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The Academic Program

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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 Geremia'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 soundtrack 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.