Film Review: Barack & Curtis: Manhood, Power & Respect by Byron Hurt

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Byron Hurt offers us a creative lens through which we might begin to examine the complex production, maintenance, inscription, internalization and appropriation of "black masculinity" in popular culture. To be sure, this is no small feat. "Black" and "masculinity" are two ideologically loaded, culturally specific signs. Not only this, they are historically situated. That is to say, getting underneath the myriad layers, which make up both "black" and "masculinity" could be a life long enterprise (or, a thorny dissertation project at best). That is, if you take seriously the complex layering of problems each term presents on its own, the modification that occurs when two historically brimming adjectives are placed together, the meaning that is signified and inscribed through the stabilization and consistency of language, and the perennial negotiation (by way of tug of war) that occurs through the appropriation and performance of the living phrase, "black masculinity."

I will say up front that I think Hurt does an acceptable job with this, particularly given the time constraints of his project. If his goal was to offer differing versions of "black masculinity" through both parallels and juxtapositions, he does this. Hurt is very careful to convey both the differences and similarities between Barack and Curtis. Although, content analysis shows that many more differences than similarities were foregrounded. Nonetheless, Hurt does communicate the complex reality of the concept, "black masculinity," and the living subjects, black men. As mentioned in this short web-based documentary film, there is a "little of 50 and Obama in all men." I concur with this. However, I would venture to say that *everyone* has a little of both, again, depending on cultural and historical specificity. Meaning, the intellect and "stately" stature of Barack and the street smart, hyper-masculinist b-boy stance of 50, are cultural productions that are historically, not gender, specific. Women possess and appropriate these qualities too.

This brings me to the lurking, yet not really explicit message in Hurts' film: race and gender are unhinged cultural productions, which try to become fixed through the regularity of language, discourse, representations, and performance—all of which tries to anchor meanings in limited "either/or" or "both/and" boxes. However, neither of these positions work. Both suggest the existence of distinguishable lines between the ideas we place upon bodies (think of a puzzle). For instance, let's say I agree that all men have a little of 50 and Obama in them. The "either/or" position, which Hurt rightly avoids, suggests individuated binary opposites while the "both/and" position, which Hurt understandably foregrounds, suggests a detectable symbiosis made up of discernable inner and outer boundaries. This fails to get at the very real complexity that is 50/gangsta/Curtis/father/son/successful entrepreneur/etc. or Barack/intellect/first black president elect/father/son/husband/etc. It certainly doesn't get underneath the complex layering of overarching, regulating themes such as blackness, masculinity, cultural production, and America.

To be sure, both of these men are products of an intermeshing of multiple cultures and histories. Thus, their particular meanings are fluid, complex and vast. In short,

Barack is more than a Harvard trained intellect and Curtis is more than a thugged out gangsta turned materialistic, business savvy entrepreneur. In the words of black feminist literary critic Hortense Spillers, both of these men are "marked" with numerous meanings. However, no one truly knows their names. Hurt attempts to convey this. I think though that this is a somewhat impossible task to achieve in ten minutes. And yet, Hurt has provided a start. The task of examining and re-imagining "black masculinity" is layered, arduous and tangled. There is a lot to do here. We know that media helps to define both race and gender through language and representations, and that seemingly polar opposites such as Barack and Curtis are more so "twin actants" on a common cosmic slope with many points of commonality. Perhaps next steps should include parsing out the condition of "otherness" that both men share, which has been passed from generation to generation through the production of meaning via language, discourse and representations.

I imagine a serious analysis of this will show that the media (meaning television, film advertising, etc.) is only partially to blame. In conclusion, the production, maintenance and circulation of race and gender ideals extend far beyond traditional media sources. These ideas are not only hegemonic. They are imprinted in our psyches. And not only this, they are appropriated through all of our bodies-*both men and women*.
To view *Barack & Curtis*: http://www.bhurt.com/barackandcurtis.php