

## BRANDON'S ANGLE

# Films by African-American creators commemorate black history

**BRANDON SHILLINGFORD**  
Contributing Writer

As Black History Month comes to an end, I'm reminded of many films made by black artists that made me fall in love with movies. With that being said, here are just a few that I love and find the most influential. And if you haven't seen them, drop whatever you're doing and check them out.

**"GANJA AND HESS,"**  
**BILL GUNN (1973)**

After premiering at the 1972 Cannes Film Festival, Gunn's masterpiece was lauded by French critics, but adversely panned in the states. American critics called it "slow" and "pretentious," and it was pulled from theaters after three days.

"Ganja and Hess" operates as a subversion to the highly popular blaxploitation films of its time, which were often overproduced and showy — critics of the genre said it promoted stereotypes about black people. Most blaxploitation and horror movies were fast paced and filled with action — "Ganja and Hess" is the exact opposite. Slow and deliberate, it seeks to study love, passion, and religious and social confines in the black community. It also serves as an allegory for addiction.

Dr. Hess Green is a wealthy, intelligent and clever black man. He's a contrast to the way black men were portrayed on screen in the '70s. Duane Jones' nuanced portrayal of Hess is a welcome deviation from stereotypical genre conformity, especially in horror where black men are often treated as expendable.

"Ganja and Hess" is a phenomenal piece of horror history that taps into cultural and racial taboos and fears, permeating the psyche. It creates a specific type of cerebral horror and has influenced countless films like it.

**"DO THE RIGHT THING,"**  
**SPIKE LEE (1989)**

Lee's magnum opus is an unparalleled work of cinematic rage. Lee puts his heart and soul into the film. His passion is seen in every frame, and venom comes from every word in the script. It's impassioned filmmaking at its finest.

Lee taps into hot-button racial issues in a masterwork of tonal balance, shifting from being uproariously funny to profoundly sad. "Do the Right Thing" is a film of its time and acts as a snapshot, with vignettes of Lee's character Mookie experiencing life. He delivers pizzas, talks to neighbors and visits his girlfriend, all while the neighborhood racial tension reaches a boiling point.

It's a personal film for Lee and one of

the most important of all time. Provocative and fearless, "Do the Right Thing" is a film we still discuss 30 years later.

It's a vital piece of cinematic art that leaves an impact which lasts long after the credits roll.

**"THE WATERMELON WOMAN,"**  
**CHERYL DUNYE (1996)**

"I'm working on being a filmmaker. The problem is, I don't know what I want to make a film on. I know it has to be about black women because our stories have never been told," Dunye said while playing herself in "The Watermelon Woman."

As a thesis statement for independent film and a generation of women that had yet to be authentically represented, Dunye's "The Watermelon Woman" was truly ahead of its time. It tells the story of a young black woman — played by Dunye herself — navigating dating life, filmmaking and family.

The film uses its miniscule budget to its absolute advantage. It doesn't use Dunye's sexuality as a story device or as an obstacle for her to overcome, but as an advantage that allows her to see the world from a unique perspective.

Dunye brings essential questions of race and sexuality to the forefront in a

medium where filmmakers never had the courage to do so before.

**"GET OUT,"**  
**JORDAN PEELE (2017)**

While it may be cliché to label a film as an "experience," I find it hard to think of a more appropriate term for Peele's masterful and genre-transcending directorial debut, "Get Out."

From the opening shot, "Get Out" takes you into its clutches and doesn't let go. It's extremely visceral, setting a very specific tone right from the beginning. Peele seeks to put you in the shoes of main character Chris — conveying his terror, excitement and anger — as a weekend away with his white girlfriend's family reveals sinister intentions.

Taking cues from films like "Ganja and Hess," Peele crafts a rich cinematic experience that not only rewards the viewer but challenges them, making it an essential piece of contemporary African-American cinema.

