



# Passing Through: A Methodology for Close Analysis

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As Alessandra Raengo explains in her Introduction to this issue of *liquid blackness*, studying Larry Clark's *Passing Through* has presented both practical and theoretical challenges. Collectively, we found the solution to those obstacles was to fully embrace the possibilities of film study, by adopting methodologies that compliment the shape of the film. For example, Kristin Juarez's archival research featured in the "Dossier on *Passing Through*," which is connected to this publication, produces a historical network and visual ecology that has as many spatial, political, and aesthetic linkages as the film itself.<sup>1</sup> Considering film study as its own form means being explicit about research as a process of making. Therefore, when I wanted to initiate a close reading of the film, I was confronted with the fact that I did not want to *make* pieces of *Passing*

*Through*. As the title suggests, this film is about movement, connectivity, and scale—there must be room to pass through, and this passing should not be interrupted. The tools of 'close' reading (cropped screen-captures or enlarged frames) clearly produce a completely different construction of the cinematic space. While these challenges remain, this piece and the entire issue feature stills from the film, foregrounding these concerns may help us better understand what passes through in this film, and how movement might shape black cinema.

The trajectory of Warmack, the main character in *Passing Through*, is not unlike a classic hero on a quest for self-actualization in the face of forces attempting to restrain him. But at the end of the film, he does not ride into the sunset. Instead, he remains in the same dark apartment flooded in neon light from the

depressing motel sign outside of his window. Yet, when Warmack picks up his saxophone and plays, it is clear that he is not bounded to this space. Like his grandfather, Poppa Harris, Warmack is not defined by his particular position at any time (prison, a record contract, etc.); instead, Warmack is the possibility of connecting to any moment in space and time. Contrary to the notion of blackness as a kind of confinement, the collectivity of the jazz ensemble allows Warmack to become the embodiment of dynamism. My aim is to adopt a reading strategy that can account for this reversal. I choose to view the film in a linear fashion, to produce images that have the potential to move forward and backward, and to pay particular attention to the moments Clark calls "accent marks," that initiate movement across time and space.<sup>2</sup>

The completion of Warmack's journey is significant in light of his previous state of restriction, which we see throughout the film. In the film sequence shown in Figure 1, Warmack is reminded of a painful memory, a violent attack on a member of his jazz ensemble and his subsequent incarceration at Attica Correctional Facility—which is represented by actual footage of the infamous Attica prison rebellion. While the use of archival footage helps to enrich our main character's backstory, it also provides a moment to consider the 'landmarks' of black visual culture, moments of overwhelming familiarity, that black cinema must also pass through. Within the film Warmack is trapped by governmentality, the historical moment, and an exploitative music industry. Similarly, the well-known "burden of representation" confines black cinema within

FIGURE 1  
*The Ensemble*



particular categories of genre, narrative, and style. *Passing Through* is a complex film precisely because it does not want to be paused. *Passing Through* comfortably moves through multiple artistic traditions (photography, jazz, drawing, poetry),

film genres (film noir, Blaxploitation), and expressions of culture (religious ritual, ancestral lineages, folklore) so that no one of these individual tropes of black expressive culture can define the film. For that reason, in the following exercise, I will identify

ways to see the film stage the sometimes difficult movement of a black body through space and time.

#### **The Ensemble (Figure 1)**

While this sequence focuses primarily on Warmack's experience at the

FIGURE 2  
*The Break*



center of the Attica prison rebellion, I suggest it begins with the jazz ensemble. Embedded within this group is a political formation that has the ability to record, preserve, and perform a racial black politics. As Clark explains, this group performs

the music that "makes you think and makes you reflect."<sup>3</sup> In other words, this moment of practice, as a double for the forward playing or screening of the film, facilitates a reflective moment of looking backward. Thus, the improvisational

work of the ensemble allows us to *pass through* and connect these characters to a black radical tradition.

#### **The Break (Figure 2)**

At the beginning of the rehearsal, Warmack struggles to reconnect

with his bandmates, but the use of eyeline matches and establishing shots clearly make the spatial relationship between the group clear. However, when one member reminds everyone of a racist encounter that left a musician blinded, the group is incapable of maintaining their rhythm. Clark refers to these moments that signal a stylistic change as “accent marks.” Clark argues these moments do not require explanation, they simply work in the moment of improvisation or not.<sup>4</sup> The characters register their emotional discomfort silently, but it is clear that this is an improvisational fail. The ensemble cannot recover without activating and working through the painful memory. In other words, they cannot move forward without looking back. By superimposing the first shot of the flashback over Warmack’s face, the transition visualizes an impossible space/time evoked by

the ensemble that allows Warmack to be both ‘here’ and ‘there.’

**The Attack or “The Sound Before the Fury of Those Oppressed” (Figure 3)**

After the transition from the band rehearsal into the past, we see Skeeter, a member of the ensemble, being attacked. Enraged, Warmack comes to Skeeter’s defense and repeatedly punches the attacker. It is meaningful that the film visualizes violence against black bodies, a kind of violence that often remained off screen. However, Warmack’s subsequent attack and the image of violent black masculinity are all too familiar. This is yet another “accent mark.” However, instead of initiating contemplation like the previous segment, Warmack is shuttled forward in time to his inevitable incarceration. The film is making literal the fixity that emerges when

a particular kind of racial image is deployed. Immediately, the image of Warmack’s violent aggression becomes another familiar image of imprisonment. The inevitability of this moment is reinforced by the care in which the fictional and documentary footage are combined, particularly in the color processing.

**The War - Attica Correctional Facility, 1971 (Figure 4)**

By utilizing archival footage in the Attica scenes, *Passing Through* necessarily considers this historical moment through the lens of media. During the Attica prison rebellion, prisoners tried to bring human rights violations that were occurring behind bars to light. Thus, it is fitting that the combination of footage in *Passing Through* visualizes the sides of the rebellion as a conflict of image production. In between a visual exchange between prisoners making

FIGURE 3.  
*The Attack or “The Sound Before the Fury of Those Oppressed”*



FIGURE 4:  
*The War - Attica Correctional Facility, 1971*



demands and white onlookers, the film inserts more explicitly militaristic imagery. For example, prisoners dig trenches in one shot while correctional officers arrive in tanks and helicopters in another. Similarly, the leaders of the warring sides (Russell G. Oswald, Chief of New York State's Penal System and prison spokesperson, Elliot Barkley) look on. It is undeniable that the prisoners were trapped within the prison walls; however, the film makes this issue of confinement a problem of visibility.

#### The Black Body in Pain (Figure 5)

If the previous segment of the film argues black radical politics are a response to black bodies being

fixed or caught within an anti-black visual economy, this last part of the sequence offers a possibility for liberating the black image. In the wake of the violence at Attica, the details of many prisoner deaths were shrouded in mystery and the prison denied involvement. Therefore, it is significant that the last major movements in this sequence are fictional images of black bodies in pain. In close ups, we see prisoners succumb to gunshot wounds and, in a moment of solidarity, two prisoners rush an injured body toward the camera. The film does something that would have been impossible for the real prisoners by filling an absence in the archive. This final accent provides the most explicit contemplation of movement

and stillness by ending with a still photograph of naked prisoners being arranged by guards that slowly fades to red. This ending defies traditional filmmaking in the unconventional use of color and the more obvious pausing of the moving image. Again, this allows the film to do work that the prisoners cannot by making the images of their abuse visible and, notably, moving outside of it. ■

<sup>1</sup> *liquid blackness* "Dossier on *Passing Through*," Curated by Kristin Juarez, available at <http://passingthroughdossier.tumblr.com>.

<sup>2</sup> Larry Clark, Interview for "Dossier on *Passing Through*" by Alessandra Raengo, San Francisco State University, March 19, 2014, available at <https://vimeo.com/liquidblackness/videos/sort:alphabetical/format:thumbnail/>.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

FIGURE 5  
*The Black Body in Pain*

