

Fall 2017

L.A. Rebellion: Creating a New Black Cinema, book review

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Recommended Citation

Peter Catapano, review of L.A. Rebellion: Creating a New Black Cinema by Allyson Nadia Field, Jan-Christopher Horak, and Jacqueline Najuma Stewart (book review), *Journal of American Ethnic History*, 37, no. 1 (Fall 2017), pp. 110-112. doi:10.5406/jamerethnhist.37.1.0110

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Field, Allyson, Jan-Christopher Horak, Jacqueline Najuma Stewart, ed. *L.A. Rebellion: Creating a New Black Cinema*. (Berkeley: University of California Press) 2015.

This set of essays chronicles the history of a diverse collective of black filmmakers that attended U.C.L.A. film school during the 1970s and 1980s and who set out to challenge over a century of Hollywood representations of blackness. While often different in subject and style, the L.A. Rebellion shared the common ambition “to perform the revolutionary act of humanizing Black people on screen.” To do so, this generation of film school trained black filmmakers worked to create “an alternative—in narrative, style, and practice—to dominant American mode of cinema.”(1) This book is a result of a larger 2009 U.C.L.A. Film & Television Archive project to restore, catalog, and exhibit dozens of films, short and feature-length, produced by this group of influential, but largely unknown filmmakers.

L.A. Rebellion contextualizes the history of this important cinematic movement by emphasizing the time and place of its inception. The campus of U.C.L.A. in the 1970s provided both inspiration and opportunity for this driven group that hoped to challenge Hollywood. The racial ferment over the firing of Angela Davis in 1969 accelerated demands by many faculty and students for the creation of ethnic studies departments. The radicalized atmosphere on campus also forced the U.C.L.A. film school to change hiring and admission policy to address its own lack of diversity. Some of the freshly hired faculty were black filmmakers and scholars who immediately became mentors to a new generation of black U.C.L.A. film students. Particularly influential among his students was Teshome Gabriel, an Ethiopian born film scholar who joined the faculty in 1970. In his popular course offering “Film and Social Change,” Gabriel introduced students to the vibrant global liberation cinema of the period that included screening from the Third Cinema movement and Cinema Novo. According to Allison Field, in her essay “Rebellious Unlearning: U.C.L.A. Project One Films (1967-1978), the required introductory film

making course, Project One, also provided a place for black students to collaborate and to screen each other's work. Fields contends that many in this nascent movement applied Third Cinema principles in their Project One films both in production and in film design. These short student films were largely shot on location in Los Angeles, telling the story of ordinary black lives in a realist setting in the Cinema Novo mode.

The L.A. Rebellion also emerged at a time when blaxploitation films had become popular after the release *Cotton Comes to Harlem* in 1970 and *Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song* and *Shaft* in 1971. Jan-Chrisopher Horak in his essay, "Tough Enough: Blaxploitation and the L.A. Rebellion," describes the challenges faced by these independent minded filmmakers as Hollywood increased its production of black themed movies. While blaxploitation provoked criticism from many in the black community for its hypermasculinized characters and its ghetto stereotypes, the movies proved popular to audiences both white and black. Many young black filmmakers envied the popularity among the movie goers who they considered their target audience. Horak argues that some of the L.A. Rebellion filmmakers, most notably, Jamaa Fanaka in his *Penitentiary* cycle (1979, 1982, 1987) self-consciously mimicked blaxploitation to attract this audience, while simultaneously subverting genre's conventions and spectator's expectations.

In "Thread and Nets: The L.A. Rebellion in Retrospect and in Motion," Chuck Kleinhans argues that by the 1990s, Hollywood showed a greater willingness to hire black directors and move beyond the formulaic genre convention of blaxploitation. A new generation of black filmmakers, many products of film schools themselves, were able to find mainstream distribution and, in the cases of Spike Lee's *Do the Right Thing* (Universal, 1989), Reginald Hudlin's, *Houseparty* (New Line, 1990), and John Singleton's *Boyz in the Hood* (Columbia, 1991), critical

acclaim with impressive box office. The L.A. Rebellion receded as a collective movement though two of its best known directors Charles Burnett and Julie Dash found an audience in the vibrant American independent film circuit of the 1990 with *To Sleep with Anger* (1990) and *Daughters of the Dust* (1991). Both films in theme and style are very much representative of the Rebellion aesthetic.

L.A. Rebellion is a valuable resource especially for interdisciplinary scholars in film history and ethnic studies. In the final essay, “Encountering the Rebellion,” Alessandra Raengo neatly summed up the L.A. Rebellion’s accomplishments and unfinished project of “open[ing] up a space where students, artists, and scholars of all extractions can commit to, invest in, and desire a greater understanding of the experience and expansive possibilities of blackness.” (314) *L.A. Rebellion* also provides a series of oral histories with some of the filmmakers, as well as a comprehensive filmography. Thankfully, many of the titles are now available for the first time in decades, allowing audiences an opportunity to encounter this exceptional moment in film history for themselves.

Peter Catapano earned a Ph.D. in US History from the University of California, Irvine and a M.A. in Film and Television Studies from U.C.L.A. He is an associate Professor of History at New York City College of Technology in Brooklyn where he teaches US History and the History of Immigration.