



Directed by Zeinabu irene Davis

Producer: Z. irene Davis, Andy Rice

Cinematographer: A. Rice

Editor: A. Rice

Digital video, color, approx. 60 min.

## Daughter of the Rebellion

by Michele Prettyman Beverly

My involvement in the Atlanta stop of the L.A. Rebellion: Creating a New Black Cinema Tour provided me with some powerful moments of clarity and a renewed sense of inspiration. As the complicated history of the L.A. Rebellion unfolded with each screening, each discussion, and each interaction with filmmakers and audiences, it became clear that this history was being re-animated and propelled into a new future vibrating with new possibilities. While the impulses that inspired the work of L.A. Rebellion filmmakers were diverse, what was shared was a desire to create a more personal relationship with cinema, evident in the production styles (locations, training local actors and crew members) and subject matter, and also in the insistence on the creation of 'shared spaces' in which to experience cinema. It is appropriate then that this tour would also create shared spaces for dialogue between a range of social spheres, which, in turn, revealed powerful insights into the relationship between cinema and communities, and the discourses that emerge from such encounters. Thus it was not in my own discrete intellectual and personal space, but in these shared spaces, that powerful crystallizations of blackness, aesthetics, and cinema emerged.

This process began for me after screening a work-in-progress cut of Zeinabu irene Davis's film—*Spirits of Rebellion: Black Film at UCLA*. Davis's documentary film provides rich historical and personal context surrounding the emergence of the L.A. Rebellion, which she describes as "a group of critically acclaimed black media artists. . . the first sustained movement in the United States . . . that aimed to re-imagine the production process so as to represent, reflect on, and enrich the day to day lives of people in their own communities." Members of the L.A. Rebellion were part of an Ethno-Communications Program, a short-lived UCLA initiative to train more Black, Native American, Latino, and Asian students in filmmaking.

In *Spirits of Rebellion*, Davis, herself a member of the second-wave of this cohort of filmmakers, reunites with classmates, mentors, and instructors, gently pressing them to retrieve their memories of learning about filmmaking and collaborating on each other's films. For Davis, her project is explicitly didactic and archival. Her intention is to educate audiences about the rich history of black cinema while also inserting these films into the broader narrative of film history. Davis's mission is equally cathartic and personal as she unearths the revelations and trajectories of her fellow L.A. Rebellion peers. In perhaps the film's most poignant moment, Davis recalls a gathering of some of the filmmakers and their families and the emotional reactions of the filmmakers who witnessed how their own children could now fully grasp the weight and significance of their parents' work.

While some who participated in this UCLA program have challenged the notion that it should be termed a "black film movement," or whether the term "rebellion" is an appropriate one, what became clear was the impact that the L.A. Rebellion films and filmmakers had on me, personally. What resonated as I watched Davis's film and spent time with both her and Haile Gerima—an important and internationally acclaimed figure of the "rebellion," yet one who precariously disavows Davis's position that it was in African American independent film

movement—was a question raised by a graduate student in the film history course I teach at Emory University who attended the screening of Davis's film. He asked, and I am paraphrasing here, "What was the point? What did this movement create?" He was unclear about the impact of such a "movement," one which he, as a young scholar of art and film from Serbia, had never heard of. His interrogations were in some ways legitimate. How can you quantify a film movement and measure its influence and worth when many of these films have never been seen, even by film scholars, much less by a broader academic and cultural public? Yet his questions also reflect the skepticism that pervades the mainstream, dominant culture vectors of studies of film, art, and visual culture. Why had Davis and other scholars audaciously endeavored to designate this unwieldy, contested group of student filmmakers "a movement" or "school" and who has been influenced by this work?

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The short answer is me. I was profoundly impacted by my first contact with an L.A. Rebellion film, which was seeing Julie Dash's film *Daughters of the Dust* in 1992 at the Baltimore Museum of Art. (Dash had been a student at UCLA and was a prominent member of the L.A. Rebellion). At the screening event, I viewed the film alongside members of my church congregation, Baltimore's Bethel A.M.E. Church, some of whom had traveled in chartered buses across town to see the film. But it was not simply seeing the film; it was seeing *this* film with *these* people from my own life and community in *this* space that had been designated for the consumption of something that was both culturally relevant and 'artistic,' something we understood

to be radically different from what was available at our local multiplex. This singular event had united the sometimes disjointed worlds that I cared about—the worlds of spirituality, community, art, and culture—and for a few hours a stage was set for us to have a uniquely intimate experience with cinema and with each other.

A second series of memories and experiences occurred the following year with Haile Gerima as he transported his film *Sankofa* to theatres around the country, camping out in lobbies to greet and often console audiences who saw his groundbreaking cinematic treatise on slavery, memory, and survival. In *Sankofa*, Gerima courageously plows through the historical layers of slavery to create a searing, intimate account of black people's lives, deaths, and acts of resistance and healing. Gerima, his family members, and Howard University film students were the marketing and merchandising team, the promoters, and the distributors. My experiences with them and my contact with the audiences watching these films allowed me to experience cinema's power to connect people to both shared historical memories and very personal, visceral emotions.

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Later, Gerima would help me get my first experience on a film shoot. In preparation, his wife, filmmaker Shirikiana Aina, gave me some of the best advice I had ever been given about life and filmmaking: “Whatever happens, let it roll off of you like oil off of a duck's back.” The processes of filmmaking—production, exhibition, and distribution—had forever been changed in my mind and perhaps also in the minds of countless other viewers who had never met, seen, or touched a filmmaker. It was not Martin Scorsese or Francis Ford Coppola (whose work I love and

admire) who made me want to be a filmmaker; it was these filmmakers, instead, as well as being able to experience films on these specifically grounded terms that lit that fire. In this context, filmmaking became real, personal, tactile, responsive, and accountable—a living, breathing exchange.

Contemplating the graduate student's question, these memories rushed to the surface and Davis' title became clear. *Spirits of Rebellion* was the title most appropriate in capturing how these new modes of filmmaking, aesthetics practices, stories, and subjects were disseminated into the cultural ether, conjuring the movement of a seemingly elusive presence, one that circulates, moving in, through and around us, changing us even when we may not be aware of it. The influence of the L.A. Rebellion films and filmmakers continues to have cultural resonance so long as it is connected to people and to our continued desire for work that speaks to us and for us. I am grateful for these filmmakers and their work and consider myself a 'daughter of the rebellion.'