Chapter Five

Black Hollywood Meets New Hollywood

The Landlord and the Racial Impasse Film of 1970

When William Wyler makes such a vivid, melodramatic rationale for the collapse of race relations that the movie [The Liberation of L. B. Jones] comes close to celebrating it, you had better believe that something is happening in this land.—Vincent Canby

I've never seen a script in which the intellectual and emotional applications of color were more apparent... For the first time in modern literature, theatre, or film, white can be used [for] negative connotations.

—script consultant (probably Jerry Howard) on The Landlord

As a new decade dawned in Hollywood, the economic, social, and aesthetic turmoil impacting American commercial cinema persisted. The losses incurred by the major studios during the recession of 1969 initiated a period of retrenchment in the industry, a period in which the majors, seemingly having lost the knack of attracting a mass audience, desperately tried to woo niche audiences to theaters through a variety of means. In the wake of the extraordinary profitability of the biker art picture Easy Rider in 1969, studios aggressively courted the middle-class youth audience by distributing features that addressed topical issues of interest to the nation's college-aged counterculture, or that approximated the sophisticated formal and narrational innovations of the 1960s European art cinema, or that took advantage of the liberalization of film content resulting from the demise of the old Production Code and the implementation of a new ratings system. A number of such films were released by Hollywood studios around 1970, but many were outright flops, most memorably MGM's overbudgeted Zabriskie Point (1970).

As detailed in chapters 3 and 4, the African American movie audience was another niche market that studios courted by the late 1960s. Like the
American film industry in general, which was in the midst of a painful transition from the era of the classic studio system to the even more profitable phase initiated by the mid-1970s blockbusters Jaws (1975) and Star Wars (1977), black-themed Hollywood cinema in 1970 was on the cusp of a period of substantial growth. Yet despite the reasons for guarded optimism, the black-oriented productions of 1970 were significantly shaped by a climate of disenchancement with the glacial pace of film employment opportunities for African Americans and pessimism over prospects for a legitimate and authentic black cinema emerging from the major studio network.

The attitudes of the African American creative and technical personnel who worked on Hollywood's post-Uptight black-themed movies reflected the mind-set of many black artists at the end of the 1960s. Influenced by the surge in black America's receptiveness to racial separatism, these individuals increasingly expressed doubt that black and white actors could ever continue to work together or learn from each other. Not surprisingly, the most downbeat assessment of Hollywood's capacity to offer rewarding work came from James Baldwin, then embroiled in a battle with Columbia over his Autobiography of Malcolm X script. Baldwin told the New York Times that African Americans had little more to gain by participating in a commercial film industry that reduces artists and their creations to mere "properties." For black actors, the price of merely "appearing"—that is, the price of acquiescing to white writers and directors—"may prove to be too high for black people to pay," for such an act preserves the existing industrial power structure. Bitterly, the author damned his Columbia bosses with metaphors of peonage:

If they think that I was happy being a slave and am now redeemed by having become—and on their terms, as they think!—the equal of my overseers, well, let them think so. If they think that I am flattered by their generosity in allowing me to become a sharecropper in a system which I know to be criminal—and which is placed squarely on the backs of nonwhite people all over the world—well, let them think so.

Let the dead bury their dead. 3

The growing unwillingness of African American artists to assimilate into the Hollywood system is further manifest in the content of the explicitly and tangentially black-themed pictures distributed by the majors in 1970. The list of relevant "racial impasse" films to premiere in that year includes . . . tick . . . tick . . . tick . . . in January; The Liberation of L. B. Jones and Halls of Anger in March; Leo the Last, The Landlord, and Watermelon Man in May; The Angel Levine in July; and The Great White Hope in October. My case study here is one of the many released under the banner of United Artists (UA): Hal Ashby's The Landlord. Produced by Norman Jewison for the Mirisch Company for distribution by UA, The Landlord is both a typical and an outstanding 1970 black-themed Hollywood film: typical because it reflects the period's tendency to depict black-and-white race relations as damaged perhaps beyond repair, and as bogged down in a stalemate with neither side willing to really listen to the other; outstanding because, more so than any other racial impasse movie of that year, The Landlord was the product of a nearly unprecedented close collaboration between leading film talent of both races. Contrary to Baldwin's experience, the black and white creative personnel on The Landlord did seem to benefit in many ways from their partnership, and the resulting film therefore exhibits an awareness of the contradictions underlying the assumptions that animated the racial impasse cycle.

As in previous chapters, my intention here is to explain a particular movie's perceived failure in the face of high expectations, but at the same time I hope to demonstrate the ways in which The Landlord, alone among the racial impasse films of 1970, offered a sophisticated alternative to the already conventional filmic treatment of American race relations. This approach was soon overwhelmed by the black action formula initiated by Ossie Davis's Cotton Comes to Harlem and replicated by blaxploitation successes like Shaft, but under timelier conditions it might well have supplied Hollywood with a model for the treatment of race relations both commercially and artistically more viable than that of Uptight.

In giving equal time to both black and white sides, The Landlord, like many of the racial impasse movies, may have seemed to represent a step backward for the studios following The Last Man and Uptight, two films that focused primarily on interactions within African American communities. In fact, through dramatizing the adventures of an impetuous, bourgeois white youth seeking to build interracial relationships despite censure from white relations and black acquaintances, The Landlord more clearly resembled a slightly earlier film whose formula many hoped had already passed into obsolescence: Guess Who's Coming to Dinner. The Landlord actually acknowledges the parallel in one of its many knowing asides to the tradition of black-themed Hollywood cinema. When the white protagonist, Elgar Enders, tells his mother, "I think I love a girl who's a Negro," Mrs. Enders responds worriedly, "Didn't we all go together to see Guess Who's Coming to Dinner? All Negroes are not like that."

A few pundits attributed the core disparities between the earlier and later
pictures to the deterioration in black-white relations since Dinner’s December 1967 release date. For Richard Harmet, writing in the Los Angeles Free Press, a “revolution” in attitude separated the two movies, in addition to calendar years: “The Sidney Poitier film, which gently touched on miscegenation, was directed to offend nobody—not even Southerners. . . . [But] The Landlord is tougher stuff.” The source of this toughness for critics like Harmet was the very acknowledgment of racial impasse in American life, or the seeming inability of blacks and whites to live in harmony. With an increasing number of African Americans advocating separation from their Caucasian counterparts in the realms of culture, politics, and economics, Dr. John Prentice’s strong desire to assimilate into the white world of Guess Who’s Coming to Dinner seemed much less believable or commendable than it had upon that picture’s release.

What fundamentally separated The Landlord and other 1970 films from once-hailed benchmarks like Dinner and In the Heat of the Night (another collaboration of UA, Mirisch, and Jewison) was that the later pictures are not merely upfront about the black-white stalemate but bluntly pessimistic about mending the harm that had been done to American race relations of the late 1960s. These films were, to apply Vincent Canby’s comments about The Liberation of L. B. Jones, seemingly “more valid” than the recent Poitier vehicles because they were “more bleak.” Even more so than the already largely forgotten Uptight, whose fatalistic portrayal of ghetto existence was tempered by the relatively digestible form of a thriller narrative, the new wave of black-themed films legitimately surprised and even shocked a number of critics with their cynicism and bluntness.

Prior to May, the 1970 film that seemed to best signal the beginning of a radical new trend was L. B. Jones, the final picture by the legendary Hollywood director William Wyler. Adapted from a Jesse Hill Ford novel, L. B. Jones is a southern Gothic set in a socially backward, racially divided small town where Lord Byron Jones (Roscoe Lee Browne), a gentle black undertaker, sues his young and alluring black wife (Lola Falana) for divorce on grounds of infidelity. In a development that threatens the town’s white power structure, a redneck white police officer (Anthony Zerbe) is named as the correspondent in the suit. The officer and an accomplice subsequently murder Jones to prevent a devastating scandal. The town fathers refuse to prosecute the two killers, thereby preserving the Jim Crow customs that have governed the hamlet for decades. The cop, however, receives poetic justice when he is pushed into a thresher by a steely black youth (Yaphet Kotto) whom he tormented years earlier. To Stirling Silliphant, the film’s co-screenwriter, such a grimly fatalistic ending was the only honest option. As Silliphant made clear in a Variety interview, a contemporary black-themed movie with a peaceful resolution would only “mislead the vast white middle class” into thinking that the country’s racial dilemma had been solved.

Reportedly, Columbia Pictures, L. B. Jones’ distributor, balked at the seemingly pro-black power message of Wyler’s film. Columbia executives became especially nervous about the picture’s commercial future after a tense December 1969 preview, when a number of viewers walked out, in a predominantly white Los Angeles suburb. Even after the trimming of several scenes, L. B. Jones was still confrontational enough to warrant objections from one of its own cast members, Yaphet Kotto. Kotto, after witnessing firsthand young black filmgoers cheering the death of the racist cop, told the press of his fears that the film’s exhibition might instigate anti-white violence in ghetto communities; the actor then asked Columbia to allow him to travel with the picture and discuss it at predominantly African American high schools. As Jan Herman records in his biography of Wyler, Kotto’s concerns were readily adopted by reviewers and syndicated columnists, some of whom claimed the film would likely “incite black youths to violence.”

The reviews that greeted the March 1970 release of L. B. Jones mostly reinforce this sense of indignation. More telling than the straightforward pans, however, were the responses of critics too stunned by the film’s flaunting of its incendiary subject matter to take a clear position on the question of its merit. “Gone is the essentially cheerful, separate-but-equal, we’l-work-this-out-together camaraderie that has always looked a little too easy in Sidney Poitier movies,” pronounced the New York Times’ Canby, who confessed that L. B. Jones left him “depressed.” Andrew Sarris, writing in the Village Voice, expressed surprise that the film’s “inflammatory content” hadn’t aroused more comment, as he was unable to “recall any other movie, white or black, that treated the casual exploitation of black women by white men as a fact of life in the South.” Though reviews like Sarris’s dismissed the idea that a really good studio film could be made about the new social realities, they continually communicate a sense of marvel over the commercial American cinema’s marked shift in attitude on the topic of race.

Of these critiques, Jacob Brackman’s October 1970 piece for Esquire is remarkably astute in situating these films within the context of recent American movie history. Brackman was the only writer in 1970 to generalize about that year’s spate of racial impasse movies based on observations of more than a couple of films. His essay encompasses reviews of Halls of Anger, Leo the Last, The Angel Levine, They Call Me Mister Tibbs—a continuation of In
the Heat of the Night, again with Poitier as Virgil Tibbs—and The Landlord. Amazingly, all of these titles were distributed by United Artists. Indeed, UA’s profile in 1970 as Hollywood’s most racially diverse major studio, with regard to both production content and hiring record, earned the studio a featured spot in a special issue of the Chicago Defender on U.S. businesses making noteworthy advances in race relations.13

Through viewing these films in relatively quick succession, Brackman became acutely aware of the dramatic change in the tone of Hollywood’s black-themed films: “Now movies seem at last to acknowledge that some problems are too big for a decent man to handle.” Although the wealthy white protagonists of The Landlord and Leo the Last attempt to reach out with benevolence to the inhabitants of black ghettos, both are rebuffed. In Ján Kadár’s The Angel Levine, as in the aforementioned two films, “egalitarianism counts for nothing.” Levine depicts the racial impasse by pairing an aged Jewish tailor (Zero Mostel), who requires a miracle to save his sick wife, with a recently deceased black thief (Harry Belafonte), who needs the tailor to believe in him in order to be confirmed as an angel. Rather than work together to their mutual benefit, the two men instead continually “push each other away.” Brackman notes, the white man from “anxiety” and the black man from “enraged frustration.”14 The deeply ingrained racial suspicions and superstitions held by both parties create an unbreachable gulf between the two men, with catastrophic implications for both.

“None of these films would have made sense to us a half a dozen years ago,” Brackman concludes.15 The incredulity with which films like Levine and L. B. Jones were initially received testifies to a concerted attempt by studio filmmakers to both broaden their portrayals of black American life and own up to the fact that liberal virtues have not triumphed as easily in real life as they had in the mid-1960s Poitier vehicles. Yet the cultivation of impasse and ambiguity (of the sort memorably exploited in 1960s European art cinema) in the depiction of race relations doomed these films to commercial failure, regardless of the relative aesthetic value of certain titles, such as The Landlord. That failure hastened the demise of the integrated Hollywood film and directly contributed to the rise of the black-cast blaxploitation formula, a formula within which racial tension is abstracted and drained of its real impact because of its caricatured representation of blacks and the relative absence of whites.

“The Most ‘Negro’ Film Ever”: Remodeling The Landlord

The Landlord was originally a comic novel by the African American author Kristin Hunter, published in March 1966. Elgar Enders, the white title character, is the thirty-four-year-old neurotic offspring of a junk shop magnate. Eager to escape his father’s domineering influence, Elgar purchases a slum tenement building at the story’s outset. Immediately he becomes intimately involved in the lives of his poor black tenants: Marge Perkins, a beefy fortuneteller and once-renowned blues singer; P. Eldridge Dubois, the self-proclaimed president of a nonexistent black college; Charlie Copee, a hostile black nationalist; his wife Fanny, a voluptuous beautician who becomes Elgar’s mistress; and the Copees’ sons, Willie Lee and Walter Gee. When Elgar moves into the apartment’s renovated top floor, his relationship with his tenants deteriorates, a situation exacerbated by Fanny’s unexpected pregnancy and her uncertainty about the father’s identity. The landlord is unable to win the respect of his renters until he becomes involved in a campaign to thwart the city’s efforts to gentrify the community and, consequently, displace its residents of color.

The tone of Hunter’s book throughout is gently satirical and, in the surprised estimation of the Saturday Review critic Abraham Chapman, neither

![Figure 5.1](image-url)
didactic nor bitter in the manner of the stereotypical new "Negro novel." Elgar’s inarticulate rage and self-loathing and even his prejudices are generally played for laughs. His befuddled interactions with his eccentric charges comprise the book’s narrative core, and it is through the frequent incapacity of (white) landlord and (black) tenant to understand each other and the constant shifts in the tenement’s balance of power that the novel’s point of view emerges. The initial suspicion and hostility with which the renters receive Elgar is eventually tempered, and they throw a "rent party" in honor of the new landlord, who is seduced at evening’s end by the sexually voracious Fanny. During their months-long dalliance, Elgar forgives the back rent owed by all of his tenants. But the resulting goodwill dissolves as his lodgers begin to suspect him of having purchased their brownstone only to sell it back to the city for a quick buck. Realizing his mistake—attempting to buy his tenants’ love rather than earn their respect—Elgar embarks on a crusade to save the community from the “Blight Control Bureau” by devising plans for low-rent housing and neighborhood improvements. Simultaneously, he willingly impoverishes himself by funding a musical comeback for Marge, spelling the end of her services as his cook, and by buying a commercial lot for Fanny, where she can establish a beauty salon—which means that Elgar must care for her children while she works. In the end, Elgar finds contentment in his relationship with his renters, but now through his acceptance rather than the abdication of responsibility.

The mistrust and uncertainty that characterize the relationships between Elgar and his tenants in Hunter’s novel are not entirely motivated by race, though race surely broadens the divide between the parties. That said, perhaps the most striking thematic aspect of Hunter’s book is the author’s implication that race is a mutable category, that racial identity is something that is fluid and changeable: a notion signaled by Elgar’s bemused observation to his psychoanalyst that his tenants, when “bored with the designations they were born with,” simply “change them at will” and take on new ones. This idea is most memorably put into practice via the character of Copee, who over the course of the book assumes the identities of a Black Muslim, a Choctaw Indian, an African warrior chanting “Uhuru!” (freedom), and—following an apparent nervous breakdown—a remorseful white man, so moved by “the plight of our lost brown brothers” that he founds an integrationist organization called the “Pan-Humanity-Solidarity Society.”

The novel’s other especially intriguing figure is Lanie, a free-spirited bohemian and Elgar’s on-again, off-again lover. Lanie’s racial makeup cannot be determined through mere observation. She taunts Elgar with epithets like “Great White Father” and “Marse Elgar” and refuses to tell him her “actual” race, stringing him along by claiming to be a mixture of “Greek and Creek (Indian)” while in the next breath vowing that her “grandmother is as black as that chair.” In the book’s conclusion, Lanie confesses to Elgar that she is indeed white but has lived as black since the end of her marriage to a black man: “Before my marriage I was white. Afterward I was identified with my husband, so I was colored. Then came the divorce, and there was no turning back, so I just stayed where I was, in limbo.”

Lanie’s self-granted right to choose her racial identity echoes not just Copee’s transformations but also Elgar’s. After the rent party and his initial liaison with Fanny, Elgar so strongly identifies with his newfound friends that he feels he has finally detected his true self, and he relays this discovery to his therapist: “Sometimes the power of this little organ up here really astonishes me, Borden. I said to myself, ‘Skin, what is it? Just an extra suit of underwear. And who in hell’s business is it what color underwear I wear?’ And then I said, ‘Why can’t I change my skin the same way I change my T-shirt?’ . . . I said to myself, ‘Elgar, at last you know who you are. You have found your identity at last, Elgar. You are a Negro!’—And ever since then, Borden, I say to myself every morning. ‘Elgar, think black.’ And it works, Borden! Yeehoo!” Following his rejection by Marge, Fanny, and the other tenants, Elgar claims his whiteness—“Elgar was not sure how a white man was supposed to act,” Hunter writes, “but he would damned well find out”—and this reclamation further confirms the variability of race as a category.

The Landlord is a book in which practically all the conventional methods of identity demarcation are exposed as completely arbitrary, including class and religion. Elgar has access to millions yet chooses to live like a tramp. Marge, on a whim, forsakes vooodoo for Christianity and the blues for spirituals. Even sexual orientation is treated in this manner, as the homosexual Dubois promises to “reform” in exchange for an endowment for his college. The novel’s optimism arguably stems from the thesis that people separated by such barriers can (with some effort) find common ground because those barriers are, in the end, artificial constructs. The movie adapted from the book would display more pessimism about the prospects for common ground, which makes it align with the filmmaking trends of that year. This pessimism, however, evolved over a period of several years.

Norman Jewison purchased the rights to The Landlord little more than a month after the novel’s publication, a few weeks prior to the premiere of his first sizable hit, The Russians Are Coming, the Russians Are Coming
This film's success solidified his standing as the top director under contract to the Mirisch Company, an independent production firm run by the brothers Harold, Walter, and Marvin Mirisch. The Mirisch Company had steadily built a reputation as a home for top creative talent and as a purveyor of high-quality Hollywood films, including the Best Picture Oscar winners West Side Story (1961) and Jewison's In the Heat of the Night; in 1966, the company was in the midst of a long and successful run as a production supplier to United Artists. UA was one of the healthiest major studios in the 1960s, thanks to the critical and financial success of the Mirisch films and the windfall profits UA received from its distribution of the James Bond series. The studio was thus able to act autonomously despite being owned (beginning in 1967) by the Transamerica conglomerate. Under these beneficial conditions, Jewison undoubtedly felt secure in developing a property that dealt with race relations not only candidly but with a humor that had seldom permeated Hollywood's previous social-message films.

Jewison's interest in the Landlord property, which he initially intended to direct himself, surely stemmed from its humanistic treatment of the race angle. The preserved early notes on the novel highlight the narrative's high points with regard to the characters' relationships. The more politically fraught plotlines, such as "the Urban Renewal thing," are deemphasized. (Indeed, the notes end halfway through the novel, at the moment when Elgar's tenants turn against him.) In correspondence with the playwright Neil Simon, Jewison hinted at his vision of the script, a vision that would smooth out the rough edges of the novel's satire: "We have yet to bring to the screen in this country, a real, genuine, warm comedy with a mixed cast." Essentially, Jewison hoped to do for the race war what he had done for the cold war in Russians: expose the inherent absurdity of a conflict between intractable enemies, and reveal the underlying humanity that links the two opposed parties.

The parallels between Russians and The Landlord were more explicitly illustrated in a January 1967 letter to Jewison from Erich Segal, the future author of Love Story, who was then an assistant professor at Yale University and an aspiring screenwriter hoping to adapt The Landlord for the screen. As Segal pointed out, Jewison's most recent film and Hunter's novel shared several themes, starting with "an incongruous confrontation of supposed enemies, each of whom carries his cliché preconceived prejudices... [A] result of this kooky confrontation, the world is just a little bit better." In Segal's eyes, however, the Landlord adaptation had to diverge from the comic ambience of Russians because blacks could not be as freely lampooned as the Soviets, lest a filmmaker arouse the ire of the NAACP and "overcompensating liberals." Despite apparent misgivings about Segal's abilities, Jewison hired the author to write a first draft, which Segal delivered in October 1967. Segal's version of The Landlord stays relatively close to the book's plot, yet it is also significantly—and surprisingly, given Segal's aforementioned warnings—more outlandish in tone than the novel.

One of Segal's more noteworthy departures from the book, and one that would survive in later drafts, was an expanded depiction of the white world that produced Elgar Enders. Segal's script mandates that until Elgar "crosses Ninety-sixth Street... not a single Negro face is seen in the film." The first forty-six pages are therefore set almost entirely in the milieu of the upper-crust Enders clan, a family so wealthy and aristocratic that they employ only white servants. His father insists that Elgar initiate a profitable enterprise or be dis-inherited. Duped into buying a Harlem tenement, Elgar's arrival at the site is marked by a stylistic flourish that encapsulates the dramatic shift in environments: "Elgar at Ninety-sixth Street, the corner. This is the frontier. Camera first shows him with nice apartment buildings in the background, then the Camera circles, always on that blank stupid face of his, to show us what lies before him... slums."  

Although in the novel Elgar's strong identification with blackness was psychological and therefore only temporary, in Segal's script Elgar, who is considerably more naive than his prototype in the Hunter book, actually comes to believe he is black. The empathetic reaction of Elgar's psychoanalyst to his patient's revelation in the novel is replaced in Segal's draft by incredulous, double-take responses from Elgar's father, whom the son now threatens with the admonition "you've been holdin' out on us, Mister Charlie," and from Elgar's white chum, Reed Flaxenhairst, to whom Elgar explains the impossibility of a white man's comprehension of "the intricacies of Black Power." In place of the Lanie character, Segal offers a black waitress from the Playboy Club as Elgar's romantic partner, and the two of them walk off together in the final shot. Their love supplies the film with an upbeat ending, following Elgar's failure to prevent the wrecking ball from demolishing his adopted habitat.

Jewison's eventual disappointment with Segal's version of The Landlord perhaps stemmed from the author's flagrant disregard for the potentially combustible nature of the subject matter—a disregard that had already been foreshadowed in the remainder of Segal's January missive, in which he encouraged the director not to worry about achieving "authenticity" in the depiction of the black ghetto: "I mean its [sic] gotta seem right, but I
doubt if you need a technical consultant from Elijah Mohammed [sic]." Segal recommended that Jewison instead strive for a broadly farcical, "zany" treatment of the novel's events modeled upon Richard Lester's 1965 British comedy *The Knack... and How to Get It*. A "Swinging London"-era farce about a teacher and his awkwardness with women, *The Knack* seems like an odd point of reference for, as the screenwriter promised, "the most 'negro' [sic] film ever." But Segal's conception of the narrative had already begun to evolve toward an emphasis on Elgar's relationships with women, both white and black. In his letter to Jewison, Segal advocated dropping the Lanie character and giving Elgar a "really white" debutante girlfriend in order to emphasize the gravity of his later switch to a black love interest: "This would allow Elgar's pendulum to swing first from one extreme (whiteness) then to the other (blackness) and finally to a golden mean (people are people)." Segal was also adamant that Fanny's seduction of Elgar should remain as it is in the book so that the filmmakers could both comment on the difference between black and white "wooing styles" and insinuate that "Fanny's candi-"..." Segal's screenplay also displays the influence of *The Knack* with regard to the proposed film's sounds and visuals, which were to be rendered using the fast-paced, "free-wheeling, jumping camera" style that Lester had perfected in his two features with the Beatles, *A Hard Day's Night* (1964) and *Help!* (1965). The script brazenly casts the Supremes, the best-selling Motown vocal trio, to serve as a nonidiotic Greek chorus remarking on the events of the plot and to perform original songs. Images of Elgar being chased down the street by a black mob, for instance, were to be intercut with shots of the Supremes in concert singing, "in their usual glittering style," a number called "Lynch the Landlord" ("String him up by his/asbestos heart"). The broadly campy and self-conscious musical numbers that Segal envisioned for *The Landlord* were ultimately deemed too jarring, but his ideas about the film's visual design would have more staying power. Segal's request that the movie's all-white milieu be represented only "in wishy-washy shades" would be adhered to and amplified in the finished picture. Apparently inspired by Lester's use of similar devices in *The Knack*, Segal also spent a good deal of effort devising fantasy sequences and imaginary reveries, both to signify Elgar's resentment toward his father and to represent "the fantasies both white and black man [sic] have of each other." (The "Lynch the Landlord" scene, for instance, is interrupted by Elgar's heat-of-the-chase hallucination of his pursuers as "spear-wielding, war-painted black savages.") These sorts of "fantasy tableaux," to borrow from Variety's description of the film, characterize the final product to a significant degree.

Jewison's only public comments about his initial choice for screenwriter were diplomatic: "Segal's a bright young man...but I didn't think his first draft was ethnic enough." Indeed, certain aspects of Segal's script confirm that he was ill-suited to the task of painting an accurate (albeit satirical) portrait of African American life. Segal's rendering of the speech patterns of his black characters, especially Marge—"Fanny Coppee, I knows just what I gotta do. Gonna nutritionize this little white boy"—would have struck many viewers as objectionable. His portrayal of Fanny focuses entirely on her sexual availability to her white landlord, who communicates to her primarily through leering innuendo: "Not now, Mrs. Coppee, I'll unclog your drain tomorrow." The Enders family is also drawn using broad strokes (they are portrayed as breathtakingly dimwitted), but their ignorance is seldom expressed in terms of racial bias. In contrast, the black characters harbor obviously race-based prejudices. Accordingly, both militant blacks and Uncle Toms are lampooned, the former via the introduction of a black separatist organization called K.A.R.K. ("Kill and Re-Kill"), and the latter via the figure of Elgar's lone African American schoolmate at Princeton, "Curtis P. Devine," who dresses and speaks "whiter" than anyone in his class. At a time when the standard-bearer film comedy on race relations, *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner*, presented its black protagonist as a heroic paragon of mainstream values, such a script had little chance of reaching the screen. Segal may have felt that he was respecting both the satirical tone of the book and Jewison's original conception of the film as a zany comedy. But either Segal misinterpreted what the producer wanted or Jewison simply changed his mind, preferring something grounded in more recognizably human emotion. In the end, no one in the Jewison camp displayed much enthusiasm for Segal's work, and Jewison wisely began looking for an African American writer to safely negotiate the property's potential land mines. Unfortunately, this new direction ensured further delays for the project. For a production that was supposed to capitalize in a timely fashion on the intense interest in race-relations in America, a production intended to be the first "real, genuine, warm comedy with a mixed cast," the march of time now became a worrisome obstacle.
Growing Up Casual: Bill Gunn's Versions

The second and solely credited screenwriter to work on *The Landlord*’s adaptation shed the broadly satirical tone that was Segal's legacy to the project. Of the many fascinating and frustrated figures to emerge during the post-civil rights era of black-themed cinema, few match Bill Gunn for unrealized potential. An accomplished playwright and novelist, Gunn’s experiences within the film industry prior to the late 1960s had been confined to acting in small roles. Gunn drafted a couple of unproduced screenplays for Columbia and Universal in the late 1960s before scripting what would become two of 1970’s most important racial impasse movies, *The Angel Levine* (in collaboration with Ronald Ribman) and *The Landlord*. In that same year, he wrote and directed *Stop!* on location in Puerto Rico for Warner Bros. Evocatively described by John Williams as an “atavistic homoerotic thriller,” *Stop!* was never distributed commercially, apparently because it received an X rating from the Code and Ratings Administration (CARA). Gunn’s only theatrically released film as a director, the allegorical vampire movie *Ganja & Hess* (1973), would eventually acquire a fervent cult following. At the time, however, it was received with incomprehension by most American critics and audiences and was sold by the producer Jack Jordan, who had once called Gunn a “black Stanley Kubrick,” to an exploitation distributor that severely re-edited the picture. Gunn’s cinematic career reached its nadir in 1977, when his name was removed from the screenwriting credits on Columbia’s Muhammad Ali biopic, *The Greatest*, and replaced with that of a white writer, Ring Lardner Jr.—an ordeal later chronicled in Gunn’s 1982 roman à clef, *Rhinestone Sharecropping*.

Upon his death in 1989 at the age of fifty-nine, Gunn was eulogized by Greg Tate in the *Village Voice* as a major, yet virtually unknown, African American artist whose talents had been stifled by the studio system: “Imagine a world where Miles Davis was disallowed from recording after *Kind of Blue* or where Toni Morrison was only known as the author of *The Bluest Eye*. . . . If Gunn had been making a film a year after *Ganja and Hess* our cinema would have been transformed as Miles and Morrison have transformed our music and literature.” As suggested by the stage, screen, and literary texts he left behind, Gunn’s work may have been as uncompromising as that of the far better known Davis and Morrison: steeped in both African and European cultural traditions, obsessed by questions of sexual as well as racial identity, and fiercely resistant to the intrusion of commerce. Yet Gunn’s talents as a screenwriter seemed in 1970 surprisingly well suited for an industry that was opening up to new styles of filmmaking as it seldom had before. Gunn himself thought little of the studios’ transition from integrationist, social-problem films to more “accurate” portrayals of black American life, and curiously dismissed *Uptight* in a *Newsday* interview: “The only two black men the white filmmakers can deal with are the Uncle Tom character and the militant. They can’t understand the black man in between.” *The Landlord* afforded Gunn the opportunity to develop three-dimensional African American characters that fell somewhere “in between,” as he himself did. It also allowed him to demonstrate a keen ability for sketching a range of upper-class white characterizations, from the sympathetic to the ridiculous.

Intriguingly, this complexity in the depiction of blacks and whites, acting both among themselves and in conflict with each other, was arrived at in considerable part because of the outside impositions to which Gunn’s script was subjected. The multitude of interpretations of events and characters forced upon Gunn during the drafting of the *Landlord* screenplay—suggestions mostly from white parties, including Jewison, Hal Ashby, several script consultants, and executives from Mirisch and United Artists—resulted in a document that at times shows the strain of compromise. Yet this document also succeeds in reflecting the multiplicity of viewpoints and experiences that influenced the debate of the time about relations between blacks and whites. Gunn undoubtedly chafed under this system, which explains his move to independent filmmaking after 1970. But when he had the opportunity to work with sympathetic and enthusiastic collaborators, as he did on *The Landlord*, both he and they profited from the experience.

Acting on the advice of Chiz Schultz, Gunn’s producer on *The Angel Levine*, Jewison recruited the writer just weeks after rejecting Segal’s first draft. The fifty-seven-page treatment that Gunì turned in on February 12, 1968, is peppered with both acute observations of character and zany allusions to contemporary race issues. In the treatment’s opening scene, for example, the inhabitants of an inner-city neighborhood halt their day’s activities immediately upon hearing of the imminent convening of a “blood brother caucus” by the “Black Potency League.” The ensuing black power demonstration is disturbed by the arrival of Elgar, who is chased out of the ghetto by Copee. On the way, they cross paths with a middle-aged, interracial gay couple walking two poodles, one black and one white; Copee shouts at the two men “TWO FOUR SIX EIGHT, WE DON’T LET’M MISCEGANTE [sic]!” The broad racial humor in the treatment comes typically at Elgar’s expense, playing upon his naiveté and incapacity to comprehend black behavior.
Hollywood’s black-themed cinematic tradition is also a frequent target of Gunn’s satire. A scene involving the Cumberboms, an elderly, seldom-seen couple who occupy the top-floor apartment in Elgar’s building, is accompanied by stage directions invoking “the old films where the old and beloved Negro retainer is on her deathbed and the slaves stand in the background ready to sing a spiritual at any moment.” The “conscience-liberal” trend of the late 1940s is skewered when Elgar and Lanie (who is black in Gunn’s version) watch Home of the Brave on television after making love: “James Edwards is staggering across the floor in tears, as the doctor screams, ‘YOU CAN WALK!’ When the doctor yells ‘Walk, nigger!’ Lanie giggles.” Gunn even tweaks the “race film” activities of his boss in his description of Elgar’s superficially liberal mother, “seated on a lounge chair sipping a glass of Cherry Herring [sic] on the rocks, reading a copy of The Confessions of Nat Turner.”

Although his specific reaction to Gunn’s Nat Turner joke is unknown, Jewison’s observations about other aspects of the treatment suggest that he wanted Gunn to steer clear of the traps that Segal had fallen into. Referring to Gunn’s opening, in which a black woman tosses a watermelon from an apartment window at Elgar and inexplicably shouts “Moby Grape Now!”, Jewison criticized the writer’s reliance on, in his words, “Moby Grape type of humor,” deeming it “too ‘commercial’-like, too ‘hip slick.’” In Gunn’s ending, the goodwill generated by Elgar’s transfer of the tenement deed to his tenants is comically shattered by the arrival of Fanny’s new baby, whose father is not Fanny’s husband: “It is very light-skinned, its head covered with blonde curls.” This turn of events results in Elgar’s once again being chased by a mob of angry blacks. For Jewison, this conclusion was as unsatisfying and as meaninglessly cute as Segal’s: “Nothing is ‘said,’ nothing is resolved.” Remarkably, Jewison also seems to have regarded Gunn’s first effort as scarcely more “ethnic” than his predecessor’s. He felt that the black apartment dwellers had lost the dimensionality they possessed in the novel and had “become nothing more than contemporary extensions of Jim Crow caricatures.” Regardless of the fairness of the charge, Jewison appreciated the peril in producing a black-themed film in which the characters come off as hoary stereotypes. And even the usually independent-minded Gunn, who initially defended the treatment’s characterizations as “real in every sense,” reportedly came to agree with the Jewison team’s assessment. Future drafts added significant detail to these characterizations (especially with regard to Elgar’s mother, Joyce, who barely appears in the book) and clarified Gunn’s intent to comment on rather than indulge in racial stereotyping.

Unexpectedly, Gunn found himself working with a new director in the fall of 1968, when Jewison’s associate Hal Ashby, a veteran film editor, was given the director’s job after Jewison. Then in the midst of the Nat Turner brouhaha, decided his attentions were too divided to devote sufficient time to The Landlord (although he would try to maintain a watchful eye over it as producer). In his first full-length version of the script, delivered to Ashby in early September, Gunn fleshed out the film’s characters and introduced a number of plot points, lines of dialogue, and vignettes that eventually became part of the finished picture. Many of these new elements comment on the black-white divide, with Lanie continuing to embody both sides of the chasm. Rather than tease Elgar about her ambiguous racial identity, she tells him upfront about her complicated childhood, spent shuttling back and forth between her divorced Irish American and African American parents: “In the summer I was white and in the winter . . . I was black.” The divide is exploited to warmly humorous effect in a newly added scene in which Joyce Enders, visiting her son’s tenement to help decorate his remodeled apartment, is sidetracked by an encounter with Marge, who loosens up the high-strung society lady with ham hocks and pot liquor. Other interracial interactions are considerably more scathing, especially Elgar’s experiences with the Copees. Near the end of the script, after the news of his wife’s pregnancy puts him on the warpath, Copee chases Elgar with an ax. But on the verge of bringing the weapon down upon his trapped and cowing prey, Copee draws back, mysteriously paralyzed by mental anguish. After his raving pursuer is taken away in an ambulance, the guilt-ridden Elgar retires from the renting business and gives the building deed to Fanny. Once she gives birth, Fanny turns her mixed-race son over to Elgar, bitterly telling him that she wants the baby adopted as white so he can grow up “casual” like his father.

A number of additional scenes that would be cut from subsequent drafts sustain this satirical approach to the subject of black-white relations. Many of these vignettes, especially in the script’s first half, are relatively absurd in tone, as when Elgar imagines the Enders’ black manservant, Heywood, “stirring a pot of soup with one hand and reading ’NIXON’ A Political Portrait by Earl Mazo and Stephen Hess, with the other,” ambushed by a sexually rapacious Joyce Enders. Yet a sense of murderous racial hostility can be detected even in the comedy. Thus, the comical rage of the omnipresent “Black Potency League” is balanced by the more sinister threat posed by the “Vigilantes Investigation Patrol” (“V.I.P.6”), an anonymous group of middle-class whites who patrol the ghetto at night by car, a submachine gun
lying on the front seat. "Any trouble, call," they assure the beleaguered Elgar. "Give us a little time, we have to come in from Levitt town [sic]." Gunn's seriousness of purpose becomes clearer near the end of the screenplay, when the character of Dubois, now an actual teacher (and renamed from the novel's Dubois), shows a newsreel to his African American pupils. This film within the film, meticulously described by Gunn, juxtaposes shots of blacks attacked by police dogs and struck by cattle prods with shots of President Nixon hugging Vice President Spiro Agnew and "Hubert Humphrey embracing Lester Maddox and accepting an axe handle from him." The montage culminates with an image (filmed, Gunn dictates, during the Watts riots of 1965) of a black boy lying in a pool of blood, followed by images of George Wallace cheered by an all-white crowd and banners and placards that read "kill the Niggers, Niggers go home."

Perhaps predictably, the newsreel scene was singled out for criticism by at least one of The Landlord's script consultants, Andrea Brandt, who reviewed Gunn's work for Ashby. Although she felt the script to be one of the best she had ever read, Brandt faulted the schoolroom scene for being "too strong" and potentially alienating, arguing that spectators "who know and truly care about the situation feel it very strongly—the others won't want to have their face [sic] rubbed in it." Brandt was much more effusive about an earlier scene that made a similar point about the gulf between blacks and whites but in a more lighthearted manner: a parody of a classic Hollywood musical number in which Elgar sings the Gershwin tune "Let's Call the Whole Thing Off" ("You say tomato, and I say . . ."), backed by a chorus of "twenty beautiful Negro girls in natural hairdos and mini African outfits carrying sequined machetes" and "twenty beautiful white girls carrying machine guns with short sprayed blonde hairdos."

Additional script feedback provided by a Jewison protégé, Jerry Howard, further indicates the discomfort felt by some of those involved in the production with the first draft's treatment of racial discord. Howard's notes are primarily about visual style; the story's black-white conflict interested him insofar as it could be represented pictorially. He therefore applauded Gunn's insertion of a scene on a racquetball court in the film's opening because of the symbolism of "the black ball hanging against the white wall," and he strongly registered his enthusiasm for the Gershwin number by suggesting it be done in the style of Mirisch and UA's West Side Story, with
"all that hockneyed [sic] choreography" that "we all hate." But Howard simultaneously objected to a dinner scene at the Enders' manor in which Elgar, disgusted with his father's racism, dumps a tureen of cold potato soup over Heywood's head—an act that "could never be pulled off in any realistic sense." Howard also felt that Gunn's new and opaque apocalyptic ending, in which the apartment building explodes, should be modified to include Elgar, Lanie, and Elgar's newborn child among the explosion's victims in order to convey to black militants "that violence by its very nature can cause pain unjustly and is therefore evil." Subsequent drafts by Gunn reflect attempts at compromise between his own conception of the story and the vision of the mostly white preproduction team. In versions dated October 9 and December 9, 1968, Gunn brings the Lanie-Elgar relationship slightly more to the forefront and also incorporates an arduous discussion of Lanie's racial makeup lifted from Hunter's novel. It seems plausible that Gunn, like Hunter, saw Lanie as a metaphor for the difficulty of bridging the black and white worlds in the 1960s. Worldly and wise because she embodies (and has thus decoded) America's racial hang-ups, Lanie functions to educate her beau about race. As Gunn conceives of her character, therefore, it is crucial that she is a light-skinned black, not a white passing as black (as in the Hunter novel) or "black period" (as Ashby briefly considered). In an undated script fragment in Ashby's production files, Lanie and Elgar's trip to Long Island is marred by Elgar's queries about why his girlfriend is "pretending" to be black. Lanie replies: "I am colored white... which is the truth, but I'm black, which is their lie, which[,] force fed to me over a long period of time, must become my truth." This repudiation of colorblindness is perhaps Gunn's most disturbing retort to Hollywood products like Guess Who's Coming to Dinner, which posits that racial conflict can be solved by pretending that racial difference doesn't matter, an impossible outcome as long as, in Lanie's words, "[one] drop of African blood makes me black." The disappearance of these lines from subsequent drafts of the script implies the intervention of a censor who may have been uneasy at the suggestion that the products of miscegenation are orphans in Nixon's America: a notion that reverberates in Fanny's request that her son by Elgar be adopted as white. Had this meaning become too explicit, The Landlord might have been perceived as an acid condemnation of its title character, a rich and sheltered white landlord who, blissfully unconcerned by the power imbalance inherent in such an arrangement, sleeps with and impregnates his married black tenant. Indeed, later script drafts, though they emphasize the Elgar-Lanie romance, downplay issues of black-white sexuality in general. Even while the story continues to hinge upon the consequences of sexual infidelity, interracial sex is of much less importance than it was in Hunter's novel and Segal's adaptation. Gunn had sprinkled reminders across earlier drafts of Elgar's status as a sexual predator of sorts; memorably, Copee refers quite accurately to Elgar as a "Mother Fucker" in the October 9 script, and the treatment proposes a bizarre insert of Elgar as a "White Knight" pointing his lance at a group of black women, all of whom immediately become "nine-months pregnant." These incidents were cut from later drafts, however, as were many joking references to intra- and interracial homosexuality, including a suggestive sight gag in a men's washroom during a charity costume ball, in which a man dressed as Paul Revere asks a fellow partygoer dressed as Daniel Boone to help him undo his pants, while Elgar and his father argue in the foreground.

Another explanation for the changes in the script's final drafts, respectively dated April 11 and May 15, 1969, is the intervention of Hal Ashby and Norman Jewison. The two men began working on the Landlord script after Gunn turned in his second draft, and it is quite possible that many of the revisions in these later versions originated with the director or the producer. Several of these revisions involved the elimination of language or material that could be construed as offensive. In executing these changes, the filmmakers were probably influenced by the counsel of Marvin Mirisch, who in a December 17 memo to Jewison expressed concern over a number of scenes in the script's second draft. Even though the new CARA ratings code had gone into effect only two months before, Mirisch complained about the script's excessive use of expletives, avowing that "experience in the exhibition of films which have been using some of these words has been all bad, and we should avoid it, finding words which will do the job and still not be objectionable." Mirisch also vehemently objected to a line in which Fanny jokes about Jesus Christ: "He says he may be the Lord, but first he's a Jew, and anybody from South Philly knows what that means." (Up until the final drafts, The Landlord was set in Philadelphia, Gunn's hometown.) Speculating that audiences would find the line both anti-Christian and anti-Semitic, providing they could "understand its meaning," Mirisch was so opposed to its inclusion that he reiterated the point in an April 11 memo to Jewison after the line had already been excised.

To buttress his employer's claims, Edward Morey, the Mirisch production supervisor, submitted two versions of the script to CARA for evaluation in the spring of 1969. CARA's vice-president, Eugene G. Dougherty, responded
to Morey that the “story in its present form would appear to be in the R category” because of the cumulative effect of “undue nudity,” the Boone-Revere gag, the pot smoking of Elgar’s sister Susan, an obscene pun in the title of Fanny’s home business (“Fanny Hair Styling”), and the “sadism” of the deranged Cope’s biting Walter Gee’s cheek and drawing blood. A subsequent appraisal from Dougherty of the script’s final draft sounded many of the same alarms; the continued presence of the above elements virtually guaranteed an R rating. Nevertheless, because the script “could achieve an M [for “Mature Audiences”] rating provided the offensive portions were modified,” Dougherty offered to work with the producers to achieve a more commercially desirable classification.

The creative team behind The Landlord responded to such directives in complex and sometimes contradictory ways, and their reactions are typical of the struggles of late 1960s filmmakers who hoped to produce “realistic” adult-oriented pictures about volatile social issues. Ashby and Jewison’s obligation to the Mirisch’s and United Artists was to make a film with the broadest possible commercial prospects, and in early 1969 this meant an M rating at worst. As Dougherty correctly noted, The Landlord was the type of property that might receive an M, whereas Midnight Cowboy, an X-rated picture that UA was handling with a limited release right around this time, could only have been an adults-only film. From an executive standpoint, it made sense to deny The Landlord’s filmmakers the liberties granted to Midnight Cowboy’s director, John Schlesinger, and producer, Jerome Hellman. Thus, many of Mirisch’s and Dougherty’s recommendations were implemented without complaint. Ashby and Jewison deleted Cope’s biting of his son’s cheek and, perhaps wary of charges of black anti-Semitism, they agreed with Mirisch on Fanny’s line about Jews. But the filmmakers also fought for the inclusion of material that connoted authenticity and adult sophistication, and when these elements couldn’t be explicitly rendered on the screen they were preserved through allusion and innuendo. Accordingly, in the annotations he wrote on Mirisch’s initial memo, Ashby objected to the characterization of the script’s language, noting that while he “plan[ned] on covering or protecting in these areas” he didn’t intend “to make a ‘dicty’ [i.e., snobbish] film.” Jewison’s official response to Mirisch was more diplomatically worded, paraphrasing Ashby’s retort to promise (somewhat disingenuously) that they had “no intention . . . to use a word with a dirty or obscene connotation.”

Few of the points of contention on which Ashby stood his ground had to do with the depiction of racial hostilities, for many of Gunn’s most barbed references to race matters had already been toned down in the later versions of the screenplay. The Vigilantes Investigation Patrol, the romantic designs of Elgar’s parents on their black domestics, and the fantasy of Elgar as White Knight were all cut from The Landlord’s third draft, and the only remnant of Duboise’s newsreel is some briefly glimpsed television coverage of the Martin Luther King Jr. Memorial dedication ceremony. That April 11 script did, however, contain new and extensive dialogue at the rent party on the “fad” of blackness, or the accelerating acceptance of black nationalism. In this scene, the tenants impatiently correct Elgar’s use of the term “black”: “Black ain’t no more black any more than you Ofays is white. It’s brown, beige and high yellow . . . You Ofays screamin’ about miscegenation and you’ve watered down every race you’ve ever hated.” This passage reintroduces and foregrounds some of Gunn’s core concerns, and its inclusion in the finished film may be the only time in the picture when the issue of the white sexual exploitation of black women is raised directly. Still, when considered in light of the perceptible nervousness of the producers about humor as a means of communicating social criticism, its delivery via an angrier, more serious tone helps (somewhat paradoxically) mitigate the virulence of its critique.

FIGURE 5.4 Elgar (Beau Bridges) fails the civics lesson given by Professor Duboise (Melvin Stewart) in The Landlord. Wisconsin Center for Film and Theater Research.
This mitigation is typical of Hal Ashby's version of The Landlord, which persistently exhibits a sort of schizophrenia about the type of picture it is and the audience it hopes to attract. The level of black participation in the film, the use of an authentic black American milieu, and the emphasis on black matters of interest brought The Landlord comparatively close to the ideal that African Americans had been demanding from Hollywood for decades. Yet the film's black content is generally filtered through a European prism. Ashby's picture borrows heavily from art-cinema techniques of narration and style, techniques that have comparatively little to do with African American culture, and the result sometimes resembles a mishmash of mutually exclusive tastes and methods. This may explain Gunn's eventual rejection of the film. (As a participant on a panel at the 1971 New York Film Festival, Gunn remarked: "I've liked every script I've ever written. I've hated every movie made from them."") Although his own directing style would also draw considerably on European influences, Gunn apparently felt that his finely observed, character-driven script could make its points about racial misunderstanding without a great deal of embellishment. If one considers The Landlord to be at heart an appeal for the wedding of diverse and even incompatible elements, Ashby's approach is perhaps more appropriate. From a box-office standpoint, however, it would prove to be a major miscalculation.

Black and White in Color: Hal Ashby's Contributions

The filming of The Landlord represents the most significant point of collaboration between two groups that would play enormous roles in the formation of an artistically and economically viable system of production in 1970s Hollywood: the black actors and craftspeople who would serve as the backbone of the black movie boom and the white filmmakers who sustained an auteurist-based movement, roughly spanning from 1967 to 1977, known variously as the New Hollywood cinema or the Hollywood Renaissance. Despite their mutual importance to studio production of the time, these talent pools rarely commingled. In the canon of masterpieces accepted today as the legacy of the Hollywood Renaissance, perhaps only Robert Altman's Nashville (1975) makes use of black actors (Timothy Brown and Robert DoQui) in what might charitably be classified as featured parts. Among the secondary entries in the canon, only Ashby's The Last Detail (1973) and Paul Schrader's Blue Collar (1976) use African American actors—Otis Young and Richard Pryor and Yaphet Kotto, respectively—in leading roles. For the most part, however, the two production trends remained separate. The pattern across the decade seldom varied: up-and-coming white filmmakers in the New Hollywood were provided with budgets and studio support that allowed them to make critically acclaimed, award-winning, and sometimes hit pictures, while black filmmakers were relegated to the B-level, low-cost and medium-return, critically disparaged blaxploitation cycle.

The Landlord, however, offered a tantalizing model of how both top black talent and promising white talent might be assimilated into the major studio network. Many of the whites on The Landlord's production team were relative novices to the industry or to their positions, and several of them went on to have celebrated careers in the 1970s. In addition to Ashby, a first-time director who would later enjoy a long string of critical successes, others who made key contributions to The Landlord included the director of photography, Gordon Willis, legendary for his subsequent work on the Godfather series; the camera operator, Michael Chapman, later an acclaimed cinematographer in his own right (Taxi Driver, 1976); and the actors Beau Bridges (Norma Rae, 1979) as Eigir and Susan Anspach (Five Easy Pieces, 1970) as his sister, Susan.

But the producers also made a concerted effort to hire African American personnel with little or no previous experience working on a major feature film. Eighty percent of the cast was black, including Pearl Bailey (Marge), making her first movie appearance in ten years, and the featured players Louis Gossett (Copee), whose only other screen credit had been for A Raisin in the Sun; Diana Sands (Fanny), whose only substantial previous film roles were in Raisin and An Affair of the Skin; and the newcomers Marki Bey (Lanie) and Melvin Stewart (Duboise), the latter a former professor at San Francisco State University. Ashby and Jewison also tested or considered a number of black actors who would go on to play prominent roles in the black movie boom, including Rosalind Cash, Diahann Carroll, Barbara McNair, Paula Kelly, Diana Ross, Billy Dee Williams, Paul Winfield, Godfrey Cambridge, and Roscoe Lee Browne. Just as importantly, the makers of The Landlord also actively sought black actors for the production's white positions. Jewison solicited suggestions from industry sources including Uptight's assistant director Martin Hornstein, who provided Jewison with a list of recommended hires in April 1969. Hornstein highlighted the African Americans among his candidates and commented on many of them, including The Angel Levine's assistant director Sam Bennerson ("Could make neighborhood contacts [and knows] most blacks in film industry"); the makeup man and hairstylist...
Scott Cunningham ("I don't know if he's still working but to my knowledge he was only black in union"), and the script supervisors Cle Kent and Ruth Deen.

Jewison was initially unable to lure many top black movie workers because of competition with *Cotton Comes to Harlem*, which was also filming in New York during the summer of 1969. Because of the simultaneous shooting schedules, Jewison and Mirisch lost out on the services of Benner son and John Carter, an African American film editor identified by United Artists' Lee Katz as "our best bet editorially in the East, if color is a matter of concern."50

Jewison did, however, score a major coup by hiring Hal De Windt, an associate producer on *Levine* whom Jewison coveted for his ability to iron out the "difficulties" that would assuredly "arise during location shooting in the Park Slope area of Brooklyn." When the corporate office complained that De Windt was being paid twice what he made on *Levine*, Jewison defended the arrangement based on De Windt's value during *The Landlord*’s preproduction phase.44 De Windt also deserves much of the credit for the painlessness of the film’s location shooting. Whereas resentments and racial tensions plagued the concurrent production of *Cotton*, no comparable incidents were reported from *The Landlord*’s set. Several members of the Park Slope community, adjacent to the Bedford-Stuyvesant area, were recruited for work on the film; many served as extras, with even children receiving full wages. Rooms in the neighborhood were rented to the film’s actors, and one resident cooked soul food for "any and all" takers.55 Thanks to the producers’ sensitivities and the community’s hospitality, the heavily integrated *Landlord* shoot was relatively harmonious.

Shooting *The Landlord* at various New York–area sites and soundstages was more than a way of maintaining fidelity to the criterion of realism or of respecting the spirit of the work by drawing on the contributions of underemployed African American technicians outside Hollywood. It also enabled Ashby to gain maximum control over the production by removing it from proximity to his producer, the Mirischs, and United Artists. In his December 17 memo, Marvin Mirisch encouraged Jewison to reconsider his plans to allow Ashby to make the movie wholly in New York. Mirisch reminded Jewison that, in addition to saving a substantial sum of money and affording the filmmakers the luxury of working with superior studio facilities, moving the production to Los Angeles would allow the busy producer to more closely monitor the shoot’s progress.50 Quite possibly, Mirisch was concerned about the director’s sense of responsibility and loyalty to his employers, for Ashby already had a reputation within the industry as a maverick. The executive was proven correct about the fiscal drawbacks of an out-of-town shoot, as traffic problems and persistent rain throughout the summer eventually pushed the production to a full fifteen days behind schedule and nearly $500,000 over its $2 million budget.7 There is no indication, however, that Jewison ever regretted his decision to leave Ashby to his own devices on the East Coast. Strong disagreements between the two men would not emerge until the postproduction phase.

The first image of *The Landlord* makes it clear whom Ashby regarded as the ultimate authority on the project. The opening shot, which has surely bewildered almost everyone who has seen the film, is taken from footage of Ashby’s own wedding; he was married on the film’s set with Norman Jewison presiding as best man.48 It is fitting that the director himself appears in the film’s first moments, for even though he was making his directorial debut, Ashby approached the production with a fully formed appreciation for the importance of the auteur in the New Hollywood. As Charles Mulvehill noted after his longtime friend’s death, Ashby’s philosophy of filmmaking stated that "the picture should be the star, not the actor, which meant, ultimately, the star was the director."9 Because of his close partnership with the highly respected Jewison, coupled with the instability reigning within the industry, Ashby was given the opportunity to translate this philosophy into action with the full backing of a major Hollywood distributor. Consequently, *The Landlord*, formally the most audacious film of Ashby’s career, adheres to the conventions of narrative and visual style developed by the practitioners of the auteur-driven European (in particular, French) art cinema of the 1950s and 1960s. These conventions, as outlined by David Bordwell, are informed by the aesthetic standards of both realism and reflexivity, seemingly opposed elements that are reconciled by the trope of ambiguity. In other words, an incomprehensible moment in an art film can be understood as an expression of "character subjectivity," or of "life’s unities," or of the "author’s vision."90 Ashby’s *The Landlord*—much more so than Gunn’s or Segal’s—exploits all three of these possibilities.

Ashby’s vision of the story’s presentation was most fully expressed early in the screenwriting process within the script notes of Jerry Howard.91 Though officially employed by Jewison’s production company, Simkoe, Howard approached the story material with an attitude more closely aligned with Ashby’s own. Howard posited that a director could visually translate *The Landlord* in two ways, resulting in either a "highly stylized, broad version" that allowed for "an exciting, highly individual, entertaining film," or a "‘realistic’ portrayal portend[ing] . . . disaster." In the event that a realistic
approach was adopted, Gunn's script, which Howard felt to be strong in dialogue but weak in "emotional motivation," would require drastic changes to make the characters' actions more plausible. According to Howard, Jewison had conceptualized the film as a naturalistic and "emotional" rendering of race relations and therefore had never completely accepted Gunn's "intellectual" screenplay. Citing Harry Belafonte's observation that The Landlord was, at heart, a farce and arguing that Gunn's screenplay was "no more real than Barbarella," Howard contended that Jewison erred in assuming that the story had to be rendered with verisimilitude: "Cinematic realism and truth are not synonymous." Perhaps hoping to placate Jewison, who strongly disapproved of the farcical format, Howard pointed out that the producers did not have to make a picture as broadly stylized as Help!, instead he hoped for a balance similar to that achieved by Stanley Kubrick in Dr. Strangelove. Because The Landlord dealt with a subject that did not "[lend] itself to underplay," Howard was quite comfortable with the adoption of the art cinema's narrational and stylistic deviations.92 The ending, he maintained, should be even more ambiguous than in Gunn's original script, and the film's frenetic visual style should be based on jump cuts, direct address, and a "moving, zooming, turning, whirling" camera.93

Ashby may have gone even further with these deviations than Howard had envisioned. Whereas Howard implied that the film could profitably employ as a primary approach either naturalism or stylization, two options as opposed to Jewison's one, Ashby mixed both modes at will, refusing to stick with one for very long and shifting between the two without clear motivation. In blurring the lines between blunt ghetto realism (of the type Howard inveighed against), bizarre subjective fantasy (which Howard endorsed), and overt authorial commentary, Ashby rejected the Help! model and instead adopted that of a less commercially successful Richard Lester film, Petulia (1968), a socially aware, albeit "kooky," romance starring George C. Scott and Julie Christie. Ashby in fact makes a few conscious allusions to the earlier movie; The Landlord's charity ball sequence owes much to the opening scene of the Lester film, as Variety's reviewer pointed out, and both pictures reach their dramatic climaxes in hospitals.94 But the real measure of Petulia's influence on Ashby is located in its formal radicalism and unsignaled temporal shifts, probably derived from the work of Alain Resnais. Ashby's film is equally ambiguous in its narration and style, although its ambiguity is appropriately emblematic of the title character's confusion about his place in the conflict between the races.

The Landlord's first few minutes are therefore largely impenetrable, as Ashby juxtaposes shots of various, seemingly unrelated activities in the Brooklyn slums with an overexposed image of a racquetball court, the narrative status of which is never explained. Then an unmotivated flashback showing a female teacher asking the child Elgar and his white classmates "How do we live?" is intercut with a monologue by the grown-up Elgar on his philosophy of life. This extremely fragmentary narration pervades much of the film, often returning in full force during thematically or narratively important set pieces. In particular, Elgar's hostile interrogation by the black revelers at the rent party is bizarrely stylized. In this sequence, Ashby preserves the continuity of the spoken lines but parcels out fragments of the dialogue to several different speakers. The ambiguity is intensified when the diegetic party music is cut from the soundtrack, even as people in the background continue to dance. (This scene could be interpreted as subjectively motivated, distorted by Elgar's intoxicated state or by his agitation at being described as a white supremacist.) Furthermore, while the finished film dispenses with the "explosion" ending, it concludes on an equally ambiguous note: Elgar takes his newborn son to Lanie's apartment; Lanie meets him outside, then takes the baby into her building, shouting "Come on!" back at Elgar. The end credits then roll as the sounds of the racquetball game from the opening scene return. Arguably, this conclusion is even more enigmatic than that previously proposed, if less apocalyptic.

Even when there is little doubt as to whether a particular moment or event should be read as externally or internally "real" or as reflexive, The Landlord further promotes confusion because of its juxtaposition of the subtle with the outrageously transparent. Many of the satiric comic points are made with a relatively-heavy hand, particularly those involving Elgar's relationship with his mother, Joyce (Lee Grant). To cite just one example, Joyce reacts to the news of Fanny's pregnancy by imagining with horror a slew of coal-black grandchildren, to whom she sings a plantation-era lullaby: "Lay your kinky woolly head on your mammy's breast." At the same time, certain crucial narrative moments are so underplayed that they barely register. When Fanny brings a woozy Elgar into her apartment following the rent party, for instance, she offers him an aspirin and then herself ingests what she believes to be a birth control pill. But unbeknownst to her (and to the viewer) the pills get switched, resulting in her eventual pregnancy. The error is subsequently explained in a typically oblique manner: telling Elgar of her condition, Fanny points to her stomach and exclaims, "Excedrin headache number one."
Some of the ambiguity in *The Landlord*'s narration could be explained as stemming from some uncertainty about how salacious the filmmakers could be. The industry's retirement of the Production Code and its adoption of a new ratings-based system—a move that provided more latitude to Hollywood filmmakers with regard to controversial subject matter or language—happened during *The Landlord*'s preproduction stage. Yet the finished film reflects an odd mixture of pre-*CARA* hesitation and post-*CARA* boldness. Ashby muted the impact of some of Gunn's more risqué material; the "Fanny Hair Styling" sign next to the Copee's mailbox is visible only in passing and barely shown long enough for the viewer to notice it, and the washroom gag is merely alluded to via a quick cutaway to a couple of unidentified men framed from the waist down. There is no nudity in the film, as opposed to the script, and less profanity. Yet *The Landlord* does contain a seemingly improvised moment in which one of Lanie's go-go dancing co-workers (Marlene Clark, whom Gunn later directed in *Ganja & Hess*) snarks that Lanie's "high-yella" skin and rich white boyfriend don't mean "a fuckin' thing" to her, a line that appears in none of the various script drafts. This particular vulgarity, which by itself guaranteed the film an R classification, seems all the more odd in light of a sight gag from the picture's opening minutes, in which the word "motherfucker" is clearly mouthed by a black man trying unsuccessfully to hail a cab yet is not audible on the soundtrack.

The film's visual design is equally indebted to certain art-cinema conventions, but this domain also presented Ashby with the opportunity to comment in a more personal manner on the racial dynamic explored in Gunn's screenplay. In a nod to his favored auteurs, Ashby inserted into *The Landlord* an assortment of allusions to various French New Wave and Left Bank directors. A mentally subjective montage of Elgar's relatives staring disapprovingly into the camera is strongly reminiscent of a scene from Agnès Varda's *Cleo from 5 to 7* (1962), and a highly stylized sequence of lovemaking between Elgar and Lanie, their body parts abstracted against a blindingly white background, is a homage to both Resnais's *La guerre est finie* (1966) and Jean-Luc Godard's *A Married Woman* (1964). Godard seems to be Ashby's main source of inspiration, manifest both in Elgar's direct-address "interview" in the film's opening sequence and in the *Breathless*-style jump cuts that highlight Elgar's journey by car away from the Brooklyn ghetto and back to midtown Manhattan. This scene, of Elgar breaching the border between black and white neighborhoods, is a staple of the treatments and drafts going all the way back to Segal's, but Segal had suggested handling the moment with a semicircular tracking shot. Gunn recommended a straight cut from a billboard for Kent cigarettes featuring a black model to an identical poster featuring a white model to signify Elgar's return to his all-white milieu. Characteristically, Ashby's solution is the flashiest.

The aptness of these tropes and allusions for a story about interracial cohabitation is debatable, but *The Landlord*'s other major stylistic idiosyncrasy has been recognized by many as entirely suited to the subject matter. From the start of the script's lengthy gestation, those working on the movie conceived of it as a literal visualization of the black-white conflict at the thematic heart of the story. In particular, color was a major preoccupation for the *Landlord* team, and Howard was especially enthusiastic about such opportunities. In his notes, he imagined a sharp contrast between "the vibrantly clashing crescendo of colors" within the slum residences and "the gray scale delineation of shades of white" inside the Enders estate and in other "white" locales. These theories about the "intellectual and emotional applications of color" appear to derive, once again, from an appreciation of contemporary European art cinema. Specifically, Howard alludes to Michelangelo Antonioni's *Red Desert* (1964) in his suggestion that for Elgar and Lanie's sex scene, "the background colors should reflect their attitude toward love-making during each stage."76

Yet *The Landlord* differs from art films like *Red Desert* and Varda's 1965 feature *Le bonheur*, cited by the critic Joel Doerfler as another apparent influence, in that it does not use color in a supposedly Brechtian way or, to quote from Sandy Flitterman-Lewis's description of the Varda picture, to "call attention to itself as material or as dramatic element."77 Colors in *The Landlord*, while theatrical, are for the most part naturally motivated. Rather than to foreground the film's artificiality, Ashby uses color to reinforce the contrast between the two worlds, black and white, and consequently to stress the incompatibility of those worlds. Thus, the scenes set at the Enders mansion in Long Island and in other "white" areas (like the racquetball court) make use of brilliantly overexposed white-on-white compositions—Joyce Enders even owns a white cat that matches her rooms and clothing—while the much busier ghetto exteriors and interiors are rendered in a host of underexposed hues, primarily earthy browns.

This color scheme is not always constant, and characters are able to traverse these boundaries—most obviously Elgar, who moves freely between both worlds and whose own apartment within the tenement is white-walled and sparsely decorated. But crucially, and contrary to Howard's recommendations, these boundaries are generally closely observed throughout the
movie. In his notes, Howard claims that The Landlord is “about” transition, a theme that is narratively enacted by the shift from the “wild comedy” of the film’s setup and development to the “brooding introspection” of the climax. Therefore, Howard advocated a similar shift in color design, from the harsh color contrast of earlier scenes to “a more subdued representation” beginning at the moment of Copee’s breakdown: “the scene around him is no longer one of multitudes of color. The day is gray, overcast. The faces are predominantly black. The colors are subdued. The film has moved into its reflective stage.” Had it been implemented, Howard’s proposal may have connoted a reconciliation of sorts through placing both black and white characters on the same figurative plane near the film’s end. By sustaining the visual divide between their worlds, Ashby privileges impasse over acceptance and thus expresses a grimmer view of the potential for interracial understanding.

This ultimately unreachable divide is preserved despite an important early scene that seems to indicate, through color design, an equal footing between characters from very different worlds: the scene in which Fanny takes Elgar in on the rent party and allows him to seduce her. Their prolonged interaction is played out in monochrome, a red light bulb providing the only source of light in Fanny’s apartment. (Elocutously, the lamp that holds the bulb is made from a trophy Fanny won a decade years earlier in a “Miss Sepia” beauty contest.) This detail serves to neutralize the distinction in skin color between the two figures. Yet this notion of equal footing is exposed as false by Fanny’s ensuing pregnancy, which results in a significant degree of emotional pain for Fanny but not for Elgar, and thus foregrounds the power disparity in their relationship: presumably Fanny submits to her white landlord’s sexual urges out of fear of repercussions if she doesn’t. Appropriately, this red-dominant scene has a visual echo in a later, white-dominant scene, also featuring Fanny and Elgar, following their son’s birth. Ashby and his art directors literally illustrate the inequity between the two by adorning Fanny’s hospital room in the same sterile white shades as the film’s other domains of white power, visually entrapping the black mother and sealing the fate of her child to grow up white.

The Landlord Gets Buried

Aesthetic values aside, The Landlord was a disappointment in release during the summer of 1970, and many factors figured in its box-office failure. Ashby himself probably helped sabotage its economic prospects, because of both the kind of film he had made and the adversarial relationship he had built with the Mirisch Company and United Artists. During postproduction, Ashby was angered by what he perceived as the two companies’ lack of commitment to the film, and he drafted a letter to Marvin Mirisch in late 1969 blasting the executive for his reluctance to hire a sound-effects editor whom Ashby had requested. Ashby’s irritation with his employers erupted in full force the following January, when a publishing rights snafu prevented the director from hiring the folk rocker Neil Young to compose The Landlord’s score. In a rambling, expletive-filled missive to Jewison, Ashby linked the difficulties he had in realizing the picture as he saw fit to the studio’s profit motive: “So I say fuck U.A., and fuck anybody else who feels they have to put the possibility of some remote profit in the way of my doing what I feel is the best thing for my film.” Conversely, Marvin Mirisch’s strongest reservations about Ashby were connected to concerns about cost overruns, and in the end those concerns were justified. The Landlord, originally budgeted at just under $2 million, eventually incurred total expenses of $2,415,746, nearly all of the increase resulting from below-the-line costs.

Despite the antagonism behind the scenes, commercial and critical prospects for The Landlord seemed encouraging prior to its release. Thanks to Jewison’s recent track record and more than four years of buildup in the trade papers, industry interest in the film was high. A sneak preview took place in Sherman Oaks, California, on April 9, where the movie received generally positive scores. Almost half of the 161 respondents rated the film as “excellent” and another third said it was “very good”; there was little discrepancy between age groups in their responses to the film, with those in their twenties liking it only slightly more than those listed over thirty. After its opening in New York in late May, The Landlord received generally glowing reviews in the trades. Shelly Benoit in Entertainment World praised the film for its accuracy in dramatizing “how races perceive each other” and compared it favorably to the “flowery” Learning Tree and the “blundering” Liberation of L. B. Jones. Arthur Murphy in Variety was more lukewarm, preferring the interplay between characters to Ashby’s “overly-flashy” style, but he predicted the movie would generate “excellent” business—a prognosis seconded by the Hollywood Reporter’s John Mahoney, who speculated that The Landlord would attract the youth audience that had supported M*A*S*H (1970).

The trade papers’ optimism turned out to be ill-founded, however. Indeed, in his Variety review, Murphy hinted at one of the film’s commercial flaws when he observed that it was “unfortunate” that The Landlord
had picked up an R rating due to remediable aspects like foul language and “a couple of intimate situations.” Murphy was probably still thinking of the Ashby film the following week as he wrote his review of Melvin Van Peebles’s race-switching comedy Watermelon Man, in which he protested the “dubious commercial trend” of inserting profanity and “a bit of extra undress” into films even on the grounds of “artistic aptness.” By doing so, filmmakers like Ashby and Van Peebles forfeited reaching an audience “who might be considered to need exposure” to their “message[s].” Murphy’s latter remark suggests that he considered race-themed content to be a relatively bankable element if rendered palatable for general audiences. It is not clear what evidence Murphy based this claim on, however, as there had not yet been a breakout black-themed movie hit in the 1970s era. (Within a month, Cotton Comes to Harlem would become that hit, but it would convincingly disprove his general assertion.)

Like Van Peebles, William Wyler, Harry Belafonte, and others, The Landlord’s creative principals were to some extent pioneers feeling their way in a relatively freer age of film content and trying to gauge the appropriateness of applying a decidedly adult approach to the cinematic depiction of social realities. An unfortunate consequence of this inquiry was that The Landlord’s sexual explicitness, though restrained in comparison to some of the earlier script drafts (and in contrast to a host of studio releases that year), was made into a central feature of United Artists’ odd and ultimately inappropriate promotional campaign while the film’s race-centered content, presumably a selling point, was downplayed. The image most often used in newspaper advertisements during the picture’s early run was a drawing of a white finger extended toward a pair of dark-colored doorbells resembling bare female breasts, accompanied by the slogan “Watch the landlord get his,” a verbal and visual double entendre that sanctions the white-on-black sexual exploitation that the film (albeit tentatively) calls into question. A subsequent ad retained the miscegenation subtext by using a picture of a playing card spade labeled with the word “LOVE” and tattooed on a white hand. Misleading and offensive as these images may be, the marketing people at UA may have felt that little else existed on which to publicize a film characterized by a wild mixture of tones and styles.

Other ads in The Landlord’s pressbooks attempt to play up the wackiness of the characters, including a composite picture of the film’s secondary characters and mislabeled as “the tenants”—the group includes Lanie and Mr. and Mrs. Enders, who obviously don’t fit this classification—set alongside

an image of Beau Bridges carrying a toilet. “These are the tenants. This is the landlord,” reads the ad copy: “They’re going to crack your plaster.” (Radio and television spots similarly played up, in the words of the press kit, “the whimsy and humor of the feature.”) In yet another advertising illustration, the accompanying text merely lists a series of narrative events and characters without contextualizing them:

Wasps.
The military-industrial complex.
Rent parties.
Arrows dipped in Fanny’s barbecue sauce.
William Jr. being made head of the New York office.
An attempted ax murder.
Marge’s pot liquor and palm readings.
Du Bois’ [sic] school in the cellar.

![THE LANDLORD](image)

**THE LANDLORD** is about:

- Wasps.
- The military-industrial complex.
- Rent parties.
- Arrows dipped in Fanny’s barbecue sauce.
- An attempted ax murder.
- Marge’s pot liquor and palm readings.
- Bullets’ school in the cellar.

He’s going to crack your plaster.

THE MARGO PRODUCTION COMPANY A NORMAN JEWISON-HAL ASHY PRODUCTION

**THE LANDLORD**

BEAU BRIDGES, LEE GRANT, DORIS SANDS, AND PEARL BAILEY

DANA WASHBURN, PETER FOG, ANDRE WATSON, DONNA HARRISON, LEONARD MILLER, AND DOREN VENTURA

VEE SOLOMON, ROBERT ELLIS, AND PETER ROMAN

THEATRE

[FIGURE 5.5 An advertisement from The Landlord's bewildering promotional campaign. Wisconsin Center for Film and Theater Research.]
This scatter-shot approach to selling the picture confirms the difficulties encountered by the studio in defining what the film was about. Without a conventional angle or hook to work from, UA’s marketing campaign for *The Landlord*, characterized by the *Denver Post* as “inane and inept,” may have been doomed to ineffectiveness.119 Ashby himself became convinced that his debut film’s poor showing was due to the studio’s marketing shortcomings. In a 1971 letter to Joe Baltake, a *Philadelphia Daily News* critic who had named *The Landlord* 1970’s best film, Ashby relayed his disappointment with UA’s handling of its promotion, observing that the studio “really let me and the film down in more ways than one.”120 Considering the picture’s lack of marketable qualities, such an assessment is perhaps uncharitable. United Artists is, however, susceptible to the charge of botching *The Landlord’s* distribution. The studio did not do the picture any favors, for example, by opening it in the same week as its British import, *Leo the Last*, with which *The Landlord* shares numerous plot similarities.

The release pattern also hurt the film. Marvin Mirisch adopted the strategy that UA vice-president Jim Velde had found successful with *Midnight Cowboy*: opening in small theaters and building gradually on strong reviews and word-of-mouth.121 Accordingly, the film opened in only two theaters in late May, the Coronet in New York—the very East Side theater at which *Midnight Cowboy* had premiered—and the Village in Los Angeles. It then expanded gradually in mid- and late June to houses in about a dozen cities, including Boston, Philadelphia, Cleveland, and Washington.122 Unfortunately, by this time *The Landlord* was losing rather than gaining viewers in its New York and Los Angeles engagements, and its nationwide momentum stalled. *The Landlord’s* peak position on Variety’s chart of top-moneymaking films was twentieth for the week ending July 1, when it earned $121,766 in thirteen theaters.123 In contrast, *Cotton Comes to Harlem* had made nearly three times that amount in only nine theaters the previous week.124

*The Landlord* ultimately could not capitalize on the “hard to see” approach because it did not receive the kinds of rave reviews that *Midnight Cowboy* had received. Though the trade papers loved the Ashby film, many of the reviews in the influential Manhattan dailies and mass-market weeklies were unflattering. Peter Bart, an executive at Paramount, sent the director a letter of consolation regarding the initial press response to his picture, jokingly advising “maybe you should change your name to Godard.”125 In fact, Ashby’s appropriation of Godardian techniques may have been the problem in the first place. His self-conscious and flashy style put off both Joseph Morgenstern of *Newsweek*, who pronounced the “novelty” of the audacious camerawork to be “skin-deep,” and the anonymous *Time* critic, who complained that Ashby had inherited “Jewison’s stylistic slickness, which is stamped all over the film like a muddy footprint.”126 The one unequivocal rave that *The Landlord* received from a widely read source was written by the *New York Times*’s second-string critic, Howard Thompson, who classified the film as “wondrously wise, sad and hilarious” yet at the same time “a dead-serious appraisal of senseless racial awareness.”127 But to the studio’s chagrin, Thompson’s piece was buried in the *Times*’ back pages. When a *Daily News* advertisement for the film four days later reprinted the review, it was prefaced with the disclaimer “We could hardly find this review in The N.Y. Times—so in case you missed it . . .”128 Much of the picture’s strongest support came from the white alternative press, most notably in articles by Richard Harmer in the *Los Angeles Free Press* and Molly Haskell in the *Village Voice*, but those notices were of little help in broadening the audience for the film.129

There are no archival records or estimates of the racial breakdown of *The Landlord’s* audience, but there is little reason to suspect that African American viewers turned out to support the film. The producers did make overtures to black organizations and the black press, scheduling screenings for those groups and providing fodder for publicity pieces.130 *The Landlord* also received glowing reviews from some of the more mainstream black critics: Cecil Carnegie, writing in *Essence*, found the film to be an unfinishing statement of “the central despair of black manhood in white America,” and Clayton Riley in a lengthy guest essay for the *New York Times* praised the film for “rising above its sometimes politically incorrect commentary” and compared it favorably to Jean Genet’s play *The Blacks*.131 But *The Landlord* never clicked with black audiences, even as movies “not made with the Negro market in mind”—like *They Call Me Mister Tibbs*. . . . *tick . . . tick . . . tick . . .* (starring Jim Brown as the new sheriff in a racist Mississippi town), and *The Liberation of L. B. Jones*—were succeeding with those very audiences.132

It is not terribly astonishing that *The Landlord* did not attract African American spectators as easily as the black-cast *Cotton*, but the former film’s failure to compete with the likes of *Mister Tibbs*. . . . *tick . . . tick . . . tick . . . tick . . . tick . . . *, and *L. B. Jones* is somewhat surprising. *The Landlord* featured no top-billed black stars like Jim Brown or Sidney Poitier, yet neither did *L. B. Jones*. *The Landlord* exploited themes of racial conflict that some in the industry were starting to suspect were anathema to African American viewers, but *L. B. Jones* and . . . *tick . . . tick . . . tick . . . tick . . .* were much more inflammatory in this
regard. *The Landlord* featured an integrated cast, yet it used more black actors in substantial parts than any of the aforementioned pictures. It treated black-white relations as material for farce as well as for drama, but the moderately successful *Watermelon Man* was much broader in execution. Yet of the films cited in this paragraph, only *The Landlord* failed to bring in even $1 million in domestic rentals.

Ultimately, however, the discrepancy between *The Landlord*’s returns and those of *L. B. Jones* and *Watermelon Man* was not great. Compared to those pictures, *The Landlord* was a flop primarily because of its low return on cost; its total expenses of $2.5 million were more than twice the final budget of *Cotton*, another United Artists production. UA’s head, Arthur Krim, even stated that the studio would not be averse to producing similar types of picture in the future. In a February 1971 candid assessment of *The Landlord*’s lack of business, Krim told his boss at Transamerica, John R. Beckett, that UA would continue making this kind of film “but at one-quarter the cost.” In an age of shrinking budgets and tightening production schedules, Krim still saw value in films that could attract underrepresented segments of the filmgoing audience, providing that the studio was realistic about the buying power of those segments.

But as the 1970s wore on, the major studios continued to lose money even on modestly budgeted pictures that must have initially seemed like safe investments. None of the racial impasse films of 1970 was especially successful commercially. The most disappointing among them, including *The Landlord*, *The Angel Levine*, *Halls of Anger*, and *Leo the Last*, helped push UA to a $4.5-million deficit for the year, resulting in the scaling back of its 1971 production schedule and contributing to the company’s reevaluation of its decades-long relationship with the Mirischs. The studios’ simultaneous discovery of a sizable black audience for movies with heroic black protagonists signaled the end of Hollywood’s efforts to tap the integrated market. With *Cotton* netting more money in 1970 than ... *tick* ... *tick* ... *tick*, *L. B. Jones*, and *Watermelon Man* combined, Hollywood had little incentive to develop additional projects with mixed casts about the prospects for interracial harmony. The blaxploitation movies begin from the assumption that those prospects are nil, and that message resonated with a lot of filmgoers.

In retrospect, the optimal time for a film like *The Landlord* would have been around 1968, before the American market was relatively glutted with “race movies” and before audiences became, in Krim’s terms, “more and more sated with films of this genre.” Certainly, because of the vagaries of studio feature film production, any director wishing to make a movie reflecting a very short, contemporary historical period works at a considerable disadvantage. As one independent filmmaker astutely observed in *Esquire* in 1970 about the slew of youth-culture pictures then rolling off the Hollywood assembly line, “the trouble with Now-movies is that they’re often Then-movies.”

But the tardiness of the Ashby film and other impasse pictures is not solely attributable to the inevitable time delay between social change and its eventual cinematic documentation. Kristin Hunter’s novel was purchased in early 1966, but the first adapter hired didn’t complete a first draft until October 1967. Krim’s correspondence indicates that UA hoped the movie version would be ready for “the new modern film audience” sometime during the 1968–69 season, but it wasn’t ready until May 1970. Particular production circumstances aside, projects like *The Landlord* were also delayed because of Hollywood’s reticence in addressing racial discord with candor. The rights to Jesse Hill Ford’s book *The Liberation of Lord Byron Jones*, to cite another example, were purchased in 1965 by the producer Ronald Lubin and the screenwriter Stirling Silliphant, but because of studio wariness the two men had to wait five years before realizing the novel as a movie. And Harry Belafonte nurtured his *Angel Levine* project for six years until he deemed the film industry to be properly receptive to, in his words, “the sort of movie I wanted to make.” Many of these titles, including *The Landlord*, must have struck many 1970 filmgoers as “Then-movies.”

The delay in its realization helped doom *The Landlord* to irrelevancy at the time of its release. This is, as we have seen, a familiar refrain for many of the black-themed pictures of the 1960s. *The Landlord* appeared at a time when, thanks to the beginnings of an influx of African American talent into the motion picture industry, concerns about the authenticity of the cinema’s representations of black life may not have been as salient as in 1963. It was riskier for critics to dispute Bill Gunn’s or Gordon Parks’s versions of African American social reality than it had been to question Shirley Clarke’s or Nicholas Webster’s. In 1970 “authenticity” more often translated into “timeliness,” and the relevant question became: “How accurately does a black film represent what’s happening in the black community today?” Had Hollywood acted on these projects more quickly, future black-themed movie producers might have been able to capitalize on the success of an *Angel Levine* rather than face an uphill battle following the failure of *Uptight*. For this reason, it is all the more regrettable that *The Landlord* missed its turn on the development fast track.
Soul Searching

Black-Themed Cinema from the March on Washington to the Rise of Blaxploitation

Christopher Sieving

Wesleyan University Press
Middletown, Connecticut