Big Screen Classics

Ethnic Notions + Looking for Langston

Ethnic Notions
Director: Marlon Riggs
Production Company: KQED TV
Written by: Marlon Riggs
Photography: Calvin Roberts
Graphic Artist: Tom Curtis
Narrator: Esther Rolle
USA 1986
58 mins
Digital

Looking for Langston
Director: Isaac Julien
©/Production Company:
Sankofa Film and Video
Producer: Nadine Marsh-Edwards
Production Assistant: Robert Crusz
Runners: James Wolstenholme, Malcolm Manning
Jobfit C4 Trainee: Mary Montgomery
NEMDC Trainee: Emily Mokaene
Assistant Directors: Chris Hall, Maureen Blackwood
Continuity: Julia Britton
Casting: Isaac Julien, Nadine Marsh-Edwards
Screenplay: Isaac Julien
Script Consultant: Mark Nash
Director of Photography: Nina Kellgren
Rostrum Photography: Begonia Tamarit
Focus Puller: Amanda Richardson
Grip: Gary Romaine
Gaffer: Nuala Campbell
Electricians: Natasha Franklin, Simon Jones
Stills: Sunil Gupta
Editor: Robert Hargreaves
Assistant Editor: Emma Matthews
Art Director: Derek Brown
Art Department Stylist: Leslie Gilda
Storyboard: John Hewitt
Props Buyer: Neesh Ruben
Construction Manager: David Ferris
Costume Designer: Robert Worley
Make-up: Hilary Steinberg
Titles: Les Latimer Opticals
Incidental Music: Peter Spencer, Trevor Mathison, Wayson Jones
Sound: Martin Jackson, Ronald Bailey
Dubbing Mixer: David Skilton
New York Research/Production: Mark Nash
Cast:
Ben Ellison *(Alex)*
Matthew Baidoo *(Beauty)*
Akim Mogaji *(James)*
John Wilson *(Karl)*
Dencil Williams *(Marcus)*
Guy Burgess *(Dean)*
James Dublin *(Carlos)*
Harry Donaldson *(leatherboy)*
Alaena Adams, James Dublin, Michael Bailey, June Givanni, Guy Burgess, Cherry Smyth *(mourners)*
Tony Knight, Akim Mogaji, Derrick McClintock, Jimmy Somerville, Dencil Williams *(angels)*
Michael Bailey, Jon Iwenjiora, Paul Bernstock, Tony Knight, Steven Brown, Orson Nava, Sarah Dunn, Matthew Scott, Simon Fogg, Cherry Smyth, Pedro Williams *(dancers at wake)*

Marlon Riggs: Americans have always been more and at the same time less than what we pretended. With the quickening approach of the 21st century, greater numbers of us are giving testament to this inescapable fact, challenging the cosy myths by which America has been ritually defined. Who are we? Who are we becoming? Who and what have we been? In the next century, can we even continue to speak (could we ever?) of a collective 'we'? For the longest time, of course, these questions had simple answers.

America was white. America was male. America was heterosexual. America was Christian. America, above all, was a melting pot into which diverse cultural communities gleefully descended to achieve the social and ideological transformation necessary for inclusion within the American Dream. That many of us – marginalised and oftentimes invisible Americans of African, Asian, Latino and Native descent, as well as women and the working poor – never quite melted and metamorphosised according to this traditional prescription for social progress, hardly mattered. The great distance between the Dream and our actual lives was not due to any fault in the Dream: the defect was in us. The Dream thus survived intact, its seductive power sustained by America's stubborn refusal to look too closely at the hidden but terrible costs of 'the good life' and at who actually could – much less wanted to – afford it.

The sixties, of course, spotlighted the complex oppressive regime of thought, politics and culture which underlay the myth of America. For the first time in US history, the ideological fabric of white heterosexual patriarchy was exposed for the life-constricting straightjacket it had always been. Despite conservative attempts during subsequent years at repair, the old social fabric has been steadily unravelling. Thus we have arrived at this present moment, wherein a nation historically averse to serious introspection now exhibits – in its politics and popular media as well as its universities – an almost obsessive reflexive preoccupation with our national identity.

To be expected, much of the current debate is simply a rehash of old opinion – an attempt to forcefully rebut and undercut the decentring politics of radical multiculturalism (i.e., the kind of multiculturalism where difference actually makes a difference). Bring back the melting pot. Restore 'traditional values'. Re-institute prayer in schools. Preserve the primacy of Western civilisation (the only one that matters anyway). And not least, protect that critical bedrock of American greatness, 'the American family': such pronouncements reveal an intense, even pathological desire to perpetuate a thoroughly obsolete myth of America, and through this, a repressively orthodox system of sociocultural entitlement.

While the ideas of conservative/fundamentalist America are hardly new, the typically strident pitch with which such ideas are now being argued betrays how acutely anxious many conservatives have come to feel, due to both real and anticipated loss of privilege and power. What is more, arch-conservative rhetoric – as should be evident to anyone watching our presidential elections for the past quarter century – has found a certain public resonance. Difference, in the traditionalist outlook, has been regressively equated with disunity; and disunity with profound social chaos and collapse. Just as nature abhors a vacuum, so, it seems, do many Americans with regard to the social-political myths by which they organise and make sense of their lives. Even a fundamentally flawed, repressive, inequitable social order seems to many better than none at all. A clear imperative thus confronts American progressives – that intricate (and frequently fragile) web of communities comprised of people of colour, feminists, gays and lesbians, the poor and working class, as well as ethnic whites who value ethnicity, indeed all who have been systematically disenfranchised and dehumanised under the once ascendant 'traditional values' of pre-Civil Rights America.

It's no longer enough, if it ever was, to critique interlocking systems of oppression without offering affirming alternatives of how society should and can reconstitute itself. As we move into the inevitably more demanding multilingual, multicultural environment – both nationally and globally – of the next century, our greatest task will be an inversion of the commonly assumed equivalence between difference and disunity. We must re-write this equation, demonstrating again and again that unity does not require unanimity, that

Wayne James, Irvine Lewis, Trevor Miller *(brothers in jazz)*
John Alexander, Dave Greaves, Tommy Carlton, AJ, Pete Collins, Ian Johns, Joe Fordham, Seymour Laws, Reginald Parker *(thugs/police)*
Clarke Peters *(voice reading Langston Hughes)*
Erick Ray Evans *(voice reading Bruce Nugent)*
Essex Hemphill, Wayson Jones *(American voices)*
Toni Morrison *(voice reading James Baldwin)*
Stuart Hall *(British voice)*
UK 1989©
45 mins
Digital 4K

The screening on Wed 19 Nov will include an introduction

unity – that is, a sense of social cohesion, of community – can and does derive from the expression, comprehension, and active nurturing (and not merely tolerance or fetishisation) of difference.

This is the new standard of civilised life that now demands our urgent labour, a new world order, if you will, that subverts traditional conceptions of social order: a standard which in effect subverts the meaning of the word 'standard' itself. For the new order must be comprised of multiple standards: shifting, open-ended, dynamically transforming, so as to engender ways of thinking and living that privilege no one set of cultural differences over another but affirm virtue in all.

Marlon Riggs, *Standards*, vol.5 no.1, Autumn 1995

In Isaac Julien's film, Langston Hughes is not the subject of a biographical documentary so much as an evanescent presence invoked by a dream-like montage of poetry, music and cultural history. Hughes is widely remembered as the key poet of the Black American artistic movement in the 1920s known as the Harlem Renaissance, but here his public persona is secondary to the enigma of his private life – his sexuality. In an age when homosexuality was regarded as a 'sin against the race', the idea of 'coming out' was unthinkable. *Looking for Langston* imaginatively reconstructs a world previously hidden from history and reflects on 'the beauty of the people with freakish ways'.

Its languid monochrome texture and stylised art direction evoke an ambiguous sense of time and place. Characters inhabit the fictional milieu of a 20s speakeasy, in which tuxedoed couples dance and drink champagne, celebrating hedonistic pleasure in defiance of the hostile world outside, which intrudes at the end as thugs and police raid the club and 80s house music plays on the soundtrack, almost like a music video. Archival film and sound recordings combine with contemporary poetry and music by Essex Hemphill and Blackberri, both Black gay American artists. In its mosaic of visual and literary quotation – from James Baldwin and Toni Morrison to Jean Cocteau and Kenneth Anger – the film unravels complex themes of sexual repression and racial transgression. For example, an exchange of looks between Langston (Ben Ellison) and his mythic object of desire, 'Beauty' (Matthew Baidoo), provokes a hostile, competitive glare from Beauty's white male partner (John Wilson), who in turn contemptuously rejects the inquiring look of a young Black man. Allusions to pornography and Robert Mapplethorpe's Black nudes similarly underline the question of who has the 'right to look', without oversimplifying the erotic fascination with 'difference' that gives a volatile edge to interracial sexuality.

Like other young Black British independent filmmakers, Julien is motivated by a concern with the past in order to throw new light on contemporary issues. The contributions of Black artists to modernism have been consistently written out of official versions of history – or, as Stuart Hall conveys in the film's commentary, after the 20s the 'primitive' Negro was no longer in vogue and wealthy white patrons found other uses for their money. In this sense, *Looking for Langston* is an archaeological project, reconstructing the historical continuum in which Black aesthetic expression has been an integral part of modernism. And it points out that the contributions of Black women and gay men have been rendered even more invisible by conservative notions about a homogeneous and undifferentiated Black 'community'.

This critical interest in history suggests that Julien is attempting a dialogue (or its visual equivalent) with the different traditions from which he has invented his own artistic identity as a Black gay 'auteur'. Black people have historically been the objects of representation, rather than its subjects and creators, as racism often determines who gets access to the means of representation in the first place. Julien overturns this double-bind as the Black subject 'looks back'. Certain motifs, such as the 'direct look' whereby Black characters seem to ask the audience what they are looking for, appeared in the first film by Julien and the Sankofa workshop, *Territories* (1984). With a new degree of self-confidence (and a considerably larger budget), *Looking for Langston* continues and develops this artistic project, deepening the critique of racial representation by extending it into the domain of fantasy. At times, the seductive quality of the film's preoccupation with its own stylishness risks a degree of cliché, but this is a risk worth taking if a wider audience is thereby invited into the dialogue about the 'politics of difference'.

Kobena Mercer, *Monthly Film Bulletin*, February 1990