



Directed by Zeinabu irene Davis

Producer: Z. irene Davis

Screenwriter: Doris-Owanda Johnson

Cinematographer: Pierre Hermann Désir

Editor: Z. irene Davis

With: Stephanie Ingram, Darryl Munyung Jackson,
Marc Chéry, Doris-Owanda Johnson, Z. irene Davis

Digital video transferred from 16mm, b/w, 17 min.

Purification Rituals: Beauty and Abjection in *Cycles* by Joey Molina

Zeinabu irene Davis's short film *Cycles* (US, 1989) is a mediation on blackness in many of its alluring dimensions, particularly as it relates to Black women's experience. It does so by establishing a compelling tension between blackness as beautiful and abject. Shot in black and white, *Cycles* employs creative techniques, repetitive voice-overs and stop-motion cinematography, to capture blackness in its both intense and boundless dimensions. It is important to clarify that blackness functions as abject in the film, not in the sense of something horrid, but rather something that doesn't respect borders. Julia Kristeva describes the abject as "what disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules."¹ In its exploration of black femininity, *Cycles* pays attention to the need of black women's liberation from negative images in media and in the social world, as well as the need for their bodies to be and expand unencumbered in a multiplicity of directions. In this way, the film helps us think about how blackness similarly exceeds boundaries and simple description.

The narrative is about Rasheeda, a woman anticipating her period, hence the title *Cycles*. The first shot immediately introduces the film's Afrocentric sensibility, as the camera flows by an African statue following its every curve and continuing to reveal a ceremonial space with a portrait and flowers. The music that accompanies the opening scene also functions as another signifier of African culture. As she waits, Rasheeda cleans her apartment and engages in African rituals of purification. These rituals emphasize the relationship between Rasheeda's body, her surroundings, and the borders that separate the two.

Then, we encounter Rasheeda sitting by a window, drawing attention to another kind of boundary—her apartment walls. The voiceover dialogue explains, "it had not arrived, she didn't know what to do, whether to prepare or not." This statement is left unexplained to the audience; yet, it creates a sense of intrigue as well as anticipation. As a result, the audience is sharing the main character's quest. The confessional tone of her voice expresses concern; perhaps her period is late because she is pregnant. A ticking clock, that marks the time while she does housework, emphasizes her anxiety.

Suddenly, Rasheeda is dressed in an African pattern dress. The film shows her doing routine chores like sorting laundry, vacuuming, and mopping. This obsession with cleanliness becomes much more apparent in the short stop-motion sequences. As she is cleaning a toilet, a voice exclaims, "Progress is being made," a line that will be repeated throughout the film. This is the first instance where Davis employs the stop-motion effect: she cuts back and forth between various images of Rasheeda face down into the toilet bowl with her hand scrubbing the inside. Throughout this scene Rasheeda's skin appears much darker and her body appears larger than in the other shots. This exaggeration of her features presents her body as a strange surplus of the film—like Kristeva's discussion of the abject—which has the ability to exceed narrative boundaries. While Rasheeda's chores position her body near toilets and other dirty items that should be cast off, the chores are conducted in

undeniably erotic ways. It's hard not to find this scene peculiar because the erotic movements of her body do not seem to match her mundane chores. The film repeatedly emphasizes the shape and contours of Rasheeda's body as she cleans. First, she is on her hands and knees scrubbing a tile floor. Later, in one of the stop-motion sequence, Rasheeda is cleaning the bathtub in various contorted positions as a harsh tenor voice moans in the background. In what appears as a fantasy scene, Rasheeda is cleaning the shower while wearing a swimsuit. As she lathers the bathtub wall, waving her hands in large strokes, Rasheeda's body gyrates from side to side. Finally, the camera fixates on a still image of her back. The lines of her bathing suit create a triangular pattern and the shot flickers until it fades to black. The erotic tone of some of the scenes suggests a coy (or is it flirtatious?) attitude about black female sexuality.

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The attention on Rasheeda's form continues as she focuses on cleaning her own body. As she brushes her teeth, a voiceover declares, "time to attend to herself." Once again, Davis uses stop motion as Rasheeda's toothpaste suds overtake the screen. The use of cuts and stop-motion enables the film to speak beyond the narrative and blackness to overflow narrative constraints. Rasheeda stares into the mirror, unimpressed. The camera tilts down to her hands caressing her stomach and stays fixed on her belly as she wraps her arms around it. It seems she is considering the possibility of her pregnancy. This leads to the third erotic scene, when Rasheeda runs the bath to enjoy some relaxation. We see a close up of Rasheeda's feet in the tub surrounded by water as her toes play with the flowing water faucet, emphasizing its phallic shape. She also rubs soap on her hands and lathers her fingers individually. Rasheeda ebbs in the bathtub and finally it is time for bed, but not before she applies some lotion on her legs, and most notably on her toes.

The camera lingers in this moment of personal bliss.

Once Rasheeda is asleep, the viewers are allowed another moment of narrative excess in the form of a self-conscious dream sequence. As Rasheeda sleeps, an African chant fills the scene and the film cuts to graffiti on a wall. In the dream, Rasheeda is outside on the streets of L.A. She's with friends and is in an ecstatic mood; there is remarkable difference in this setting, compared to the confined space of her apartment. As the beats in the chant gets louder and faster, a voiceover exclaims, "Rasheeda, what is wrong with you?" She approaches the camera as she follows a man shaking a shekere (a West African percussion instrument) and her two girlfriends try to pull her back but are unable to restrain her. Then, a tribal song plays over a joyful montage of different scenes depicting Rasheeda and her friends. They are standing in the middle of a busy intersection, hugging, posing, and dancing in ritualistic manner. The most interesting part of the women's playful behavior is the way they stare directly at the camera, defying the traditional logic of film performance.

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Many of the spiritual references in the film relate to purification practices by the Orishas in the Yoruba tradition.² These scenes express a sense of liberation and happiness, especially when juxtaposed to Rasheeda's daily chores. Different voices with various accents repeat the phrase, "Progress is being made." The repetition becomes a mantra at the same time as quick shots of Rasheeda in movement appear on the screen. Her body in motion indicates that as a black woman, she can freely express herself in a multitude of ways.

The dream sequence ends and Rasheeda wakes up groggy from such a vivid dream. She walks into the bathroom and the camera follows her. Then it pans back to her bed to reveal a stain on her bed sheets. Her body has responded and not only answered her question about pregnancy, but also done something spectacular. The conclusion of the film and the credit sequence, a collage of women's voices describing what they are impelled to eat or drink on the eve of their period, expresses blackness as beautifully abject.

The film creates tension from the beginning. It creates a point of identification with a body that is considered abject in mainstream visual culture. Even when she is asleep, Rasheeda's point of view drives the narrative. Yet, the mismatching voices throughout the piece enhance that sense of disruption of identity that Kristeva mentions in the *Powers of Horror*. As spectators, we are encouraged to experience the same emotions as Rasheeda, including her moments of disruption—the stop-motion segments, her dream sequence, and eventually her period. This experience of the narrative, which is both confusing and alluring, illustrates the film's representation of the black female body as beautiful and boundless.

¹ Julia Kristeva and Leon S Roudiez, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982), 4.

² See Jacqueline Stewart's commentary in the UCLA L.A. Rebellion website: <http://www.w.cinema.ucla.edu/la-rebellion/films/cycles>.