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The Image Messengers: Filmmakers at Howard

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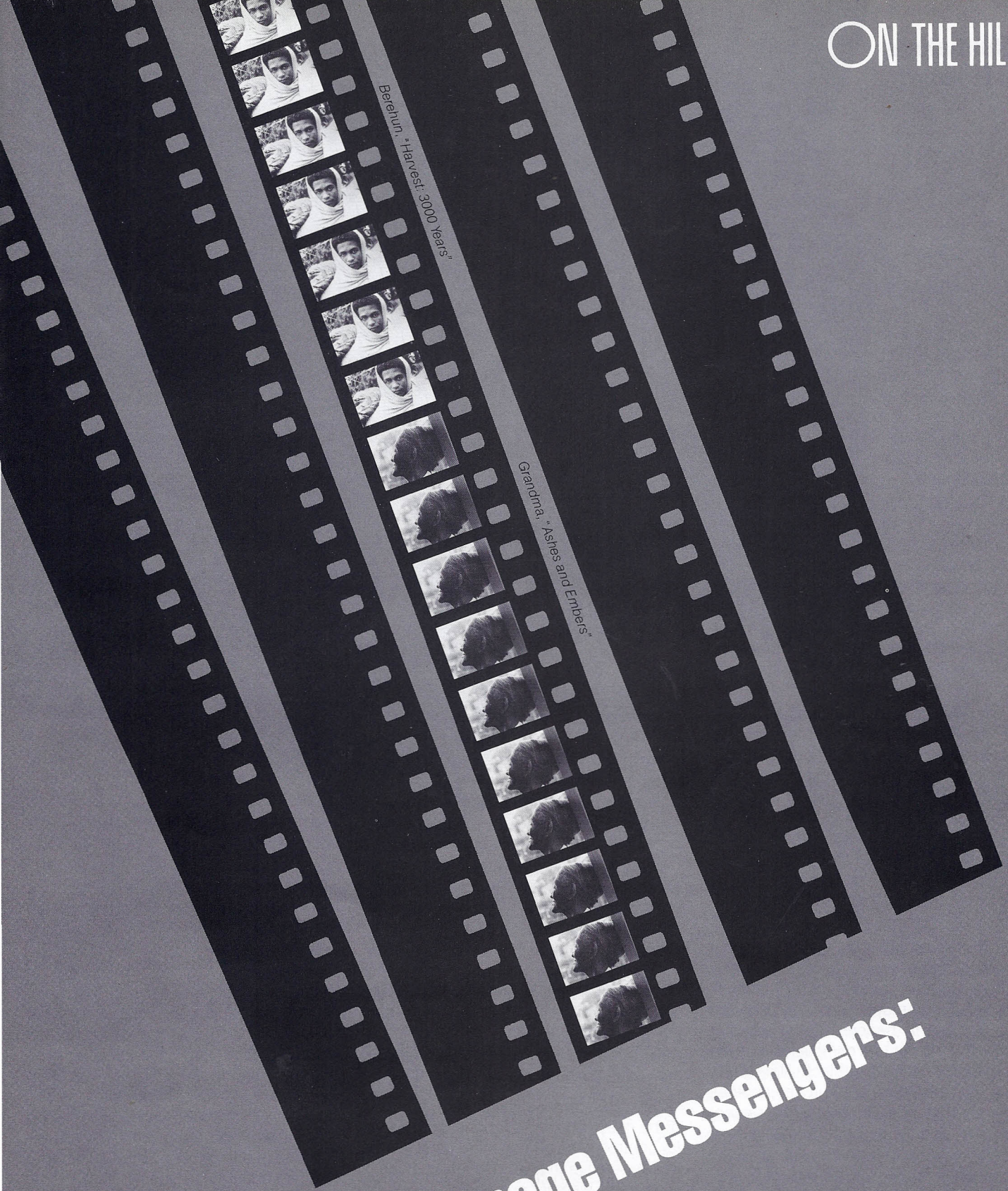

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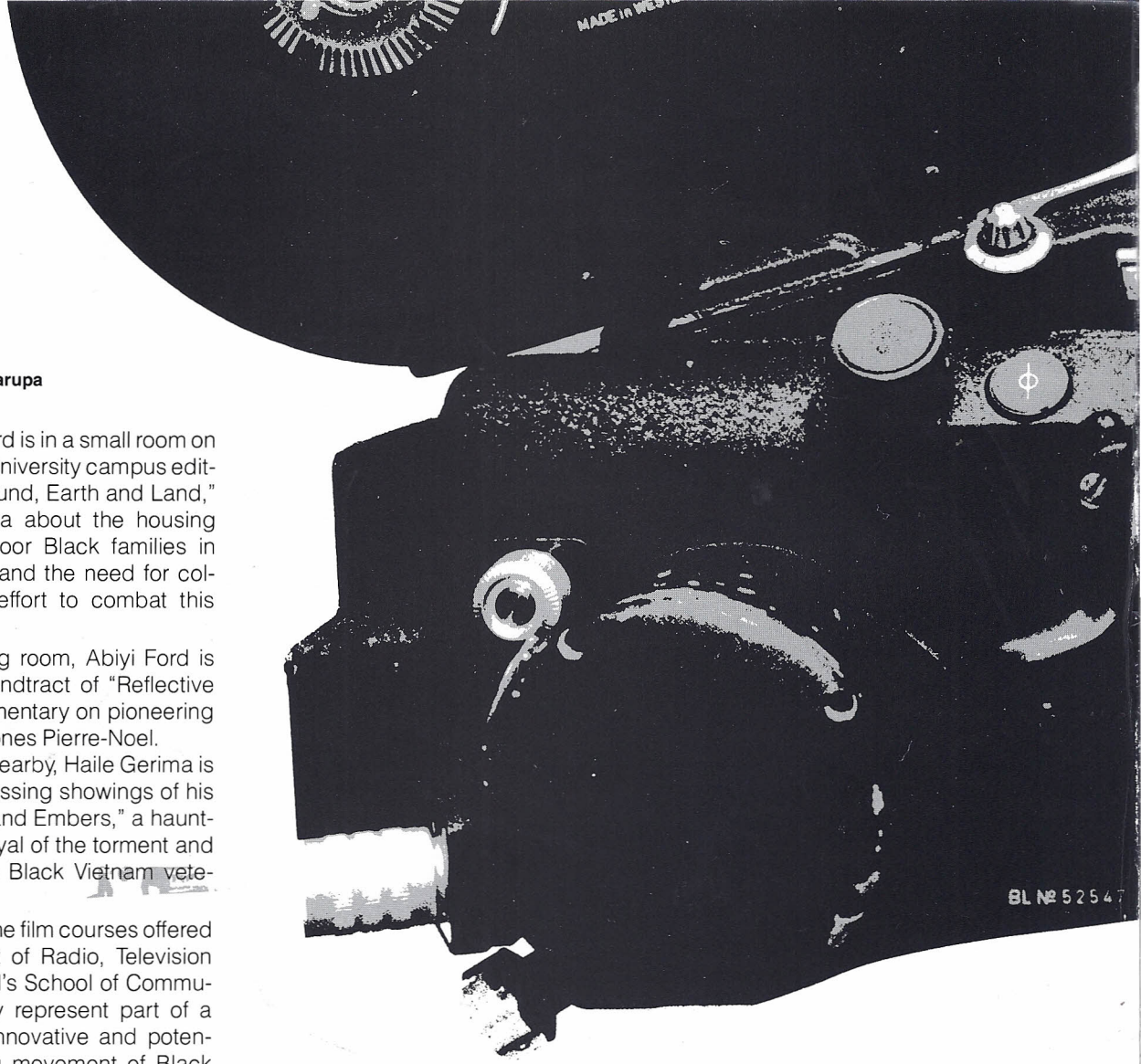


By Harriet Jackson Scarupa

Alonzo Crawford is in a small room on the Howard University campus editing "Dirt, Ground, Earth and Land," a docudrama about the housing displacement of poor Black families in Washington, D.C., and the need for collective organized effort to combat this displacement.

In another editing room, Abiyi Ford is structuring the soundtract of "Reflective Moments," a documentary on pioneering artist Lois Mailou Jones Pierre-Noel.

And in an office nearby, Haile Gerima is on the phone discussing showings of his latest film, "Ashes and Embers," a haunting episodic portrayal of the torment and transformation of a Black Vietnam veteran.

The three teach the film courses offered by the Department of Radio, Television and Film at Howard's School of Communications. And they represent part of a small, struggling, innovative and potentially revolutionizing movement of Black filmmakers who deliberately have turned their backs on that sultry, flashy, dollar-bedecked siren — Hollywood — to inscribe on celluloid their own personal visions.

Not surprisingly, many of these most forceful visions have to do with the liberation of Black people from oppression, whatever its particular form. As Crawford has written, "It becomes obvious after analyzing the content of most films on the Black experience by Black filmmakers that they are all, in one way or another, films of resistance. Consciously or unconsciously, overtly or covertly, they have elements or images that resist forces in society that oppress Black people."

Equally obvious to most Black independent filmmakers is their reason for making films in the first place. "You can't beg somebody to draw your face," says Gerima. "*You* have to draw your face. As long as you let others do it, it will be their conception. The total struggle in America today is to balance the false conception of white America about Black people that has dominated for so long."

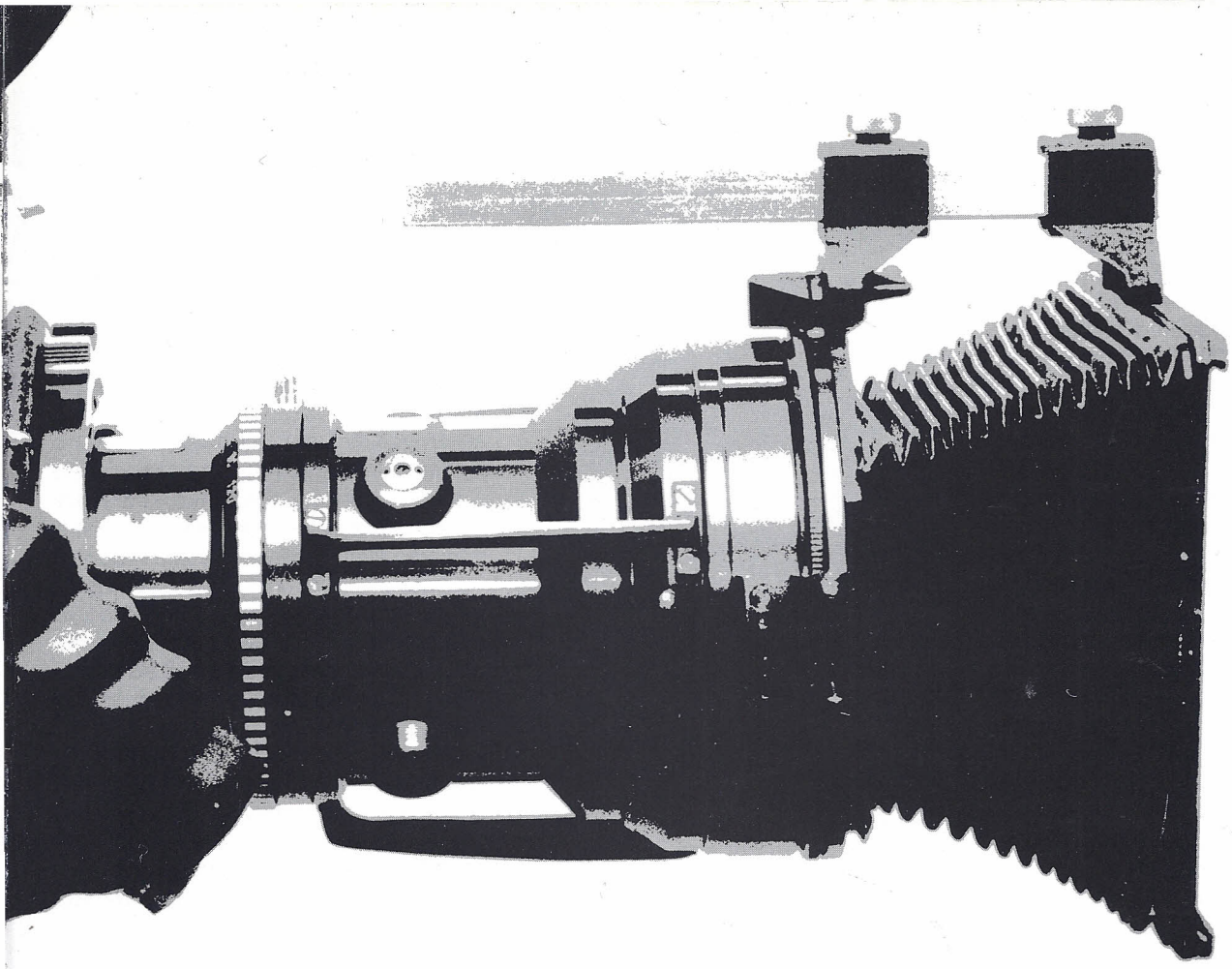
Adds Ford, speaking in global terms, "Western cinema has successfully introduced the Western man in the manner *he* thinks of himself, maintained his culture in the manner that *he* thinks it should be maintained, amplified it in the manner that *he* wants it amplified and set the conditions of behavior, if you will, for imitation on the part of non-Western peoples to behave in a manner that satisfies Western man more so than anyone else.

"Film is enormously influential. It is one of the heavy artillery weapons in the battle for control of the human mind. That is why it is imperative that we use it and make it synchronic with *our* culture and needs."

Surely, the need to present more balanced, relevant, and ultimately more positive images of Black and Third World life on the screen is readily apparent to even the most casual moviegoer or TV viewer. The National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, in fact, has proposed a boycott of Hollywood films to protest the sorry state of the industry's offerings *vis-à-vis* Black reality, Black people, Black actors, Black technicians. . . .

But there are those who believe that putting pressure on Hollywood to repent and reform represents but one response to the problem. "What I also would like to see happen is for people to note that there are Black *independent* filmmakers who make quality work that is available to the general public," says Ayoka Chenzira, program director of the Black Filmmaker Foundation, a New York-based organization which distributes, exhibits and promotes the works of such filmmakers. "That's something that has not been emphasized enough."

Some estimates put the number of Black independent filmmakers in the country at around 250 but Chenzira advises us to stay away from any exact figures. "New people are coming along all the time," she says. Others, who once considered themselves filmmakers, have given up. For the lot of the Black independent filmmaker is a particularly difficult one.



When a poet is compelled to express himself all he needs is a pencil and piece of paper. When a filmmaker is compelled to express himself he needs equipment, expensive equipment. (Example: "Ashes and Embers," considered a low-budget color feature film, cost close to $100,000 to make.)

Funding is a critical problem for all independent filmmakers, but for Black independent filmmakers it is especially so. It is even more difficult now as grants from the National Endowment for the Arts and the American Film Institute, so crucial to the work of so many in the past, have been cut back.

Distribution is another critical problem since the films most Black independent filmmakers are producing are not the kind most white-owned movie houses and TV stations are interested in showing. Organizations like the Black Filmmaker Foundation, which distributes 70 films and videotapes produced by Black film artists, and Gerima's Myphenduh Films, which distributes his own films and those of some other Third World filmmakers, may provide an antidote to this situation. But the kind of network they represent is still young and struggling. Churches, schools, community centers, even the walls of city buildings represent alternative sites for showing films. But most people still equate going to the movies with going to a movie theater.

In addition to funding and distribution problems, there exists what Chenzira calls "a prejudice against 16-millimeter films," the *mètier* of most Black independent filmmakers. She is a filmmaker herself (e.g. "Syvilla: They Dance To Her Drum") and people sometimes ask her, "Do you make *real* movies or do you make those other kind of movies? And what they mean by 'real movies' are 35-millimeter features."

Then there is, of course, the problem of acceptance. Critics tend to dismiss Black films as amateurish or propagandistic — or both—while appreciation from a larger public seemingly enamored with "The Jeffersons," et al, seems far far away.

Ironically, or perhaps not ironically at all, the works of Black independent filmmakers have found greater popular and critical reception abroad. "It's the same situation with Black dancers, Black jazz musicians, Black painters," Chenzira says. "Unfortunately, probably more Europeans can name all the works of John Coltrane and all the films of Haile Gerima . . . than can people in the United States. It's as if we don't appreciate those things that are homegrown until they get that European seal of approval. Then we say, 'Aaah, look at our artists!'"

When you tally up all the obstacles facing Black independent filmmakers, you begin to wonder why they try and how any of them survive. But they persist. They persist because they must. . . because the need is so great.

Tony Gittens is a Howard University alumnus who heads the Black Film Institute of the University of the District of Columbia, which sponsors lectures, film showings and workshops dealing with Black film. And he's found that people *do* come out to see the work of Black independent filmmakers.

"There's still a demand by the Black community to see the reality of its life reflected on the screen," he says. "That's not to say every independently-made Black film does that [reflects that reality] but many of them do. Black people will go and see Richard Pryor and Eddie Murphy and they go in droves and find it entertaining. But there is still a very deep desire on the part of significant segments in the Black community to see their story being told by themselves. That in itself has a lot of validity."

Within this larger context, then, let us turn to the works and beliefs of Howard University's three film professors.

Haile Gerima

Haile Gerima's "Ashes and Embers" opens with a scream and maintains that level of intensity for a very full two hours. Its protagonist is Ned Charles, a man who's been back from Vietnam for eight years now but "ain't over that war yet." "I don't know what's wrong with me," he tells his grandmother. "I don't know why I'm alive. I can't even explain to you the things that have been done to me and the things that I've done ... I've rode on a road of bones."

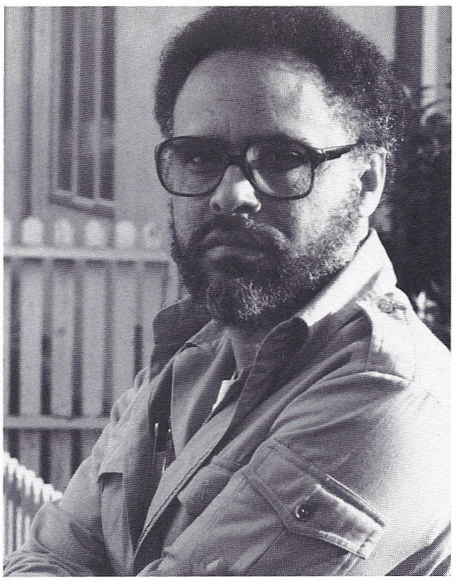
Unable to come to grips with his experiences in Vietnam and unable to make sense of the complexity that surrounds him now that he's home, he lashes out — at his militant grandmother; at his politically aware but emotionally detached girlfriend; at his girlfriend's continuously intellectualizing "bookreadin'" friends; at a friend who seeks to pursue the glitter of Hollywood stardom; at an older friend who runs a TV repair shop but whose real interest is consciousness-raising.

The film's structure reflects the fragmented and confused state of Ned Charles' mind as Gerima cuts from the lush, history-tinged southern countryside of the grandmother's home; to Washington with its monuments to official patriotism and its ghettos of despair; to Hollywood, factory of an illusionary America; to the nightmare of Vietnam itself where the kneeling image of an old straw-hatted Vietnamese woman merges in his mind into an image of his own kneeling, straw-hatted grandmother.

Gerima's camera hits and runs. But it also lingers, lingers over the poster of Malcolm X on the walls of the girlfriend's apartment; lingers over the grandmother's quilt, photographs of ancestors, and the hypnotically-moving swing on her front porch; lingers over the grandmother's face: lined, loving, proud, glowing with a special inner light.

The grandmother is crucial to Gerima's story. As she sits before a fire that illuminates all her natural beauty, she tells him again and again: "Don't you forget [the struggle of Black people throughout history for freedom, dignity, justice] 'Cause I don't want you to ever forget. I don't want you to ever forget. ..." Only after Ned Charles begins to make key linkages with the past, to the heritage carried on by his grandmother and others like her, is he able to begin to find a way out of his personal hell.

In one softly-lit scene at a fishing pier, he finally *listens* to his older friend. Listens as his friend tells him to "think about history." Listens as his friend tells him about Paul Robeson and W.E.B. DuBois who were persecuted but who stood tall. Listens as his friend warns him, "They're my strength. Better be yours too."



PHOTOGRAPHY BY MYPHENDUH FILMS, INC.

"...If you insulate yourself with comfort you become detached from the reality of the day-to-day experience of poor people."

"Ashes and Embers" was completed in 1982 and took almost four years to make.

Gerima's other films include: "Wilmington 10—U.S.A. 10,000" (1978, color/black and white, 120 minutes); "Bush Mama" (1976, black and white, 98 minutes); and "Harvest: 3,000 Years" (1976, black and white, 150 minutes, in Amharic with English subtitles.)

The first is a documentary on the Wilmington Ten which views the celebrated-notorious case of the civil rights activists as part of a worldwide struggle between the oppressed and the oppressor, as the Rev. Ben Chavis emphasizes over and over. But the real "stars" of the film may well be the relatives of the defendants. Gerima bathes their faces in compassion and respect as one speaks of working "like a dog all my life in white people's houses" or another tells how "the whole system's bad towards Black folks, poor folks" but that she isn't bitter because "if I was bitter I couldn't fight."

"Bush Mama" is a portrait of Dorothy, a Black Los Angeles welfare mother who wanders somnabulistically through her life as she treks to the welfare office, only to be confronted with assaults on her dignity, and wanders through encounters with her neighbors, many of them maimed by racism and poverty but others able to see through all the muck. But it is also a portrait of her spiritual and political awakening, an awakening that comes in confluence with that of her man. At the end, she flings off the wig she has worn throughout the film, a gesture symbolizing the liberation of her mind as well.

In "Harvest: 3,000 Years," Gerima looks to his home, Gondar, Ethiopia, and shows the daily back-breaking routines of a peasant family as it slaves for a lazy, tyrannical landlord. The society portrayed is one where "the poor live in graves and the rich live in high buildings with ladders," as the local "madman" revolutionary expresses it, and where the rulers speak of 3,000 years of progress but the madman knows better.

In one arresting scene, with ironically triumphant music in the background, the madman lifts his legs high and marches —backward. "March, March, 3,000 years backward," he chants, mocking the rulers' contention. As he marches bright-eyed children laugh at his antics, unaware of his perception of truth. But Berehun, the eldest son of the peasant family, does not laugh. At the end he comes to a realization: "I thought the exploitation was limited to my family, but it is everywhere." As the images of poor Ethiopians merge into each other, servants into shoeshine boys, shoeshine boys into laborers, laborers into blacksmiths, the words "with our labor, with our backs, with our sweat" are projected on the screen.

The capacity of people to change — whether the unlettered Berehun, the tormented Ned Charles, the somnambulistic Dorothy—is a theme that runs through all of Gerima's work. That he focuses on this theme both in his films and in his conversation reflects his belief that "the dominant literature and film in Western society has made my people think they are incapable of transforming. But in fact the capacity to transform is inherent in all human beings."

In order to change, the characters in Gerima's films must take into account the past. This reflects his view that "Black people in the past did more with less resources, less freedom of mobility and less technology than we do today. My disappointment is more with my generation. My generation is very individualistic and unaware of the perspective of history. Very few realize where all the little benefits we have came from.

"So in my films I'm constantly obsessed with the elderly generation of my people. And also because elderly people play a major role in my own self-discovery and self-strength. When does Ned Charles listen to his grandmother? When my grandmother was near me, did I listen to her? Or is it when she passes [dies] that I try to recollect and try to put pieces of things together? These are amazing

human dilemmas that I am fascinated with personally."

Gerima also sees film as a way to get people to think about the class structure of society and how destructive it is. "Most of the time comfort blinds people," he says. "It doesn't matter what color you are, if you insulate yourself with comfort you become more and more detached from the reality of the day-to-day experiences of poor people." So his films seek to ask a question which he phrases this way: "How happy are you in a world where 90 percent of the world's inhabitants are in misery? How happy are you as a human being?"

His, though, is not a pessimistic vision. "I couldn't make a movie if I had no hope," he says. "I think the world will change. I think the present control of the media by the West makes it look bleak. But as human beings develop a more fundamental consciousness of the globe being one, and as we begin to see every human being on this planet as an equal history-maker, and we all begin to claim that right, that will be the brightest time!"

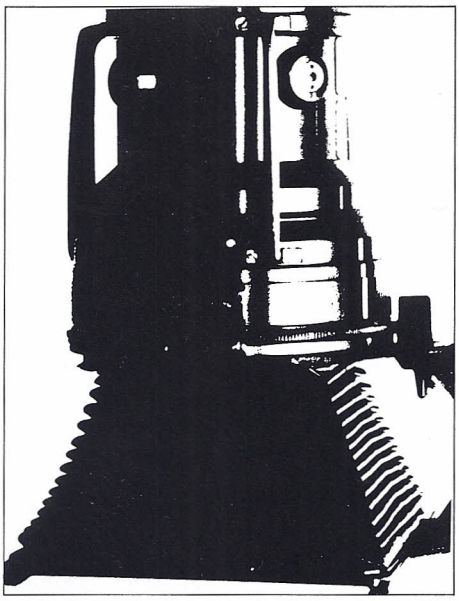
Gerima's films, especially "Ashes and Embers" and "Harvest: 3,000 Years," have brought recognition to him and via him to Howard's film program. "Certainly Haile Gerima is well known both on the national and international level," Chenzira notes. Says Gittens: "Haile is highly respected for his film work and Haile is also respected for his thought. He is one of the clearest spokesmen for the point of view of alternative film in this country."

Gerima's formidable articulateness, though, may make many language purists blanch. His sentences tend to take a convoluted life of their own, showing carefree disregard for some of the finer points of English grammar, and he loves to coin words, mix metaphors and respond to a matter-of-fact question with words that veer off into poetry.

Gerima's resume is crowded with lists of film presentations and lectures he has given, professional and community activities in which he has participated and honors, citations and grants he has received.

Awards his films have received include two grand prixs from the International Film Festival in Figueira de Foz, Portugal; the George Sadoul Prize from the French Film Critics Association at the Cannes International Film Festival; first prize, Benalmadena (Spain) International Film Festival; first prize, Jamaica National Film Festival; the Oscar Micheaux Award for best feature film from the Black Filmmakers Hall of Fame, Oakland, Ca.

Support for his work has come from the



National Endowment for the Arts, the National Endowment for the Humanities, the D.C. Commission on the Arts and Humanities, the John Simon Guggenheim Memorial Foundation and Howard University.

"Ashes and Embers" was financed through a combination of grants, loans, portions of his salary, and revenues generated by showings of his previous films.

When he works he keeps costs down by using students and other volunteers on his crews and, generally, casting his films with non-professional actors, often with extraordinary results. (Witness: all the performances in "Harvest: 3,000 Years" and that of Evelyn Blackwell as the grandmother, especially, in "Ashes and Embers.")

Articles about Gerima's films and his vision and reviews of specific works have appeared in publications as diverse as *The New York Times, Variety, The Baltimore Afro-American, Horn of Africa* and *The Washington Post.* Overall, the critical response has been favorable.

While expressing reservations about some aspects of "Ashes and Embers," a *Village Voice* critic nonetheless concluded that the film "establishes Gerima as among the most interesting and original narrative filmmakers on the current scene." A *Buffalo Evening News* writer observed that "Mr. Gerima's achievement is the depth and reality of the black world that he creates on film," while a writer in *The Black Collegian* found Gerima to be "a power filmmaker, gifted in inciting emotional riots in the guts of his viewers."

Not everyone who sees a Haile Gerima film likes a Haile Gerima film. Some find them too slow-moving and because of this "boring." "If you come out of an urban environment with its dog-eat-dog mentality, planes taking off, telephones ringing, subways whizzing, computers going, and you sit down to watch my films it's like taking a New Yorker and putting him in the village where I was born," he says. "Two different times will collide."

While acknowledging the existence of this collision, he nonetheless declares, "I will refuse to submit to the urban subwayized (sic) kind of pacing to a film. I'm not saying I'm always right. But my interest is to explore the time element of a specific story and let that story impose its *own* time upon the audience that has come to see it. Sometimes people in the audience want to impose their own time. So my films fight them back. I think even that is positive."

Others, especially white critics, find his films too "preachy." "My films are 'preachy' if you don't agree with the message or if it doesn't speak to you," he says. "But a whole lot of Black folks who write about my films don't think they're 'preachy' because they identify on a gut level with what is spoken by different characters. So, it depends. . . .

"Just the other day one Los Angeles theater rejected 'Ashes and Embers' on the basis of articles the owners read that it was too political. Yet they have shown the most controversial foreign political films. But those films deal with things that are far away, things that don't raise dust here. They [whites in the film world] look out for themselves but when we [Black filmmakers] speak, before we even develop our utterance that much we're considered 'propagandistic.'"

Then there are those who seem to question Gerima's qualifications for making films dealing with the Black American experience because he is, after all, a "foreigner." "I was born in Ethiopia and I spent most of my years there," he answers. "Therefore I'm molded out of that context. But my having been in the U.S. for 12, 13 years and my profound relationships with Afro-Americans has had a major impact on me. I would say I'm a Black person in America. I don't have the historical experience of Afro-Americans but I think it is my duty to study and learn and know what went down with them.

"I don't set myself up as an authority. Every film I do that deals with Afro-Americans is another attempt by me to understand Afro-Americans. I could call all my films, 'Dear Afro-American brothers and sisters.' They are just small humble letters from me in film form. Just letters written by me out of love and passion and care. And as I continue to do films here, every film teaches me to say the next letter."

They are all part of what he calls "my restless search in film."

Alonzo Crawford

The power of film is not in the watching but in the process of making.

It's a slogan Alonzo Crawford often uses. In a paper, "A Pedagogy of Cinema: The Power of the Film Process to Raise Black Social Consciousness," he spells out what he means by his slogan:

"It is naive to believe that the viewing of a single movie, regardless of how progressive it may be, can liberate anyone. Qualitative change in social awareness cannot take place through passive acceptance of reality on a movie screen. No movie ever liberated anyone. It is the involvement in the *process* from conceptualization to critical analysis which liberates both filmmaker and 'audience.'

"It is the perception of the process of filmmaking — the conceptualization, production, distribution, exhibition and criticism — as an organic whole through which the participants dialogically interact which is liberating. The power of cinema as a tool of authentic pedagogy is grounded in trust between the community and the filmmaker, for the filmmaker, too, is an oppressed member of the community struggling toward liberation as a person and as an artist.

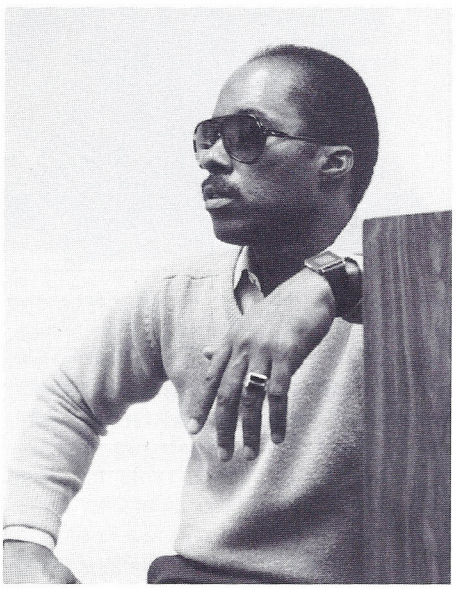
"This pedagogy brings the traditionally isolated artist face to face with the raw contradictions of society. It exposes the artist to the authentic images and processes of the real world as interpreted by those most closely concerned."

"Dirt, Ground, Earth and Land," Crawford's 90-minute color docudrama, reflects both his belief in the power of film as a consciousness-raising tool and his collective approach to filmmaking. It is an indictment of the way speculators and landlords are pushing the poor out of inner-city neighborhoods in order to create trendy, overpriced abodes for affluent whites. It is also a call to arms to combat this displacement for it views the right to decent housing as a right that should be enjoyed by all.

The film contrasts the renovated home of a white family, with its typical "back-to-the-city" interior design clichés, including bars on the windows, with the run-down dwelling of a poor Black mother named Rosetta whose boyfriend works as an unskilled laborer on construction projects. "Well, it's about the time to go play slave again," he tells her as he heads for work.

Other scenes comment on the lack of recreational facilities for poor-inner city children (a child is killed exploring a drainage ditch, his cries for help unheard); on the frustrations felt by Hispanic parents as their children abandon their language and culture; on the manipulations and machinations of developers as they seek to increase their purchases of homes now occupied by poor Blacks; on the dawning realization of their own racism on the part of some whites (the mother in the trendy house.)

"In the end," says Crawford, "Rosetta organizes the community against the speculators and there is a major demonstration on the block. It's implied that the community is gaining ground." [As of this writing only part of the film was available for viewing.]



PHOTOGRAPHY BY ABIYI FORD

"...We follow the Hollywood tradition in portraying white people and we follow our tradition in portraying Black people."

Crawford and his crew shot the film at numerous locations in Washington. They talked with some of the people who lived in these locations about many of the issues raised in the film, sharing with them their research on tenants' rights and landlords' responsibilities. And things began to happen.

Tenants in one southeast apartment complex near 12th and Alabama Avenues, filed civil charges against their landlord for housing code violations, using footage the crew shot of the building's deplorable conditions as evidence. "After the judge looked at our footage, the tenants won," Crawford says. "We hadn't even known they were going to court when they [working through a legal aid lawyer] subpoenaed the film." The story has a bittersweet ending: Rather than make repairs, the landlord abandoned the complex, forcing the tenants to move. But they enjoyed six months free rent before that happened.

Residents of a block of houses owned by a single landlord on Carrollsburg Street, S.W., another location used in the film, "took off so fast we couldn't keep up," Crawford says. "They held a major mass meeting and brought the landlord in and made him promise he wasn't going to touch [displace] that community." Thus, the film's plot followed real events in one of the areas filmed.

The way Crawford sees it, "People on Carrollsburg Street started looking at the speculators and looking at the landlords and instead of seeing the situation as hopeless and themselves as helpless they started saying, 'We got some power here!'"

The film is cast with non-professional actors who live in the Washington area. Most of the children, like those they portray, came from poor families And in working with them, Crawford and his crew often found themselves caught up in the unexpected. "I got involved in trying to teach the children the lines and I discovered that they couldn't read," he says. "So we had to get into a tutoring thing."

Some residents in locations where the film was made helped man the crew. "About 40 people — students and community people — worked on the film over the four years," he explains. "The credits go on forever." This involvement firmly convinced him, he says, "that the Black independent filmmaker's responsibility is in the community, that we have to adapt our skills to the problems of the community and that I can trust the community with expensive equipment, with helping in an expensive process, even with the development and creation of the idea."

"Dirt, Ground, Earth and Land" also represents Crawford's attempt "to challenge the existing aesthetic structure of film, not only challenge it in terms of its aesthetics but also to challenge the philosophy out of which the aesthetics evolved. The existing ideology is one based on individual competitiveness and all that, which is fine if it works for you. But it doesn't work for us as Black people. Therefore we have to challenge this concept of individualism and move to one of *collectivism.*

"We said, 'In a collective approach to film we must show people collectively.' And you'll see that whenever we show Black people we try to show them as a group and only when they do something that goes against the progress of the group as a whole do we show them as individuals. Then we use a close-up.

"Another thing we did was to use realistic lighting in the Black homes but in the white community we use this beautiful, picturesque kind of Hollywood lighting.

The Academic Program

Since August, the Department of Radio, Television and Film has been operating under a new "integrated media program," explains Arthur France, chairman of the department. What this means for the student interested in pursuing a film career, he says, is that "film has been integrated into the total curriculum" and that the degree earned now bears the designation "broadcast production-film," instead of "film directing" as it did in the past.

It is no longer possible, then, for a student to concentrate exclusively on film and not have any exposure to the basics of television and radio production. "Our new approach was instituted to make better use of our resources—both teaching and equipment—and to match new trends in the industry," France says. "Film and television are merging outside in the professional world. Television people are required to know film and if film people don't know some television, some video, they are going to have a hard time getting a job."

Film-oriented students first take such generalized courses as "Introduction to Media Production" and "Basic Television and Film Production" and then take more specialized courses in film, among them: "Cinematography," "Script Writing," "Cinema Sound" and "Film Directing."

Students in the film production tract learn all the necessary skills to produce a double system synchronous sound 16-millimeter film (e.g. how to operate movie cameras, microphones, editing machines). They learn how to come up with ideas for films, whether documentary or feature; how to develop a film idea; script it; and ultimately how to translate that script into the visual medium. They do all this, says Abiyi Ford, "with a healthy respect and understanding of the grammar of film, as distinct from a person who can merely *record* what unfolds before the camera."

But technical training constitutes just one part of Howard's filmmaking program. "The student [who comes out of the Howard program] will also have a strong understanding of the social dimensions of film and how it impacts on society and, particularly, how it translates into the historical reality of Black and Third World people," Ford adds. "We have designed two special courses in this area, 'Third World Cinema' and 'Blacks in Film.' But in all the courses we teach, we make a definite effort to try to instill an Afrocentric or Third World perspective. Even when we look at the technical equipment, we still try to introduce it and try to approach it from this perspective."

"We're training students so they can go and work anywhere," says Alonzo Crawford. "But what we hope comes out in the process is that they have a certain consciousness about where they're from, who they are and what their responsibility is as Black filmmakers."

On a practical level, a unique feature of Howard's instructional program in film is that students do not have to pay for the film they use on various projects. "That's very important," says third-year-student Arthur Jafa Fielder, III, "because historically Black people, and Black students especially, haven't gone into film for economic reasons."

Last January, the university's Board of Trustees approved a proposal submitted by the School of Communications to establish a professional graduate program leading to the Master of Fine Arts (M.F.A.) in film. "This need for advanced study in film and broadcasting from the Afro-American and minority perspectives is necessitated by the simple fact that there are no such programs to be found anywhere," stated the proposal. "In a world that is demonstrably highly responsive to the influence of these media, it becomes imperative that Howard University's initiative in this area be extended logically to include a program of study leading to advanced degrees in film and broadcasting."

Howard's film professors greeted the news of the Board of Trustees' decision with elation. In their view the decision will mean more films will be coming out of the university (thanks to thesis films) and so will more highly-trained filmmakers, filmmakers with the potential to become in Haile Germia's words, "profound image-makers." □

So we follow the Hollywood tradition of filmmaking in portraying white people and we follow *our* tradition in portraying Black people." Such devices, though the viewer is not likely to be fully conscious of them, represent part of what Crawford calls "our search for the Black aesthetic in cinema."

Many of the ideas and approaches evident in Crawford's current film have their genesis in earlier short films he's made. Two examples:

"Crowded" (1978), a compelling portrait of the deadening, dehumanizing conditions of the Baltimore City Jail, has a rich soundtract but no narration. "The images were so powerful that we felt a narrator might distract," he says. The film was used by legal aid attorneys to win a class-action suit filed by inmates to reduce the jail's population. Crawford hopes the film will cause the viewer to raise some questions about the whole penal system in this country, not simply the overcrowding of one particular institution.

"My Mama and My Sister Too" (1974), made while Crawford was working as a media specialist for the Metropolitan Applied Research Center in New York City, reflects Crawford's view that "the Black family is the Black man's strength." "Yet, throughout social science history," he says angrily, "our families have been classified as pathological." "The film is about a Harlem welfare mother and her seven children and how they collectively organize themselves to deal with being on welfare, to struggle for education and, at the same time, to nourish each other," he explains.

Currently, Crawford is writing a proposal for a full-length film with a family theme. [His housing displacement film has been supported by grants from the National Endowment for the Arts, the American Film Institute, The Film Forum and the D.C. Commission on the Arts and Humanities.] The new film he wants to do addresses the question: "What makes a young man who comes from a respectable Black family turn to a life of drugs and crime and what does society have to do with it?"

"It is," he says softly, "the story of one of my brothers." He hopes to involve his brother in the filmmaking process and he hopes that this involvement will spur his brother to examine his life, to analyze it and to begin to take some steps to change it. Just as the residents on Carrollsburg Street did.

Abiyi Ford

Abiyi Ford stands in front of his "Documentary Film Critique" class and talks about how films were originally used to record the activities of European royalty but how their value as message carriers became recognized.

He talks about the early success of the documentary "Nanook of the North" and how it started "a whole syndrome of films on places Western man thought bizarre and unusual from his perspective." Thus was launched "a search for exotica."

10 He talks about the ideas of "objectivity" and "subjectivity" in documentary film, about the close line separating education and propaganda, about "the raging war for the management of information, for the control of the human mind."

And he illustrates his views with references to popular films and television shows.

"I've had you for several courses," a student tells him at the end of class, "and I find that whenever I go to the movies with my friends now I can't just sit back and enjoy what I'm seeing. Instead, I'm always thinking about what the message is underneath."

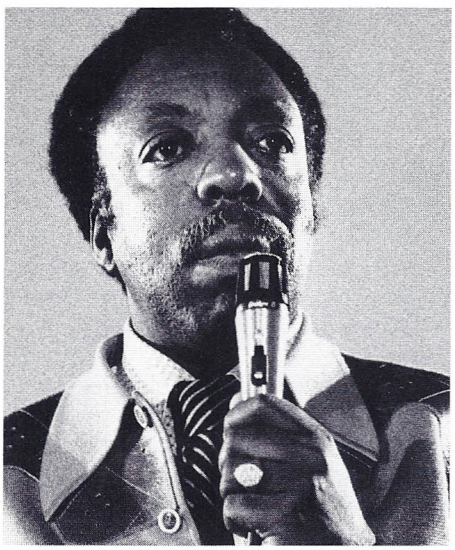
Ford beams. After all, that's just what he wants his students to do.

Although Ford has made some films through the years (an educational series for New York's Bank Street College of Education, some short experimental ventures, a documentary on the First Pan African Cultural Festival in Algeria in 1969), he is known primarily for his work as a teacher and a theoretician of film.

"There is no such thing as benign entertainment," he is apt to boom out in his Shakespearean actor-style voice. Even if a person is watching something "just" for relaxation or entertainment, "it can be readily demonstrated that the mind, the sensors are being programmed," he says. "The sensors are receiving new information and the mind is codifying it and storing it and it is going to surface in one form or fashion later in life. That is the scientific, natural behavior of man."

A person may watch "Tarzan," for example, and think it is just an adventure film, he points out, "but along with the story that person will be developing, learning and acquiring notions and concepts that are stereotypical of Third World people in other regions. The *descriptive* part of 'Tarzan' is the idea the viewer gets about how Africans live. The *prescriptive* part is that the viewer will prescribe for himself not to associate with those people [Africans] who have been described to him as totally alien, inferior or hostile to his own particular environment."

Description and prescription are words that often crop up in Ford's conversation. "Cinema, for Third World people, should take on the responsible task of description and prescription for the manner in which we are to interact with the world," he argues. "We have always been *described* by Eurocentric sources which still continue to do that to a large extent and we also respond to the *prescriptions* that are given out by these sources. It's a vicious circle. We must begin to alter this and turn it around."



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"...I'm interested in encouraging people to look to books, to plays, even to stories as sources for film."

Ford expresses such ideas not only in his teaching but in papers he's given. Papers with titles like "From the Fireside to the Screen: Toward the Synchronization of African Cinema with African Culture;" "Film and Propaganda;" "The Third World and The Alternative Cinema;" "Images of Third World People in the Mass Media."

These days he also is working on an hour-length documentary which is supported, in part, by a small completion grant from WETA, a Washington Public Broadcasting Service station. The film was initiated by someone else but has since become his own, both in terms of all the new footage he has shot and edited and of its overall conception.

The ideas behind "Reflective Moments," Ford says, are to allow artist Lois Mailou Jones Pierre-Noel "to do the telling of her own story" and "to reintegrate her into the tapestry of history." In it, the artist simply talks about her life, either sitting in her garden with the sun transforming her face into an Impressionist painting or inside her handsome, canvas-filled home. Throughout, her words are punctuated by roving images of her paintings and stills of scenes from her past.

She describes the influences on her life and art. "My mother was an artistic person; she loved to make hats," she remarks, and the camera seems to caress her joyous canvases of colorful, flower-decorated hats.

She speaks of her stay in Paris, "the most shackle-free period I experienced," and the camera lingers over her artistic depictions of Paris street scenes while a recording of Josephine Baker is heard on the soundtrack.

She recalls her travels to Africa and to Haiti ("For me, Haiti is Africa") and the camera shows the influence of this heritage on her canvases. At the film's end, her own profile is set against that of an African sculpture she once painted, serving as a graphic reminder of the links between Black people all over the world.

Working on the Pierre-Noel film has given Ford "the bug" to make additional films, he says. He is currently developing proposals for two films inspired by his own experience as the son of Barbadians who became followers of Marcus Garvey and settled in Ethiopia. Another project he'd eventually like to tackle, and one which he admits "may be inordinately ambitious," is to make a film adaptation of John Oliver Killens' sweeping novel, "And Then We Heard the Thunder."

"In addition to doing films that come out of our minds — what Haile does, for instance — I'm interested in encouraging people to look to books, to plays, even to stories as sources for film," he says. "There are grandmothers or grandfathers sitting down somewhere who have four or five films in them."

Ford received his Master of Fine Arts (M.F.A.) from Columbia University; Crawford's M.F.A. is also from Columbia, while Gerima's is from UCLA. But what the three men seem to share goes far beyond degrees, namely: an aesthetic love of film as a medium; a searing anger at the way Black and Third World peoples traditionally have been depicted on the screen; a recognition of the power of film; a commitment to using that power not as a tool to escape reality but as a tool to examine it, confront it and change it.

The three Howard professors have the credentials and the certified skills to make an escapist movie. But for them that would be a cop-out, a betrayal of the needs of a people. As Gerima says, "What is important is that your poetry, your songs, your films sustain a vision to create stronger human beings able to deal rationally with the complexity of a globe that more and more is becoming one." □