

# In Black and White

MARY V. WALTON

THREE RECENT MOVIES about Negroes, *The Cool World*, *Black Like Me*, and *Purlie Victorious*, illustrate one way at least in which the Negro world is exactly like the white world: films about it can be good, bad, or indifferent. Of the three, only *The Cool World* is consistently entertaining. The other two, while not so poor as to send one to the nearest television set, at times make the viewer feel embarrassed for the acting, the writing, or the directing.

*Purlie Victorious*, adapted from the successful Broadway play of the same name, concerns the attempts of the Reverend Purlie Victorious to outwit the doddering but lascivious Ol' Cap'n Cotchipee in order to buy a church for the Negroes of Cotchipee County. Ol' Cap'n is an antiquated racist who keeps "his" Negroes by keeping them in debt. But the film is mostly for laughs, not social criticism, and the gravity of the situation is lost in comedy.

The movie opened last September as *Gone Are the Days!* and did very badly at the box office despite generally favorable reviews. Recently it was rerun under its more familiar title, but the producers' evident hopes that this would stir up interest were disappointed. Popular plays can be turned into good movies—*The Best Man* is a current example—but *Purlie Victorious* illustrates how not to do it. The main point the producers missed is how much more important the visual element is on the screen than on the stage. A movie must create the illusion of reality with lifelike settings as varied and unusual as the real world generally is, and actors who seem not to be acting. In *Purlie* continued interest would depend on initial acceptance by the audience of a rather improbable situation. But the sets are few and so clearly artificial that they might have been used in the stage version. The actors, inadequately coached for films, use expansive gestures, exaggerate their facial expressions, and speak in loud voices, sometimes losing words. So unimaginative is the pro-

duction that it looks and sounds like a filmed play.

Ossie Davis, author of both play and screenplay, has a marvelous gift for dialogue but a lesser one for plot construction. The opening scenes give away the ending, so that the story, which develops in a long flashback, has little suspense. Some of the performers are entertaining, particularly Godfrey Cambridge, who plays Gitlow, a Negro yes man.

THE SECOND FILM, *Black Like Me*, is an adaptation of the book by John Howard Griffin, a journalist who, wanting to find out "what it's like to be a Negro in the South," used pills, supplemented by sun-lamp treatments, to change the color of his skin, and then embarked on a tour of several Southern states. Although Mr. Griffin "passed" without challenge, it is hard to see how James Whitmore, who represents him in the movie, could have done so. He neither looks, dresses, talks, nor acts like anything but a white man with a deep tan. Mr. Whitmore's characterization is particularly grating when he reacts to incidents arising from his color the way a white man might who did not expect such treatment. Even if he looked like a Negro, his stiffened jaw and open resentment would soon destroy the illusion—or at least land him in jail.

And yet this travesty is curiously effective in dramatizing the oppression the Negro suffers in the South. The journalist is turned down for jobs, pursued by bullies, insulted by white women. A bus driver forces him to remain seated at a rest stop where whites are allowed off. He is told to leave a public park. Hitchhiking, he is picked up by white drivers who question him about sex, particularly whether he's ever had a white woman. When he evades their questions, they refuse to take him any farther. He learns to recognize the "hate stare," ostensibly peculiar to Southern whites. Another Negro tells him to drink as little

water as possible because toilets are sometimes hard to find. The movie's greatest weakness, Mr. Whitmore's very inability to be a Negro, unintentionally becomes a powerful illustration of the distance between the races.

Wondering how the movie compares with the book, I bought—and read in one sitting—Mr. Griffin's fascinating account of his weeks as a Negro. Many of the movie's incidents are quite true, and some have been altered only slightly for convenience. Unfortunately, Hollywood insisted on providing extra human interest in what might have been a decent documentary. The movie Griffin goes out with a warm and sympathetic Negro woman, who is intended, perhaps, as a contrast to his own wife, a woman whose manner indicates possible racial prejudice of her own or, at the very least, disapproval of her husband's project. (For the record, the real Mrs. Griffin wholeheartedly supported her husband.) Also, just to show that Negroes are not all good, the movie inserts a young civil-rights militant who hates all whites, including those like the journalist who are on the Negroes' side. And the movie Griffin is so plagued with self-doubt, which he expresses by gazing off into space with an agonized expression, that he is not very companionable. In one soul-searching scene he almost gives up. But not quite.

All this personal melodrama is included at the expense of some very interesting parts of Mr. Griffin's book—the discrimination among Negroes themselves based on shade of skin, his visits to Negro universities, the way conditions vary among states and cities. Those who really want to know what it's like to be a Negro in the South should read the book. It's not only more enlightening, it's more interesting.

THE RESPONSE of Southerners attacked for their racial policies is to indict the North. Whether or not the indictment is made in good faith, *The Cool World* shows that it is not without some validity. Set in Harlem and based on Warren Miller's novel of 1959 and the subsequent play by Miller and Robert Rossen, the film deals with the struggle of fourteen-year-old Richard

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"Duke" Custis to win respect among his contemporaries in the only way he knows, by becoming president of his gang, the Pythons, and leading it to victory against a rival gang, the Wolves. As the key to both leadership and victory, Duke seeks to buy a gun from Priest, the very cool ex-president of the Pythons, a bearded hipster who flaunts a white mistress and traffics in crime.

The film, directed by Shirley Clarke, is technically brilliant. As the camera roams the wretched streets, it stops wherever the eye might stop, on the face of an old man, on a group of people listening to a demagogic speaker denounce the "white devils," and on children laughing, playing, watching. The camera pursues Duke through aimlessness, crime, flight, and a fleeting glory. It moves rapidly because Duke is always on the move, here rejecting the love of his family, there basking in the admiration of his gang and his gang's woman, the fourteen-year-old Luanne. When the camera leaves him at last, he is completely alone in this comfortless world. The wailing, pounding, crying music of Mal Waldron, played by Dizzy Gillespie, is a wordless commentator whose rhythms haunt the film. *The Cool World* is a remarkable thing to see and hear.

**T**HE MOVIE is relentless in its revelations. Luanne longs to go to San Francisco to see the ocean. She is unbelieving when Duke tells her there is an ocean that can be reached by subway. When he takes her to Coney Island, she disappears, and he hunts for her on the empty beach, carrying a large stuffed animal under his arm. We never see Luanne again. Such scenes strip these kids of their toughness, shocking us into the most startling realization of all: they are children; they don't have a chance.

*The Cool World* attacks the white world without ever mentioning segregation. It condemns the treatment that has rooted most Negroes in virtually inescapable poverty, for it is poverty that forces Duke to satisfy his craving for leadership through a delinquent gang and makes idols of men like Priest.

All three films are in black and white.

## BOOKS



# The Captive Commanders

ROBERT P. KNAPP, JR.

**T**HE SWORDBEARERS, SUPREME COMMAND IN THE FIRST WORLD WAR, by Correlli Barnett. *Morrow*. \$7.50.

It is unlikely that the war of 1914-1918 will ever be exceeded in terms of sustained military slaughter. Man's earlier efforts in organizational achievement had laboriously produced monuments like the Pyramids, the Great Wall, and the Panama Canal, but warfare had never been waged on a systematic, industrialized basis. Not until 1914 had man been able to marshal every resource of the earth, every product of his skill, every avenue of communication, and every spark of human spirit to reduce the actual, desperate acts of combat to an unending series of futile and meaningless horrors, mere day-by-day transactions incidental to the massive industrial outpourings of the warring nations. Cool and assiduous minds produced manuals showing for every unit how many tons of ammunition were needed for "a day of fire," how many pounds of food for "a day of rations," how much hay, how much oats for "a day of forage," how many men for "a day of replacements" for the dead and wounded. From the sunny harvest days of August, 1914, to the bitter finish five grim Novembers later, no mind, no man ever successfully formulated a plan for decisive military victory. In no war before

or since were the supreme commanders of the military forces so powerless to influence the outcome of the struggle. Ultimately in each case and on each side, the commander's task became that of maintaining the status quo, rehabilitating his shattered troops, and restoring their broken lines of combat.

Correlli Barnett's brilliant and fascinating study is accordingly not so much an examination of the personalities of the commanders or of their careers as it is a trenchant analysis of the events in which they were caught and of the societies that produced both men and events. "The First World War," he writes, "had causes but no objectives." What he says of the German High Command in 1914 was by his evidence equally true of the commanders of all the belligerent forces. Fifty years before Hiroshima, the second industrial revolution of the latter half of the nineteenth century had created forces of destruction that man could command but not control. As the author observes of the generals of Imperial Germany in 1914: "Both individually and as a group they were as ill-equipped to lead this great machine [the German Army] as a seventeenth-century coachman would be to drive a Mercedes-Benz."

Mr. Barnett's history spans the entire war. He has chosen as his foci