

A very short and incomplete film history via Black directors

This list is not meant to be exclusive or exhaustive (it couldn't possibly be) but all the directors listed here (based on approximate time their careers started) would reward any time invested in watching their films. There is only so much room here, so unfortunately we have not listed artists from other disciplines. This list mirrors the timeframe of *The Watermelon Woman*, which is from the 1920s into the 1990s. This info is pulled from the resource list on the back of this sheet and other research, please see that list to dig deeper.

1920

Oscar Micheaux
Solomon Jones and Zora Neale Hurston (both known for their documentary work)
Richard Maurice
James & Eloyce Gist
Spencer Williams

1960

The Black Panthers leveraged film and documentary in a crucial way. Agnès Varda directed a documentary about them and they directed their own films, maybe most notably *Off the Pigs!*
Gordon Parks (also an incredible photographer)

Madeline Anderson
William Greaves
Sidney Poitier
Michael Schultz
Melvin Van Peebles
Ivan Dixon

"There are times when the white critic must sit down and listen. If he cannot listen and learn, then he must not concern himself with black creativity. ... If I were white, I would probably be called 'fresh and different.' If I were European, *Ganja and Hess* might be 'that little film you must see.' Because I am black, I do not even deserve the pride that one American feels for another when he discovers that a fellow countryman's film has been selected as the only American film to be shown during 'Critic's Week' at the Cannes Film Festival, May, 1973. Not one white critic from any of the major newspapers even mentioned it. ... That kind of disrespect could not have been cultivated in 110 minutes. It must have taken at least a good 250 years.
-Excerpt from Bill Gunn's 'To Be a Black Artist', New York Times, May 13, 1973

1980

Michelle Parkerson
Wendell B. Harris, Jr.
Bill Gunn
Robert Townsend
Kathleen Collins
L.A. Rebellion movement (including Charles Burnett, Billy Woodberry, Larry Clark, Zeinabu irene Davis, Julie Dash)

Isaac Julien
Spike Lee

"As a Black queer filmmaker I must say: we have few mentors, few people's work that we can look up to, to find ourselves in, to even speak to. To figure out who we are as filmmakers. And I was fortunate enough to meet, and speak with, and be encouraged by Marlon Riggs. ... You should add [his work] to your collection because there are very few Black queer makers so important as Marlon."
-Cheryl Dunye, in her Criterion Closet Picks video

1990

Julie Dash
Marlon Riggs
The Hughes Brothers
Kasi Lemmons
Carl Franklin
Bill Duke
Ayoka Chenzira
Cauleen Smith
Leslie Harris
Bridgett M. Davis
Cheryl Dunye

If you are interested in four other beautiful, smart, and personal debut feature films to pair with *The Watermelon Woman* please check out our recent newsletters for this film. We share more information about why these films are so critical, why we should all watch them, and why they remained solo feature films for these artists. The directors noted here made *Drylongso*, *Just Another Girl on the I.R.T.*, and *Naked Acts*, respectively. The fourth we recommend is *Pariah*, directed by Dee Rees and released in 2011.

We offer our manifesto, recognizing that film manifestos never whisper. Their messages envision political, aesthetic, and cultural possibilities. We must remember that traditionally the field of film studies was designed around the centering of heterosexual white men. This forms the bedrock of the film industry and of film studies. This means that the study of black film, however one defines black film, has as a practice and a product often been treated as additional or derivative rather than integral (e.g., the infamous "race week" in any Intro to Film/Media course). **We must learn, acknowledge, and teach that blackness has been central to the history of film since the birth of the medium**, not just starting with *The Birth of a Nation* (D. W. Griffith, 1915). We must teach Oscar Micheaux, but also the Lincoln Motion Picture Company, and the long histories of early and nonextant black film that scholars like Jacqueline Stewart, Pearl Bowser, Allyson Nadia Field, and others have endeavored to bring to light. Furthermore, greater focus on the work of black women and queer filmmakers will further the necessary decentering of film studies' perspectival tendencies and ultimately dispute the narrow categorical meanings attributed to black film.

- "Reclaiming Black Film and Media Studies", Racquel J. Gates , Michael Boyce Gillespie
Black Camera, Indiana University Press, Volume 13, Number 1, Fall 2021

Resources

- Indiana University Black Film Center & Archive at bfca.indiana.edu
 - The Black Film Archive at blackfilmarchive.com (created and maintained by Maya Cade)
 - 1898-1971 Regeneration Black Cinema at regenerationblackcinema.org
 - Black Women Directors Digital Library at blackwomendirectors.co
 - Women Make Movies at wmm.com
 - *Pioneers of African-American Cinema*, a 5 disc + 1 booklet set available on DVD and Bluray via KPL and Kino Lorber. Also currently available on Kanopy.
 - *Paul Robeson: Portraits of the Artist*, a 4 disc + 1 booklet set available on DVD at KPL.
 - Milestone Films at milestonefilms.com
Since 2007, Milestone has concentrated on the restoration and worldwide distribution of films outside the Hollywood mainstream featuring "lost" films by and about African Americans, Native Americans, LGBTQ and women. Milestone's motto is "We like to fuck with the canon."
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Q: You've mentioned Michelle Parkerson - what else is on your cinema syllabus?

Cheryl Dunye: Smaller works. People don't watch all of Isaac Julien's stuff. He went back to the art world. People don't look at *Young Soul Rebels* or Tom Kalin's film *Swoon*. It was very experimental, using history, in the Queer New Wave. Certain stuff falls through the cracks. People don't watch some great documentaries and queer films that are masterpieces. People don't go into bodies of works, they binge-watch shows. I would encourage people to pick a director and watch their entire body of work. Get a subscription to Criterion Channel and look at a whole bunch of films by one director to figure out their style. Douglas Sirk and John M. Stahl both made versions of *Imitation of Life*, and though they were white men, they were dealing with Black content. What were they trying to do, what didn't they do, and how do we turn it around? Let's look at our representation, look at Oscar Micheaux's work.
