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FILM

How the Movies Made a President

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[BARACK OBAMA](#)'S victory in November demonstrated, to the surprise of many Americans and much of the world, that we were ready to see a black man as president. Of course, we had seen several black presidents already, not in the real White House but in the virtual America of movies and television. The presidencies of [James Earl Jones](#) in "[The Man](#)," [Morgan Freeman](#) in "[Deep Impact](#)," [Chris Rock](#) in "[Head of State](#)" and [Dennis Haysbert](#) in "[24](#)" helped us imagine Mr. Obama's transformative breakthrough before it occurred. In a modest way, they also hastened its arrival.

Make no mistake: Hollywood's historic refusal to embrace black artists and its insistence on racist caricatures and stereotypes linger to this day. Yet in the past 50 years — or, to be precise, in the 47 years since Mr. Obama was born — black men in the movies have traveled from the ghetto to the boardroom, from supporting roles in kitchens, liveries and social-problem movies to the rarefied summit of the Hollywood A-list. In those years the movies have helped images of black popular life emerge from behind what W. E. B. Du Bois called "a vast veil," creating public spaces in which we could glimpse who we are and what we might become.

Filmmakers as diverse as [Charles Burnett](#), [Spike Lee](#) and [John Singleton](#) have helped tear away that veil, as have performers who have fought and transcended stereotypes of savagery and servility to create new, richer, truer images of black life. Along the way an archetype has emerged, that of the black male hero, who, like [Will Smith](#) in "[Independence Day](#)," rises from the ashes — in the case of that movie, the smoldering ashes of the White House — to save the day or just the family vacation. The movies of the past half-century hardly prophesy the present moment, but they offer intriguing premonitions, quick-sketch pictures and sometimes richly realized portraits of black men grappling with issues of identity and the possibilities of power. They have helped write the prehistory of the Obama presidency.

Modern African-American history has been, among other things, a series of firsts, and the first black movie star — the first to win an Oscar in a lead role and the first to see his name featured above the title in movie advertisements — was [Sidney Poitier](#). For much of the 1960s Mr. Poitier bore the special burden of being the only one. He became a symbolic figure not only for other African-Americans but also for the nation as a whole: the Black Everyman.

In 1961, the year Mr. Obama was born, Mr. Poitier played Walter Lee Younger, the flawed, ambitious protagonist of "[A Raisin in the Sun](#)." Subsequent roles would draw on some of that character's anger and idealism, but they were more concerned with addressing the thorny questions of African-American male authority. How does a black man assert leadership in a society that expects, and is often willing to enforce, his subservience? How does he reach some accommodation with the white world without sacrificing his integrity or his self-respect?

Confronting these challenges in movies like [“In the Heat of the Night”](#) and [“Guess Who’s Coming to Dinner.”](#) Mr. Poitier became an ambassador to white America and a benign emblem of black power, though not a favorite of the Black Power movement. Almost as soon as they were released, in 1967, those earnest, integrationist, liberal pictures started to look old-fashioned and naïve. As riots engulfed American cities and a more militant black politics threatened to overshadow the civil rights paradigm, Mr. Poitier, a canny political thinker and a serious activist, was criticized for being insufficiently race-conscious.

In 1971, two years after the black scholar Larry Neal scolded Mr. Poitier in The New York Times for his choices (“There is no sense in being a million-dollar shoeshine boy”), [Melvin Van Peebles’s](#) independent production [“Sweet Sweetback’s Baadasssss Song”](#) helped usher in a new kind of African-American male representation. Hailed by Huey P. Newton as the “first truly revolutionary black film made,” this scrappy, low-budget triumph and its roving, carnal hero offered a rollicking alternative to the neutered black male of the sort that Mr. Poitier had often played.

Yet even as he stood as a not-so-benign emblem of black power, erotic and otherwise, the hypersexualized black male also became fodder for white exploitation. In the years since, much like the virgins and whores of every color in movies about women, black male characters have often been divided along an axis of virtue and sin, forced to play cop or thug, saint or sociopath. Such is the seductiveness of the Black Outlaw that, after watching Morgan Freeman slink across screen as a pimp called Fast Black in the tense 1987 drama [“Street Smart,”](#) [Pauline Kael](#) was moved to ask if he was the greatest American actor in movies.

Not all Outlaws are pimps; sometimes they just roll like them. It seems telling that in 2002 [Denzel Washington](#) became the second African-American man to win an Oscar for best actor playing a dirty Los Angeles police detective in the thriller [“Training Day.”](#) Mr. Washington brought a queasy erotic charge to his character’s violence that seemed intended to erase every last trace of his stoic, heroic, Poitieresque profile in films like [“Philadelphia”](#) and [“Remember the Titans.”](#) This was Denzel the Bad, with his black leather jacket and pumping big guns, cinematic soul brother to [Samuel L. Jackson](#) in [“Pulp Fiction”](#) and just about every other movie Mr. Jackson has starred in where he has wreaked vengeance on anyone unlucky enough to get in his way.

The violence can be just as thrilling when it’s strictly verbal. [Richard Pryor](#) was among the first comedians to discover that a white audience could be won over by being provoked and insulted. He built his stand-up act, which had wide crossover appeal, on a foundation of profane, confrontational truth-telling and never shied away from the briar patch of race. On his albums and above all in his concert films, he aired a mountain of social, racial and psychosexual dirty laundry, turning himself into an anxious, libidinous embodiment of the American id.

Pryor, the Black Provocateur of the 1970s, worked a little too blue, in his prime, for network television, so he entered the pop-cultural mainstream, somewhat improbably, as a movie star. He teamed up with [Gene Wilder](#) in a series of sweet and silly interracial buddy comedies and also starred in [“Blue Collar”](#) and [“Which Way Is Up?”](#) in which he combined the persona of black comic everyman with that of battered and beleaguered working-class hero.

Later, as his own career foundered, Mr. Pryor’s influence spread far and wide. Chris Rock, with his commitment to political and sexual candor and his joyful disdain for the sensitivities of the audience, is perhaps his most

obvious heir. But that line of succession passes through the career of [Eddie Murphy](#), who also provides a crucial (and sometimes underestimated) link in the continuum of black movie stars that runs from Mr. Poitier to Mr. Washington to Mr. Smith.

As a young member of the rebooted "[Saturday Night Live](#)" cast in the early 1980s, Mr. Murphy (who, like Mr. Obama, was born in 1961) first made his mark lampooning black archetypes and celebrities of all kinds. In his concert movies and stand-up routines, he was swaggering and sometimes obnoxious, but his ability to combine ingratiating jokiness with cold-eyed hostility came through most successfully in feature films, where he made the transition from comic foil (in "48 Hrs." and "[Trading Places](#)") to action hero (in "[Beverly Hills Cop](#)") with astonishing grace and speed.

When Mr. Murphy, on "SNL," made fun of [Bill Cosby](#) — gumming a cigar and extolling the virtues of Jell-O Pudding Pops — it was an act both of homage and of Oedipal aggression. In 1984 Mr. Cosby may have already been a father figure to younger black entertainers, but his career as America's dad was just beginning, with the debut of "The Cosby Show" on [NBC](#). The novelty of that series, at once revolutionary and profoundly conservative, lay in its insistence, week after week, that being black was another way of being normal.

The traditional composition of the Huxtable family, with the father as its benevolent, sometimes bumbling head, was part of the series's strategy of decoupling blackness from social pathology. "The Cosby Show" did not deny the existence of serious problems in black America — not least the problem of absent fathers — but the presence of Cliff Huxtable, in his own home and yours, suggested that the problems were not intractable.

And it is striking how powerful and appealing the figure of the Black Father has become in the past 25 years — how many younger, more iconoclastic performers have come home to Cliff Huxtable. Mr. Murphy himself, for instance, in the Dr. Dolittle movies, is channeling the man he used to mock, and [Bernie Mac](#), who started out as a profane truth-teller in the Richard Pryor tradition, reached his pop-cultural apotheosis as a put-upon patriarch in the sitcom that bore his name. Even [Ice Cube](#), without shedding his gangster scowl, settled into a comfortable niche as a family man in the "[Barbershop](#)" and "[Are We There Yet?](#)" franchises.

Black men have also flourished on screen as surrogate, spiritual fathers. Much like the wee green Jedi master who instructs Luke Skywalker in "Star Wars: Episode V — The Empire Strikes Back," the Black Yoda helps guide young (white) heroes to their destinies. Routinely paired opposite callow, less expert actors like [Keanu Reeves](#), [Ashley Judd](#) and [Ben Affleck](#), Mr. Freeman in particular can be relied on to provide counsel and ballast to even the most lightweight genre exercises, along with a sense of purpose and moral seriousness. The touch of gravel in his voice is suggestive of long, hard-traveled roads, while the sagging, doggone tired and mournful eyes look as if they have borne witness to real pain. Much like James Earl Jones before him, though with less basso profundo, Mr. Freeman has become the go-to guy for voice-of-God narration, and for playing the Big Man upstairs.

Yoda himself is a science-fiction variation on Jiminy Cricket, the cute little critter who, in the 1940 Disney classic, advises Pinocchio to "always let your conscience be your guide." In Hollywood, black characters have often provided this kind of advisory role, chirping friendly counsel from the sidelines, as [Hattie McDaniel](#) does when she maternally scolds (and protects) [Vivien Leigh](#) in "[Gone With the Wind](#)" or when an avuncular Bill Robinson (a k a Bojangles) teaches [Shirley Temple](#) how to dance up a flight of stairs in "[The Little Colonel](#)." These mentor-student relationships invoke what the historian Donald Bogle calls the "huckfinn fixation," movies in

which a good white man, having gone up against the corrupt (white) mainstream, takes up with a “trusty black who never competes with the white man and who serves as a reliable ego padder.” The white hero “grows in stature” from this association because “blacks seem to possess the soul the white man searches for.”

For years the price of this soul was sometimes paid in black flesh. Movie history is littered with the mangled ([Joe Morton](#) in “Terminator 2”), flayed (Mr. Freeman in “[Unforgiven](#)”) and even mauled (Harold Perrineau in “[The Edge](#)”) bodies of supporting black characters, some sacrificed on an altar of their relationships with the white headliners, others rendered into first prey for horror-movie monsters. There has often been a distinct messianic cast to this sacrifice, made explicit in films as different as the 1968 zombie flick “[Night of the Living Dead](#)” and the 1999 prison drama “[The Green Mile](#).” In the second, [Michael Clarke Duncan](#) plays a death-row inmate who suggests a prison-house Jesus: “I’m tired of people being ugly to each other. I’m tired of all the pain I feel and hear in the world every day.” More recently, Will Smith picked up the mantle of the Black Messiah in four of his star turns: “[The Pursuit of Happyness](#),” “[I Am Legend](#),” “[Hancock](#)” and “[Seven Pounds](#).”

Savior, counselor, patriarch, oracle, avenger, role model — compared with all this, being president looks like a pretty straightforward job. Barack Obama, after all, is only one man (and only half black) and is working from a script that has yet to be written. But the fantasies of black heroism that have pervaded our popular culture give some sense of what the country hopes for in its new leader, whose burden is not the same as the one taken up by the 42 white men who preceded him.

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