

BEARING BREASTS, NOT ARMS: BLACK FEMININITY IN THE FILMS OF SKIP NORMAN

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“What is perhaps most innovative about the bpp’s cinematic appearance is that it threw into doubt the validity of the common sense that linked “man” with “male” with “masculine,” if only for that any-instant-whatever in which one stared in amazement while the Panthers appeared.”

— Kara Keeling, *The Witch’s Flight*¹

Strange Fruit (1969) was Skip Norman’s DFFB thesis film.² The 28-minute short relies on stock footage and on-screen text in 16mm to express the messages of the Black Panther Party (bpp) in a German context. Norman re-authors the visual and audio documents, first pairing rhythmic drums and later the voice of Black Panther leader Bobby Seale with quotes (from Frantz Fanon, for example) and Panther slogans (“All Power to the People”) that appear as white text on a black background or superimposed over photographs. He intersperses these images with long tracking shots of German streets and footage of Seale speaking to a predominately *white* audience. Seale’s patient, slow delivery and long pauses have their own rhythm. The tendency for Black activists to speak with delays that anticipate future translation and global transmission, a “cadence of Black protest on film,” marks the footage of Seale with a cinematic language associated with the civil rights movement of 1960s United States of America.³

¹ Keeling, Kara. *The Witch’s Flight: The Cinematic, the Black Femme, and the Image of Common Sense*. Perverse Modernities. Durham: Duke University Press, 2007, p. 85.

² The title is most likely a reference to the song, *Strange Fruit*, originally performed by Billie Holiday and made popular by Nina Simone’s 1964 rendition. The lyrics are based on the 1931 anti-lynching poem by Abel Meeropol, a Jewish schoolteacher and songwriter from New York.

³ Griffith, Karina. “The Decolonial Potential of Profound Cultural Nostalgia.” *Forum Magazine*, Arsenal – Institut Für Film Und Videokunst e.V., 2021. <https://www.arsenal-berlin.de/en/berlinale-forum/archiv/program-archiv/2020/magazine/the-decolonial-potential-of-profound-cultural-nostalgia.html>.

Norman sometimes cuts the footage to the rhythms of Seale's soliloquies; the translation here is a visual one. In short edits, Norman adds still photographs of Black experiences: first in black and white, towards the end, in color. The still images are dynamic; Norman zooms out from the photos to reveal more of the image; other times, the pictures appear as circular vignettes. Their appearance on screen is often so short that the flashes of extra-ordinary, private Black life and ordinary *white* violence work on the subliminal realm.

What Kara Keeling calls "cinematic appearance" is the spectacle of moving images of black leather on gun-wielding Black bodies in Black expressions of Western revolution. These images formed the visual text of many independent documentaries of the early 1970s. Filmmakers from Europe were interested in capturing the civil rights movement and the involvement of the Black Panthers. Yolande du Luart's [Angela – Portrait of a Revolutionary](#) (1971), and Agnès Varda's *Black Panthers* (1970) both focus on the emblematic activism of Angela Davis and her contribution to the movement upon returning to the United States after her post-graduate studies in Germany. In *Kathleen und Eldridge Cleaver in Algier* (1970), Claudia von Alemann records each of the two activists speaking emphatically during their time in exile. As Keeling points out, gender divisions and revisions of the cinematic Black Panther are part of its spectacle. Norman's filmic texts of the Black Panther Party movement from the late sixties and early seventies are a significant, transnational contribution, however markedly different in their focus on male protagonists in image and sound. The appearance and voice of the Black women is a rarity in Norman's German films.

For this reason, one still image that appears at the end of *Strange Fruit* is so remarkable. Norman centers it on the screen three times in the film's final ten minutes, in the section titled "Questions." It is an image of a Black woman holding a child with another baby on her left breast. None of the three look into the camera: the baby on the mother's left arm reaches up to the woman's breast; the skinny child the mother holds with her right arm leans against her and looks off frame. It is one of the few images in color; the naked brown of their skin on film renders a warm sepia. This image of the lactating mother is juxtaposed with the sound of military trumpets and artillery fire which continues under the image—the cut is matched with the burst of a cannon. Directly after, the image cuts to a scrolling shot of the sign for "First National City Bank," followed by three flags waving (British, French and USA). The soundscape includes a voice reciting from the 1966 text "Monopoly Capital: An essay on the American Economic and Social Order" by Paul A. Baran and Paul M. Sweezy: "NATO: the Need of The American Oligarchy, for a large and growing military machine to contain, compress and eventually destroy world socialism."⁴ The

⁴ Baran, Paul A. *Monopoly Capital: An Essay on the American Economic and Social Order*. New York: Monthly Review Press, 1969.

section continues this way, cutting between military footage, images of illuminated and neon American brand logos against a black background (Esso, Shell, Coca Cola, ending a long zoom into an IBM sign) and the sepia mother and children.

Minutes earlier, Norman uses Seale's metaphor of hunger to illustrate the burning, visceral desire for justice.⁵ The grasping child on the breast shows both a type of ravenousness and satiation and its placement in the "Questions" section prompts more inquisition than answers. How can we understand this Black woman in this undulating text about capital, consumerism and war? Is it a punctuation mark, a new phrase or a space? We, as spectators, are already versed in the cinematic appearance of the Black Panthers, which include women who bear arms, not their breasts. *Strange Fruit* has its own common sense, one that eschews these images in favor of domestic representations of women that link "woman" with "female" with "feminine."

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⁵ One of the few other still images of a woman pictures is the first image in the "Death of Starvation" section, where Seale describes the Breakfast for Children Program. It is not clear if Norman had access to the many photos of Black men serving Black children in the breakfast program (some wearing frilly aprons) which we can now readily find with an Internet search.