

**Roundtable**

# **Images and Memory of Slavery**

**Can Cinema Fathom the Tragedy of the  
Slave Trade?**

**Unesco Slave Routes Project**

**Hal weaver on Black Film makers on  
Slavery**



# Images and Memory of Slavery

## 'How can Cinema fathom the tragedy of the Slave Trade?'

By Ali Moussa Iye, UNESCO Slave Route Project

By its breadth, its duration, and its barbarity, the African slave trade can be considered as the greatest tragedy of humankind of all time. And yet an unbelievable silence has weighed on this catastrophe, which was not even recognized as a crime against humanity until the World Conference against racism in Durban, South Africa in 2001. This silence is all the more intolerable because the disastrous consequences of this outrage (prejudice, discrimination, and economic marginalization, all based on race) and the social and cultural interactions that it generated continue to shape the world of today.

How has film, which has become the mode of expression most relied upon to construct collective memories, handled this tragedy? How has this relatively young art form, which learned very quickly how to exploit historic tragedies in order to establish its own legitimacy, told this story?

The relationship of film to the tragedy of the slave trade and of slavery itself has rarely been questioned directly. The slave trade encompasses all the ingredients of high drama and engages with all the great ethical ideals that are the basis of the most popular movies: spectacular violence, martyrs, heroic resistance and deeds, uncommon figures, forbidden passions and loves. Yet mainstream cinema, notably in Hollywood, has not treated the issue with the same moral commitment, talent, and perceptiveness that it has given to the other human tragedies. Rather, it has tended to perpetuate many of the racial prejudices inherited from slavery, notably through the negative images and stereotyped roles reserved for Blacks in films. Paradoxically, even films by Black filmmakers, notably African films, have given inadequate attention to this sorrowful subject.

It is interesting to note that the first major television production on slavery, 'Roots,' was also the first series to mobilise so many people in front of the small screen in prime time. The worldwide success of the film 'Spartacus,' which dealt with a slave revolt in antiquity, also illustrates the potential of such stories for the cinema.

So why has the film industry not placed the tragedy of the slave trade in the position it warrants? Why has Black cinema, albeit with some notable exceptions, generally not brought slavery and the slave trade to the forefront? How have those rare films and innovative filmmakers who have dealt with this issue illustrated this painful memory?

These are some of the questions that were discussed at the Round Table proposed by the UNESCO 'Slave-Route Project,' organized in collaboration with ZIFF, Radio France Internationale, and The BlackFilm Project. The meeting intended to inspire reflection on the role of filmmakers for the 'work of remembering' that today's societies need to undertake in order to learn lessons from such human barbarities.

## The UNESCO Slave Route Project

The Slave Route Project deals with a tragedy that has involved all the continents and provoked profound transformations, the impact of which continues to be felt in today's societies. These deep and global transformations explain in part the socio-cultural, geopolitical and economic configurations of the contemporary world.

UNESCO decided in 1993 to set up the Project to study the subject of the slave trade and slavery as a means of contributing to the preservation of peace, one of the fundamental goals of the United Nations. Such horrors are caused by 'the denial of the democratic principles of the dignity, equality and mutual respect of men, and by the propagation, in their place, through ignorance and prejudice, of the doctrine of the inequality of men and races,'

By virtue of its scale and duration, the slave trade is regarded as the greatest tragedy in human history, and also as a strange form of globalization. It has caused deep-seated changes worldwide, which account in part for the geopolitical and socio-economic configurations of the world today.

The slave trade has given rise to significant interactions among the peoples of Africa, Europe, the Americas, the Indian Ocean, the Arab Muslim world and Asia, which have profoundly and lastingly transformed their cultures, knowledge, beliefs and behaviour. The process of interculturality that began with the slave trade is still going on and continues to transform humanity.

The concept of 'route' was chosen to illustrate this flow of exchanges among peoples, cultures and civilizations that has transformed the geographical areas affected by slavery, a unique interaction that encourages intercultural dialogue.

The Objectives of the Project are:

- To break the silence surrounding the slave trade and slavery in the different regions of the world by elucidating their scale and root causes through multidisciplinary scientific research;
- To highlight the consequences of the slave trade and slavery on the contemporary societies, in particular to ensure better comprehension of the multiple transformations and interactions among peoples and cultures they generated;
- To help in establishing a culture of peace, mutual understanding and peaceful coexistence among peoples, by facilitating reflection on intercultural dialogue, cultural pluralism, and on setting up new forms of citizenship in modern societies.

The main lines of action to achieve these objectives include:

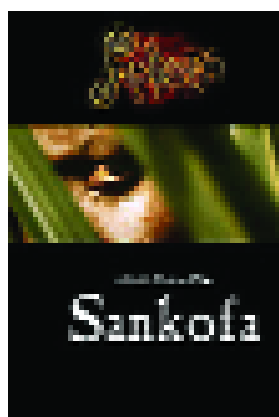
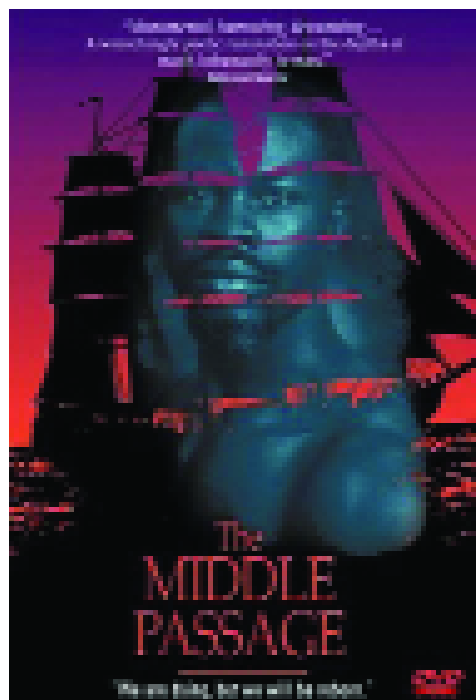
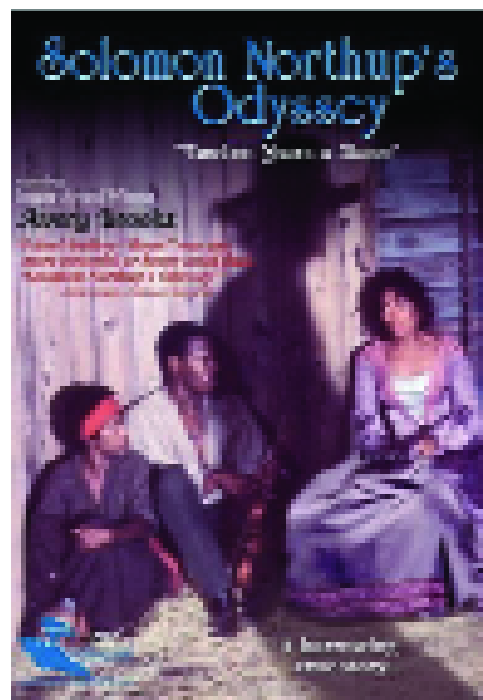
- Deepening scientific research on the slave trade and slavery
- Developing curricula and educational material with a view to encouraging teaching of this tragedy at all levels of education;
- Promoting the contribution of Africa and its Diaspora;
- Promoting living cultures and artistic and spiritual expressions resulting from the interactions generated by the slave trade and slavery, and seeking closer association with major events bringing to light these cultures and expressions, such as music festivals, cinema, commemorative celebrations etc.;
- Preserving the archives and oral traditions related to the slave trade and slavery, particularly in Africa, the Caribbean, Europe and Asia, which will be electronically recorded to facilitate conservation, dissemination and promotion of these oral traditions, and their use as pedagogic material;
- Taking inventory of and preserving tangible cultural heritage, places and sites of memory

linked to the slave trade or slavery, and encouraging preparation of documents for the proposal of new sites related to the slave trade, to be put on the World Heritage List.

After ten years of existence, and in order to convey the universality of this tragedy, the Project's activities, which have thus far focused on the trans-Atlantic trade, have been broadened to include:

- Extending and strengthening the project's activities in regions that have so far received little coverage, such as the Indian Ocean, Asia, the Arab-Islamic world and the Andes region of Latin America;
- Developing little-explored topics, such as the long-term consequences of the slave trade and slavery, and the transfer of knowledge, know-how and techniques from Africa to the rest of the world, particularly the Americas and the Indian Ocean, and the struggle against racial prejudice and racisms inherited from this historical tragedy.

A series of activities will be launched to raise awareness on the contribution of Africa and its Diaspora to the rest of the world, as well as the contributions made by populations of African descent to the evolution of their host countries and their countries of origin.



# Black Filmmakers on Slavery and the Slave Trade: Setting the Cinematic Record Straight

By Dr. Hal Weaver, W.E.B. Du Bois Institute for African and African American Research, Harvard University, and  
The BlackFilm Project, Boston

During most of the 20th century, the tendency of Hollywood and other dominant media around the world was to demean Black men, women, and children through persistently negative stereotypes. Film historian Donald Bogle points out the following types: Black adult males - never men, only child-like and animal-like - were Uncle Toms (loyal, subservient), Coons (buffoons), or Bucks (big-muscled, over-sexed vultures, rapists). Black women were Mulattos (tragic) or Mammies (loyal, over-sized). Pioneering Black actors in the U.S. and U.K. film industries, like Paul Robeson and Canada Lee, tried to change that representation. However, the Plantation-Genre film, always under-valuing Black humanity, remained the norm.

Only after the impact of the freedom movements in the 1950s and 1960s in Africa, the U.S., and the Caribbean did Black filmmakers emerge to use their new, decision-making positions as directors and producers to reverse the cinematic images by beginning to set the record straight. Ousmane Sembene, Melvin Van Peebles, Sergio Giral, Euzhan Palcy, Spike Lee, Raoul Peck, and Gordon Parks were among the directors leading the precarious way in demonstrating that the liberation and other human aspirations of Black folks around the world could become legitimate cinematic concerns and subjects.

An historic UNESCO-initiated, international, day-long roundtable at ZIFF 2006 was aimed at breaking the cinematic silence about slavery and the slave trade. This discussion-film screening revealed the heroic efforts of several Black filmmakers in presenting Black folks with dignity and humanity during the horrific trans-Atlantic slave trade and the ensuing enslavement of Africans in the Americas. Films were selected from a variety of filmmakers from Africa and the African Diaspora: (1) the penetratingly analytical compilations of African-American Marlon Riggs (*Ethnic Notions*), (2) the creative, innovative Cuban Sergio Giral (*The Other Francisco/El Otro Francisco*), (3) the poetic documentary of Martiniquean Guy Deslauriers (*The Middle Passage/Le Passage Milieu*), (4) the pioneering 'Life' photographer, composer, film director-producer-scenarist African American Gordon Parks (*Solomon Northup's Odyssey: Twelve Years a Slave*), and (5) the Ethiopian-born/U.S.-migrated Haile Gerima (*Sankofa*). All these filmmakers sought to subvert the Plantation-genre films denigrating persons from Africa and the African Diaspora.

## Propositions

There are several overall propositions to be made before moving on to discussing the films. These propositions under-gird this presentation on the filmic treatment of slavery and the slave trade by Black directors:

1. All film is political, either sustaining the status quo or advocating political, social, or economic change. In a more general sense, art and politics are inextricably interwoven.
2. A good 'historical film' might be as revealing about the present as it is about the past with which it is purportedly dealing.
3. Western, Euro-centric, White-superiority norms are pervasive. Hence, the assumption of the inferiority of others led to a justification of the acts for slavery and colonialism by providing Christian 'uplift' and 'civilization.'
4. As U.S. historian Rosenstone concludes, 'History need not be done on the written page. It can be a mode of thinking that utilizes elements other than the written word: sound, vision, feeling, montage.' (Robert A. Rosenstone, *Visions of the Past: The Challenge of Film to Our Idea of History*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998)

## Subverting the Plantation-Genre Film Norm

Five films were selected in which African and African-Diasporic directors deliberately set out to subvert the Hollywood Plantation-Genre norm:

\* Marlon Riggs: *Ethnic Notions*- documentary analysis of representation

African-American scholar-filmmaker Marlon Riggs analyses the deliberate, totalitarian misrepresentations of images. This dis-information had its specific basis in the justification of the institution of slavery and the follow-up condemnation of Reconstruction. Riggs skilfully mixes disturbing, demeaning popular-culture images of African Americans in film and other graphics with the director's personal off-screen essay narrated by actress Esther Rolle and the on-screen scholarly analyses by eminent Black and White historians. This superb editing illustrates the connection between film content and the national political, economic, and social contexts related to race relations, North and South. The evolution of the images depended on the historical-political-economic-social context: from the Loyal Toms (faithful, contented, happy, servile, docile during slavery) to the Carefree Sambos (irresponsible, definitely not ready for participation in the political process during Reconstruction). Other, equally convincing categories of women, men, and children are Faithful Mammies, Grinning Coons (buffoons), Savage Brutes, and Wide-eyed Pickaninies.

Riggs makes the direct connection between art (cinema et al.) and the historical context of European-American domination of African Americans. The history scholars conclude that it is those negative popular-culture images of Black folks that determined both negative White perceptions and behaviour and negative Black self-images and behaviour; they also conclude that those images were intended to justify that behaviour. So the context influenced the film industry, and the films, in turn, influenced the context (human behaviour and institutions) for most of the 20th century.

\* Sergio Giral: *The other Francisco*- romantic novel versus economic realities

Cuban filmmaker Sergio Giral draws upon a literal portrayal of the first abolitionist novel in the Americas, 'Francisco' - written a few years before the U.S. publication of 'Uncle Tom's



Cabin' - to reveal the realities of slavery in a parallel docudrama format. In contrast to the romantic depiction in the novel, the realities of slave rebellion are graphically and consistently on the minds and in the hearts of enslaved Africans on Cuban plantations. Slaves used escape, arson, infanticide, murder, sabotage, and other means of resistance at their disposal. It was a film Hollywood dared not make.

\* Guy Deslauriers: *The Middle Passage* - poetic historic documentary of the trans-Atlantic crossing

Martiniquean director Guy Deslauriers draws upon the novel of fellow Martiniquean Patrick Chamoiseau and the written narration of acclaimed African-American novelist Walter Mosley to produce this magnificent example of pan-African-Diasporic collaboration. The filmmaker uses a poetic, voice-over narration, with a dramatic, visual reconstruction, to illustrate the horrors, the suffering, and the inhuman conditions faced by captured Africans as they were taken across the Atlantic to the Americas. Despite the harassing life down in the dark, dank hole of the ship, where humans are packed like sardines, the surviving human beings are re-born to form a new humanity: 'A new man will emerge into the alien sun of this New World.'

\* Gordon Parks: *Solomon Northup's Odyssey: Twelve Years a Slave* - one of Hollywood's first truthful films about slavery

Gordon Parks, pioneering African-American photographer, composer, and film director-producer-script writer, helps break the Hollywood silence about the realities of slavery in the U.S.A. The director draws upon a published autobiography of a northern-born carpenter-musician Solomon Northup, 'Twelve Years a Slave,' to present Northup's life chronologically from 'freedom' in the North to slavery in the South and back to 'freedom' in the North. A melodramatic narrative, following the usual Hollywood formula, this film, nevertheless, is pioneering: one of the first Hollywood films to portray slavery honestly, the first Hollywood movie to portray the trickery of bounty hunters searching for Blacks to return to or to put into enslavement or re-enslavement, and one of the first to portray a happy, functional, cohesive African-American family despite economic challenges. Solomon is a dignified, literate carpenter, who, moonlighting as an accomplished fiddler, is wooed to Washington, D.C. for his musical talent, but is instead kidnapped and locked in chains in the U.S. capital.

\* Haile Gerima: *Sankofa* - magnificent experimental poetic film essay by a Pan-African ideologue.

Filmmaker-college professor, Ethiopia-born and U.S.-educated Haile Gerima has directed, produced, and scripted an independent film, *Sankofa*, that managed to penetrate the urban, African-American market through non-traditional distribution-exhibition techniques. This politically engaged filmmaker, using a poetic, non-narrative, off-screen voice-over, had a remarkable effect on African-American urban populations when it was released independently in 1993. His highly artistic and anti-slavery/anti-slave trade film, with a contemporary, Pan-African perspective, has become a cult film among African Americans.

## Looking Ahead

Fuelled by their liberation movements, filmmakers from Africa and the African Diaspora

brought new visions and new insights as they began to subvert the dominant Hollywood model, both in content and in form. In this next stage of using film to break the silence about slavery and the slave trade, how can Black filmmakers - with their allies - move ahead to develop strategies and tactics to continue the unfinished business on the long road ahead? What roles can Black filmmakers and their allies play in remembering and purging the human barbarities of the past while providing positive insight into the dysfunctional legacies of the present? What does the future hold? Collaborating with UNESCO, ZIFF and other concerned, committed institutions and individuals, what next steps need Black filmmakers take to institutionalise the operation of breaking the silence? The dream continues.