

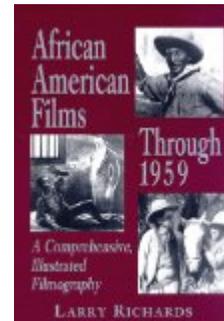
# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Larry Richards. *African American Films Through 1959: A Comprehensive Illustrated Filmography*. Jefferson, N.C.: McFarland, 1998. 312 pp. \$65.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-7864-0307-3.

Reviewed by Harvey Young (Cornell University)

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## A Beacon of Light

Shine the spotlight over here, please. To the left ... a bit more ... ah perfect, now I can see! *African American Films Through 1959* is a veritable beacon which guides film academics, students, and cinemaphiles through the shadows of film history and casts a light on a whole period of filmmaking that has been obscured in darkness for decades. With the exception of the occasional Paul Robeson or Oscar Micheaux retrospectives—at college campuses or film forums—little has been done in contemporary film society to explore the early (1890-1960) titles that tarred, targeted as an audience, or directly addressed African Americans. Larry Richards text is a wonderful collection of films, reviews, and advertisements that rescues African-American cinema from neglect and obscurity. It is a book which deserves to stand beside the *NY Times Index of Film Reviews* and Ephraim Katz's *Film Encyclopedia* in every institution's and every person's reference collection. It is an invaluable research tool and an interesting and insightful read.

*African American Films Through 1959* is a comprehensive filmography which lists films which were made between 1895 and 1959 by, for, starring, or geared towards African Americans. *Chronologically the filmography begins with shorts made by the Thomas Edison Company (Native Woman series) and ends with Black Orpheus, Porgy and Bess, and Imitation of Life*. Centering the African-American experience in early cinema, Richards presents shorts, features, documentaries, instructional films, soundies, trailers, and films produced by independents, Hollywood studios, and the U.S. Government. The breadth and depth of Richards text attests to the lasting

presence and influential role of Blacks in motion pictures' early years.

*African American Films* presents film reviews for over 1,300 titles. Noting the subject matter, it is obvious that many of these pictures were never reviewed, advertised, or addressed in mainstream newspapers and periodicals. Aware of this problem, Richards spent countless hours reading early African American newspapers "and found a tremendous amount of information, and included many of the names and dates of previews and reviews." It is obvious from the methodological research and the meticulous organization of the text that *African American Films* was written as a reference guide. Richard goes out of his way to divulge his sources. He lists the Library of Congress Catalog numbers (when available) for all the films and cites the source, date, and year of all non-original reviews. In the appendices, he cross-lists and cross-references everything presented in the filmography. He lists the actor credits (Appendix A), production studios and their titles (Appendix B), director credits (Appendix C), producer credits (Appendix D), and films by year (Appendix E). In addition, a complete index easily accommodates quick referencing.

One element that is guaranteed to attract attention and favor is his use of "race film poster art." Throughout *African American Films*, Richards presents 135 film posters which complement the films listed and reviewed in the film-ography. Beyond serving as a welcome relief to the eye from the lines of text which fill each page, the posters stand as cultural artifacts and markers them-

selves. They comment on how photoplays were marketed towards a primarily Black audience, invite questions on the image and representation of African American society, and encourage a critical comparison between the “selling” of independent versus Hollywood studio films. These relatively rare posters could easily be transformed into a book on their own and serve as just one more reason why this book should be a fixture in everyone’s reference collections.

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