming down the lane. War comes, ruining the scene, but old Daniel defends the place against Yan-

kee marauders when he is not spying and running messages through the swamps, at last saving the day "for massa sake and little missa." A trade reviewer loved every moment. "Much good can be done by presenting to those who know nothing about such scenes a reproduction of them," he wrote. "Perhaps in that way a better understanding of the Southern people can be disseminated."[42]

The next year *Hearts and Flags* offered Uncle Wash, who protects Colonel Dabney's daughters from Yankee foragers even after they use him to batter in the door. A Union captain saves the day and returns after the war to seal political reunion with his marriage to one of the girls as Wash looks on. In *Mammy's Ghost*, Mammy has her white ward rattle a chain in the attic to persuade Yankee searchers that a ghost rather than a wounded rebel is in the attic. In *A Special Messenger* a girl spies for the Confederacy secure in the knowledge that her black butler is nursing her wounded lover. *The Judge's Story* is a flashback told by a "mammy" in which a Negro defendant saves the Judge during the war and earns "the rest of his days in happiness and

Hearts and Flags (© Thomas A. Edison, Inc.), one of scores of movies that celebrated the Golden Anniversary of the Civil War, revived traditional Southern black roles. (GEH)



comfort" rather than in jail. In *Uncle Pete's Ruse* black Pete, "the only cool and collected person on the premises . . . saves a hidden rebel soldier from Union eyes by painting smallpox on the family."[43]

The rattle of sabers and gunfire continued on screen through the election year of 1912 when Woodrow Wilson brought the Democratic Party and Southern ideals back to the capital. Sambo, the black servant in *The Soldier Brothers of Susannah,* typical of this happy breed, feeds his homecoming master, who is thin from eating "no count vittles up Norf." Uncle Mose and old Mammy in *None Can Do More* and *Old Mammy's Secret Code* both die in their master's causes, he while freeing his master from Yankee prison, clutching a picture of Lincoln to his bosom, "loyal to his savior, but even more loyal to his master," and she by suffering execution as a spy after using her laundry line to signal in code from inside Grant's headquarters. An entire black family guard the plantation from Union troops in *The Informer,* as they sneer at the "false brother" who joined the Federals. Even the suicidally tragic mulatto may die in the cause, as she did in *A Gentle Volunteer.* By 1914 *In the Fall of '64* extended the loyalty to the entire slave quarter whose inmates concealed a Confederate officer from the Yankees. Freedom was not their ambition. One of them, Old Mose in *The Old Oak's Secret,* finding his new freedom unbearable, hides his master's will with its manumission clause in a tree.[44]

The cycle of war movies shaped the outlines of heroism and villainy in purely Southern terms. Few pictures featured Yankee heroes save for those who moved South after the war. To live in the North was to experience misery and bad food, remedied only by an eventual recrossing of the Ohio or the Mason and Dixon Line. Southern "heavies" were foreigners or declassé overseers, never slaveholders or their slaves. Black heavies, when they appeared, were either town Negroes or mulattoes. Jim, the loyal slave in *A Slave's Devotion,* for example, rebels not against the institution of slavery but only against his cruel overseer. He runs not for freedom but to evade the overseer and his dogs, and finally, as a Confederate runner, dies saving his old master. Lew Dockstader, the old minstrel, played the title role of *Dan,* the servant-friend whose life is spoiled by the cruel overseer who hopes for war so as to win the master's daughter during the turmoil. We know he is evil because Dan finds him "preaching freedom and riches to the negroes." *Old Mammy's Charge,* "The Sweetest Southern Story Ever Told in Pictures" according to its ad-mats, carries Mammy northward with her newly married mistress. Soon both parents die, leaving Mammy to struggle against the courts, who wish to take custody of their orphan. At last the old grandfather comes in search of his daughter and takes Mammy and child southward "where peace and comfort await them."