



TEAR THIS BUILDING DOWN: JAMES BALDWIN ON FILM

Color Adjustment

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Director: Marlon Riggs

Producers: Vivian Kleiman, Marlon Riggs

Writer: Marlon Riggs

Cinematographers: Michael Anderson, Rick Butler, Robert Shepard

Editor: Deborah Hoffmann

Composer: Mary Watkins

Narrator: Ruby Dee

With:

Steven Bochco

Diahann Carroll

Henry Louis Gates Jr

Herman Gray

Bob Henry

Hal Kanter

Norman Lear

Sheldon Leonard

Denise Nicholas

Bruce Paltrow

Alvin F. Poussaint

Daphne Reid

Tim Reid

Esther Rolle

Patricia A. Turner

David L. Wolper

USA 1991

90 mins

Digital

TEAR THIS BUILDING DOWN: JAMES BALDWIN ON FILM

Go Tell It on the Mountain

Mon 21 Oct 20:30; Fri 22 Nov 18:10 (+ intro)

If Beale Street Could Talk

Tue 22 Oct 14:30; Fri 22 Nov 20:40; Sat 30 Nov 17:50

I Heard It through the Grapevine

Thu 24 Oct 20:40; Sun 3 Nov 13:30

A Raisin in the Sun

Sat 26 Oct 15:30; Sat 9 Nov 18:10; Thu 28 Nov 20:30

I Am Not Your Negro

Sat 26 Oct 20:35; Sat 9 Nov 15:30; Thu 21 Nov 18:30

Color Adjustment

Fri 1 Nov 20:55; Mon 4 Nov 18:10

James Baldwin: The Price of the Ticket

Fri 8 Nov 18:15; Mon 18 Nov 20:35

With thanks to

Special thanks to the African Odysseys steering committee, whose support has enabled audiences to enjoy 17 years of Black film programming at BFI Southbank

This ground-breaking, critically acclaimed and Peabody Award-winning documentary, narrated by Ruby Dee, examines the representation of race in a selection of US television's most popular shows, (including *Amos 'n' Andy*, *The Nat King Cole Show*, *Julia*, *Roots* and *The Cosby Show*).

In his analysis, Riggs outlines a history of race conflict and asserts that African Americans were allowed into America's prime-time family only insofar as their presence didn't challenge the myths surrounding of the 'American Dream'.

This documentary features short clips of Bill Cosby in *The Cosby Show*. A ground-breaking and historically important film, it was released in 1991, prior to the abuse allegations against Bill Cosby. Seeing him on screen may be upsetting to some viewers.

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When Marlon Riggs died on 5 April 1994, independent cinema lost the voice and vision of an important artist at the very moment when he was coming into his own. With three major documentary films behind him – *Ethnic Notions* (1986), *Tongues Untied* (1989) and *Color Adjustment* (1992) – Riggs was working on an investigation into the cultural diversity of Black identities, *Black Is ... Black Ain't*, when his life was cut short, at the age of 37, by Aids. Like so many other influential Black gay men of his generation – including critic James Snead, writer Joseph Beam and activist Craig Harris – Riggs' death bears witness to a bitter tragedy: that the 'talented tenth' of queer negro artists and intellectuals, who have been in the vanguard of the renaissance of Black culture in the US and UK during the 80s and 90s, have helped create new forms of collective identity among Black lesbians and gay men and have achieved so much in displacing outmoded racial and sexual paradigms, are now menaced by the spectre of premature death.

But Riggs' legacy is very much alive and is fully part of the almost daily re-evaluation of the ethics of multicultural diversity in this volatile moment. In a climate of deepening uncertainty, in which the fragmentation of social identities has been dominated by a politics of resentment, Riggs held a crucial position as a multi-dimensional media activist. His roles of film-maker, lecturer, writer and advocate, pursued with prodigious energy, all contributed to the formation of a new politics of recognition which he sought to bring to public attention with urgency and passion. *Tongues Untied* remains his key work, not only because it was the first of its kind – a coming-out film for Black gay men – nor because its struggle for self-representation was linked to the analysis of racial representation put forward in *Ethnic Notions* and *Color Adjustment*, but because its imperfections and rough edges offer fresh points of contact and contention. This is why the film retains its live and direct quality some five years after it was made.

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Riggs came to film from journalism. He graduated magna cum laude from Harvard in 1978 and in 1981 received his master's degree from the Graduate School of Journalism at the University of California, Berkeley, where he subsequently became one of the youngest tenured professors. With broadcast-quality video as his medium, his first work on the urban blues music scene in his adopted city of Oakland located him within the Black independent tradition of documentary realism established by African-American directors and producers such as William Greaves, Pearl Bowser, Henry Hampton, St Clair Bourne, Louis Massiah and Carroll Parrot Blue. Equally influenced by the Bay Area tradition of lesbian and gay counter-information, exemplified by such classic documentaries as *Word Is Out: Stories of Some of Our Lives* and *The Times of Harvey Milk*, he found himself straining against the limits of the positive/negative images dichotomy common to Black and gay counter-cinemas. What differentiated his project was his concern with the power of images *per se*.

In the deconstruction of 150 years of racial stereotyping that he undertook in his Emmy award-winning *Ethnic Notions*, Riggs asked why the nineteenth-century repertoire of Sambo, Mammy, Uncle Tom and Pickaninnie remains so vivid in the American imagination. By dissecting the ambiguous emotional attachments that keep such stereotypes alive in the hearts and minds of those who would repudiate them, Black and white alike, Riggs allowed for a deeper understanding of the way images unconsciously affect identities.

In *Color Adjustment*, which examines primetime television portrayals of Blacks, Riggs brought to light hidden continuities, from blackface minstrels to squeaky-clean sitcom respectability, in the fears and fantasies Black images are made to represent. Advertisers boycotted *The Nat King Cole Show* in the late 50s on the grounds that the sight of a charming and intelligent Black man might alienate middle-class white families, who were precisely the target demographic sought by the neo-conservative *The Cosby Show* in the Reaganite 80s. That *Color Adjustment* won US television's highest accolade, a George Foster Peabody Award, is an acknowledgment of the insight and impact of Riggs' analytical interventions.

Kobena Mercer, *Sight and Sound*, August 1994