

FREQUENT SMALL MEALS presents

CIVIL RIGHTS ON FILM

Rare films on African-American life, 1941-1967

curated by Andy Ditzler



filming *Black Natchez*, 1965
courtesy Ed Pincus

Co-sponsored by the following departments at Emory University: the Studies in Sexualities Initiative, the James Weldon Johnson Institute, the Department of Film Studies, and the Office of LGBT Life

Government training films, *cinéma vérité* documentaries, itinerant and ephemeral films, network news reports, activist film, and the avant-garde: the explosion of moving image forms in the mid-twentieth century was a prism through which the complexity of African-American life was shown. New ways of documentary filmmaking coincided with the spectacular growth of the Civil Rights movement, documenting the movement with unprecedented intimacy. And by the late 1960s, image-conscious subcultures and political identities were foreshadowed in the way documentary began to challenge notions of cinematic truth. “Civil Rights on Film” captures this movement with a series of rare and important moving image works, all made between 1941 and 1967.

PROGRAM 1: LIFE, WORK, AND SEGREGATION IN THE SOUTH

All My Babies (George Stoney, 1952) 16mm, 54 minutes

Movies of Local People: Kannapolis (H. Lee Waters, 1941) 16mm, 25 minutes

Friday, February 20, 2009, 8:00 PM at The Cyclorama in Grant Park



Mary Francis Hill Coley, Albany, Georgia, 1952 (photograph by Robert Galbraith)

Produced in 1952 by the Georgia Department of Health as a training film for midwives, *All My Babies* is now considered a classic of documentary film. It documents the extraordinary working life of Mary Francis Hill Coley, an African-American midwife from Albany, Georgia. In the film, “Miss Mary” assists two different families with their children’s births, and the contrast between these two families is the window through which the film reveals living conditions in the rural south during the Jim Crow era. An unsparing yet moving portrait of compassion, *All My Babies* is held in the collections of UNESCO and the Museum of Modern Art, as well as being selected for the National Film Registry by the Library of Congress.

During the Great Depression era, North Carolina photographer H. Lee Waters traveled from town to town with his 16mm camera. He took images of local people on the street, then projected them at the town movie theaters, allowing people to see themselves on the big screen. Waters’s films are now an important historical record of the locales where he shot. His film of Kannapolis, North Carolina, documents the African-American neighborhood of this segregated city. Like *All My Babies*, it was selected for the prestigious National Film Registry.



Still from *Movies of Local People: Kannapolis*, by H. Lee Waters (1941)
courtesy the Rare Book, Manuscript, and Special Collections Library, Duke University

PROGRAM 2: INSIDE THE MOVEMENT: “DIRECT CINEMA” AND CIVIL RIGHTS

The Children Were Watching (Robert Drew, 1961) 16mm, 21 minutes

Black Natchez (Edward Pincus, 1965) 16mm, 61 minutes

Saturday, February 21, 2009, 8:00 PM at The Cyclorama in Grant Park



Still from *The Children Were Watching* by Robert Drew (1961), courtesy Drew Associates

With handheld cameras, portable sound equipment, and a commitment to capturing “real life” on film, the *cinema vérité* and Direct Cinema documentary styles coincided with the peak of the Civil Rights movement. In Natchez, Mississippi, tensions over school desegregation are exacerbated when a black official is gravely injured by a car bomb. Conflict emerges between the black leadership, represented by the NAACP, and local activists who begin to agitate for a more aggressive response. Filmed with only a two-person crew, “Black Natchez” is an intimate and fascinating document of the pressures inside the movement.

School desegregation in New Orleans is the subject of 1961’s “The Children Were Watching,” produced by Direct Cinema pioneer Robert Drew for network television. This hard-hitting film is an example of how the new style of television documentary brought the sometimes shocking imagery of racial conflict into the national consciousness.

PROGRAM 3: THE FIERCE URGENCY OF NOW

Black Power, White Backlash (excerpt) (CBS-TV, 1966) 15 min., color, shown on DVD

Perfect Film (Ken Jacobs, 1986) 22 min., b&w, 16mm

Malcolm X: Nationalist or Humanist? (Madeline Anderson, 1968) 14 min., b&w, shown on VHS

NOW! (Santiago Alvarez, 1965) 6 min., b&w, shown on DVD

I Have a Dream (speech by Martin Luther King, Jr., August 28, 1963), DVD

Phyllis and Terry (Eugene and Carole Marner, 1964) 36 min., b&w, 16mm

Friday, February 27, 2009, 8:00 PM at Eyedrum

A group of rare films from the 1960s, from a wide range of media sources, capture the difficulties, urgency, and hopes of the Civil Rights movement and its leaders. A network TV special (*Black Power, White Backlash*) gives a glimpse of mainstream media coverage of the tensions between Martin Luther King Jr. and the Black Power movement, and a film on Malcolm X (*Nationalist or Humanist?*) is shown as an example of the first Black-produced network TV show. Two films consist entirely of images taken from the media – one by a noted avant-gardist who simply left the raw footage alone to speak for itself (*Perfect Film*), and another by a master propagandist who edits for maximum emotional effect (*NOW!*). Martin Luther King Jr.'s legendary speech "I Have a Dream" is seen here in its entirety as it appeared live on television screens in 1963. The second part of the program is a little-seen documentary gem about two teenage girls on New York's Lower East Side (*Phyllis and Terry*), made by independent filmmakers in 1965.



Still from *NOW!* by Santiago Alvarez (1965)

PROGRAM 4: "MY NAME IS JASON HOLLIDAY..."

Behind Every Good Man (Nikolai Ursin, 1965) 16mm, 8 minutes

Portrait of Jason (Shirley Clarke, 1967) 35mm, 100 minutes

Saturday, February 28, 2009, 8:00 PM at Emory University, White Hall room 205



Jason Holliday in *Portrait of Jason* by Shirley Clarke (1967)

"The most fascinating film I've ever seen" - Ingmar Bergman on *Portrait of Jason*

Filmed in one wild night at New York's Chelsea Hotel, Shirley Clarke's explosive *Portrait of Jason* is a landmark of nonfiction film – the combination of a visionary director, a complex and enigmatic subject, and a moment of new cinematic and social possibilities.

Jason Holliday is an unapologetically gay cabaret performer with charisma to spare, a knack for drama, and a life that's provided him with plenty of stories to tell – about racism, homophobia, parental abuse, show business, drugs, sex, prostitution, the law, and whatever else he can think of while the cameras are rolling. Jason is endlessly entertaining – he sings, tells his stories, performs, breaks down, gets back up, keeps going. But he is as elusive as he is talented, and the more intimate the details he reveals, the less clear his "identity" becomes. As the night goes on he plays an increasingly intense game of cat-and-mouse with the filmmakers, who can be heard egging him on from behind the camera. The climax of the film is a shocking attempt by the crew

to break through the layers of Jason's charisma to reveal the person underneath.

Courageous, funny, disturbing, prophetic, and unlike any other film, *Portrait of Jason* is a powerful viewing experience. Unavailable for many years, it has now been restored and rereleased by the Museum of Modern Art.

Portrait of Jason is accompanied by *Behind Every Good Man*, a student film from 1965 Los Angeles. Breezy yet compassionate, this film is very possibly the first cinematic portrayal of an out-of-the-closet gay African-American.

VENUE INFORMATION

The Atlanta Cyclorama
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next to Zoo Atlanta
404-624-1071

Website: www.atlantacyclorama.org

Eyedrum
290 Martin Luther King Jr Dr, Suite 8
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404.522.0655

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White Hall Room 205
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Emory University
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Map: http://andel.home.mindspring.com/pdf/white_hall_map_notes.pdf

CO-SPONSORS

The Cyclorama and the department of Film Studies, the Office of LGBT Life, and the Studies in Sexualities Initiative at Emory University

CIVIL RIGHTS ON FILM is a **Film Love** event. The Film Love series provides access to rare but important films, and seeks to increase awareness of the rich history of experimental and avant-garde film. The series is curated and hosted by Andy Ditzler for Frequent Small Meals. Film Love was voted Best Film Series in Atlanta by the critics of Creative Loafing in 2006. Archives of the series may be found at www.frequentsmallmeals.com.



Still from *Movies of Local People: Kannapolis*, by H. Lee Waters (1941)
courtesy the Rare Book, Manuscript, and Special Collections Library, Duke University

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