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**The Museum of Modern Art's Department of Film: How Two Public Film Programs  
Addressed Social and Cultural Conditions of African American Communities**

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**The Museum of Modern Art's Department of Film: How Two Public Film Programs  
Addressed Social and Cultural Conditions of African American Communities**

**by**

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## **Dedication**

For my family and friends who continue to support me unconditionally. And for the unsung heroes, Willard Van Dyke and Iris Barry. Your achievements and love of film continue to inspire me.

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I stumbled on this piece of history because of my love for film. Despite any implications, I had complete support from the incredible Art Education faculty at The University of Texas at Austin, from my kind and gifted classmates, from my family, and from my friends. I am extremely grateful and lucky to continue to have this support throughout the research process. Thank you for your kindness.

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## **Abstract**

# **The Museum of Modern Art's Department of Film: How Two Public Film Programs Addressed Social and Cultural Conditions of African American Communities**

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This study investigates the Museum of Modern Art's Department of Film and its role during the mid-1960s into the 1970s as an educational institution that addressed the social and cultural conditions of African American communities. The study is framed around two public film programs known as *Cinéprobe* and *What's Happening?*, concentrating on the years 1965-1974, during which the two programs were established.

An examination is made of both programs as they progressed in the early years as educational programming for MoMA's audience. In both programs, African American filmmakers were invited to share their films and to discuss the meaning and process of filmmaking to an audience unfamiliar of their work. Evidence that both programs were intended to be educational pursuits is examined, including museum memos, letters, press releases, and recorded audio. The study concludes by suggesting a historical reframing of film programs in the 1960s as pertinent to the field of art education.

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## **Chapter 1: *Introduction to the Study***

The Museum of Modern Art's Department of Film, earlier titled the Film Library, was established as a center devoted to collecting and preserving film for serious study. Inducted into the museum in 1935, the Film Library was the first organized film archive in the United States and a pioneer of film education, kick-starting film programs in universities around the country. The Library's collection also aided film societies and other museums with topical film packages and literature about film through their unique circulating rental program. Most importantly to this study, the Film Library created the first dedicated space for public programming using film as its center force. The role of education was at the forefront of the Film Library's undertaking and it did this through tracing, collecting, preserving, distributing, and exhibiting film. The Film Library also established itself as a national cultural force that interacted consistently with its community and programmed film that was appreciated by those interested in learning about all aspects of film and its influential role in society.

The early half of the Film Library's history has been documented in various texts. These include Lynes (1973), Wasson (2001, 2005), and Sitton (2014), which addressed its many accomplishments and setbacks including its complications with funding, its relationship with the film industry, its role in World War II, and its arduous efforts to create circulating and exhibition programs for diverse audiences. Little research, however, has been conducted on the drastic changes that occurred in the department

during the 1960s and 1970s and its role in educating the public about social and cultural conditions in the United States.

The 1960s witnessed drastic shifts in filmmaking as many marginalized groups began producing and distributing their own films. These films, often documentaries, covered politically and socially relevant topics that commercial Hollywood film had a tendency to misrepresent. As a result of these changes, the Department of Film introduced new public programming and film series where young independent filmmakers were invited to screen and discuss their work to audiences. Many of the filmmakers invited to participate in these programs were African Americans with strong connections with the Black Power Movement and the Black Panther Party. MoMA played a minor yet important role in addressing cultural and social conditions for African Americans during the 1960s and '70s. This was unique behavior for art institutions at this time, especially one as prestigious as MoMA. By creating a platform for Black artists to gain public exposure, MoMA acted as a moderator between marginalized groups and an audience that was primarily White. By doing so, these artists were afforded a space to share their often-unknown cultural narrative and gain a public voice.

This study investigated educational film programming at The Museum of Modern Art's Department of Film between 1965 and 1974 and examined how these various programs addressed social and cultural conditions for African Americans. This study also investigated how the department offered African Americans a voice to share their personal stories. By studying this topic, we can learn about early alternative

educational opportunities found in museums for African Americans, and further understand the role film has played in our social and cultural experience.

### **CENTRAL RESEARCH QUESTION**

The following question motivated and directed this research study:

Considering the Department of Film at the Museum of Modern Art as an educational center, how did the department's educational mission seen in its public programming respond to and reflect the social and cultural conditions of African Americans between 1965 and 1974? Sub-Question: In what ways did the Department of Film represent the diverse stories of independent filmmaking by African Americans during this time period?

### **PROBLEM STATEMENT**

I have found gaps in literature concerning MoMA's Department of Film during the 1960s and 1970s that do not mention the department's changing educational mission. Dr. Haidee Wasson, an Associate Professor in Film Studies at Concordia University, has conducted the majority of research about the Department of Film, and although she sets up an unwavering framework concerning the sociological and cultural importance of the department, her research trails off by the early 1950s. My research picks up where Dr. Wasson and other literature on the Department of Film has ended.

I argue that the 1960s and 1970s, a time when the department was under the directorial leadership of Willard Van Dyke, is the most influential period for the

department in tackling large-scale social and cultural issues complicating the daily lives of its audience. I also argue that the Museum of Modern Art's Department of Film played an influential role in addressing the social and cultural conditions of African Americans in the 1960s and 1970s by presenting an opportunity for African American artists to discuss their cultural narrative, social history, and political and racial obstacles with an audience unfamiliar to this marginalized group's rich culture.

By the late 1960s, images of African Americans in film were undergoing changes directly influenced by the push for Black liberation and integration seen within the country. These images, although surpassing negative stereotypes, still did not represent African American culture and identity in a full and rich manner (Simpson, 1990). The concept of integration did not help eliminate racial differences and it did not assist with the dissemination of a widespread cultural understanding (Rhodes, 2014). In this research, I argue that the struggle for African Americans to find a cultural voice and reclaim their narrative was addressed through the utilization of independent filmmaking. By producing, directing, and distributing film about their communities, Black filmmakers were able to tackle these issues of finding a collective voice. These specific independent filmmakers were those that MoMA's film department invited to participate in its new public programming. Therefore, the department played a critical role in contributing to the efforts made by African Americans in propagating their multi-dimensional cultural stories portrayed through film. This area has been rarely researched, and my study attempts to address these important gaps in historical writing.

## **MOTIVATIONS FOR RESEARCH**

My interest in MoMA's Department of Film began after researching how film was utilized in museums for educational purposes during the first half of the twentieth century. I immersed myself in what little literature was available concerning the history of the department. Being the first archival center dedicated to preserving film in this country and a center that pioneered film studies as a serious area of investigation, I was amazed that this center has received little research attention. For some time I have been drawn towards historical stories of everyday life, especially narrative accounts of people who made influential strides in expanding areas that have too often been ignored. I was, therefore, captivated with the lives of Iris Barry, the first curator of MoMA's Film Library, and Willard Van Dyke, the director of the department in the 1960s and early half of the 1970s. I believe that these two leaders can be considered art educators in their own right because of their arduous efforts in educating the public about film and its importance in influencing attitudes towards culture and society.

As a historian and a future art educator, I feel very passionate about expanding the role of other areas of art, such as film, into the norms of art education whether it be found in school curriculums, in institutional practices, or in community-based art programming. I believe much can be learned when various artistic mediums are practiced and considered to be on the same playing field as mainstream art education.

My decision to write exclusively about African American culture stems from my interest in working with African American communities through community-based art programming. As someone who continues to struggle with the idea of being an outsider

trying to fit in, I believe this research has assisted me in understanding various narratives and personal experiences that have shaped diverse cultures as well as my own.

## **RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

A historical research methodology was best suited for my study of MoMA's Department of Film from the year 1965 until 1974. I examined a variety of archival material including memos, audience letters, program notes, press releases, newspaper clippings, and firsthand accounts. In addition, I also consulted historical studies found in books, journals, films, and documentaries.

I visited the Museum of Modern Art's Archives, where I completed a majority of my research. Because very little research has been conducted on the Department of Film during the 1960s and '70s, I relied almost exclusively on MoMA's available archives and made interpretations based on this material. However, I found Russell Lyne's *Good Old Modern* (1973) and Haidee Wasson's *Museum Movies* (2005) influential sources when creating a framework for my study on the Museum of Modern Art and its Department of Film. A more thorough discussion of the research methodology employed in this study is discussed in Chapter 3: Historical Research Methodology.

## **DEFINITIONS OF TERMS**

- Black Aesthetic: The attempt to create art with African American cultural specificity that represents Black cultural traditions and a collective cultural narrative (Fine, 1971).

- Black Consciousness: Complete awareness of one's individual Black identity.
- Community: A group of people living in a collective district who share a common set of social values, attitudes, interests, goals, and experiences.
- Culture: used to identify the values, attitudes, and acceptable behaviors of groups of people from a common heritage, culture, or background (McFee, 1961). The ideas, meanings, beliefs, and values people learn as members of a community.
- Cultural Response: The concept, referred by Freedman (2003), in which cultural difference is illustrated and supported effectively through the arts. Multicultural issues concerning the visual character of our social lives and environments have often been the critical issue seen in art and the most important aspects of art to teach (Freedman, 2003, p. 21).
- Education: According to museum educator, David Henry, education is when people's hearts and minds open to a broader understanding of the world, to different cultures, social patterns, and histories. Education prepares people to assertively ask their own questions, rather than answer other people's. Education should engage with the real world, and connect people with others across traditional boundaries (Finkelpearl, 2013, p. 108).
- Film: In this study, film refers to all elements of the medium including abstract, non-narrative art film, to include theatrical film and documentaries.
- Film Library: A depository devoted to the collection, preservation, and distribution of film for educational purposes.



- **Public Programming:** Activities in an art institution that involve public participation and go beyond the scope of the museum's collection in order to appeal to a more diverse audience. Programming that uses art in broad terms in order to address larger social issues that affect the daily lives of its audience.
- **Independent Film:** Any film practice that rejects Hollywood systems of cultural representations, production, and distribution.
- **Social Perspectives:** Mentioned in Freedman (2003), social perspectives refer to the social life of visual culture that is being redefined on a global scale and becoming hybrid cultures. Visual technologies shape the forms of information that are being spread by all these adapting cultures (Freedman, 2003, p. 21).
- **Society:** An organization of people whose interaction patterns cluster them into specific categorical groups (McFee, 1966).
- **Visual Culture Education:** Careful content analysis of the values being projected through mass media and a continued study of the diversity of values being projected in American society (McFee, 1961, p. 139). Visual Culture is much more concerned with understanding and empowerment as opposed to artistic expression. This is done through the emphasis on image-making (Duncum, 2002, p. 6).

## **LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY**

This study focused on the activities of MoMA's Department of Film between the years 1965 and 1974. These parameters were chosen because it was the decade Willard

Van Dyke was director of the department. Through analyzing the data I collected, I believe he influenced many of the changes the department made that resulted in the screening of films with social and political content. The study also focuses exclusively on two of the department's public programs that were introduced under Van Dyke's leadership, including: *What's Happening?* and *Cinéprobe*. Both of these programs dealt with social and political issues and included many films by African American filmmakers. The department was involved in many other important activities, however, this study focused only on program activities that directly involved its audience.

### **BENEFITS TO THE FIELD OF ART EDUCATION**

In my study, I addressed the importance of visual culture in education and discussed its introduction into the lexicon of art education thanks to the progressive minds of June King McFee, Vincent Lanier, and others. Although teachers did not fully appropriate visual culture into the curriculum in the 1960s, there were art institutions, specifically the Museum of Modern Art, who were instinctively involved in this area of teaching. Therefore, I believe this research furthers our understanding of the role of museums in art education as well as the use of film when recognizing diverse cultures in America, especially marginalized groups.

I believe that the lack of available literature and research conducted on the Department of Film provides an opportunity to address these omissions and gain a greater sense of humanity in the process. I believe that my research about African American filmmakers and their role in the museum during the 1960s and 1970s is just the beginning

of a necessary and engaging look into a history that until recently has been overlooked in historical writing. I also believe my research generates questions that could potentially initiate an expanded view of film and museum practices, particularly for the field of art education. I aim for my research to be a tool for future researchers to use when initiating their own studies into the many artistic contributions of African Americans in film in this country.

## **THESIS CHAPTERS**

In Chapter 2: “Review of Literature,” I identified and discuss the secondary sources I utilized when analyzing my data. The sources I used assisted me throughout my research when a more thorough understanding of my topic was necessary in answering my central research question. In Chapter 3: “Historical Research Methodology,” I discussed in detail the type of methodology I used in order to complete my study. I included a section on the employment of archives as well as my use of film as a primary source of information. I also explored my personal research experience with the archives to better define the process of historical research. In Chapter 4, “Transformation Through *Cinéprobe*,” I explored the first of the two programs I researched that began at MoMA during the 1960s. I explained the purpose of the program and laid out the program’s structure and early stages. After establishing a context for *Cinéprobe*, I continued to list and describe specific films screened in the program that directly addressed the African American community. Similarly, in Chapter 5: “Revolution Through *What’s Happening?*,” I continued to explore the purpose and early stages of the second program

I researched called *What's Happening?* After laying out the groundwork for the program, I listed and explored a selection of programmed films that directly addressed various social and cultural shifts in the African American community. In Chapter 6: "Finding Educational Results in Communities Through Film Programming," I explore the overall effectiveness of the two programs discussed in Chapters 4 and 5. In Chapter 7: Conclusions and Implications, I summarized my findings and discussed the implications of this study as well as referenced future studies that could stem from my original investigation.

## **Chapter 2: *Review of Literature***

Various secondary sources guided my research when exploring the Museum of Modern Art's role in addressing social and cultural conditions of African Americans during the 1960s and 1970s. The purpose of this chapter is to provide an overview of the pertinent literature that was used in this study. This chapter is divided into five sections: (a) Sources that address visual culture education, (b) writings regarding societal changes for African Americans in the 1960s, (c) sources focused on African Americans and independent filmmaking, (d) general sources covering the Museum of Modern Art's Department of Film, and (e) sources directed toward the changing role of the Museum of Modern Art and art education. Each section highlights the leading voices I consulted throughout my research.

### **VISUAL ART EDUCATION**

One of the challenges faced when creating a framework for this study around visual culture education was that although a handful of educators emphasized the importance of a new purpose for art education during the 1960s, few institutions and schools were either appropriating it into their practices or calling it visual culture education. It is important to stress that although MoMA's Department of Film did not acknowledge its educational practices as visual culture education nor used the same vocabulary as art educators when defining its efforts, the department did achieve some of the same results mentioned by educators such as June King McFee, Vincent Lanier, and Elliot Eisner. From my research, it is evident that there was a shifting interest in studying

new media such as film and television in classrooms and museums by the mid-1960s. The importance of empowering students to analyze textual and visual communication found in art in order for them to form a critical eye became an element in the writing and pedagogical practices of McFee, Lanier, and Eisner. In establishing context for this study, I considered visual culture education and its elements an important feature of the two programs created by MoMA's Department of Film during the late 1960s and early 1970s. The two programs, *Cinéprobe* and *What's Happening?*, challenged audience members to watch featured films with a critical eye, and to be active participants with the filmmakers present in order to create a discourse about social issues that were unobserved by major news outlets.

One of my research objectives was to compare the Department of Film's programming practices seen in *Cinéprobe* and *What's Happening?* with the visual culture practices expressed by the progressive minds of the educators I addressed in this section. I consulted texts by June King McFee (1966), Elliott Eisner (1965), and Vincent Lanier (1966). In Graeme Chalmers' "Visual Culture Education in the 1960s" (2005), he clarifies that the study of visual culture began in the 1960s as popular "low" cultural forms, media and communications, and the study of such phenomena merged with "high" cultural forms such as fine art, design, and architecture. This emergence paralleled with new disciplines such as film, advertising, and television studies becoming an established area of study in colleges and universities. Chalmer's article emphasizes the importance of studying art in conjunction with cultural practices and historical phenomena such as the counter-cultural movement, the rise of the consumer culture, and the Vietnam War

(Chalmers, 2005). The many changes occurring in the 1960s and 1970s did directly affect educational practices, values, lifestyles and, in response, the overall shifting opinions towards other cultures and people.

June King McFee's "Society, Art, and Education" (1966) describes the many changes that occurred in American society during the 1960s. One of these changes was a decrease in work time and an increase in leisure activities. McFee (1966) best describes the important role of educators to provide art training,

so that the arts can become central activities in socially useful work - - improving our cities and our homes, and the quality of our experience, as well as contributing to the quality of production: in creating new dimensions for communication which have symbolic and aesthetic meaning in our diversified society. (p. 130)

The social structures of American life were drastically changing. McFee considers this social shift a period of opportunity for art educators and art institutions to influence their audiences to contribute to society through art. She believes educators should teach the public to recognize that art education can be vital to the development of citizens because it is one of our primary communication systems (McFee, 1966). According to McFee, in order for art educators to be successful in this activity, they must also understand the cultural diversity of their students or audiences so to preserve culture and maintain the uniqueness of the culturally diverse group, as well as their individual identity. The idea that educators could be central figures of cultural transmission was a very progressive concept in the 1960s, but it addresses similar ideas of my own while conducting my research on the Museum of Modern Art's film programming. The Department of Film played an essential role in becoming a platform for cultural diffusion.

I looked at Elliot Eisner's "Curriculum Ideas in a Time of Crisis" (1965), in which he confronts the outdated approaches to art education and focuses on student knowledge and attitudes towards art as influenced by the world in which they live. He mentions that the shifting patterns in art education have not occurred in a vacuum and are a result of the changes occurring "in the American social order," and once the character of society changes, so, too, does the literature and dynamics of a classroom and in the case of my research, the dynamics of public programs at museums (Eisner, 1965, p. 8). According to Eisner, he believes there should be productive, critical, and historical aspects to art teaching in order to provide students with tools to become critical consumers and make value judgments towards art and media. As far as a critical focus, Eisner believes that all students need to learn how to look at art and should be given the tools to answer major questions, such as "what is art and how does it affect my daily life?" This was a useful text as my study confronted the role of changing views of African American culture and society seen in the films screened at MoMA's film programs *Cinéprobe* and *What's Happening?* By viewing these films within a context controlled by the programs' mission, to spread information ignored by popular news outlets, it in many ways taught its audience how to examine information and media from diverse perspectives.

Vincent Lanier's "New Media and the Teaching of Art" (1966) challenges the problem of not including the critical and historical modes of study in art education practices, which is similar to Eisner's theory in "Curriculum Ideas in a Time of Crisis" (1965). In Lanier's paper, he stresses that critical and historical aspects can be added to



teaching practices through the study of newer media such as television and film. He examines the use of newer media and its ability to help connect people from around the world, and train educators to be more prolific teachers that can relate best with their students who have grown up during an age of fast paced technological advancements (1966). Lanier explains that the field of art education has witnessed a growth in prestige and power, meaning that educators can play an important role in shaping the form and content of the technology used in classrooms and influence how technology can be used and analyzed by students.

### **SOCIETAL PROGRESSION AND AFRICAN AMERICAN COMMUNITIES IN THE 1960S**

To further understand the societal shifts occurring in the 1960s that directly impacted African American urban communities as well as to understand why the Museum of Modern Art's Department of Film chose certain films to address these various social conditions, I consulted several valuable texts. Tom Finkelpearl's *What We Made* (2013), June King McFee's "Society, Art, and Education" (1966), Reynolds Farley and Albert Hermalin's study found in the article "The 1960s: A Decade of Progress for Blacks?" (1972), and Ronald L. Taylor's "Sociology and African-American Studies" (1999), evaluate the primary social shifts that impacted the African American community in the 1960s. These texts also address the repercussions of these changes.

The 1960s witnessed the strong rise of the Civil Rights Movement, as well as an expanded awareness of a number of African Americans who were leading the ongoing discourse regarding the place of their race in present and future society. By the late

1960s, attention paid to the deplorable conditions of African Americans had shifted from being of concern primarily in the southern states, to refocusing on the conditions of urban communities around the country due to the efforts of Martin Luther King Jr., Malcolm X, the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, the Black Panther Groups, and many others (Hess, 1985; Massood, 2003). Researchers such as Reynolds Farley and Albert Hermalin developed an extensive analysis in the early 1970s concerning the question of how racism divided the working class in urban communities. Despite the work accomplished by non-violent efforts, conditions for African Americans were not improving as quickly as many activists wished. In response, another shift in the Civil Rights struggle occurred, in which white supremacy and political alienation met with resistance.

Tom Finkelpearl and his research in *What We Made* (2013) describes the mid-1960s and the Civil Rights Movement as a time divided by two paths: the path of collective action encouraged by Martin Luther King Jr. and a more radical path of confrontation. King's goal was not only economic justice for African Americans. Much of his rhetoric was dedicated to establishing personal interconnections and a commitment to live together as a nonviolent brotherhood (Finkelpearl, 2013). However, alternative voices from groups such as the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee were becoming increasingly radical, establishing a philosophy that labeled cooperation an unsuited choice when resisting oppressive racism. Many theorists have discussed the successfulness and lack thereof of each. Saul Alinsky's writing, referenced in Finkelpearl's *What We Made* (2013), on this topic best supports my research of

community engagement. A people's organization, according to Saul Alinsky, is a conflict group and in order for it to be successful it must identify the issue, provoke conflict, and find the winnable battles that will seek the "displacement and disorganization of the status quo" (Alinsky, 1946, p. 132). A community organizer himself, Alinsky wrote that a true democratic group was built up of active, participating, interested people who, through participation, would become informed, educated, and develop a faith in themselves, each other, and their future (Alinsky, 1971). With that in mind, my research looked at the Black Power Movement, its democratic components, and the effectiveness of this crusade through the framework set up by Alinsky's own pragmatic views.

As explained by African American theater scholar and activist, Larry Neal, the Black Power Movement was an "Afro-American's desire for self-determination and nationhood" (Neal, 1968, p. 29). A main component of the Black Power Movement was the necessity for people to define the world on their own terms and reclaim their narrative. Many Black activists desired to utilize media technologies and prestigious institutions in order to reach large audiences outside their local communities. They also established various programs that benefited urban communities directly by employing African Americans, which provided a source of income for community members. It also created a safe place for local community politics to reside and a site where training in mass communication professions could occur (Lierow, 2013). According to Neal (1968), the concepts of Black empowerment and the Black aesthetic were fundamental features of the Black Power Movement.

Farley and Hermalin's study in 1972 addresses the socioeconomic progression in the 1960s for African Americans and the struggle to eliminate racial differences. In the first half of their study they reference economist and Nobel Prize winner, Karl Gunnar Myrdal, who argued in 1944 that "the most important changes for blacks in this country would be changes in the values and beliefs of whites.... Blacks would make progress if and only if whites accepted blacks as equals and treated them in accord with democratic ideals" (p. 998). Ronald Taylor's (1999) article on sociology and African American studies also referred to Gunnar Myrdal's opinions towards the race problem in the United States. Myrdal believed that racial assimilation and integration were the only steps that would effectively end racial discrimination in the country (Taylor, 1999). With that said, Farley and Hermalin's study discusses various shifting trends in society during the 1960s that nods toward Myrdal's argument of the power of racial assimilation.

The study uses surveys, which concluded an overall response of approval towards integration on a number of fronts. From this data, Farley and Hermalin concurred that an increasing amount of Whites favored integrated public transit systems and schools, while a majority favored the civil rights laws enacted in 1963 and 1964 that would eliminate racial discrimination in the job market. The surveys also provided information concerning an increasing willingness to pay higher taxes that would upgrade jobs, schools, and housing for Blacks. What was obvious, however, was a much higher approval rate of occupational integration than in neighborhood integration (Farley & Hermalin, 1972). Farley and Hermalin argued that although socioeconomic progress occurred in the 1960s for both Blacks and Whites, it did not eliminate racial differences nor change attitudes

and beliefs towards Blacks. Despite the push towards community integration, many African American communities stayed predominately African American. A similar result was seen in urban schools around the country.

Farley and Hermalin's study concludes that poverty was substantially reduced among Blacks with a significant upwards shift for Black income, occupation, and education between 1959 and 1969. Blacks made social and economic progress in the 1960s, however this shift did not end racial socioeconomic differentiation in income, occupation, or education. Overall differentiation between Blacks and Whites continued to be quite substantial, especially for males (Farley & Hermalin, 1972). What their research implies is that economic improvements and racial integration do not work hand in hand and are two quite different areas of consideration when discussing race relations.

As mentioned in Taylor's (1999) article, most of the sociological literature circulating during the 1960s concerning African Americans was devoted to documenting the deprivations of Blacks that defined and characterized Black communities due to "segregation, discrimination, and exclusion from the mainstream of American life" (Taylor, 1999, p. 518). Black disadvantage in communities was mainly due to economic deprivation, which caused a range of social pathologies including family instability, violence, and crime. The social dynamics of primarily Black communities reflected the racially dominant society in the 1960s, however most sociologists blamed the failure of racial integration on what they considered negative sociocultural characteristics of the Black minority. According to Taylor, certain sociologists during the 1960s went even further by describing Black culture as an inferior version of American culture, and at best

a version of lower-class culture with no future of developing a national consciousness nor ethnic solidarity (Taylor, 1999). Taylor credited the emergence of the Black Power Movement as a result of these prejudiced sociological beliefs. Members of the Movement demanded the introduction of Black Studies into colleges in order to develop a Black perspective with alternative interpretations of African American community and culture in relation to the larger American society. By creating Black Studies programs in schools, a goal of the Movement was to develop definitions, concepts, and theories that best reflected the African American experience and corrected the dominant stereotypes and misinterpretations seen in the sociological literature of that time (Taylor, 1999).

June King McFee's "Society, Art, and Education" (1966) examines the multitude of changes occurring in society during the 1960s. Her writing is within an educational framework, which best relates to my study when clarifying how societal trends impacted the Department of Film's public programming decisions. At the beginning of her study she states

this country is in a period of intense social change. Increased consciousness of minority groups and their emergence are challenging stereotypes and prejudice.... World problems, with the accelerating speed of communication and transportation, become community problems. Art educators' individual reactions to change probably run the gamut of those found among diverse groups in the larger society. (McFee, 1966, p.122)

This progressive mindset from an educator in the 1960s compliments my research because it addresses a definite focus towards minority groups in an effort to respond to stereotypes. McFee continues to point out that one of the biggest forces in American society is that of desegregation of public institutions and services. This meant more

opportunities for minority groups and, therefore, far-reaching social change. She also mentions that civil rights are essential but economic opportunity and meaningful education also need to be addressed in order for any real change to happen for minority communities (McFee, 1966). All the authors I consulted in this section give nod towards a major shift in the African American community, especially those residing in urban environments. This shift can be best understood as a transition of the perception towards the Black community by mainstream America. Much of that change was made in response to the Civil Rights Movement and the socioeconomic growth that came with it. Just as important to note were the members within that community who fought to change the perception of their people. Those steps in doing so are further discussed in the following section.

## **SOURCES ON AFRICAN AMERICANS AND INDEPENDENT FILMMAKING**

My study focused on two programs established at MoMA's Department of Film during the late 1960s and early 1970s that showcased various artists, including young African American independent filmmakers. Although *Cinéprobe* and *What's Happening?*, as part of their mission, discussed and screened film of numerous marginalized groups, my research specifically examines screenings of films made by African Americans that dealt with community-driven themes. Tom Finkelpearl's (2013) chapter "An American Framework" explains that efforts made by civil rights groups in the 1960s, as mentioned previously in this chapter, and the democratic institution's social relations were both "mirrors of the socially cooperative art that was simultaneously

emerging” (p. 7). In the context of Finkelpearl’s research, the socially engaging art he is referring to is performance art. However, this also gives nod to the programs that were surfacing in libraries, museums, and community centers that enabled audience members to interact with one another, with film as the major vehicle for such interaction. In order to fully understand the effectiveness of film as a source of community engagement as well as to understand the historical renaissance of independent filmmaking during the 1960s, specifically by Black filmmakers, I consulted numerous researchers who specialized in these areas.

The resurgence of young independent filmmaking came to fruition due to the proliferation of easily accessible and usable film equipment after World War II. Author Elena Rossi-Snook (2005) points out an important trend of film production during the post-World War II years, including a “unique mix of educational films, documentaries, animation, avant-garde films, student projects, and feature films that, today, evidence the social evolution of the twentieth century” (p. 2). Easily usable and affordable film equipment enabled aspiring artists to produce, direct, and distribute their own films. African American independent filmmakers, for example, often used their neighborhoods and communities they grew up in as subjects of their films. By examining their own cultural identity, this new equipment afforded artists the means to acquire footage that was uninterrupted with a heightened reality. Acknowledging the Black Power Movement seen in urban communities by the late 1960s, many of the films screened at MoMA dealt with groups involved with this Movement, including the Black Panther Group.



A common theme in all the literature I reviewed regarding African American films from the 1960s and 1970s was a central concern to reclaim the Black narrative and escape the countless stereotypes created by the predominately White Hollywood institution. Scholars in African American film and television, such as John Hess (1985), Clyde Taylor (1985), Floyd Coleman (1990), Elizabeth Hadley (1999), Tommy Lee Lott (1999), Manthia Diawara (2000), Lars Lierow (2013), and Jane Rhodes (2014) guided my research when considering the parallels between Black images in film over time and the work of African American filmmakers attempting to reclaim their narrative, as well as to better understand the role MoMA's Department of Film had in providing a space for these actions to occur.

In order to tackle the goal of reclaiming their diverse narratives, African Americans tried various platforms to tell their story, describe their experiences, and define their collective and individual cultural identity. According to Jane Rhodes (2014), certain filmmakers utilized mass media as a vehicle to comment on race relations and community issues such as with *Black Journal* (1968), a public affairs television program funded by the Ford Foundation that was produced by a number of Black filmmakers who aimed to create an alternative Black cinema in short documentary film (Lott, 1999). This technique was also seen in the work of Henry Hampton who created *Blackside, Inc.*, an independent film company that produced award-winning documentaries concerned with the Civil Rights Movement and the Black Power Movement (Hadley, 1999). By participating in mainstream television programming, *Black Journal* and *Blackside, Inc.* members could chart the progression of political movements for racial equality that were

ignored by other media sources. Mass media became a “key battleground in the black freedom struggle and activists demanded changes in how blackness was represented” (Rhodes, 2014, p. 136). As mentioned previously, the Black Panther Group was a key figure in the Black Power Movement. However, the depiction of these groups in most media outlets showed black militancy and aggressive behavior, ignoring the positive work they contributed to their communities. Programs like *Black Journal* examined the Black Panther Group’s efforts beyond mass media’s narrow depictions. Rhodes’ (2014) article continues to describe *Black Journal* and other similar programs as an effort to help release the “pressure built up within aggrieved communities that continually erupted into urban uprisings” (p. 139). Documentary films screened on these television programs told the unique and, until then, obscured stories of African American communities, providing community residents a venue through which to acknowledge, understand, and celebrate one another.

There were independent filmmakers that opposed the use of mass media as an outlet for artistic expression. In direct opposition to the use of mass media, independent filmmakers developed other forms of distribution as a commentary to the misrepresentation of Black communities (Diawara, 2000). Filmmakers found alternative outlets to show their work by participating in museum events, film festivals, and college courses. Films were also screened at libraries, churches, and community centers, where filmmakers gave lectures on their films to audiences (Lierow, 2013). These films were often documentaries and provided strategies of resistance towards White supremacy. New York City was a central hub for these new radical film companies where

fundraising, production, and distribution of films was done entirely in-house (Hess, 1985). Production houses such as Newsreel and Third World Newsreel were established, dealing with topics such as race relations, the Vietnam War, and other social, political, and economic issues arising during the 1960s and 1970s. Members of these film groups were adamant about the distribution of their films and often went along to showings in order to lead discussions about the various issues raised in their films.

My research also led me in the direction of consulting research that looked at the evolution of film and the depiction of African Americans and African American communities over time. Donald Simpson's "Black Images in Film – The 1940s to the Early 1960s" (1990) provided the most clarifying context I have found so far regarding how and why Black images were beginning to change by the 1940s. According to Simpson (1990), the tone of most of the creativity in the black liberation struggle after 1940 was due to the war effort, and was specifically determined by the goal of integration. Several political and historical factors influenced this shift. There was increasing pressure on the government to end discrimination in industry and in the military during World War II. The national rhetoric that came out of the war created an upsurge in democratic ideals seen in many industries, including the film industry. The NAACP's Hollywood chapter also began negotiating with the film industry, which changed the way Blacks were depicted in films.

Thirdly, the rise of the television industry began to curtail American's interest in cinema. Because of this changing attitude toward film, filmmakers began producing films with "sensational plots and themes to attract the public to the movie theatre. Racial

awareness type themes and films where blacks were not portrayed in the traditional stereotypes... were amongst the kinds of films that Hollywood began to produce” (Simpson, 1990, pp. 21-22). In terms of the film industry, this was their way of sympathetically presenting African Americans as well as their effort to show their increasing tolerance towards minorities. Films began to represent African American characters in more of a multi-dimensional way, creating a complex individual narrative.

Lars Lierow’s “The Black Man’s Vision of the World” (2013) mentions that African American filmmakers faced challenges when attempting to accurately represent African American community life. The Black aesthetic was an important tenet to the Black Power and Black Arts Movements. African American filmmakers were inclined “to pursue film projects in documentary, narrative, or artistic-experimental styles, through independent as well as commercial channels” (Lierow, 2013, p. 7). Black film produced during this period attempted to shape a new culture for African American identification, and in doing so helped to create a black consciousness. Lierow’s essay reiterates the countless films being produced by African Americans that examined their culturally diverse communities. He explains that this movement in filmmaking was just as propagandistic as it was educational and had goals that were rooted in instruction as well as service promotion. Film was used as a tool to spread cultural propaganda and a mode of communication that could reach more audiences and affect broader ideologies. It was also used in an effort to help communities learn from each other and reshape their self-identity while spreading messages to the general public that the African American communities were culturally rich and essential to the nation.

## **GENERAL SOURCES ON THE MUSEUM OF MODERN ART'S DEPARTMENT OF FILM**

As mentioned in Chapter 1, there are few texts dedicated to the history of the Museum of Modern Art's Department of Film, and even less that refer to the department during the 1960s and 1970s. Haidee Wasson's *Museum Movies* (2005) and other scholarly articles by her, such as "The Cinematic Subtext of the Modern Museum" (2001) as well as Russell Lyne's *Good Old Modern* (1973) cover a majority of the department's development from the early stages until the early 1970s. Both these authors provided my study with access to the department's beliefs, values, and attitudes towards film and the society they worked within.

Since 1935, the Film Library had become an important resource for film scholars, filmmakers, and the general public who were interested in the historical influence of film. Believing film to be the only new modern art form of the twentieth century, MoMA considered it necessary to collect and preserve important film from the past and present. Beyond the practices of collecting film and learning the intricacies of preserving inflammable 35mm film reels, the central purpose of the Film Library was to educate and engage its public about the social and cultural relevance of film. Lead researcher of the Library's early history, Haidee Wasson, describes MoMA as one of the leading institutions to forward "the values of education film viewing, studious attention, face-to-face discussion and, most important, structured criteria by which films would be engaged" (Wasson, 2005, p. 186). The Film Library engaged with a wider and much more diverse audience than many other departments in the museum. This afforded the

museum with an ability to adapt quickly to changing public needs, especially the needs of young audience members. Wasson also claims that the department considered film an educational instrument that should be screened and discussed within a different context than common commercial movie theaters (Wasson, 2008). By doing so, the museum encouraged sociological, historical, political, and aesthetic dialogue about film.

Wasson also claims that MoMA's Department of Film furthered its mandate to demystify the museum and make its collection accessible and approachable for the public by finding ways to stay technologically and socially relevant as well as constantly visible to the public (Wasson, 2005). Part of its success during the first couple decades was due to its active integration of press into its operations. The museum utilized radio, television, major news syndicates, and its own monthly publications to share its ongoing work of collecting, preserving, screening, and teaching about film. It strategically created "buzz" around its programming and film study center and instituted a framework that presented MoMA's Film Library as a place that celebrated American culture and art. Wasson also mentions in an earlier article that the museum, as a whole, embraced technological advancements that celebrated mass media and consumer culture (Wasson, 2001). The museum transformed the entertaining practice of watching film by creating a way for audiences to engage with and discuss film in an educational and productive manner.

In Russell Lynes's *Good Old Modern*, he refers to one of the founders of the museum, Paul Sachs, and his speech given in 1937, in which he stressed the need for more leisurely scholarly work. Sachs noted that energy must be put into funding the film department because film was one of the best ways to reach the greatest number of young

people (Lynes, 1973). As referred by both Wasson and Lynes, all of MoMA's directors since 1935 found significant value in the Department of Film. This is evidenced from countless examples in Lynes's research of next to no directorial oversight of film collecting and programming. Although its budget was small, the department had nearly full reign of all their activities.

The film department's authority concerning internal decisions was significant when considering the changes MoMA and its film department encountered in the 1960s. Under the leadership of Willard Van Dyke, the film department from 1965 until 1974 began new programming that appealed to a younger generation and began collecting independent film in larger numbers, which included body of works by marginalized groups of people (Lynes, 1973). In Chapter 16 of *Good Old Modern*, Lynes describes in some detail the major developmental changes in the Film Library during the 1960s into the 1970s. With the new director came a new department name and, accordingly, a higher overall reputation by the museum and the New York art world. The department's programming was regularly seen in all major and local news syndicates including the *New York Times*, *Wall Street Journal*, *The Village Voice*, and *Newsweek*, usually with generous commentary by reviewers (Department of Film Exhibition Files, C. 63. MoMA Archives, NY). More attention towards programming and collecting meant increased exposure for filmmakers represented by MoMA in these various programs.

As a pioneer of social documentary film in America during the Great Depression, the new Director, Willard Van Dyke, expanded the department's reach in order to appeal to the needs and interests of its varying audience members. This meant adding areas of

programming that appealed to a younger and more diverse crowd (Lynes, 1973). Van Dyke also dealt with the department's steadily decreasing budget by collecting and programming independent films and films made by young artists that cost next to nothing to purchase and screen and were less costly to preserve. In Lyne's personal account of the film department, he quotes Van Dyke who described the 1960s as a period witnessing new developments in film production with "an explosion of young film-makers" that were sending "their 'stuff' to the Museum" endlessly (Lynes, 1973, p. 337). Van Dyke responded to this resurgence of young filmmakers in America by developing two new program series, *Cinéprobe* and *What's Happening?*, which are the central points in this research. Both programs invited young filmmakers into the museum to share their films and discuss them with an audience. Based on the subject matters of these films programmed, *Cinéprobe* and *What's Happening?* also summoned a whole new audience unfamiliar to the museum's film department as well as museums in general.

## **READINGS ON THE CHANGING ROLE OF THE MUSEUM OF MODERN ART AND ART EDUCATION**

Art historian and author of the unofficial history of the Museum of Modern Art, Russell Lynes, dedicates Chapter 21 "Living Dangerously in the Seventies" of his book *Good Old Modern* (1973), to explain the museum's transformation during the 1960s. This chapter is a necessary source for this research because it creates a certain context that explains the changing role and reputation of the museum. By understanding exactly what the museum was facing at that time, the significance of the decisions made in the film department under Willard Van Dyke's leadership is clarified.



During the 1960s, the Museum of Modern Art witnessed an increasing amount of criticism from the art world and the public. It also risked financial setbacks that influenced the quality and quantity of its exhibitions and public programming. Russell Lynes (1973) comments on MoMA's slight functional decline during the 1960s also as a direct result of its own success. He further explains that the museum sold its "doctrine" so well that the institutions most influenced by the museum were beginning to resent its authority and turn away from it. Lynes documents other internal and external attitudes concerning MoMA's role in *Good Old Modern*. Certain art figures believed that MoMA had reached the end of its life span and had lost its power as a leading art institution, while others described the museum as a relic of its time but too old-fashioned in its practices (Lynes, 1973). Overall, there was a consensus that the MoMA should stay away from contemporary art and focus its attention on what it did best, which was strictly modern art.

Financial setbacks also destabilized MoMA. Up until the 1960s, MoMA relied entirely on private funding from their most affluent trustees. However, the period of unregulated support from the moguls of New York City, such as the Rockefellers, Whitneys, and Guggenheims, was coming to an end. Funding for cultural institutions rapidly changed during this time due to legislation pushback and an ever-growing amount of arts non-profits demanding their share of government and private support. For example, the Rockefeller Foundation's financial giving, one of MoMA's heavily relied on foundations, gradually changed into an assortment of controlled funding sources, which created limitations for the museum regarding how and where the donated money

could be spent (Lynes, 1973). Federal and state governments also began supporting the arts in differently with the introduction of peer panels at the National Endowment for the Arts in 1965 and the New York State Arts Commission, where museum programming was evaluated and controlled much more extensively (Lynes, 1973). Competition for the “cultural dollar” was increasingly fierce and MoMA was forced to reevaluate its role as an arts center in order to maintain the type of funding and support it received in the past.

In accordance with Russell Lynes’s considerations of the financial changes for arts organizations during the 1960s, art historian Otto Wittmann (1966) and the American Association of Museums recount that by the mid 1960s there were 700 art museums and related art institutions among the 4,500 museums in total in the United States. Despite this growth of art museums and the appreciation of them at the time, tax benefits and deductions were much more extensive for other educational institutions (Wittmann, 1966). Although the government’s response to art museums as educational organizations was gradually shifting, according to the Internal Revenue Code of 1954, it ruled that even if a museum maintained a regular faculty and a regularly enrolled body of students, it still was not considered an educational site and would not be considered to receive certain tax breaks that other organizations were allotted (1966). All art institutions during this period were therefore struggling to maintain funding for educational programming.

Russell Lynes also describes a new kind of attack on MoMA that was percolating during the 1960s. Artists within the community began demanding MoMA respond to their interests and concerns regarding how artists were being represented by museums. Through protests, sit-ins, and public hearings, the Art Workers Coalition demanded that

the museum participate and evaluate their relationship to artists in the community and to begin representing artists it had neglected over the years, including African Americans and women artists. Lucy Lippard, a member of the Art Workers Coalition in the 1960s, recounted that,

there seems little hope for broad reform of the Museum of Modern Art. It has done a great deal in the past and now seems to have become so large and unwieldy that it has outgrown its usefulness. What is really needed is not just an updated Monolith of Modern Art, but a new and more flexible system. (Lynes, 1973, p. 441)

Russell Lynes replied to this criticism with numerous examples of MoMA's historically significant achievements since 1929. This response suggests that despite the increasing amount of criticism the museum was receiving, according to Lynes, it is important to remember the museum's many accomplishments as well as its artistic and scholarly impact. From the ever-growing progressive departments established since 1929, to the introduction of art classes in the museum, which was a new form of art teaching created by museum educator Victor D'Amico, and to the creation of the Committee on Art Education, MoMA generated great influence both nationally and internationally. The museum also expressed genuine interest in working with African American communities seen through exhibitions of Black artists going as far back as 1935. Despite the criticism received during the 1960s concerning MoMA's White male dominated focus, Lynes pointed out that MoMA was one of the first museums to exhibit and survey African American Art; an exhibit that was highly revered by the African American community. Finally, to the well received traveling exhibitions, and to the schools, universities, and art museums the MoMA continued to influence, Russell Lynes stressed that these triumphs

should not be disregarded by those who criticized MoMA for being too old-fashioned, large, and unwieldy (Lynes, 1973). Lynes concludes this chapter by addressing the importance of maintaining MoMA's work in supporting and programming the work of emerging contemporary artists.

## **CONCLUSION**

After reviewing and interpreting this wide range of applicable literature, as evidenced in this brief overview, I have referenced these material sources in more full and rich detail in the chapters that follow. Chapter 3 evaluates the methodology used for this study and references the sources that best applied when undertaking historical research, as well as utilizing archives as a main primary source. Chapters 4 and 5 are dedicated to the explanation of the *Cinéprobe* and *What's Happening?* programs, and how both addressed African American communities by using film a central tool. Chapter 6 contains an analysis of both programs and their usefulness towards the African American community, as well as to the goals of the community to reclaim its rich cultural narrative.

### **Chapter 3: *Historical Research Methodology***

This chapter is a discussion of the methodology utilized in this study and the works I referred to while conducting this research and analyzing the data secured through this investigation. Discussion is also centered on the archival material and documentary film I studied as well as my experience while working with these sources at the Museum of Modern Art's Archival center in New York City.

#### **READINGS ABOUT USING HISTORICAL RESEARCH**

Having chosen a research topic that involves a museum's past history, it was clear that I was to conduct a study using a historical research methodology. Works by Burke (1991, 2004), Williams (2003), Bolin (1995), and Kyvig and Marty (2010) guided me in my process of making a concise argument about MoMA's Department of Film and its historical influence. I referenced historical writers from the field of art education, as well as individuals who have worked with historical writing about marginalized cultures and communities in order to expand my knowledge concerning the process and complications of my own writing.

As an historian, I am given many choices regarding how I may address and approach history. With my study and the works of Burke (1991, 2004) and Bolin (1995), my approach explored the new contemporary paradigm of historical writing that focuses on areas that have been overlooked thus far in much historical literature. Under this paradigm, I am interested in Peter Burke's concern with historians who are blurring the

lines between what is marginal and what is fundamental in history (Burke, 1991). Bolin (1995) comments, “there has been a shift toward writing history about changes in economic and social contextures rather than about historical events themselves” (p. 48). Regarding my research, with this approach I considered the cultural shifts that occurred during the 1960s and 1970s which caused changes in the way MoMA interacted with its community, specifically various African American communities.

As described in Burke’s *What is Cultural History?* (2004), my historical framework aimed to “portray patterns of culture” and “to describe the characteristic thoughts and feelings of an age and their expressions or embodiments in works of... art” (p. 9). MoMA’s Department of Film encouraged a discourse on relevant socio-political issues through the films they screened during its programming. I looked for trends and themes found in the selected films shown by the Department of Film in order to understand what topics interested MoMA most. For example, MoMA intentionally choose film dealing with race and its implications in order for these issues to be considered and discussed by the community at large.

In this study, I attempted to comment on what could be learned from looking at and analyzing views and beliefs about groups of people easily stereotyped, and how these misconceptions constructed about them can be cleared through the study of and discourse of art. To assist in this analytical process, I considered Burke’s (2004) discussion of historical memories. He explains that as events recede they sometimes lose their specificity. They are often elaborated on, usually unconsciously. Therefore, these historical memories come to resemble the general representation current in the culture,

which helps memories to endure at the price of distorting them (Burke, 2004). My research aimed to address and bring to light these misconceptions of African American cultures and their diverse definitions of identity in the 1960s and 1970s.

Burke (2004) also focuses on the importance of representation. Stereotypes made of cultures and people have been and continue to be influenced through writing. I acknowledged that the Black community has many components that shape its cultural identity and, therefore, many narratives to express. My research intended to address these multi-dimensional discussions about African American cultural identity found in the films that were screened at MoMA.

### **Historical Writing**

As expressed in Williams (2003) and Kyvig and Marty (2010), it is imperative that a historical study be presented in a logical order with supporting evidence that creates a reliable account of the subject at hand. In Chapter 11 of *The Historian's Toolbox*, Williams describes various tools that a historian may use when creating a narrative and explaining data. The tools I found most valuable were the uses of chronology and causation, which helped me identify patterns and themes in my research material and explain why certain actions were made by leaders of the film department. My study also follows MoMA's history from the years 1965 until 1974 in order to capture a picture of the progression of the department's new programming and leadership.

Kyvig and Marty (2010) discuss elements to focus on when conducting historical writing, including origins, dynamics, milestones, and character. *Origins* emphasizes the people who were familiar with the institution's early stages, while *dynamics* focuses on the power that was acquired, held, and used and how decisions were made. These are key components to the structure of this study. The reason why MoMA's film department has been so legendarily successful is because of its strong leadership throughout its history and because of the individuals who established the museum's structure and mission. The Department of Film underwent an exciting transformation under the leadership of Willard Van Dyke in the early 1960s, but this department always had leaders who were finding new film and film concepts to study, collect, and program that was thrilling to a wide-ranged audience. This is an important element to reference throughout my research. Part of the success of this department in the 1960s is due to the fact that it is has, since 1935, always been excitingly challenging. From its early stages the department established an incredibly enthusiastic team who loved film and celebrating film history. This internal attitude towards film was consistent from the early stages and onward as articulated by Russell Lynes (1973) and Willard Van Dyke himself in the documentary *Conversations with Willard Van Dyke* (1981). Film was still a relatively new medium that was consistently changing and being challenged by the artist and its audience. This refers to Kyvig and Marty's final elements, *milestones* and *character*. *Milestones* consider times of marked and important change, and *character* seeks to identify features that set a subject apart from others of the same general type (2010). All four of these elements are a large part my study and have influenced the structure of how I evaluated the two



programs *Cinéprobe* and *What's Happening?* From the research I conducted, I concluded that part of the success of each program was due to the historical structure of the department, the leadership, the many societal and cultural shifts occurring at the time, and the unique aspects of these two programs. It is important to take note that no other museum on the same prestigious level as the MoMA delivered programs that supported and represented young independent filmmakers, and very few museums were screening films made by African Americans or members of other marginalized groups.

## **ARCHIVAL RESEARCH**

This study was conducted using document materials as my main primary source and as a basis for assembling a narrative of past events occurring in MoMA's Department of Film. I considered Williams' *The Historian's Toolbox* (2003) as well as Kyvig and Marty's *Nearby History* (2010) to assist in my analyses of archives and how best to use these materials and create an accurate narrative of the work that was conducted in the film department. Williams (2003) is explicit when discussing the value of primary sources. He mentions, "historians should not argue or narrate beyond what the evidence demonstrates is the truth" (p. 58). This was a supportive reminder to me when analyzing my data and avoiding the tendency to create a narrative based on biased and unsupported opinions.

Chapter 5 of Kyvig and Marty's text was pivotal in assisting this study during the process of data collection and analysis. Careful thought concerning how the archives were organized and who organized them helped answer certain questions about why the

record was kept in the archive and why certain records were not. Chapter 5 of Kyvig and Marty's text (2010) also mentions that the record creator had a particular purpose in mind and gathered material based on that purpose. Certain information unrelated to that purpose might not be found, even if that material involves the activity or person in question. I considered this when interpreting why the archives I used may have been organized in a specific manner. It also provided me with skills when I thought of other archival folders I originally assumed to be unrelated that ended up being useful.

## **RESEARCH AND UTILIZING FILM**

As an element of this investigation I examined film (specifically film screened by MoMA during the public programs *Cinéprobe* and *What's Happening?*) as a primary source. A majority of the films screened in these two programs at MoMA during the period under question are in the form of documentaries. This recognition was helpful to my study because documentaries can create a more purposely accurate narrative of real life than other forms of theatrical film (Williams, 2003). Williams discusses the use of film in Chapter 19 of *The Historian's Toolbox*, as a way to help historians understand the past. He described film as another form of a primary source, which may tell us about a specific time, place, and circumstance under which a film was made. Such films that help document the past are "works of art based on evidence and fact.... But like any work of history are subject to bias, distortion, and interpretation" (Williams, 2003, pp. 145-146). This is true for writing as well, but the advantage of using film is that it can help the

researcher to visualize the past and assist her or him in understanding a state of mind in ways that words alone are limited.

According to the research work of Haidee Wasson (2005) on the early stages of MoMA's Film Archive, she explains that despite the department's institutional home at MoMA, the film's value was associated less with "an art that had been neglected and more with a history that had been lost." This complex idea of a film's historical value became a negotiated conversation at MoMA, and later at other museums and institutions as museums continued to appropriate film and video into their collections. Wasson's (2005) research indicates that "film art became a broad rhetorical category, changing considerably across and within different concepts" (p. 30). Much can be learned from film not simply as an art object but as a piece of visual history that was once considered lost. MoMA transformed old films into modern flashpoints of conversation and discussed new ideas about the nature of film's value within the context of what Wasson considers a media savvy, publicly mandated art museum (Wasson, 2005). This position relates to the film programming established at MoMA in the 1960s and 1970s. The Department of Film highlighted the importance of documentary film made by young and often marginalized groups of filmmakers by programming them in series like *Cinéprobe* and *What's Happening?* With this in mind, I considered Williams's analysis on the importance of film, noting that much evidence about a specific time or place in history can be found by viewing film. Williams also describes watching film as a way to learn about the director, the audience, and the culture in which the movie was made (2003). In the case of my

study, watching and analyzing film can denote key characteristics about the time period and the audiences that were watching these films at MoMA.

In Chapter 7 of Kyvig and Marty's *Nearby History* (2010), the authors describe images in motion pictures as testaments to continuous change that can assist the historian when constructing an accurate narrative about a certain subject. Much is revealed through images, such as a group's customs, preferences, and styles. Images of the same subject that are produced by different creators can show very distinct qualities, "so different viewers may see each one differently." The authors go on to express that "meaning also depends, in part, on how the image is presented" (p. 133).

## **CONNECTING EDUCATION, FILM, AND MUSEUMS**

The topic of film education and programming in museums was influenced by many different research experiences I have had over the past several years. After studying the historical developments of film utilization in museums, I was struck by how little research has been conducted on the evolution of the Museum of Modern Art's Department of Film. According to source materials I found throughout the course of my research that covers what was originally known as the Film Archive, this department was not only the first film archive in the country but it also pioneered film education in museums and greatly influenced the establishment of film programs in universities around the country as mentioned in earlier chapters. Haidee Wasson's *Museum Movies* (2005), begins by declaring the Department of Film as not simply successful because of the museum's claim that film was an important piece of art or even a historical object.

She believes the department was successful mainly because “it fed a complex and emergent network of ideas, practices, and technologies that coalesced... around the idea that under carefully designed circumstances films could be studied, discussed, appreciated, and made useful for a range of projects” (Wasson, 2005, p. 30). Having a background in art history and visual arts studies rather than in film studies, I found the practicality and usefulness of this medium captivating, powerful, and very different from the art mediums I have studied and worked with in the past.

I began watching film, both old and recent, with a new lens and with a shifting consideration towards the historical and societal influence it has in our culture. I was particularly drawn towards documentary film that surfaced in the 1930s and again in the 1960s that dealt with domestic social issues. Documentary film, only a facet of this artistic channel, is structured to inform the public of pertinent topics, while maintaining a creative hold on viewers. I began researching documentary filmmakers in the 1960s with the intention of understanding how their films were used for educational purposes. My findings suggested that many of the social documentaries distributed were being screened at libraries, churches, community centers, sometimes schools, and even museums (Lierow, 2013). There was evidently a form of community engagement occurring within a communal setting that was driven by artists and their films. In my mind, this was an area of art education from the past that needed to be remembered and possibly reconsidered within the educational and community-driven framework of art practice today.

The Museum of Modern Art and its film department continued to be of interest for me and I began reading about its history to better understand its evolutionary mission to serve public needs. I referenced Russell Lynes's *Good Old Modern* (1973) throughout this research because of his personal impression of the museum over the years; from the very early stages as the first modern art museum in New York City to the years of being a gigantic institute of art, authoritative in practice. Lynes's account is both earnest and straightforward and does not steer away from the mistakes and challenges the museum and staff faced throughout the years. For that, it formed a clear image for me regarding how I represented the museum as a community center.

Russell Lynes's *Good Old Modern* (1973) is the only source material I could locate that mentions any programming established in the Department of Film after the year 1960. His chapter titled "The Gleanings" brought to my attention the work of Willard Van Dyke at MoMA in the film department and his programs *Cinéprobe* and *What's Happening?* To clarify, these programs, both community and artist focused, are the central programs examined in this research.

### **The Museum of Modern Art's Archives**

In order to answer my questions about the Department of Film's programming during the 1960s and 1970s, I contacted Michelle Harvey, the Rona Roob Museum Archivist at The Museum of Modern Art. I discussed with her my interests in and questions about the department's public programming as well as about the director of film at the time, Willard Van Dyke. Ms. Harvey sent me an extensive list of every

exhibition and program the film department was involved with from 1960 until 1975. I narrowed this body of work down to cover only the programs series that took place during Willard Van Dyke's leadership, from 1965 until 1974. After narrowing the field, I researched every program on the list and accessed as many online press releases that were available on MoMA's archival website in order to gather information on the films and the filmmakers involved. During this initial research, I found similarities between the two programs *Cinéprobe* and *What's Happening?*. Both program series were created after Willard Van Dyke became the director of the department. Both programs invited young independent filmmakers in to screen and talk about their work, and many of the program series featured African American films. It appears the programs had different purposes and missions, but the weekly series that featured African American filmmakers were very interconnected, as is explained in later chapters. As I continued to research both of these programs with the digital press releases on MoMA's website, I realized there was much information I was missing that could not be found online or in any other secondary source. I needed to visit the site where these programs took place and where I could also gain access to files not available to the public.

As mentioned previously, I discovered only one secondary source describing the programs I desired to study. Russell Lynes's *Good Old Modern* (1973) explained the difficulty of funding new programs like *Cinéprobe* and *What's Happening?* because of the department's small budget. From Lynes's point of view, it seemed evident that Van Dyke was motivated enough to go to great lengths in continuing these programs, however

Lynes's research ends around the early 1970s. There is no further discussion exploring the efforts that were made in order to continue these programs nor an explanation of exactly what filmmakers were brought in and how the audience interacted with this new style of programming. It was time in my research to consult the archive library held at the Museum of Modern Art.

I spent a total of three days at MoMA's archive center. The experience was both insightful and limiting. Many of the programs I was interested in had, more often than not, only a few pertinent materials within their folders. This was challenging when interpreting the audience's reaction and interest in these programs. However, the letters, memos, and series descriptions I did find were incredibly useful and set up my study to tell a chronological narrative of how both these film programs progressed and related to one another. From my findings at MoMA's archive center, I began piecing together what was most important to the Department of Film when defining its mission and how that mission reflected in the two programs *Cinéprobe* and *What's Happening?*. It was invigorating to find parallels between both programs and their attention towards African Americans and other marginalized groups and artists. As I continued to review the archives available to me, I selected several of the most detailed film series for this research. However, I found the amount of film projects chosen by MoMA geared to understanding African American community life an important element to this study. Therefore, in the appendix, I have listed each program series of *What's Happening?* from



1965 until 1974 that addressed African American filmmakers and African American communities, and in addition have given a short synopsis of each film.

## **CONCLUSION**

This chapter documented the investigative approach I undertook in this research as I analyzed my data to further understand the historical context surrounding the films shown at MoMA. From preliminary research, it was evident that community-based educational programming occurred in the 1960s through film and it was a driving force in the museum world. As I continued searching, I was able to make the connections between the practices of MoMA's Department of Film and the social documentaries that were being distributed to public institutions. The programs I studied were specifically interested in how films addressed social issues for African Americans during the 1960s and 1970s. The film department's audience, primarily White and middle-class, were motivated to watch selected films within a social and even sometimes political framework unlike their own. The department's film selections influenced the discussions that took place after the screenings in a unique way after viewing depictions of African Americans with a very different perspective than had been shown in news outlets. It was important for me, while conducting this research, to be aware of these multiple views of audience members, artists, and museum staff and to be aware of the possible ways I as a historian could interpret these films and audience reactions.

Chapter 4 and Chapter 5 begin my detailed exploration into the two programs *Cinéprobe* and *What's Happening?*. The analysis of both programs is found in the sixth

Chapter, while Chapter 4 and 5 are dedicated to establishing exactly what the programs were and what they aimed to accomplish in the museum as well as in the community at large. After establishing a framework of each program, I began to explore the films that specifically dealt with African American topics in society and culture as well as the efforts of the department that went into promoting these specific film programs.

## **Chapter 4: *Transformation through Cinéprobe***

### **A CHANGE OF PACE AT THE MUSEUM OF MODERN ART**

As examined in Chapter 2, the Museum of Modern Art was in the midst of a major institutional change during the 1960s. The financial security experienced in the Museum's early years was now becoming more unstable and, in response, its various departments began adjusting their regular programming. The Department of Film, still known as the Film Archive in 1965, was the most expensive division in the museum primarily because of its preservation services. However, the department's budget was always miniscule compared to other departments from the very beginning, creating an unexpected advantage. The small staff of the film department were expected to be creative with the type of film programming that took place in and outside of the museum, and were forced to interact with the outside community in order to screen film at a low cost (Wasson, 2005). Therefore, the financial change made at the MoMA in the 1960s did not shake up the work of the film department as it did in others. In many ways, less funding meant a new and exciting challenge placed on the talented and driven team that made up the film department in the 1960s.

In 1965, the museum appointed film director and photographer Willard Van Dyke as the new director of the film department. This proved to be suitable union for the time period. In a letter written by the president of Knickerbocker Productions, Howard Lesser, to the director of MoMA at the time, René d'Harnancourt, Lesser expressed his admiration of Van Dyke as a leader in the art and film world and an asset to the museum.

Lesser explained, “of greater import to a museum that is ‘modern,’ Willard will bring to the tasks that lie ahead a mind that is sympathetically attuned to the ideas and aspirations of the younger generations” (Department of Film Exhibition Files, René d'Harnoncourt Papers, IV. 234. The Museum of Modern Art Archives, New York). Van Dyke and the department's staff began exploring new areas of film that had, until then, been ignored by the film industry, including mainly American independent production and distribution companies. This was partially a decision based on the lack of funding the department received but it was also a decision made by Van Dyke as he reevaluated the department's mission and its purpose as a research center.

In the documentary film *Conversations with Willard Van Dyke* (1981), which is an intimate survey of Van Dyke's professional life, he sat down with then visiting curator, Donald Richie, to discuss his role at MoMA. Both men noted that the department needed to make changes in order to appeal to a younger generation and to provide opportunities for filmmakers. Richie mentioned that the department had been successful with its original mission to preserve film and transform the medium into a serious area of study. However, by the 1960s there were many similar film archives throughout the country that were undertaking the same type of services and exhibition programming that MoMA was providing. According to Willard Van Dyke, it was time for the Department of Film to reevaluate its public mission and explore new areas of film that were being not being shown elsewhere. According to Van Dyke and Richie in *Conversations With Willard Van Dyke* (1981), the film department reformed its mission and became a place amenable for young filmmakers to screen and discuss their work (Rothschild, 1981).

There was a renaissance of young filmmakers in the 1960s, and Van Dyke seemed to be the only one who realized that no other institution was taking responsibility to support and represent these new artists as well as represent the emerging generation of people interested in seeing this type of film.

### **BIRTH OF *CINÉPROBE***

In the fall of 1968, the program titled *Cinéprobe* was launched by MoMA's Department of Film. The purpose of the program was to provide exposure for independent and experimental filmmakers that until this program had been under-represented by mainstream film criticism as well as by production companies. This particular programming came to fruition with the assistance of Willard Van Dyke and a selection of his very dedicated departmental staff, including associate curators of film, Adrienne Mancina and Larry Kardish; film coordinator, Lillian Gerard; and assistant film coordinator, Mark Segal. In order to achieve the goal of exposing work of unknown filmmakers to the public, the department established a programming framework that proposed a dialogue between the director and the audience. At each screening, the film director was asked to attend in order to discuss his or her work and answer questions from the audience as well as receive and respond to feedback about his or her film.

The *Cinéprobe* series was designed specifically for independent filmmakers to present their new films regardless of quality or experience. Curated by Adrienne Mancina and Larry Kardish, many styles of their film were selected to participate in the program -- from avant-garde films and animation to documentaries and feature films. Mancina and

Kardish were especially partial to the films that struggled to find distribution from major production and distribution companies. In a letter from Adrienne Mancina to a perspective filmmaker, Mike Gray, she expressed her interest in helping Gray find distribution for his work by screening it at the museum. In the letter from Mancina, she voiced that if he did not find a distributor by the time of his appearance in *Cinéprobe*, the department “would be happy to invite a number of distributors to a screening here. We believe in the film and would do anything we could to help it” (Department of Film Exhibition Files, C. 63. MoMA Archives, NY). Creating a platform for artists to find distribution and public interest in their work was the overarching goal of *Cinéprobe*, and in many cases proved to be successful in doing so. Many of the filmmakers presented in this program, such as Melvin Van Peebles, Stan Brakhage, Kenneth Anger, and Mark Rappaport, naming only a few, claimed an increased following because of the exposure they received at MoMA. The Department of Film also assisted in making a name for several films years before they became commercial successes, such as George Romero’s *Night of the Living Dead* (1968), which was shown at *Cinéprobe* in 1968, and later with Kathryn Bigelow’s *Near Dark* (1987), which was screened at MoMA in 1988. Both these films are now considered classics.

In the 1960s, many artists were making films without production or distribution backing. Cutting out the middleman completely, and not necessarily intentionally, filmmakers were raising the money themselves in order for these movies to be produced. They sent their work to libraries, museums, and other cultural institutions that were involved in film programming in order to attract public attention. Van Dyke and his team

responded to this flow of films by creating programming that didn't exist yet at MoMA.

Van Dyke described the program to historian, Russell Lynes, in 1973 as

one of our most adventurous things. Not everything we show has to be a masterpiece, but it should be on an informational basis. With that in mind we offer the filmmakers the opportunity to bring their films here, no matter how difficult or how unused the audience is to it. . . . We insist that they remain and face the audience and answer whatever questions are put to them. The audience is very rough on some of them, really rough. (Lynes, 1973, p. 337)

*Cinéprobe* eventually received a corporate grant from the Standard Oil Company (New Jersey) in 1969, which was a first for the department. This grant instituted a major step towards activating the role of the museum as an intermediary between filmmakers and the public. Money from this grant went to the filmmakers as a small honorarium, which Van Dyke considered a way of adding dignity to the artist's position as a newly exposed artist, unused to the spotlight and public interaction (Lynes, 1973). Willard Van Dyke expressed in a letter to a future *Cinéprobe* participant that the series served as a way of helping

filmmakers reach a wider audience. We are aware that there are many filmmakers, of both sexes and all races, whose work remains unappreciated, and it is in this spirit that we have provided a time and a place where they can show their films and exchange ideas with an audience. (Department of Film Exhibition Files, C. 108. MoMA Archives, NY)

In the same letter he remarked that the department's role was explicitly not to give grants to artists for production, but instead provide exposure to artists for their cinematic and artistic achievements. He noted that grants for production were a priority of numerous agencies such as the National Foundation on the Arts and Humanities, various state art councils, the Corporation for Public Broadcasting, the American Film Institute, and

numerous foundations. He noted that none of these agencies were providing the kind of service that was offered by *Cinéprobe*. He recounted in his letter the number of complaints the department was receiving from the conservative museum regulars concerning some of the films screened in *Cinéprobe*. Despite this pushback, Van Dyke said, “participating in Cinéprobe is a valuable experience for many young artists, and we hope to continue it” (C. 108. MoMA Archives, NY). In another draft letter from Willard Van Dyke to a disgruntled audience member who found one of the films screened in *Cinéprobe* to be both “pornographic” and “prurient,” he defended the program and the film by referencing the philosophy and goals of the museum. The letter contained the following:

From the time the Museum was founded all of the curatorial departments have been charged with two basic goals; namely to collect, preserve, and exhibit the masterpieces of the past and to probe the current concerns of artists, exhibiting those the curators found representative of significant trends. (Department of Film Exhibition Files, C. 56. MoMA Archives, NY)

In the letter, Van Dyke explained that as curator and as a leader of the museum, it was his duty to exhibit art he found to represent relevant social and political trends and the film in question did just that, therefore, he believed showing this film was vital to his mission.

### ***Cinéprobe* and African American Film**

As mentioned previously, the mission of *Cinéprobe* was to help independent filmmakers, especially those that showed great cinematic and artistic achievement, reach a wider audience by screening and lecturing their films. The department also invited



critics and distributors to attend these screenings to help increase the chosen film's chances of public exposure. The goal of the program was to engage the audience with artists in a unique and intimate form of dialogue. Likewise, it was also a program objective to assist artists with much needed exposure for their work in order to lead to financial assistance for future work. By 1971, the film program had received its first official corporate grant, was prominently written about in all major New York news syndicates, and was lauded by Museum audiences as an essential film program and an asset to the art community. As evidenced in a correspondence between director of film, Willard Van Dyke, and a 1973 *Cinéprobe* artist participant, St. Clair Bourne, the *Cinéprobe* program goals were continuously expanded based on the needs of the community. In March 1970, African American filmmaker St. Clair Bourne, wrote to the director of the museum at the time, John Hightower, to criticize the museum for its treatment of African American artists, or more accurately the lack of exposure of African American artists and limited effort made by the museum to appeal to the Black community. Earlier that year, Adrienne Mancina wrote to Bourne inquiring of his participation in *Cinéprobe*. Bourne took this invitation as an insult, and wrote to Hightower with the following:

American cultural institutions are not famous for justly rewarding Black artists for their creative efforts. I am not interested in "integrating" the CINEPROBE series, but I do think that MOMA's resources should be made available for artists that deliberately have been deprived of such resources to further develop themselves. (C. 108. MoMA Archives, NY)

Hightower forwarded St. Clair Bourne's letter to Willard Van Dyke and asked him to personally respond as a representative of the film department. Van Dyke wrote back to

Bourne, promptly acknowledging his complaints. In the letter he concluded with this thought:

We agree that most black filmmakers have neither received just acknowledgement of their achievements nor proper opportunity for development. It was with this knowledge, and with the hope that we could help to change these conditions that Mrs. Mancina extended an invitation to you to present your work. (C. 108. MoMA Archives, NY)

This acknowledgement admitting past mistakes of overlooking African American artists and filmmakers was a major step forward for art institutions at the time. It also seemed to persuade Bourne, for he participated in *Cinéprobe* in 1973 as well as assisted in the promotion of his participation in the program. In a letter to Larry Kardish dated September 13, 1973, Bourne gave advice to Kardish on how best to reach the Black community. In the letter he stated, “I think that an additional advertisement in the *N.Y. Amsterdam News* would help alert interested viewers in the Black community.” Bourne continued, “a mailing of a press release to both community-oriented communication organs as well as the normal mass media outlets would be of great value” (C. 108. MoMA Archives, NY). This advice from St. Claire was used to promote other African American films and artists that participated in future programs at MoMA.

Discussing the concerns of racism in America was not entirely within the scope of *Cinéprobe's* mission. However, as seen throughout the timeline of this study, I have discovered a selection of films screened in this program, including St. Clair Bourne's, that were given extra attention by the department based on the controversial subject matter and the appeal the topic of these films had with its audience. Because of the sometimes provocative nature of these films, many distribution companies did not work

with these filmmakers, leading MoMA's film department to step in and oversee some assistance for their films in order to have a public presence.

### ***Cinéprobe: Mike Gray & Associates***

In the section that follows I direct attention toward a more focused look at two films shown as part of the *Cinéprobe* series. Here I discuss two filmmakers whose work was presented at *Cinéprobe*, within the timeline of 1968 to 1974, which directly addressed various issues of race in African American communities. I also describe the promotional efforts made by the museum in order for these films to be exposed to a larger audience:

The political documentary -- both investigative and propagandistic -- recently has become a popular art form. To the degree such films study distant leaders and distant revolutions, they have a psychological impact similar to a standard dramatic film. But the *Murder of Fred Hampton* takes place in our neighborhood. It is, consequently, Right Now... (Siskel, 1971, p. 11)

The political documentary *Murder of Fred Hampton* (1971), directed by Howard Alk and Mike Gray, explored the community activities and murder of Fred Hampton, chairman of the then newly formed Illinois Chapter of the Black Panther Group in Chicago. Mike Gray's work was the first film screened at *Cinéprobe* directly examining the problems of racism and its effect on the African American community. The socio-political film profile, also screened for the first time to the American public, showcased the compelling case against the States Attorneys Office in Chicago and demonstrated that film was capable of being used as an investigative tool. The filmmakers and surviving Black Panther members who witnessed the shoot-out insisted that those who were fatally

shot, including Fred Hampton, were harmlessly asleep in bed and that the act was premeditated by the police. The film explored the many sides of Fred Hampton as a leader, only to further emphasize the importance of his death and to suggest the justice system at the time of being “a symbol of establishmentarian repression” (C. 63. MoMA Archives, NY).

Mike Gray and his associates spent a year filming Fred Hampton as he interacted and worked with the Black community, as seen in various community outreach centers such as clinics and shelters, all of which were funded by the Black Panther Party. The documentary takes an unexpected political turn and investigates the killing of Fred Hampton, which involved a raid by the Chicago police. In a press release sent out by MoMA, the movie was described as having a dual focus. First, it explored the philosophies of the Black Panther Party and its activities in the Black community and second, it re-examined “some of the unresolved questions about events of the raid” offering “compelling evidence to show that such answers have been, and continue to be, purposely withheld from the public” (C. 63. MoMA Archives, NY).

After viewing the film at the Cannes Film Festival, Adrienne Mancina reached out to Mike Gray with interest in screening *Murder of Fred Hampton* as part of *Cinéprobe* to kick off the program’s fourth season. The film was chosen by the department to be included in *Cinéprobe* instead of its political programming *What’s Happening?*, because it was considered a great representation of contemporary filmmaking with cinematic qualities unlike many documentary films of the time. Enthusiastic about screening the film to the MoMA audience as well as exposing it to the American public for the very

first time, Mancina wrote several letters to Gray and his associate Barbara Kerr with ideas of how the film could be promoted to various audiences. Because Mike Gray was interested in his film being shown without charge to the “young people from ghetto areas,” Mancina and her team decided to screen the film during day time hours on their free admission day, Monday the 4<sup>th</sup>, 1971, in order to reach a larger audience and then again on the evening of Tuesday the 5<sup>th</sup>, with Mike Gray in attendance to answer questions and share ideas with the audience (C. 63. MoMA Archives, NY).

As mentioned earlier in Chapter 4, one of Mancina’s letters to Mike Gray indicated that the department was interested in finding distribution for films that struggled to grasp public exposure due to controversial cinematic themes. The film was invited to many European film festivals, and received high reviews at all of them. However, due to the political nature of the film, American distributors were hesitant to work with Mike Gray and his associates. The American response intrigued the film department, as they used this information that there was a purposeful lack of production and distribution in all their letters to critics and press releases as a selling point to persuade critics to attend the screenings.

Film coordinators Lillian Gerard and Mark Segal were in charge of all publicity for *Murder of Fred Hampton*. In order to reach the largest audience, most importantly the Black community, both coordinators wrote to numerous publications that targeted a range of potentially interested viewers. Invitations and personal letters were written to a list of news syndicates, including the *Village Voice*, *The New York Times*, *Women’s Wear Daily*, *New York Post*, *Film Culture*, *Cineaste Magazine*, *Film Bulletin*, and *Esquire*.

Realizing the importance of targeting interested Black community members, they also wrote to *Ebony*, *Essence*, *The Amsterdam News*, *Black News*, and to WLIB AM, a popular urban contemporary radio station. As a result of these efforts, all of the publications listed above attended press screenings and most attended the *Cinéprobe* programming itself (C. 63. MoMA Archives, NY). Having a reputation as prestigious as the Museum of Modern Art behind it, many of the publications Gerard and Segal corresponded with, including *The New York Times* and *Village Voice*, complied to MoMA's requests of promotion. According to Gerard and Segal, the film department was not fazed by the possible public opposition from screening Mike Gray's film, as indicated in the letters to Richard Shepard of *The New York Times* and Howard Smith of *Village Voice*. In both, Lillian Gerard stated that despite the possible pushback from the public, the museum had no hesitation in showing the film. Regardless of the film's contentious topic, they believed it to be a well thought-out production that deserved to be seen. American film critics agreed. The film was reviewed by numerous newspapers, with film critics praising the film and its importance and relevancy in American culture. Because of the MoMA's efforts, *Murder of Fred Hampton* was screened regularly at the Whitney Museum of American Art as well as other theaters and libraries in New York City.

***Cinéprobe: Melvin Van Peebles***

On Tuesday April 13, 1971, writer, producer, and director, Melvin Van Peebles, participated in *Cinéprobe*'s fourth season with a screening of his 1971 feature film *Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song*. The film, subject of heated debate, deals with contentious

issues such as police brutality, racism, body image, and sex. In a press release from MoMA there is a short synopsis from the film's director who explained the motion picture from the point of view of the main protagonist, Sweet Sweetback, played by Melvin Van Peebles himself. In his synopsis, Van Peebles stated,

Once upon a time a guy, a black guy, decided, well not really decided, he was more or less standing in the wrong place at the right time, to stand up for his rights, or as they may say on the block to get-the-man-off-his back, which of course is no mean feat. (C. 56. MoMA Archives, NY)

In the same press release, MoMA described Van Peebles' trajectory in the film industry as difficult, with the doors of Hollywood remaining perpetually shut for most of his career. Peebles eventually secured the capital needed to fund the production of his first feature film *Story of a Three Day Pass* (1968) by himself. The commercial success of the film in Europe prompted Hollywood to take interest in the filmmaker and he was given complete creative control to direct his next feature film, *Watermelon Man* (1970). However, filming with the financial backing of Hollywood did not make the process easier for Van Peebles. Unhappy with the many restrictions placed on him by Hollywood, including reluctance to hire minorities to assist with the production of his film, Van Peebles went back to funding and producing films himself. He made *Sweet Sweetback* next in 1971. His films are representational of the African American community Van Peebles was raised in and familiar with, and they confront issues of racism in realistic ways that are considered documentary in form.

Recorded audio of the program was accessed for this study as a historical trace that exemplified the tone of the evening and the response of the audience. In the archived

audio, Adrienne Mancina and the director Melvin Van Peebles discussed the importance of his film and his work as an artist. In her opening introduction to the program, Mancina reiterated the purpose of *Cinéprobe* as a program for the independent filmmaker as well as for the audience, to give people the opportunity to have a dialogue about the art and technique of film directly with the filmmaker. To introduce Melvin Van Peebles to the stage, Mancina first explained that Van Peebles considered *Sweet Sweetback* to be his first real film and *Watermelon Man* to be his way of proving to “the man,” or in this case the powerful Hollywood industry, that he could make a commercial film (Sound Recordings of Museum-Related Events, 71.23. The Museum of Modern Art Archives, NY). *Sweet Sweetback*, however, was the director’s first personal statement as a film for “his people.”

Adrienne Mancina described his work as a

militant film and Mr. Van Peebles, I don’t think, could care less if we thought of it as propaganda. It’s a statement... meant for the Black community. But if this film were only... didactic propaganda, we wouldn’t be showing it here at *Cinéprobe*. The fact is that *Sweet Sweetback* transcends its polemic by means of the formal discipline of cinematic techniques. The character of *Sweet Sweetback* in the film becomes a metaphor that fuses the personal passions of the filmmaker as well as the public distress of his people. (SR, 71.23. MoMA Archives, NY)

With Mancina’s final words the film began, and afterwards, as heard in the recording, the film received a huge amount of applause. As depicted in a letter from Larry Kardish to Jerry Gross who distributed *Sweet Sweetback* to the department, the audience went wild with excitement for the film. Kardish reported to Gross, “We had a capacity house, and although we expected some boos and catcalls at the end of the show (our *Cinéprobe* audience is quite vociferous), there was applause and enthusiastic ‘Right Ons’” (C. 56. MoMA Archives, NY). In a letter to Van Peebles, also from Larry Kardish and Adrienne



Mancia, they expressed great surprise towards the success of the program and the enthusiasm of the audience members. In the letter, they mentioned that although they looked forward to the critical reviews, they agreed “that it would be the street people that will decide for themselves” the success of the film and of the program event (C. 56. MoMA Archives, NY).

After the film was shown, Van Peebles first explained the philosophy of the film as well as the process behind making such a film in a White dominated industry. He then answered questions from the audience. The discussion between artist and audience is further explored in Chapter 6, “Finding Educational Results for Community Learning Through Film,” but for the purpose of Chapter 4 it is important to explain from the recordings that this program empowered a dialogue between the African American community and the White community in a context not necessarily familiar to either group. However, any sort of uncooperative behavior that could be instigated by the unfamiliarity of the environment, and discussion within it, cannot audibly be heard in the voice of the artist nor in the voices of the audience members who attended the screening.

Previously addressed, in the draft letter written by Willard Van Dyke to an unhappy audience member who found Melvin Van Peebles’ film *Sweet Sweetback’s Baadasssss Song* (1971) to be disgraceful and too indecent for the Museum of Modern Art, Van Dyke defined the philosophy of the museum, which likewise represented the philosophy of the film department, and stated that, “the film in question was chosen because it is a remarkable statement by a Black film producer dealing with the hostilities Black people feel toward the White world around them.” The letter continued, “I am

convinced that this is a serious picture, that the pre-credit sequence to which you took exception is integral to the film itself, and that prurience was not the intent of the film nor of this sequence” (C. 56. MoMA Archives, NY). The author of this irate letter was a single voice among the many that applauded the film and asked insightful questions, probing a conversation, which indicated a growing shift in the needs and interests of MoMA’s newly emerging audience.

## CONCLUSION

Realizing the importance of programming relevant and topical films, regardless of how debated they might be, the Department of Film at MoMA chose films they believed to be urgently important for the public to see. Discontent with the prevention of film distribution, MoMA provided an initial opportunity for many films to be accessed, so that a proper dialogue could occur and artists could receive attention necessary in order to improve their trade and further their careers.

Both *Murder of Fred Hampton* and *Sweet Sweetback’s Baadasssss Song* have been described as films with propagandistic qualities. There is no denying that both films aimed to send a strong message of the subjected racism placed on the African American community during the 1960s and 1970s. Both films, explained by the museum and film critics alike, transcended their polemic attitudes with high artistic achievement in narration and cinematic techniques. Both films exposed audiences who might have been unfamiliar to the Black communities’ daily struggles and injustices that were experienced in urban and rural environments. *Murder of Fred Hampton*, a documentary, and *Sweet*

*Sweetback*, a feature film, brought the audience a realistic depiction of Black culture and stories that until then were ignored by many major news outlets and by major Hollywood studios. MoMA's program, as a cultural platform, drove Black narrative into more people's lives, while also assisting artists with their continuing careers.

Chapter 5, "Revolution Through *What's Happening?*" explores another program established in the 1970s called *What's Happening?*. The chapter describes various film screenings that were chosen throughout the weekly program that also exposed African American filmmakers to a larger audience. Many of the films screened in this program were documentaries dealing with a range of political and cultural flashpoints from the late 1960s and early 1970s, many of which explored both the urban and rural African American communities and their continued struggle to claim and live in an equitable society.

## **Chapter 5: *Revolution through What's Happening?***

In order to best describe the next film program featured at the Museum of Modern Art, the structure of this chapter differs from Chapter 4. While there are specific examples of films screened in the program known as *What's Happening?*, Chapter 5 is organized by three common themes found in these films which featured subjects on African American communities throughout the country. The two films examined closely in Chapter 4 as part of *Cinéprobe*, *Murder of Fred Hampton* and *Sweet Sweetback*, also reflect similar themes discussed in this chapter.

As the 1970s approached, MoMA's Department of Film continued to show interest in independent films and documentaries overlooked by the mainstream film industry and film criticism. The department's already successful program, *Cinéprobe*, was used as a model when creating its new program, *What's Happening?* in 1971. The genesis of *What's Happening?* mirrored the early documentary days of the 1930s, in which filmmakers used the camera to tell actual conditions of American life. Willard Van Dyke himself pioneered this genre of film with documentaries such as *The River* (1938) about unheard stories concerning the Mississippi River and farm life in America, and *The City* (1939), which dealt with the problems of contemporary urban living. Witnessing similar trends emerging into practice once again, Van Dyke created a program that best highlighted the type of films that employed techniques from the past and the present in order to generate realistic and revealing coverage of major issues in America. The program stimulated a public reaction towards national and international social and

political issues. The films selected dealt with issues such as the Vietnam War, student unrest, racism, politics, the sexual revolution, and the women's liberation movement. I focus this Chapter on a selection of films screened at *What's Happening?* from 1971 to 1974 that deal primarily with racism in America, daily lives of African Americans in urban and rural communities, the efforts of the Black Panther Groups and the Black Power Movement, and various civil rights developments and obstacles to them. Within the first four years of *What's Happening?*, these topics were heavily acknowledged through an assortment of films chosen by MoMA's Department of Film indicating an interest in films with contentious themes and stories. This research continues to shed light on the changing philosophies of the Department of Film during this period. Evidently undaunted by the possible criticism of the museum the films programmed in *What's Happening?* could accumulate, the department championed cinema that fiercely and unapologetically questioned major problems in American society that were being ignored or narrowly contemplated.

### **THE MUSEUM OF MODERN ART AND ITS CHANGING POLICY**

In a letter to Mr. Rick Solomon, Willard Van Dyke discussed the reason for the initiation of new programming in the Department of Film as a response to the "accusation that the Museum has not been responsive to current trends. We feel that the film department can respond more easily to this accusation than other departments which we did simply by adding two hours of programming to our schedule" (Department of Film

Exhibition Files, W. 1, MoMA Archives, NY). He continued in his letter to discredit the belief that trustees of the museum controlled the programming and policies of the museum to further their own interests. The films selected in *What's Happening?*, discussed throughout this chapter, reflect Van Dyke's strong position. In his own words, Van Dyke described *What's Happening?* as a program that

will not only provide relevant information for the public that normally would not have access to it, it will also give a forum to film-makers whose film are not shown theatrically, films that may be too editorial for a large television network, but which may nonetheless be of interest to audiences that want to keep informed. (W. 1, MoMA Archives, NY)

The purpose of the program was to educate the public as well as screen film that generally had not received the theatrical and televised exposure it so deserved. Van Dyke believed that more than ever before people wanted to know about things that mattered and "the Museum will attempt to serve the community on this area of film information" (W.1, MoMA Archives, NY). In the documentary film, *Conversations with Willard Van Dyke* (1981), Van Dyke described the need for new programming like *What's Happening?* as a call for film relatable to a changing audience as well as for a need for a space responsive to young filmmakers and new film practices. Van Dyke mentioned in Rothchild's documentary, "It was important for those people uptown to understand that there were filmmakers, artists, and reporters, and indignant young radicals making films. That was important for them to know and it was just an opportunity that was there" (Rothschild, 1981).

The Museum of Modern Art's Department of Film created new programming devoted to such films because it recognized that many filmmakers were using their

medium to examine social and political problems. In a letter dated July 10, 1970 to the director of the museum, John B. Hightower, Willard Van Dyke described the new program, *What's Happening?*, as a weekly series

devoted to films on current issues: films by and about minorities, women's liberation, ecology, war, and other vital current subjects. Films will be chosen for their pertinence (I almost said relevance) rather than for their value as works of art. The program will be one hour in length at noon on Thursdays. If it proves valuable, we can extend it. It will cost nothing extra. (W. 1, MoMA Archives, NY)

The goals and structure of *What's Happening?* were different from *Cinéprobe* in that the weekly series was less interested in the cinematic qualities of film and much more directed toward the story and social lens film was capable of revealing. However, it was similar to *Cinéprobe* as both were uninterested in screening entirely masterpieces and much more focused toward showcasing new artists who were in the process of establishing their work. Instead of centering on aesthetic values, *What's Happening?* was more concerned with meaningful content. *The New York Times* in 1973 described the films shown at MoMA as “political, polemical, often socially perverse, which is what they're intended to be” (Department of Film Exhibition Files, W. 2, MoMA Archives, NY). The Department of Film already had established collection, preservation, and exhibition services in order to preserve and spotlight cinematic masterpieces. *What's Happening?* and many of the other newly established programs in the film department were more interested in the usage of film as a tool to inform audiences about issues confronting Americans as well as the countless unheard stories of American culture.

In a press release from the museum in 1970, titled *What's Happening? New Policy Launched at Modern*, the author explained the new policy of the Museum of Modern Art as a way to address “the rapid changes on the American and international scene,” hoping to “make a contribution to public understanding of critical issues affecting our daily lives” (W. 1, MoMA Archives, NY). Willard Van Dyke was responsible for this remarkable change in museum policy. Well-respected by the industry and the museum, he was able to bring documented coverage on all conceivable social and political subjects. Van Dyke and his team, as described in the same press release, did not plan screenings too far in advance in order to keep the program current and flexible. According to Van Dyke, the idea of the program was to stimulate a public reaction through this powerful medium. He continued, “The visual image, being as direct as it is, can only help to illuminate many issues confronting the public. That image is unencumbered and carries its own message; each individual is free to come to his own conclusion” (W. 1, MoMA Archives, NY). This powerful sentiment set the stage for new films of significance and social priority by new groups of filmmakers as well as seasoned filmmakers to be programmed to a newly emerging museum audience. By applying creative practices to documentary filmmaking, these new filmmakers prioritized their process by focusing on issues of real import that directly impacted American people.

Russell Lynes’s interview with Willard Van Dyke in *Good Old Modern* (1973) explored the purpose of *What's Happening?* further. By programming films of a political nature dealing with major societal problems, the new programming empowered a space where these topics could be talked about safely. It was important for the Department of



Film and its new mission to screen these films no matter the possible setbacks. Van Dyke (1973) continued, “we’re going to have to find some financing somewhere to keep that going,” insinuating that the department lacked the money to continue the program, but would do whatever it took to continue screening films (p. 338).

Because funding was always an issue for the film department, it continued to search for ways to sustain its programming. In order to do so, the Department of Film partnered with the Donnell Library Center of the New York Public Library, a neighbor of the museum on 53<sup>rd</sup> street, in 1972, to combine efforts of keeping New Yorkers informed while splitting the cost. In a press release from 1972, MoMA described this partnership as an indication of mutual desire, “to provide information that deals with socio-political matters and illuminate the human condition in many parts of the world” (W. 1, MoMA Archives, NY). Although MoMA had power over film selection, as co-sponsor, William Sloan of the New York Public Library helped with curating and was titled program director. Sloan had a strong eye for picking films with controversial themes and became a valuable asset to the Department of Film in the years to come.

In the following sections, I describe three themes I uncovered throughout the selected films in *What’s Happening?* that directly confront African American stories, culture, and civil rights. Within each section, I represent these themes with examples of various programmed films. Not all the films from 1971 to 1974 are explained in detail in this chapter, but a list of each film with a short synopsis can be found in the Appendix of this study.

## **THEMATIC REALIZATION IN FILM**

As I considered the films selected in *What's Happening?*, I encountered various themes in each selected screening. The 1960s constituted a thorough shift in African American art, culture, and discussion. Reclaiming narrative was a common subject in much of the literature on Black film composed during this time period. In almost all the films selected in *What's Happening?* they are described as either never being shown to the public before or distinguished as an unheard story from the perspective of an African American. It is evident that an important goal of the Department of Film was to spread light on debatable issues as well as to tell stories that have been overlooked, misunderstood, or underappreciated.

Coinciding with these two themes is an overarching focus on the civil unrest that existed for all minority groups during this time period. The topics seen in each of the films screened at *What's Happening?* dealt with the complications of desegregation and the struggle of changing racist behavior that had been deeply ingrained into a flawed culture system.

### **Individual Stories About Black Culture**

The first film featured in *What's Happening?* on August 20, 1970 was Lionel Rogosin's *Black Roots* (1970), a creative narrative told through the eyes of the Black community. The film was at the same time Rogosin's own personal interpretation of Black culture. The Department of Film's first programmed film was less politically and militantly conscious, and instead much more celebratory of Black culture. As represented

in the film, many topics were considered, including Black culture in music, art, history, poetry, and humor. The director featured many different perspectives in his film by interviewing African American urban intellectuals, industrial workers, rural sharecroppers, and revolutionary members. The film was described as a panorama of American history beginning in 1900 expanding to the 1960s, told from the perspective of the Black community.

In a museum memo in the summer of 1970, the document quoted Rogosin who considered “black culture a very needed infusion of humanism into our highly industrialized and mechanistic society” (W. 1, MoMA Archives, NY). He exposed this reflection in a new form of poetic cinema, juxtaposing dialogue of Black Americans with key elements such as musical interludes of jazz, blues, and other highlights of Black music. According to Rogosin, the point of this stylizing was to emphasize the beauty of Black life in America and to avoid the ugliness and the violence when contemplating political, social, and racial problems. The film was in many ways a psychological study of human nature and the artist’s interpretation of symbolic expression of the sociology of Black culture. Rogosin reflected similar themes in his other documentary, *Woodcutters of the Deep South* (1973). He asked the people of the south, his subjects in the film, to tell and live their own stories while he filmed, which he used as a developing technique when confronting the overarching concern of the film: Whites and Blacks working together to create unity in their shared work environment.

In response to negative criticism that insisted MoMA disregarded African American artists, as described in Chapter 2, the film department took appropriate steps to

respond to this criticism. Many of the films in this program explored the personalities of individual African Americans. Besides *Black Roots*, films such as *Al Stacey Hayes* (1969) by Joel A. Levitch, *Set-Up* (1970) by Nick Doob, *I Am Somebody* (1970) by Madeline Anderson, and *Part of the Family* (1971) by Paul Ronder, told personal stories of daily life as an African American growing up in rural and urban communities. Not all these films directly confronted racial concerns, but instead revealed an entire spectrum of Black American life that clarified the many accounts of Black culture. Lionel Rogosin's philosophy behind filmmaking reflect similar attitudes of other directors showcased in *What's Happening?*. Rogosin explained that through dialogue and a focus on an individual's facial expressions, gestures, and words, one "can capture the essence of personality as opposed to the conventional film which dwells on superficial action and irrelevancies" (W.1, MoMA Archives, NY). This is also realized in Nick Doob's *Set-Up*, which tells the story of Donald Horner, a Black man living in New Haven, Connecticut, who spent most of his life in prison. There was no script nor pre-determined plan for the film, as Doob intended to secure a natural evolution as Donald Horner told the story of his life and developed a relationship with the filmmaker.

*Part of the Family* (1971), produced and directed by Paul Ronder, is perhaps the most profound example of individual Black stories depicted in the *What's Happening?* program. Ronder selected three families from various areas of the country who were unlike one another in race, religion, and economic background. Each of the families told their story of sorrow and loss, making a statement that no matter how fundamentally

diverse people may be in color, culture, or faith, everyone was connected and suffered from loss in comparable ways. The film was Ronder's

attempt to remind the American people that the political tragedies they watch on their television sets actually do happen and involve real people just like them. We hear the politicians speak on Vietnam, on the Kent State murders, the Jackson State murders, and we forget that the students who are shot down and the soldiers who die unnecessarily in Vietnam are young people like the boy next door, like our own children, and like ourselves. (W. 1, MoMA Archives, NY)

The families in the film looked directly at the camera when telling their stories, as if the families were speaking straight to the viewer. He hoped that individual pain and anger could unite people and lead them to do whatever possible so that meaningless death could be stopped.

### **Spotlighting Controversial Topics**

“People who are not white in a white nationalist country are subjects and therefore, can't get justice.” – *NET Journal* (W.1, MoMA Archives, NY)

In a December 1970 museum memo that listed and described several films selected in *What's Happening?*, the document quoted Newsreel Films, an independent production and distribution company, who distributed films to MoMA regularly. In the memo it explained that “the established media systematically excludes the information that might allow for clear thinking and effective participation on the part of a great number of people in this country” (W.1, MoMA Archives, NY). Rather than exclude information, Newsreel's mission for its position in the film industry was to give people an understanding and perspective of what was happening in the world. MoMA's policy change during this period reflected Newsreel's and many other independent production

and distribution companies' goals. For *What's Happening?*, many of the films chosen for viewing were obtained through independent companies like Newsreel. Companies such as American Documentary Films, Black Journal, National Education Television, and Pacific St. Film & Editing Co., all with similar values, worked with MoMA so that overlooked or misjudged topics could be discussed from a new angle. Newsreel's films were always available for rent and free to groups that could not afford the rental costs. The money they did acquire went to further filmmaking and distribution projects. They believed their "radical analysis and perspective" to be "needed. Our films cannot and will not be made by established groups: they must be made" (W.1 MoMA Archives, NY).

In Paul Altmeyer's *Busing: Some Voices from the South* (1972), the director and a small film crew went to the deep south to document the progression of busing integration. Altmeyer did this because he realized at the time that southern involvement with shifts in racist attitudes, integration, and desegregation had been largely unreported to the rest of the country. He considered it to be important research that the entire country needed to see as a learning process and as a way to further understand the complexities of changing deep rooted mentalities directed towards minorities.

In a reaction to Newsreel's mission statement, MoMA programmed numerous films about the Black Panther Party and several of the Party's leaders. The films selected looked at the Party from a perspective that was unseen in major news outlets during the time period. Generally considered an aggressive and violent group, involved in many trial cases around the country that more often than not involved murder and resisting arrest, the Black Panther Party was given a very defined and unbreakable label by the mass

media. Films such as *American Revolution 2* (1969) produced by The Film Group, Inc. including Mike Gray (the producer and director of *Murder of Fred Hampton*); *Stagolee: Interview with Bobby Seale* (1970) directed Fransisco Newman; *Mayday* (1970) made by May First Media, Inc.; and *Frame-Up! The Imprisonment of Martin Sostre* (1974) by the Pacific Street Film Collective, all considered the importance of the Black Panther group as community leaders, examining members as human beings fighting for their rights in unconventional ways. Bobby Seal, one of the founders of the Party, was interviewed in prison in the film *Stagolee*. The founder was charged with one crime after another without palpable evidence. He had been imprisoned for months, and was then facing the gas chamber. In this documentary, Seale was asked to tell his own story in a way mass media had yet to do. As the film developed, Seale transformed from an impersonal headline story into a relatable human being, who felt the same sorrow and loss that many others also experienced. The films MoMA selected offered its audience another complex description of the group, generating new conversations to occur from an alternative context.

A popular screening series during *What's Happening's* second season was the weekly viewing of the trial of Black Panther Group member Lauren R. Watson in *Trial – The City and County of Denver Vs. Lauren R. Watson* (1970) by Robert M. Fresco. The trial was screened two days a week from January 4<sup>th</sup> until January 26<sup>th</sup> and was obtained through Black Journal, National Educational Television. The first documentary study on American television of a courtroom trial, Lauren Watson was tried for resisting arrest as well as interfering with a police officer in the discharge of his duty. This was one of the

many court trials dealing with the conflict between police and the Black Panther Party across the country. This case brought to the surface larger implications dealing with “the system of legal justice as it applies to Blacks and other traditionally underprivileged groups” (W. 1, MoMA Archives, NY). MoMA’s screening of *Trial* was a powerful response to what was already expressed by the defense attorney in Watson’s case, who explained that he would not receive a fair trial because he was not being judged by his peers. The jury consisted of people who differed from Watson in color, age, economic standing, and cultural environment. Having no background or understanding of Watson and his background, as well as the Black Panther Group beyond what was expressed in the media, the jury’s perspective was skewed prior to entering the courtroom. By screening *Trial* in a major art institution that attracted a majority of white patrons, MoMA’s attempt to educate its audience of this trial by displaying a new perspective with a different context proved a very powerful experience as it was acquired afterwards by other libraries and museums in the city to be shown to an even wider viewing audience.

### **Civil Unrest and the Fight for African American Rights**

All the films discussed in this chapter respond on some level to the unmistakable civil unrest underprivileged groups in America encountered during the 1960s and 1970s, and their efforts in procuring their rights despite the surrounding social tension. This overarching theme set the stage for *What’s Happening?* as a complete program and highlights major problems in American society that needed to be addressed in a new



context. MoMA's Department of Film did just that through screening films in a safe environment that directly responded to these injustices.

Racial integration in the army and in the busing system were addressed in films programmed in 1970 and 1973. Courtesy of Black Journal, National Educational Television, MoMA programmed *Black G.I.* in 1970. Produced, directed, and written by Kent Garrett, the film explored racist attitudes Black servicemen faced in the Vietnam War. In the documentary, it portrayed Black sailor's struggles when confronting racial slurs from Vietnamese soldiers and civilians. The servicemen who were interviewed in the film questioned the mentality of the Asians and how they accepted racial epithets, blaming White American servicemen for vulgar nicknames. They also discussed their worry of acceptance and promotional opportunities in the army, believing those ranks to be unattainable by African Americans. The busing system and the progression of integration in the south were also featured in *What's Happening?* in Paul Altmeyer's *Busing: Some Voices from the South*, mentioned previously. The film discussed the difficulty of changing racist behavior ingrained into the region's culture. The film's argument was to explain that much work beyond lawful desegregation still needed to be done in many areas of the country. Despite how progressive some cities might have been during this time, much of the country was still grappling with these major political and social changes in the late 1960s.

Although many of the films in *What's Happening?* concentrated on urban communities, a select few dealt specifically with the Civil Rights efforts in the deep south. On March 1 and 2 1970, two films were screened conveying various perspectives

of the slow shift in racist mentalities in southern America, and the efforts African Americans made to fight for their constitutional rights. *I Am Somebody* (1970) by Madeline Anderson documented the efforts made by a Black hospital union seeking economic justice. The film not only clarified what happened during the 113-day strike, “but also conveys the feelings of the workers and what their victory meant to them,” as well as illustrated “how organized labor and the civil rights movement succeeded in forging an effective coalition in the heart of the south” (W. 1, MoMA Archives, NY).

*Al Stacey Hayes* (1969), produced and directed by Joel A. Levitch, had a much more pessimistic depiction of the civil rights efforts in the south. The documentary described the daily struggles of a youthful community leader in Shelby, Mississippi, as he attempted to change the the mentality of a generation who was

taught from birth that the white man is always right and the black man is always wrong. He must daily fight the battles which were won ten and fifteen years ago in the big cities, but which still seem nearly insurmountable in the backwater South. (W. 1, MoMA Archives, NY)

In a less grim account, Lionel Rogosin’s documentary *Woodcutters of the Deep South* (1973), programmed in 1973 at MoMA and the Donnell Library Center, detailed a different perspective when overcoming racism in the south. Poor White and African American woodcutters in Mississippi and Alabama worked together to organize a cooperative association against the paper and pulpwood companies where they were employed. Rogosin’s film and the worker’s organization was in many ways a precursor to the efforts made by MoMA and its film department when developing new socially engaged programming. Coming together in order to confront a problem that effects

everyone is the epitome of successful community organization. MoMA handled the criticism of ignoring marginalized groups through the creation of newly improved programming. It built an audience that appreciated and relied on these new policy changes within the institution.

## CONCLUSION

Similar to *Cinéprobe*, MoMA's Department of Film selected film for *What's Happening?* based on what it found most valuable for its audiences. Film in this program addressed and responded to much more controversial topics than those found in *Cinéprobe*, confronting issues of race directly and frequently. The themes addressed in this Chapter indicate that telling unheard stories, despite the discomfort the topics may create in viewers, was important to MoMA as an institution dedicated to education and the exposure of truth and obscured experience.

Both *Cinéprobe* and *What's Happening?* were educational programs that taught viewers not only about the process of filmmaking and cinematic techniques, but also about the power of storytelling and the ability film has to connect people from various backgrounds. In Chapter 6, my analysis chapter, I look more deeply at these two programs and review their strengths and weaknesses as educational programming. While doing so, I consider various references as described in Chapter 2 that assisted me in this research, to fully analyze the effectiveness the Museum of Modern Art's attempt to teach its audience about cultural and social conditions and shifts in African American communities.

## **Chapter 6: *Finding Educational Results in Communities Through Film Programming***

In this chapter, I explore the accomplishments of both *Cinéprobe* and *What's Happening?* as educational film programs. While evaluating MoMA's Department of Film and its effort to address changing social conditions for African Americans, I consider the time period and the evolutionary movements that caused such shifts to occur. I consider the effectiveness of each program's offering to cultural movements redefining African American communities in the 1960s and 1970s. Most concerned with African American rights and cultural power, The Black Power Movement and the Black Arts Movement were radical activities that offered the period numerous voices and opinions, and who addressed pertinent needs of their diverse and vibrant communities.

Museums were not a place normally associated with either of these Movements and is one reason why MoMA's film programming has yet to be written about within this context. MoMA's Department of Film has contributed to art education for its role in demonstrating visual culture education as a successful way to address large-scale topics with a diverse audience, while creating a safe space where people could go to reflect and observe new points of view. In Chapter 1, I define education as an experience

when people's hearts and minds open to a broader understanding of the world, to different cultures, social patterns, and histories. Education prepares people to assertively ask their own questions, rather than answer other people's. Education should engage with the real world, and connect people with others across traditional boundaries. (Finkelpearl, 2013, p. 108)

I also define public programming in museums as participatory, where activities go beyond the scope of the museum's collection in order to appeal to a more diverse audience and address larger social issues that affect the daily lives of everyone involved. According to the definitions of both "education" and "public programming," MoMA's two film programs, *Cinéprobe* and *What's Happening?* were effective on all levels because they both provoked audiences to have conversations with one another and to truly engage with the medium, with the artist, and with each other.

## **FILM AND THE BLACK ARTS MOVEMENT**

The Black Arts Movement of the late 1960s and early 1970s was an organized artistic effort to reclaim Black aesthetic, culture, and narrative. It was similar to the Black Power Movement, which believed in Black nationalism and a restructuring of the political, social, and economic systems that favored White society and disregarded minority groups (Fine, 1971). As described in Chapter 5, I identified several themes that were prevalent in the films screened during *What's Happening?*. The reclamation of cultural heritage, the fight for civil rights, and the creation of stories interpreted as a mass Black experience were main subjects of the films and documentaries screened in *What's Happening?*, as well as the two films described in Chapter 4 as part of *Cinéprobe*. Through my research I argue that not only was film an important attribute to the Black Arts Movement, but that museums such as the Museum of Modern Art were also essential when spreading the Movement's messages. Throughout this chapter I discuss the two programs at MoMA as empowering social engagements with real educational

benefits. Before doing so, however, I describe the complexities of the Black Arts Movement and why it is considered in history to have been an unsuccessful social revolution. Through my interpretation of film, museums, and the goal of reclaiming the Black aesthetic, I attempt to shed light on certain successful qualities the Movement maintained throughout the time period and throughout history.

As theorized in literature during the period of the Black Arts Movement, the social undertaking was and continues to be considered an unsuccessful revolutionary attempt based on the lack of clarity and common themes that coalesced the Movement and connected the many voices into one organized group. Key figures associated with the Movement had different expectations and definitions as to what Black art truly was, what Black artists' roles were to be within their communities, and what they wanted to see change in society and in the arts. In Elsa Honig Fine's article "Mainstream, Blackstream and the Black Art Movement" (1971), the author defined the Black Arts Movement as an organized group linked to Black separatist politics and nationalism. The political, social, and economic conditions of the 1960s lead to the birth of a group of Black militant artists who identified as anti-establishment and anti-museum, and who were creating a form of communication through art for their Black community only. These particular artists sought inspiration from their repressed cultural heritage and concerned themselves with reclaiming "Black unity, Black dignity and respect" (p. 374). Although many voices such as Terri Simone Francis, Larry Neal, and Lars Lierow, who also extensively studied and worked within the Movement, agreed with Fine on reclaiming self-respect in the Black

community, the path of defining the purpose of the Movement and its connection with White society remained debatable.

Unclear goals and the lack of leadership were major concerns for the Black Arts Movement. Another problem for this Movement was its complete rejection and disdain for the system it was working to change. According to Fine, the purpose of the Black Arts Movement was to exterminate the White enemy, meaning White society, and destroy the system created in order to rebuild a society for themselves. Henri Ghent, a Black curator at the Brooklyn Museum in 1971, was highly critical of the violent course the Movement took throughout the late 1960s. He believed that the artists working within this aggressive framework were celebrating a policy of reverse racism, which has been debated as well as White and Black racism cannot be equated. However, he believed that Black artists could and should receive equitable representation in the art industry, considering Black art “a name or title given to works done by Black artists in an effort to bring about an awareness that Black artists exist” regardless of context (p. 374). In Saul Alinsky’s prologue to *Rules for Radicals* (1971), he noted that as an organizer himself, his work started from where the world was in the present and not from where he would like it to be. An acclaimed community organizer who used pragmatic strategies in order to successfully bring about change, Alinsky wrote that by accepting “the world as it is does not in any sense weaken our desire to change it into what we believe it should be – it is necessary to begin where the world is if we are going to change it to what we think it should be. That means working in the system” (p. xix). Alinsky’s argument aids my claim that the two film programs at MoMA were successful at generating a new mindfulness

towards African Americans because it offered Black artists a space to directly question social problems even though it was under the roof of what was considered the “establishment.” Although museums were not considered to be places where this social and cultural activity occurred, MoMA was a critical exception. MoMA’s programming was a progressive effort made during the Black Arts Movement because it joined Whites and Blacks in one room to discuss polemical topics in a diplomatic way.

Film was, for the most part, seldom written about in literature connected to the Black Arts Movement. Many of the Movement’s key figures considered film to be too commercial and mainstream for the likes of the Black artist. Museums were likewise highly criticized by Black artists who considered themselves anti-establishment. However, according to my investigation of film programming, this does not seem to be a consistent examination of the Movement as a whole. When considering the many attributes of filmmaking, a very collaborative medium that has proved to be a successful tool in spreading powerful messages and enacting change, it is inexplicable that film would be rejected entirely by the Movement.

In Lars Lierow’s (2013) research on the Black cinematic aesthetic, he discovered that scholars of the Black Arts Movement assumed that Black artists rejected anything considered popular media, even though film historians acknowledged many Black artists of the time were directly influenced by the art created during this Movement. Lierow argued that the Movement was much more involved with film than it was perceived to be by select historians. In “The ‘Black Man’s Vision of the World’: Rediscovering Black Arts Filmmaking and the Struggle for a Black Cinematic Aesthetic” (2013), Lierow



investigated Larry Neal's cinematic work during the period. As a key theorist of the Black Arts Movement, as well as a filmmaker, he believed Black filmmakers faced a dilemma when representing African American life because they were continuously "barraged with criticism by intellectuals, artists, and moral arbiters who disagreed with one or another's interpretations" (p. 4). He blamed the lack of attention to film in the critical discourse of the Movement on the fact that Black arts film archives did not exist. By overlooking the need to collect and archive film made by Black artists, film has been misinterpreted as unessential to the Movement and, therefore, forgotten.

As I discussed in Chapter 2, there were many Black arts activists who seriously thought about the role of mass media in American society and financed, produced, and distributed films in order to create alternative media. Production companies such as *Black Journal* and *Blackside, Inc.*, as explored in Jane Rhodes (2014) and Tommy Lee Lott's (1999) research, used film as a powerful form of communication. As explained in Chapter 5, *Black Journal* partnered with MoMA during the *What's Happening?* program and donated a majority of their films that dealt with African American life for screening. This became part of an agenda that challenged filmmakers to engage with, critique, and create alternatives for Black artists and community members to exist in the mainstream media. Larry Neal conceptualized the Black Arts Movement "as the effort to shape a new culture for African American identification and to instill black consciousness," while using film and television to achieve far-reaching communication abilities (Lierow, 2013, p. 6). MoMA's Department of Film was a vehicle for this sort of communication to occur

in order to spread and teach about Black consciousness, aesthetic, and social barriers to a larger and more diverse audience.

### ***CINÉPROBE AND WHAT'S HAPPENING?: A SPACE FOR DISCUSSION AND REFLECTION***

Margareta Akermark, an associate to Willard Van Dyke and the director himself, were interviewed in Russell Lyne's *Good Old Modern* (1973) about the affects of the film department's new programming initiative in the 1960s and 1970s. Lynes's asked both Akermark and Van Dyke to discuss the usefulness of showing new, independent, and provocative films that were under the radar of mainstream Hollywood. Both recount a major shift in the actual number of attendees as an important characteristic of their new programming. Akermark was especially surprised with the number of young people attending film series weekly and sometimes daily. The film department, according to both Akermark and Van Dyke, was not prepared for the amount of new members the innovative programming attracted. The museum's auditorium, which held 480 seats, was from Akermark's records year - in and year out - always at about 75% capacity (1973). She recounted moments where museum staff had to ask audience members to leave because they were over capacity. There were moments when these audience members refused to leave. This was a major increase for the film department, especially from a decade before. Although highly respected for most of the department's lifespan, a majority of its film programming and exhibitions appealed to a select group of film enthusiasts and critics. Designing programs around controversial topics and young artists was an inclusive and inviting decision that caused many young people "who felt they had

to see everything as part of their education” to participate and attend regularly (Lynes, 1973, p. 338). In an article by Bruce Bennett, he discussed the importance of *Cinéprobe* and quoted Larry Kardish, one of the two curators of the program. During the early years of *Cinéprobe*, Kardish recalled “these programs had absolutely packed houses.... There was a tremendous interest in the avant-garde at the time because there were very few other venues” doing this sort of programming (Bennett, 2007). This account, as well as recollections by Margaret Akerkmark’s, are important to contemplate because they show that part of the program’s success was due to being the first of its kind. It created a framework for future film programming in other institutions.

Evidence of the power these programs ignited in people can be found in the archived audio of Melvin Van Peebles’ screening of *Sweet Sweetback’s Badassss Song* at *Cinéprobe*, detailed in Chapter 4. After the viewing, an explosion of sound and cheering can be heard, with united “Right Ons” throughout the audience! Van Peebles followed with detailed explanation of his film process and how he dealt with financial and racial barriers throughout its course in order to create a self-sustaining film. This is part of filmmaking that most audience members do not get to experience. The explanation of his artistic development and the conversation with audience members that surrounded it, create this two-way conversation that film had yet to be allowed with a substantial viewing audience. Van Peebles’ film was made in order to celebrate and unite the Black community. However, although depicted in certain areas of his film, his intentions were not to exclude the White audience. This may not have been clear without the discourse between audience and director formed by MoMA’s programming initiative. At one point

a gentleman from the audience asked Van Peebles if he had any White people help with the film and he responded that there were many White editors and production workers on the film, along with Black workers. Van Peebles responded to this question straightforwardly by explaining that White people had certain skills not yet available to Black people. Van Peebles' intention was, however, to make the best film creatively, showcasing his "certain point of view of gorilla concept...on how to attack the situations when you come against very big odds," and that meant having the best on his team as long as everyone's intentions were the same. He explained "there is a human experience that transcends frontier, race, and color. It's not everyone's hang up" (SR, 71.23. MoMA Archives, NY). He concluded his presentation mentioning that social norms can be changed and the fact that he was able to produce this film, find distribution, and receive well-balanced criticism against all perceived odds, which meant that anyone could do the same. He proved that the system could be tampered with and possibly changed in a more equitable direction for all groups of people.

MoMA's film department used film programming as a platform to rectify social injustices by calling people's attention to films that directly commented on these major themes. The new film programming at MoMA took risks in order to appeal to a growing need within its community in order to examine major social and political issues in the country and around the world. Public discourse and community engagement were the outcomes of offering an audience access to film. The decisions made by the Department of Film in many ways responded to St. Clair Bourne's recommendations in his letter to director John Hightower in 1970. I mention Bourne's letter in Chapter 4, as he called to

attention his problems with personally integrating the Museum of Modern Art by participating in its film program series *Cinéprobe*. In his letter he stated that his decision to participate in *Cinéprobe* was “dependent upon the MoMA’s willingness to share its resources for the further development of my craft, that is, filmmaking for the Black filmmakers” (C. 108, MoMA Archives, NY). Although dissatisfied with MoMA’s past efforts, he agreed that access to film and to a place where Black filmmakers could learn about their trade was vital and so far unexplored by major art institutions and inaccessible to many African Americans, also expressed by Melvin Van Peebles. *Cinéprobe* and *What’s Happening?* not only presented the public access to films they would not have experienced elsewhere, but also afforded creative opportunities for artists of all backgrounds to talk about their work with its community, creating a participatory environment for the artists, museum staff, and the audience.

Although structured differently and highlighting various areas of cinematic achievement, both programs were designed to offer alternatives to commercial mass media and to educate its audience about the diversity of the country. The department relied on educational film companies for their distribution of a variety of films. It used these films as tools to provide its audience with information that reflected the widely differing attitudes and beliefs of diverse communities. The department’s intentions were not quite on level with many of the independent production companies they partnered with, which was to bring about complete social change. As audiences continued to partake in the museum’s programs, they became increasingly more perceptive of various cultures and beliefs. Both programs were able to establish African Americans as

“resistant subjects, rather than objects of scrutiny and scorn” (Rhodes, 2014, p. 151). The programs did not end racism in American, but they helped spawn a generation of independent Black filmmakers who were able to teach unacquainted audiences about racial identity and the need for political and economic freedom.

### **FILM PROGRAMMING AS AN EDUCATIONAL TOOL**

Although the Department of Film has not yet been considered for its contributions in the art education field, the department’s intentions were purely educational. If the purpose of education is supposed to identify patterns of behavior as well as to understand eras of history and contemplate complex ideas, as explained by June King McFee (1966), then *Cinéprobe* and *What’s Happening?* were successful at initiating a new form of educational practice outside the classroom and into another less controlled social setting. In a decade where progressive art educators like June King McFee, Vincent Lanier, and Elliot Eisner were highlighting the importance of introducing visual culture into the art education curriculum, MoMA’s Department of Film was changing its policy to do just that.

June King McFee became a major influence in my research as she applied great emphasis on creating curriculum that encouraged the understanding of various art functions based on the economic, political, and social background of groups of people. In *Society, Art, and Education* (1966) McFee stated that

a study of the function of art in societies other than our own should give us insight into the way art forms, no matter how humble, operate in people’s lives.... We may have to be willing to look at these art forms with a new sensitivity to see how

they function to give a sense of continuity and belonging to a community. (p. 126)

If what McFee stated is true, that the many functions of art are “used to maintain the values, attitudes, and sense of reality from one generation to another” as well as to “give character, identity and status to groups of people, individuals, institutions through mutually understood symbols,” then MoMA’s film programming serves as an example of this process (p. 123). The two programs portrayed the lives of the Black community in a way that had never been done before in this context. Creating a more rich sensitivity to differing cultures, beliefs, and attitudes can lead to an increased mindfulness of the importance of equality and understanding among people. As described in *American Documentary Film’s* mission statement, a leading independent non-profit organization that produced and distributed films to various educational institutions, including MoMA, they believed that “as artists... a basic function of art is to challenge dogma... and to make people strong for the basic human task of assuming control over their own lives” (W. 1, MoMA Archives, NY). Teaching people to question and consider the power of social and political norms is an integral piece to achieving any educational goal. People must also understand that they have the power to change these norms if those standards no longer or never have benefitted the entire society. This also mirrors McFee’s advice that as educators and as students, we must look at cultures that are completely unlike our own in order to gain perspective and a critical eye of changing social structures. In a time where television and mass media were becoming powerful sources for information in the 1950s and 1960s, it was up to educators to offer students the tools to evaluate these

obvious and subtle yet influential messages in a one-way communication system. Film was likewise just as powerful as mass media and television. The types of film shown at MoMA were not only alternatives to mass media outlets that structured the diffusion of information based on personal agendas, but the films selected also restructured the communication abilities of film through conversations between audience and artist.

In Eisner's (1965), McFee's (1966), and Lanier's (1966) writing on visual culture education in the art classroom, they all reflect on the need to understand all cultures and become mindful citizens, treating one another with respect by simply understanding backgrounds and belief systems unlike their own. By studying and fully considering various perspectives, using art as a main vehicle, people can connect with one another on a deeper and more committed level. *Cinéprobe* and *What's Happening?* were influential because they both unapologetically explored stories of hardship and complex topics. There is a deep-rooted need to understand one another, and public programming is one platform where that interaction can occur.

## **CONCLUSION**

I began my analysis with an explanation of the Black Arts Movement during the 1960s because I believe it exemplifies the many important implications that can occur by way of documenting history. When there are gaps and missing perspectives in historical writing and criticism, entire Movements can be considered misinterpreted or forgotten, as exemplified here. Black militant artists who were politically motivated while representing their communities did not entirely reject the system they were so against, as depicted in



much of the literature on the Black Arts Movement. The films screened at *Cinéprobe* and *What's Happening?* created successful platforms for Black artists to talk about their work, communities, and culture. With the help of being associated to a prestigious museum, Black artists worked within the system so that they could create national heroes through their art, display their propagandistic artwork, glorify historical events and people, and creating art that interpreted the mass experience so audiences who were unfamiliar with it could finally communicate on a new and equitable level.

I believe that MoMA's efforts to become more available to minority groups was a demonstration of mindful community engagement and a form of education that has been unexplored in historical writing for the field of art education. It is vital for this field to track and study these various public programs and their real influence in communities. As Elliot Eisner explained, once the educational literature reflects the changes in society, then can there be a dynamic classroom or museum program (1965). The films shown in *Cinéprobe* and *What's Happening?* demonstrated clearly that empowerment through a shared experience followed with an in depth discussion can create shifts in the way people treat one another.

## Chapter 7: *Conclusions*

The purpose of this study was to investigate how two film programs, established at the Museum of Modern Art during the 1960s and 1970s, addressed social and cultural conditions of African Americans. In Chapter 4, I examined the first program, *Cinéprobe*, created in 1968 that afforded opportunities for independent filmmakers, including African Americans. In Chapter 5, I examined *What's Happening?*, the second program, which was established in 1971 and screened documentaries with relevant political and social themes, including the trajectory of the Civil Rights Movement and the struggles of both urban and rural African American communities. In each chapter I included a contextual look into various changes in MoMA's structure that helped enable innovative programs like *Cinéprobe* and *What's Happening?* to exist and prosper. Chapter 6 analyzed the purpose of each program and its effectiveness in museum culture as educational programming. Chapter 6 also examined the effectiveness of community organizing as a form of social evolution. In this final chapter, I reexamine the research questions that motivated this study and provide a summary of my findings. I also discuss some of the implications of this study and suggest future research topics and directions that may be conducted concerning educational film programming at the Museum of Modern Art.

## **RESEARCH QUESTIONS**

Through this study I sought to answer several questions concerning the Museum of Modern Art's Department of Film and the programming they created in the 1960s and 1970s. Mainly, I wanted to further understand how the Department of Film addressed the needs of its changing audience. More specifically, I was concerned with the African American urban population, including many Black artists and activists who criticized elitist institutions, like the museum, for being exclusive to primarily White communities. Likewise, I was also interested in how MoMA's Department of Film assisted African American filmmakers with gaining the exposure and resources they lacked in the film industry, as well as how they explicitly achieved obtaining this exposure for artists from the community at large. In total, I evaluated two public programs that used film as a primary tool to address major concerns and daily struggles of African Americans in the United States, as well as create a unique dialogue between the diverse museum audience, the staff, and the artists involved.

## **SUMMARY OF FINDINGS**

The historical research I have gathered here offers a context of changing museum policy in America during the 1960s and 1970s, a detailed account of two film programs at the Museum of Modern Art and its many implications, and a new perspective of the historical influence of the Black Power Movement and the Black Arts Movement. My research sought to understand more clearly how the Museum of Modern Art directly addressed the social and cultural conditions of African Americans through public

screenings as well as Q&A style conversations with artists. After completing the research and considering much of the critical literature that was accessible to me, I believe MoMA's two film programs, *Cinéprobe* and *What's Happening?* to be two successful methods of education, specifically art education.

Each chapter engages and works off of one another in order to provide a thorough understanding of MoMA's and its Department of Film's impact on American society and influence of the art industry's structure. Besides providing unexamined information, my purpose was to clarify and discuss more precisely how influential film programming could be when attempts are made to connect diverse communities through film.

Curators Andrea Mancia, Larry Kardish, and director Willard Van Dyke, chose controversial, radical, and intense films for both *Cinéprobe* and *What's Happening?*, despite the possibility of putting the museum's reputation on the line. The department, however, used its power and image to shine an intended spotlight on films that had not yet received the attention MoMA believed they deserved.

## **IMPLICATIONS**

By studying an area of film education not yet explored in full, there are a number of implications for my research. As I acknowledged the two film programs as an important area of art education history, I highlight efforts made by the Department of Film not yet researched and written about. The Department of Film, earlier known as the Film Archive, continues to be recognized as an acclaimed research and preservation center. Although this is an incredibly important area of film studies and one that should

be remembered historically, the trajectory of film programming at MoMA should also be remembered as a location for substantial achievement.

Research conducted into film, as a part of the history of art education, is of yet territory rarely explored from this point of view. By investigating film programs and considering them an important area in art education, I am hopeful that my efforts will facilitate the exploration of new terrain and direction for art education study. From this research, I have learned that in many ways public programming can educate and engage audiences in ways other forms of education may not be able to achieve. Public programming, as seen in the two film programs studied in this research, can unite people from many different backgrounds, belief systems, and cultures, effectively creating a safe and encouraging environment for conversation and evaluation of social norms.

Evaluating how public programming in the 1960s and 1970s addressed marginalized groups of people from a cultural perspective also creates a number of implications. Museum institutions, including MoMA, have often received reputations as being perceived as inaccessible for some audiences. The two film series programs were a response to this perception. The Department of Film reevaluated the idea of access and created programming that enabled a larger group of people to feel included in conversation and in an artistic movement. By observing MoMA and its Department of Film in this way, I believe this altered perspective sheds new light on the innovation and powerful creative outlets museums provide communities, and how effective they can be in bringing important evolutionary change in our society as a place for gathering and conversation.

## **FUTURE STUDIES**

Within the scope of this research, I helped uncover the Museum of Modern Art's efforts in developing film education by examining two programs established in the late 1960s and 1970s. Beyond this, however, the museum's Department of Film created many other programs during this time that were substantial and innovative to the history of film studies. By establishing a timeline, in which I looked at *Cinéprobe* and *What's Happening?* from 1965 to 1974, this study does not explore the two programs until their terminations, which occurred for both programs in the early 1990s. There is much about these programs to be discovered, which I believe would be useful to those interested in the development of film education and cinematic practice and technique.

In order to fully understand the context of the Department of Film during the 1960s and 1970s, it would also be beneficial for more research to be conducted on the leadership of the department, most specifically the director of the film department, Willard Van Dyke. Currently, the Museum of Modern Art does not have archives dedicated to Van Dyke and his ten years of work at the museum. Further understanding Van Dyke's leadership role and his personal mission would be an important area of research and would aid in understanding the many stories and philosophies created behind the walls of the Museum of Modern Art.

Another possible way of furthering this study would be to examine locations such as other museums and libraries that also established film programs as a way of interacting with their communities. Libraries, especially the public libraries throughout the five boroughs of New York City, were especially interested in screening films by African

American filmmakers. Understanding how other cultural institutions were programming film and talking to their communities through film would surely be a valuable area of knowledge.

As mentioned in earlier chapters, most research on MoMA's Department of Film ends in the early 1950s, with Haidee Wasson's *Museum Movies* (2005). It would be beneficial for more research to be done on all areas of the film department, with an emphasis on the quickly changing technology that altered the way people interacted with and thought about film. As technology is developed, audience engagement with film has changed drastically. It would be valuable to have access to this research within the context of the Museum of Modern Art's services and programming.

The future of research for art education is limitless. After conducting this research, I believe there are many unexpected and unexplored areas that can be understood as vitally important to the field. Public programming, as demonstrated in this study, is an educational experience for people outside of classroom environments. Film is a powerful medium that facilitates further understanding of people, ideas, and past events. I believe it should be explored by art education historians in order for future educators to understand the scope of this incredibly stimulating and richly abundant field.

## **CONCLUSION**

I went into this investigation imagining history to be a unified narrative, free of debate, which, once uncovered, would simply verify everything I had always suspected. The smokescreen would lift.... Instead I found a brawl of ancestors, a herd of dissenters, sometimes marching together but just as often marching away from each other. (Coates, 2015, pp. 48-49)

Like Ta-Nehisi Coates, I went into this research expecting answers to my questions to be found in a structured order, where one piece of evidence would link perfectly with another piece of evidence, and at the end my investigation would lead to a single factual narrative. From the very beginning this was not the case. My research led me down many different convoluted paths that did not quite link as I expected and anticipated they would. Film was a revolutionary force in the 1960s, especially for African Americans, and yet so many voices argued its place and importance in the Black Power Movement and the Black Art Movement. Many of these voices disagreed with one another. I learned quickly that I was working with a subject that was “disregarded” in historical writing because it did not quite fit in the literature, movements, and art criticism of the time. Film programming in museums was fundamentally contradictory to the voices of the Black Art Movement, and even the Black Power Movement. Both Movements rejected the “system” and everything in-between, which included places like museums. I was, therefore, dealing with many contradictions. Thanks to the writings of community organizer and activist, Saul D. Alinsky, however, I learned to embrace the view that life is a story of contradictions.

I expected to find in my research hidden revolutionary movements with immensely subversive outcomes. I wanted to find heroic acts that questioned and changed the socio-political system in question. I was not necessarily disappointed. There were acts of heroism at the MoMA and especially in its Department of Film, but my expectations were too simple. What I learned from this research is that subtle change in a



flawed system can create evolutionary change. I believe this can be just as impactful as revolutionary change.

The Museum of Modern Art created programs that responded to shifts in culture and sought out support from the community and the artists that represented those communities, so that the new programs could best respond to the needs and interests of an ever-changing audience. There is no denying the importance of film in our culture. Film connects many artistic mediums together and likewise bridges various types of people together. I found that this research also connected many different pieces of history in a unique way, telling new and compelling stories about film, about African American communities and artists, and about the sometimes overlooked influences of museums on the lives of people who engage with these institutions.

## Appendix

List of *What's Happening?* screenings at the Museum of Modern Art with African American themes. In chronological order from the inauguration of the program in 1970 until 1974, the end of director Willard Van Dyke's career at the MoMA:

- August 20, 1970: *Black Roots*, (1970) Produced and directed by Lionel Rogosin. (60 mins)  
A portrayal of Black culture emphasizing the beauty of Black life in America. "An exploration of the personalities of individuals, black Americans of all types" (W.1 MoMA Archives, NY).
- August 27, 1970: *Stagolee: Interview with Bobby Seale*, (1970) Produced by KQED and directed by Francisco Newman. (60 mins)  
Documentary interviewing Chairman of the Black Panther Party, Bobby Seale, while in prison. "The film transforms the screaming headline Bobby Seale into a beautiful human being" (W. 1 MoMA Archives, NY).
- October 1, 1970: *Mayday*, (1970) Produced and directed by May First Media, Inc. (22 mins)  
Documentary about the imprisonment of members of the Black Panther Party in New Haven, Connecticut accused of murder.
- October 1, 1970: *David Hilliard on "Face The Nation,"* (1969) Produced and directed by American Documentary Films. (30 mins)  
Complete version of CBS' "Face the Nation" with David Hilliard, the Black Panther Party Chief of Staff.
- November 5, 1970: *Black G.I.*, (1970) Produced, directed, and written by Kent Garrett. Courtesy of Black Journal, National Educational Television. (54 mins)  
Documentary exploring Black servicemen in Vietnam and their struggles as they confronted racism away from home.
- November 5, 1970: .... *And We Still Survive*, (1969) Produced and directed by Stan Lathan. Courtesy of Black Journal, National educational Television. (13 mins)  
Documentary exploring the struggles of African Americans during the 1960s in America.

- December 21 and 22, 1970: *Wilmington*, (1969) Courtesy of Newsreel Films. (15 mins)  
Film showing the Dupont corporations domination of Black and White workers after the assassination of Martin Luther King Jr., in which the National Guard was called in to maintain patrols of the Black community for ten months.
- January 4 and 5, 1971: *Trial – The City and County of Denver Vs. Lauren R. Watson*, (1970) Produced by National Educational Television. Directed by Robert M. Fresco and Denis Sanders. (90 mins)  
*The First day – selection of the Jury*. Documentary study of the trial of Lauren R. Watson, a Black Panther Party member. The charges included resisting a police officer and interfering with a police officer.
- January 11 and 12, 1971: *Trial – The City and County of Denver Vs. Lauren r. Watson*, (1970) Produced by National Educational Television. Directed by Robert M. Fresco and Denis Sanders. (90 mins)  
*The second day – Officer Cantwell on the Stand*. Documentary study of the trial of Lauren R. Watson, a Black Panther Party member. The charges included resisting a police officer and interfering with a police officer.
- January 18 and 19, 2917: *Trial – The City and County of Denver Vs. Lauren r. Watson*, (1970) Produced by National Educational Television. Directed by Robert M. Fresco and Denis Sanders. (90 mins)  
*The third day – Watson takes the stand*. Documentary study of the trial of Lauren R. Watson, a Black Panther Party member. The charges included resisting a police officer and interfering with a police officer.
- January 25 and 26, 1971: *Trial – The City and County of Denver Vs. Lauren r. Watson*, (1970) Produced by National Educational Television. Directed by Robert M. Fresco and Denis Sanders. (90 mins)  
*The fourth day – the verdict*. Documentary study of the trial of Lauren R. Watson, a Black Panther Party member. The charges included resisting a police officer and interfering with a police officer.
- February 22 and 23, 1971: *Set-Up*, (1970) Produced and directed by Nick Doob and Donald Horner. (60 mins)  
A film about the life story of African American Donald Horner from New Haven, Connecticut detailing his views on society, his

experience of his time in jail, and his growing relationship with the filmmaker.

March 1 and  
2, 1971:

*I Am Somebody*, (1970) Produced, directed, and edited by Madeline Anderson. Courtesy of Contemporary Films/McGraw-Hill. (28 mins)  
Documentary on the 113-day hospital strike in Charleston, N.C. The film explained how Black workers related “to a union that fuses economic problems and the civil rights struggle into one” (W. 1 MoMA Archives, NY).

March 1 and  
2, 1971:

*Al Stacey Hayes*, (1971) Produced and directed by Joel A. Levitch. Courtesy of Jason Films. (25 mins)  
Film about the Black community in Shelby, Mississippi, a small town in the Delta and the struggle of fighting for civil rights in Southern rural states.

March 8 and  
9, 1971:

*Banks and The Poor*, (1970) Produced and written by Morton Silverstein. Courtesy of National Educational Television. (60 mins)  
Documentary that explores the bank’s attitudes towards the poor in America. The film includes interviews with bank representatives and on-location footage of slums in North Philadelphia, New York City’s Bedford-Stuyvesant, and Washington D.C.

May 17 and  
18, 1971:

*Part of The Family*, (1971) Produced and directed by Paul Ronder. Courtesy of NET Division, Educational Broadcasting Corporation, Belafonte Enterprises, Inc. and Summer Morning Films, Inc. (75 mins)  
Film about three families of different races, different religions, different economic levels, living in different areas of the country. The film details each family’s struggles with various political tragedies in America.

May 23 and  
24, 1972:

*American Revolution II*, (1969) Produced by the Film Group, Inc. including Mike Gray. Courtesy of Vision Quest, Inc. (80 mins)  
Documentary film about the 1968 Democratic National Convention and its aftermath. The film focuses on the creation of the alliance between the Young Patriots Organization and the Chicago Black Panther Party Chapter.

In October 1972, the *What’s Happening?* series was taken on by William Sloan who was then a librarian with the New York Public Library, Donnell Library Center. During this

period, the *What's Happening?* programs were screened on succeeding days as noted, first at the Donnell Library Center and then at the auditorium of the Museum of Modern Art.

October 24 and  
25, 1972:                    *Busing: Some Voices from the South*, (1972) Directed by Paul Altmeyer. Produced by and courtesy of Westinghouse Broadcasting Company. (52 mins)  
Documentary exploring the issues of integration of the busing system in the south during the early 1970s.

December 18 and  
19, 1973:                    *Ain't Gonna Eat My Mind*, (1973) Produced and directed by Tony Batten. Courtesy of Carousel Films, N.Y.C. (34 mins)  
Film exploring the gangs in the south of Bronx and how two rival gangs handled the killing of 25-year-old Cornell Benjamin, known as "Black Benjy" together in a civilized meeting.

March 26 and  
27, 1974:                    *Woodcutters of the Deep South*, (1973) Produced and directed by Lionel Rogosin. Courtesy of Impact Films. (85 mins)  
Film detailing the lives of poor Black and White working people in Mississippi and Alabama as they overcame the forces of racism in order to organize into a cooperative association. "Rogosin's film reveals the basic needs and struggles encountered in the development of all social organization of this nature" (W. 2 MoMA Archives, NY).

June 11 and  
12, 1974:                    *Frame-Up! The Imprisonment of Martin Sostre*, (1974) Produced and directed by the Pacific Street Film Collective. Courtesy of Pacific St. Film & Editing Co. (30 mins)  
Documentary about the arrest of Martin Sostre, owner of the only anti-war, Black Liberation bookstore in Buffalo, NY. The film documents "a classic case of American injustice – where the full power of the state has been brought to bear against an individual who has chosen to speak out against the powers at large" (W. 2 MoMA Archives, NY).

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