

The 50 Most Influential Black Films: A Celebration of African-American Talent, Determination, and Creativity

by S. Torriano Berry and Venise T. Berry

A review by Jason Housley

In *The 50 Most Influential Black Films*, Torriano and Venise Berry offer their selection of the 50 most significant black films. Perhaps the first task of such a listing would be to define "black film," for the majority of black-themed films (especially prior to 1970) were directed and produced by non-blacks, while black directors such as Bill Duke, Sidney Poitier, and Reginald Hudlin have helmed films with non-black themes and predominately white casts. If the authors had chosen to limit the inclusions to only those films directed, produced, and written by blacks that included a predominately black cast and themes and were influential, they would likely have less than 50 films in total that would qualify. Luckily, the authors realized that this narrow definition would limit their list considerably and provide their own definition:

We define a "black film" as having a majority black cast or a predominately black-related theme or subject matter. Whether or not the film had a black producer, director, or script writer was considered, but was not a necessity for its inclusion.

Utilizing such a broad definition brings together a wide variety of films, with the only common thread being the presence of one or more black actors in the cast. The authors categorize films by decade. While helpful in its simplicity, in actuality this method often fails to address the fluctuations in the black film industry that did not correspond directly with each neat ten-year period. During certain decades more black films were produced than in others, thus the 1950-59 chapter is exceedingly brief and considers only three films. Additionally, the relative dearth of black-themed films of the late 1970s-early 1980s leaves each decade somewhat unbalanced, with the 1970s chapter featuring films from the first half of the decade and the 1980s chapter concentrating on the latter half of the decade. Perhaps a better format would be to classify by genre-e.g. the "Blaxploitation Era" 1971-1976, The "New Negro Era" 1949-1970, "Musicals," etc.

The word "influential" in the title could be considered a misnomer. While many of the films are indeed influential, others are incredibly obscure leaving their degree of "influence" in question. While a selected film like *Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song* (1971) inadvertently created the "blaxploitation" film genre and *Harlem on the Prairie* (1938) spawned a series of all-black westerns, the Delta Sigma Theta Sorority funded *Countdown at Kushini* (1976) unfortunately failed to inspire other black organizations to invest in motion pictures. If it had, it would certainly be considered "influential" as opposed to merely noteworthy and admirable. Perhaps "important" would be a better adjective to describe the films featured.

No reader will agree totally with the Berrys' choices and the book is not designed to convince them to do so. *The 50 Most Influential Black Films* is not meant to be a thorough reference guide but more of a primer of black film for the casual filmgoer. It compels the reader to compile their own list of 50. Because inclusion is based upon the opinion of the authors, the reader will certainly dispute many of the Berrys' choices. Many would argue that Spike Lee's *Do The Right Thing* (1989) (not included) certainly had more impact on society (as well as is a better film) than his *Get On The Bus* (1996). The Eddie Murphy-Reggie Hudlin collaboration, *Boomerang* (1992), which marked Murphy's first collaboration with an independent black filmmaker, thus garnering a budget that only a Murphy project could demand, certainly outstrips the

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Hollywood production of *The Nutty Professor* (1996) (the only Murphy film listed here) in originality. Indeed, *The Nutty Professor* was a remake of an earlier, quite popular film.

Most fortunately, the Berrys are quite knowledgeable about film and successfully impart that knowledge through their text. Some entries even include revealing interviews with important principles involved in the film. If you find yourself searching for a black-themed film on your next visit to the video rental store, keep *The 50 Most Influential Black Films* handy. It may help you discover a previously unknown cinematic treasure, or at least something to keep you amused for 90 minutes.

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