

**Charles C. Irby. *The Celluloid Black: History of Blacks in Film*. Slide-tape program, 12 minutes. (Ames: Iowa State University, 1984). One-day rental \$15.00 (may be applied toward purchase); purchase \$99.00, with resources manual. Order from: Media Resources Center, Iowa State University, Ames, IA 50011. 515/294-8022.**

Black actors, and more often than not white actors in blackface, appeared in stereotyped roles in American movies from the beginnings of the industry. Such classic directors as D.W. Griffith and John Ford mindlessly exploited blacks to counterpoint white supremacy and to bear the brunt of the focus of social and political change. Blacks, even more than American Indians, were the recipients of the darker side of western irrationality. For example, intermarriage, long treated as a subtheme of Indian/white confrontation, met with virulent rejection in films which treated black/white relationships. Because of their growing numbers and because of long-standing cultural and social taboos, blacks on film were portrayed with insistent malice.

Although this unfortunate fact of American film and cultural tradition is well known to film scholars and is becoming better known to students of film, almost nothing is known about the parallel existence of a black-feature film tradition, complete with black produced and directed films with a separate distribution system catering mainly to segregationist sections of northern cities and the south. While Hollywood was grinding out racist embarrassments, black filmmakers and producers employing black actors, writers, and technicians were making movies about themselves which (although incorporating some of the cultural attitudes of the dominant white society) give a very different picture of the lives of black Americans. Because of the segregation of the races, especially in the northern cities and the rural South, there existed a circuit of black theaters which catered only to black audiences and provided a steady if narrow market for black films. Unlike other racial minorities who were not as populous nor as firmly segregated, black *de facto* isolation allowed a unique culture expression to grow and for a brief period between the wars, to flourish. The dubious distinction of the lack of social mobility gave us this fascinating artistic expression.

Charles Irby's *The Celluloid Black* introduces both the standard cinematic traditions and provides a starting point for an examination of the cultural phenomenon of blacks in the film medium. In twelve minutes the slide presentation suggests a variety of areas for further study and points to a series of possible approaches. To be used as a tool for further study, the program is designed to be presented by a resource person grounded firmly enough in the subject to provide a context for further study based on the information presented. There are helpful examples

contained in the resource book accompanying the slides and tape which also supplies information on rental sources for black-produced films as well as Hollywood films dealing with blacks which can be used to supplement this introduction. *The Celluloid Black* is a positive beginning for further study of ethnic stereotyping and a segment of black history. Unfortunately, or perhaps fortunately, we end the program wanting more of everything: more visuals, more information about both the Hollywood and black film traditions, and more analysis of stereotypes and of their impact on both the white and black cultures. There is an old show business adage about leaving the audience wanting more. In this case, however, less is not necessarily better. The slide presentation as it is puts too much reliance on the facilitator and is a little short on material. This is really too bad because what is presented is done so very well with interesting and telling visuals, with a literate and concise script, and with clarity.

The study of the impact of film and other non-print media on cultural attitudes is just beginning and racial images on film provide a fascinating and little-explored area. Slide presentations, such as this one, provide an excellent means for initiating such an exploration. Through this and similar programs the vast, untapped world of American history and culture is at last being opened to students and scholars alike. To examine our national heritage in all its ethnic diversity is an exhilarating prospect.

— Charles L.P. Silet  
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**Eddie Iroh. *The Siren in the Night*. (Exeter, NH: Heinemann Educational Books Inc., 1982) 203 pp., \$5.00 paper.**

The historical novel presents many of the same problems of interpretation posed by the docudrama, both genres possessing an ambiguity attributable to the absence of clearly defined distinctions between fact and fiction. Eddie Iroh, author of *The Siren in the Night*, obviates the reader's task of inferring these distinctions by announcing in the "Author's Note" the fidelity of his presentation to both the nature and sequence of actual events and admitting the liberty taken in his creation of a military post that did not exist during the time period covered in the novel. *The Siren in the Night*, the third novel of a war trilogy dramatizing events surrounding the Nigerian Civil War, follows two other historical