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"The country's image of the Negro, which hasn't very much to do with the Negro, has never failed to reflect with a kind of terrifying accuracy the state of mind of the country." —James Baldwin

COLOR ADJUSTMENT

by Patricia A. Gozemba

Color Adjustment Directed by Marlon Riggs. Part I: *Color Blind TV?* (1948-68) (48 mins); Part II: *Coloring the Dream* (1968-) (39 mins) both parts on one cassette. California Newsreel, 149 9th St. #420, San Francisco, CA 94103 (415) 621-6196; Fax: (415) 621-6552 Video sale, \$250; rental, \$95.

Marlon Riggs opens his provocative new film *Color Adjustment* with this quote from Baldwin, (see photo caption) which with characteristic insightfulness describes the white American psyche. Riggs is in many ways a successor of Baldwin: the African-American gay male outsider who has the uncanny ability to pierce through the hypocrisy and malevolence of racism in American culture. In this film Riggs lays bare the insidiousness of the manifestation of racism on television. Prime-time TV continues to this day to bring us "with a kind of terrifying accuracy the state of mind of the country." *Color Adjustment* presents the 1948-1991 history of white-controlled TV and its schizophrenic portrayal of African-

Americans during one of the most turbulent periods of civil rights activism in this country. The film shows with relentless clarity how prime-time '50s and '60s TV, by featuring, for example, *Amos 'n Andy* and *Julia*, made it appear that the dignified, committed, outraged, and articulate African-American civil rights activists and ordinary people on the TV news were not real.

Riggs uses the straightforward linear expository style of public broadcasting that includes painfully convincing footage from prime time and the personal and professional analysis of authorities like Esther Rolle, Henry Louis Gates, Norman Lear, Alvin Poussaint and Herman Gray. Like his first film, *Ethnic Notions*, this film is a brilliant educational piece but the analysis here is more complex and intellectually stimulating though it remains hard-hitting from an emotional point of view.

Television, the American Dream, the family, indeed the psyche of this country provide the landscape against which Riggs examines how we are created by

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and create the fictions that we try to live. Herman Gray comments that "there is this universe of experience that is held up as the norm and once people enter it, including whites, everybody has to sort of work hard to participate in that universe." Those of us who grew up on *Leave it to Beaver* and *Father Knows Best* and wondered why our lives did not match TV family life, often did not understand that it was TV that was bizarre. When the crudely racist Archie Bunker became for many white working-class folks a culture hero rather than a buffoon, many of us could understand it because he lived in our midst. This TV family, like the real family, was in battle.

Gray makes the central point in the film: "Television's ideological function . . . is hidden behind the notion that TV is really only there to entertain. Well, in its entertainment, what it's doing is reinforcing, legitimating, normalizing that particular universe." For African-Ameri-

cans it was a universe in which they were largely absent. When they were there and were successful, like Nat King Cole, they were endangered. Cole's success was a source of pride for his race but a country in the midst of violent civil rights confrontations could not endure seeing him relating in a perfectly natural way with white people on TV. The network cancelled his show after one year when no one would sponsor it.

Riggs presents personal testimony from his African-American commentators about their experience as young people watching their race on TV. Word would spread through neighborhoods and families when an African-American was going to be on TV. Gates loved Bill Cosby on *I Spy* and Diahann Carroll would not watch *Amos 'n Andy* because it would hurt her mother. Everyone loved Cole. First-person commentaries like these give Riggs's film power and indeed the film moves comfortably from the first, to

third person point of view as it skillfully dissects the monster.

Caricatures like the domestic worker Beulah on the *Beulah* show and later JJ, the wisecracking teenage male on *Good Times*, keep white America supercilious and unthreatened down to this day. Reality-based shows like *East Side West Side* and *Frank's Place* were too threatening, and networks quickly cancelled them. But what about specials like *Roots*? How did it work on the American race consciousness? The drama played on a false comparison with the white immigrant experience. It made white Americans feel that African-Americans had it a bit tougher but that just like everyone else, if they worked hard and stuck together as a family, the American dream would be theirs.

As Gray points out, *Roots* became a "family saga about movement into America. It did not indict American

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society . . . American culture came away pretty unscathed." The narration, the film's center of consciousness, adds that *Roots* "selectively reframed American history. It transformed a national disgrace into an epic triumph of the family and the American Dream." The narrator, Ruby Dee, concludes the examination of *Roots* articulating the dilemma for the African-American, "still it seemed for many of us *Roots* had given the positive image we dreamed of." Here the clarity of Riggs's presentation of the dilemma of the portrayal of the African-American is laid bare: a saccharin epic stands in the place of reality-based story. African-Americans feel proud of heroes who are not just comics and whites feel no guilt about their complicity in personal and institutional racism. In his earlier film *Ethnic Notions*, Riggs let white America off the hook a bit but here he justifiably confronts.

So if *Roots* was not the millenium would *The Cosby Show* be it? Gates points out how harmful it is to see it that way. Poussaint, an advisor to the show, tells us that the new images on that show will diminish attitudes of racism rather than support them. The narrator comments that the "saga of *Roots* continues in the Huxtables's image of success." In this Reagan-Bush era of civil rights, the Huxtables tell African-Americans, "this is what you can be," and whites, "this is how civil rights cured the ills of racism."

Anyone who has watched television ought to watch this film to begin undoing our cultural brainwash. Teachers need to bring this film to their students and engage in a dialogue about the meaning and consequences of one of America's favorite addictions—TV watching. Riggs is a wonder. His work just keeps getting better.

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