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THE FILMS
OF NGOZI ONWURAH

AND STILL RISE

THE BODY BEAUTIFUL

COFFEE COLORED CHILDREN

BIOGRAPHY

Black British filmmaker Ngozi Onwurah takes on the issues of time and space in her work which embraces heterogeneity and multiple sites of subjectivity. Onwurah consistently navigates and challenges the limits of narrative and ethnographic cinema by insisting that the body is the central landscape of an anti-imperialist cinematic discourse.

An accomplished director with several episodes of the top British TV drama series "Heartbeat" to her credit, Ngozi Onwurah also wrote and directed the prize-winning feature "Welcome II the Terrordome." Sometimes fierce and at others more gently humorous, Onwurah tackles the clashes and ironies of the apparent gulf separating black and white, whilst showing that under the skin, emotions are universal.

Onwurah's films have won prizes at the Berlin Film Festival, Germany; Melbourne Film Festival, Australia; Toronto Film Festival, Canada; and at NBPC, USA.

AND STILL I RISE
1993 16mm 30 minutes
England

Inspired by a poem by Maya Angelou, this powerful film explores images of Black women in the media, focusing on the myths surrounding Black women's sexuality. Like *Color Adjustment*, in which Marlon Riggs looked at images of Black people on television, *AND STILL I RISE* uses images from popular culture to reveal the way the media misrepresents Black women's sexuality. A combination of fear and fascination produces a stereotypical representation which in turn impacts on the real lives of Black women. *And Still I Rise* intercuts historical and media images with hard-hitting contemporary views of women of African heritage as they struggle to create a new and empowered perspective. Both a celebration and a critique, *And Still I Rise* is essential viewing for those interested in African American studies, women's studies, media studies and popular culture.

TELEVISION



AND STILL I RISE

*'Out of the huts of history's shame - I rise
Up from a past that's rotted in pain - I rise
I'm a black ocean, leaping and wide,
Welling and swelling I bear in the tide.'*

This extract, taken from Maya Angelou's poem 'Still I Rise', was the inspiration for the first programme in the BIRTH-RIGHTS series on BBC2 on June 3. Entitled 'And Still I Rise', it focused on the issues affecting African women's sexual identity and featured eloquent contributions from a number of African women living in Britain today. The programme tackled the political and historical demonising of Black women and our sexuality, from slavery through to the Victorian era. In the Victorian era, 'scientific' study of Black people involved the measuring of our head size, jaw shape and genitalia. This 'science' established the racist theory that Africans were less intelligent than White people, and more 'animal-like' in their sexuality, since they were supposedly closer to the lower order of primates. These 'scientific studies' provided the theoretical justification for the enslavement and oppression of African people. It is this 'absolute truth' of 'science' that has set a precedent for how we are still viewed today.

The verses above are significant because they highlight the 'shame' that stems from a past steeped in pain, and con-

tinues to keep many of us in psychological bondage. It has resulted in us viewing our sexual identity through someone else's eyes - those of the white man - who saw us as sexual property, 'an item of labour', chattel.

The programme interspersed historical images with contemporary images, music and comments from the African women interviewed. As the issues unfolded, the strongest emotion I felt was pain. Given the constraints of a thirty minute format, the programme did manage to tackle the issues around sexual stereotyping of Black women very successfully. But we have much more to say, and my appetite has been wetted for more programmes tackling gender issues, sexual preference, pornography and prostitution from Black women's perspectives. Sista Culcha



'A child is made in the image of its parents but to a world that sees in black and white I was made in the image of my father.' In **THE BODY BEAUTIFUL**, Ngozi Onwurah, eldest daughter of a 'mixed' marriage, explores her relationship with her white mother. Ngozi's own mother, Madge Onwurah, plays herself in the film. On Channel 4 on June 15

SPARE RIB

June 1992

THE BODY BEAUTIFUL
1991 16mm 23 minutes
England

This bold, stunning exploration of a white mother who undergoes a radical mastectomy and her Black daughter who embarks on a modeling career reveals the profound effects of body image and the strain of racial and sexual identity on their charged, intensely loving bond. At the heart of Onwurah's brave excursion into her mother's scorned sexuality is a provocative interweaving of memory and fantasy. The filmmaker plumbs the depths of maternal strength and daughterly devotion in an unforgettable tribute starring her real-life mother, Madge Onwurah.

- * New York Film Festival
- * Melbourne Film Festival, Best Documentary
- * Montreal Women's Film Festival, Best Short
- * Berlin Film Festival
- * Toronto Festival of Festivals

"Somber yet fanciful. Achieves a painful honesty."

Janet Maslin
New York Times

"As cathartic as it is transgressive."

Amy Taubin
Village Voice

THURSDAY, OCTOBER 3, 1991

The Arts

The New York Times

Review/Film Festival

On the same program, and in a more somber yet fanciful tone, is "The Body Beautiful," a film by Ngozi Onwurah about her mother, Madge, who appears as herself. Ms. Onwurah, played by Sian Martin, contrasts the things that make her different from her mother with those attributes that they share. In the former category, most notably, are the facts that the film maker, who is black, has a white mother, and that her mother has undergone a mastectomy, which becomes a great focus of her daughter's attention.

"The Body Beautiful," which achieves a painful honesty, and "Intimate Stranger," which somehow finds wit and understanding in the midst of pain, will be shown tonight at 6:15 as part of the New York Film Festival.

The Body Beautiful

Directed and written by Ngozi Onwurah; photography by Peter Collis; edited by Liz Webber; music by Tony Quigley; produced by Lin Solomon; a Women Make Movies Release. At Alice Tully Hall, as part of the 29th New York Film Festival. Running time: 23 minutes. This film has no rating.

WITH: Madge Onwurah, Sian Martin, Maurine Lee Brown, Deborah...

The Body BEAUTIFUL

JANUARY 1992



by K. Leander Williams
Imagine this scenario: A young beauty, a mulatto fashion model, talks her mother, a middle-aged white woman, into an afternoon of relaxation at a sauna. Visualize, amongst the myriad of women nude from the waist, a mother's apprehension amplified by a daughter's catharsis. If you can envision this, you will understand the world of British filmmaker Ngozi Onwurah's new film, *The Body Beautiful*.

At once beautiful and transgressive, it

places itself cinematically inside the pantheon of much of the feminist art of a decade ago dealing with Lacanian psychoanalysis. It stands in opposition to our internalized patriarchal culture's perpetuation of the sexual objectification of women—from the glorious artifice of fashion photography to the early Hollywood noir object/fetish and, now, music video.

The Body Beautiful examines the real-life relationship between the filmmaker and her mother, Madge, the wife of a Nigerian doctor. During her third pregnancy,

Madge contracted breast cancer and subsequently underwent a mastectomy, rendering her unable to nurse her newborn son. Through the use of flashbacks and narrated reminiscences by the director and her mother, the film pushes us briskly through the childhood explored earlier in Onwurah's 1988, film *Coffee-Coloured Children*.

While *Coffee-Coloured Children* explored racial identity confusion, here the text rests upon the poignantly basic duality of displaced sexuality. Raising children alone while intermittently suffering from rheumatoid arthritis, Madge often enlists their help to perform the simplest of tasks: "We were accustomed to the sight of mother's naked body," captions a wonderful scene in which the youngsters give their youthful mother, played by Maureen Douglass, a bath.

Courage is a given in Ngozi's films, and it runs in the family. Aside from the much larger question of fetishization, studies have shown gender-associated changes in a woman's appearance often force the afflicted into an emotional closet. Madge Onwurah is cast as herself and, with incredible ballast, does not eschew the camera when nudity is required. Although the sauna scene is a triumph, it is merely a harbinger of the transcendence which follows. While viewing a group of young men in a cafe, she is drawn into an evocative remembrance which first articulates a smoldering sexuality and, then, culminates in a thoroughly dramatized erotic fantasy sequence.

Like most serious artists working in the pop-culture milieu, Onwurah uses cinema as a bridge for spiritual liberation. *The Body Beautiful* is a remarkably candid exercise in cinematic soul-searching.

Black Film
REVIEW

The Year In Reviews

Our Critics Give the Voice Over to Their Favorite Movies and Then Some

MAINLINING THE MARGINS: THE YEAR IN FILM

AMY TAUBIN

The Body Beautiful (Ngozi Onwurah, U.K.). "Nothing like this has ever been seen on screen before" was my first thought, followed immediately by "and how appalling that it hasn't." In this unsparing but cathartic 23-minute film, Onwurah, the daughter of a mixed marriage, explores her relationship with her white, working-class mother, Madge Onwurah, who had a double mastectomy shortly after giving birth to her second child. While Onwurah acknowledges her ambivalent feelings about her mother's sexuality, the mother shows even more courage by revealing not only her body but her sexual desires and fantasies to the camera. She's an amazing woman and, potentially, a great actress.

MANOHLA DARGIS

Women on the run, hustlers on the make, a bugged-out junkie, a Jewish intellectual, or a biracial black model searching for answers in the scars mapping her mother's white body—the films I savored this past year speak from places of uncertainty. These are movies where physical boundaries collapse into psychic frontiers, as in *Thelma & Louise*, *My Own Private Idaho*, and *Naked Lunch*. Where borders, at times racial (Ngozi Onwurah's *The Body Beautiful*), at times formal (Craig Baldwin's *Tribulation 99*, *JFK*), but more often sexual, are crossed and recrossed by outlaws and aliens who transgress the comfort

zone. In movies like these the distance traveled isn't the smooth contours of master narratives, but something altogether funkier. It's in the scorched earth blazed by *Thelma and Louise*, the "fucked-up face" of Mike Water's *Idaho* horizon, and Bill Lee's *Interzone*—in spaces that are outside, on edge, marginal. In the best films of '91, the rules shift. Rules of genre, of story, and of time and space, that twist and turn and sometimes break.

Other favorites: *An Angel at My Table* (Jane Campion); *Barton Fink* (Joel Coen); *Black Lizard* (Kinji Fukasaku); *The Body Beautiful* (Ngozi Onwurah); *Bullet in the Head* (John Woo); *Days of Being Wild* (Wong Kar-wai); *Drowning by Numbers* (Peter Greenaway); *First Comes Love* (Su Friedrich); *The Funeral of Roses* (Toshio Matsumoto); *Homemade Movie* (Fumiki Watanabe); *No Skin Off My Ass* (Bruce LaBruce); *The Rapture* (Michael Tolkin); *Shot and Counter-shot* (Niels Bolbrinker and Thomas Tielsch); *Two Girls Go Hunting* (Joanna Head and Chris Curling). ■

FILM '91

THE VILLAGE

VOICE

JANUARY 14 1992

COFFEE COLORED CHILDREN
1988 16mm 15 minutes
England

This lyrical, unsettling film conveys the experience of children of mixed racial heritage. Suffering the aggression of racist harassment, a young girl and her brother attempt to wash their skin white with scouring powder. Starkly emotional and visually compelling, this semi-autobiographical testimony to the profound internalized effects of racism and the struggle for self-definition and pride is a powerful catalyst for discussion.

- * Nat'l Black Programming Consortium,
Prized Pieces
- * San Francisco Film Festival, Golden Gate Award
- * Films de Femmes, Creteil, France
- * New Television

"Raw and raptly personal, an elegiac exploration of Black childhood's enforced pains."

John Lyttle
City Limits

"Onwurah's award-winning first film is a terrifying heartbreaker."

Ellen Cohn
Village Voice

Coffee Coloured Children

United Kingdom, 1988
Director: Ngozi A. Onwurah

Dist—Non-Aligned Productions/Albany Video. *p.c*—Non-Aligned Productions. *p*—N. A. Onwurah, S. K. Onwurah. *sc*—Ngozi A. Onwurah. *ph*—(16 mm.) Michael Lustig, (8 mm.) Simon K. Onwurah. In colour. *ed*—Ngozi A. Onwurah. *sd. rev*—Richard Gray. *technical assistance*—Adam Collerton, Tania Diex, John Hall, Guy Knight, Derek Taylor, Technicolor. *with*—Haley McKay, Michael McKay, Annette McKay, Madge Onwurah. 540 ft. 15 mins. (16 mm; also available on VHS).

In *Coffee Coloured Children*, Ngozi Onwurah turns on its head the utopian dream of a 'melting-pot' society conjured by the 60s popular song, bringing it painfully back home to her own traumatic childhood. Born of an (absent) black father and white mother, she and her brother and sister endured an almost schizoid existence as the only black children in their area of Newcastle, struggling to make sense of the mystery of their skin colour, which required "more explaining than a child's mind could manage". The film focuses on the psychic damage inflicted by the

social, cultural and personal racism they encountered, internalised and finally exorcised.

Using a carefully selected combination of personal reminiscence (her own and her brother's voices on the soundtrack; family snapshots; reconstructed home movie-style footage), socially sanctioned, 'invisibly' racist texts (the all-white nuclear family favoured by children's book illustrators; nursery rhymes, games and toys reflecting a negative image of blackness), and dramatic reconstruction (a disturbingly graphic scene in which a young white man smears dog excrement on their front door and letter-box), Ngozi Onwurah builds a vision of a child's world suffused with self-disgust. As her mother is shown cleaning excrement from the door and carpet yet again, she recalls the guilt and shame she felt: "It was our fault. The mothers with nice white children never had to clean dog poo off their front door".

The contaminating effect of race hatred provides the compelling centre of *Coffee Coloured Children*. Behind closed bedroom and bathroom doors, brother and sister engage in manic self-mutilating rituals, scrubbing obsessively at black skin as if it could be removed like dirt, powdering the face with Vim and pouring Domestos over themselves in an attempt to attain the longed-for whiteness.

These scenes are both poignant and shocking, evoking the pain of identity crisis and family romance: "Scrubbing the skin till it bled was the only way to make her become my mother". Later, a child's voice intones: "She is my mam, she is my mam, she is my mam...". As with Martina Attile's *Dreaming Rivers*, the enigmatic figure of the mother is an essential key to the mystery of the past. Here she remains distant, faceless until the very end, when she is seen embracing her son in a touching gesture of healing reconciliation. Yet by her very exclusion she remains a question mark in the film; her own story demands to be told.

The most striking achievement of *Coffee Coloured Children* is the way in which this intensely personal subject matter is turned to political advantage by the film's structure, which engages the viewer in the re-enacted trauma. Watching the children's self-humiliation is at first painful; as the scenes continue, accompanied by a remorseless grating noise on the soundtrack, it becomes horrific; finally, as it becomes clear that the viewer, by the very act of watching, is sadistically implicated in the ritual, it induces shame, the intolerable burden of guilt is transferred from victim to observer, and the latter is forced to accept accountability for the inflicted wounds. In *Fruits of Fear*, Onwurah adopts a similar method of inciting identification with the child casualties of apartheid in order to argue for the importance of economic sanctions. Here, perhaps because the drama is a more personal tragic odyssey, the strategy is more profoundly effective.

The final scenes of sea water washing away the pain come as a relief, and the new purification ritual, in which the grown-up brother and sister burn the Vim and Domestos containers that were once the instruments of their self-torture, is a positive act of exorcism. Yet the scars remain, in the girl's promise to her unborn child that she will not deliver her to a society which is not ready for her. *Coffee Coloured Children* is not just an extraordinarily accomplished and moving memory-poem: it is a devastating indictment of a culture in which racism goes deeper than we know.

PAM COOK



Taking on a negative image

VIDEO REVIEWS

by intense competition and amazing technical accomplishments. This excellent video provides an attractive and authoritative introduction to the planes and to the people who build and fly them. Even viewers with no interest in model airplanes may be fascinated by such elegant devices as the rubber-powered, gossamer-winged indoor models that circle endlessly like great mayflies in the still air of enormous field houses. Recommended for all general collections.—*Frederick A. Schlipp, Urbana Free Lib. & Univ. of Illinois GSLS*

M.F.K. Fisher: Writer with a Bite

color. 28 min. Kathi Wheeler, dist. by Cinema Guild, 1697 Broadway, New York, NY 10019; 212-246-5522. 1992. \$250 (Rental: \$50). Preview avail; public performance.

LITERATURE

Anyone who has ever cared about food knows the extraordinarily fine writings of M.F.K. Fisher whose career spanned six decades. In these conversations with Fisher at the end of her life, the author reminisces about career and family, all the while insisting, "I was never a food writer, I just wrote about life." The excerpts from Fisher's work, which punctuate and illustrate these conversations, show that Fisher's writings about food encompass every aspect of life. A description of a tangerine evokes marching soldiers and even a kiss; a peach pie shared with her father becomes a "sincere, sweet, and delicious" memory—a gift of love. Viewers will find Fisher engaging, intelligent, and original—just as in her own works. Those who love food and good writing will savor every morsel of these conversations. True Fisher devotees will wish she were still around to dish out one more helping.—*Ernest Jaeger, Raritan Valley Community Coll., North Branch, N.J.*

Bucky Dent's Shortstop Skills: An In-Depth Video Training Guide for Ages 8 to 18

color. 60 min. Sports Excellence, dist. by 411 Video Information, PO Box 1223, Pebble Beach, CA 93953; 408-622-9441. 1993. \$29.95.

How To Coach Baseball to Kids

color. 60 min. Friends of Baseball, dist. by Norton Lansing Prods., 1574 Gulf Rd., #1262, Point Roberts, WA 98281; 604-224-7714; FAX 604-224-7814. 1992. \$59.95.

SPORTS

Coaching baseball is an ideal subject for video. *Bucky Dent's Shortstop Skills* teaches intermediate- to advanced-level players the finer points needed to execute this notoriously difficult position. Dent, a former All-Star shortstop and World Series Most Valuable Player, won't win any awards for his narrating style, but he brings a wealth of experience to his instruction. The video is simple and unadorned, with judicious

use of illustrative film clips from major league games. It is recommended for large or specialized sports collections.

How To Coach Baseball for Kids successfully delivers on the promise of its title. All the fundamentals are covered: warmups, pitching, catching, hitting, and how to play defensive positions; just as important, the tape also includes tips for dealing with parents and umpires and keeping the game in its proper perspective. The pace is fast, but the narration is clear and the videography is excellent. The emphasis is on making the game fun and safe for everyone while sharpening the players' skills and appreciation for the game. Even if you don't coach, the tape would be an excellent introduction to the sport. Highly recommended for all popular collections.—*George Needham, Public Lib. Assn., Chicago*

And Still I Rise

color. 30 min. Ngozi Onwurah, dist. by Women Make Movies, 462 Broadway, 5th fl., New York, NY 10013; 212-925-0606. 1993. \$295 (Rental: \$75).

WOMEN'S STUDIES

And Still I Rise focuses on the sexuality

of black women as portrayed in the media. It is narrated by black women who debunk and explore the myths and stereotypes associated with this identity—that they are exotic, erotic, sultry, sensual, and passionate. Commentary from writers, a social anthropologist, a film critic, a dancer, and others traces the origins of the myths surrounding their sexuality by examining how black women first came into contact with the white man. When Europeans first met people who were naked, whose kinship systems they didn't understand, and whose sexual practices they found incomprehensible, they assumed there were no codes and these people were living as savages, making them similar to animals. Enter slavery. Scenes of women caged, raped by their slave-masters, and exploited in the cinema are juxtaposed with the poetic and rhythmical, with women dancing in the street, strutting, and enjoying themselves. *And Still I Rise* is a dramatic film, filled with joy yet tinged with sadness and anger. Though filmed in England, it is quite relevant here. Highly recommended for women's studies collections.—*Ann Burns, "Library Journal"*

Descriptive Video Service Puts Feature Films on View

ea. vol: color. range: various. Descriptive Video Svc., WGBH, 125 Western Ave., Boston, MA 02134; 800-782-5756; 617-492-2777. \$14.95–\$39.95.

Just as closed-captioning has helped bring the aural dimension of video to the hearing-impaired, descriptive video attempts to make "viewers" out of the sight-impaired. Tightly edited, carefully timed narration is inserted between dialog and sound effects in original programming to convey the most important visual information in every scene. Costumes, sets, actors' body language—even, occasionally, camera movement and editing—are all described with an eye toward avoiding judgments or irrelevant interpretation. Developed by WGBH-TV of Boston and introduced on several PBS programs such as *Mystery!* and *American Playhouse*, Descriptive Video Service (DVS) has now expanded to feature films on tape. Some two dozen low-priced titles are currently available, including *The Hunt for Red October*, *Fatal Attraction*, *Pretty Woman*, several Disney animated classics, and other fairly recent films rated from "G" to "R." Unlike broadcast TV, where descriptive narration is accessed through the second audio program (SAP) feature of stereo TVs and VCRs, DVS tapes run narration on the regular audio track, so there is no way to block it

out. It is not, however, so annoyingly intrusive that a sighted viewer would be unable to watch with a visually impaired partner.

If *Field of Dreams* and *Parenthood* are representative of the DVS catalog, then the technique is quite successful—within its obvious limitations. No amount of description can capture all that's on the screen. Yet, by painstakingly selecting which visual details to convey, DVS comes close to capturing the essence of each scene. The narration in *Field of Dreams* is quick and, when called for, almost poetic. Thankfully, the oft-quoted "if you build it, they will come" is not identified as a disembodied voice—allowing the context to provide the cue. In *Parenthood*, which is more dialog-heavy, there is sometimes less time to squeeze in description. But throwaway touches, like the color of light reflecting off a cloud, are included when gaps in the dialog allow. Unfortunately, visual puns like a cut from a child chewing a plastic game piece to a casserole being pulled from an oven are lost. Whatever the inherent drawbacks in attempting to render a visual medium through words alone, the real test of whether DVS works or not is the reviews it has been getting from its target audience. By all accounts, the sight-impaired have given it thumbs up.—*Jeff T. Dick, Augustana Coll. Lib., Rock Island, Ill.*



● Film-maker Ngozi Onwurah.

Film-maker reels in top TV prize

A FILM about the plight of black children painfully growing up in a white neighbourhood on Tyneside has won its makers national acclaim.

Sister and brother Ngozi and Simon Onwurah have scooped a top £2,000 prize in Showreel 88, the BBC Television and Radio Times awards for amateur film and video makers, for their 15-minute documentary *Coffee Coloured Children*.

Shot mainly on 16mm film, it draws on their experiences in North Kenton, Newcastle, as the children of a white mother and Nigerian father.

The video, which had financial backing from Northern Arts, took two years to make and has already attracted two

other awards this year.

It was written, edited and directed by Ngozi, 26, with Simon, 21, as her assistant and won first place in the over-25s category of the competition.

Ngozi, who graduated earlier this year from St Martin's Film School, London, which Simon currently attends

Their prize money will go towards the cost of making *Coffee Coloured Children* and towards their next project — a documentary based on a story written by their mother Mrs Madge Onwurah, of Cavendish Place, Jesmond. She will also star in it.

The Showreel 88 Awards will be screened on Friday December 30.