INTERVIEWS

EPHRAIM ASILI

September 16, 2020 • Ephraim Asili on capturing radical collectivity in his first feature film

Production still of Ephraim Asili's The Inheritance, 2020. *Photo: Mick Bello.*

In The Inheritance, *director Ephraim Asili presents a dramatic narrative based on his years in a West Philadelphia Black radical collective. The New York–based filmmaker's first feature following a run of celebrated short films focused on the African diaspora,* The Inheritance *centers Black artists and activists in its fictionalized portrait of a young man who turns his late grandmother's house into a shared space for socialist thought and creativity. Alternating comedic vignettes of collective living with scripted interviews, poetry readings, and archival footage—including images of the 1985 MOVE bombing—the film quietly constructs a continuum of Black artistry that brings past struggles into powerful communion with the talents and ideologies of a new generation.* The Inheritance *premiered on September 14 at the Toronto International Film Festival and opens the New York Film Festival's inaugural Currents section on September 18. Below, Asili discusses his experiment in communal life, his cinematic process, and the influences that shaped the look and tone of the film.*

BASING THE FILM AROUND MY TIME IN THE COLLECTIVE seemed like the best vehicle for exploring the issues that I was thinking about at the time—namely, how we might work together in order to resolve our own problems. I was also interested in capturing the process of political awakening on camera. We were not exactly a Marxist collective, but we did work to share domestic and financial responsibilities equally. We also believed in many of the same social causes, like protecting the environment, social justice in terms of police brutality and the treatment of women, and political prisoner support. We often attended rallies and events together. Both during this time and prior to it, we were very close to MOVE; many of their elders were very generous with us. In many ways, we modeled ourselves after them. We spent as much time as we could learning about John Africa and his teachings. Some of us took up raw food diets, some became advocates for natural childbirth. At the time, I was married to my first wife, who also lived in the collective; our son was born at this time. Approaching this part of my life through filmmaking over ten years after the fact provided a great deal of perspective.

Stylistically, the film is deeply influenced by Jean-Luc Godard's *La Chinoise* (1967). When I first got around to watching the film in grad school, I was floored. It reminded me of my days living in a collective, but at the same time seemed to be coming from a totally different place in terms of class and culture. I was also struck by the form. It was not a "story" about a collective. It was immersive. Despite what might be considered naive politics, the film has so many strengths. From the first time I saw it, I knew I wanted to make what in reggae music would be called a version or in hip-hop a remix of *La Chinoise*, a critique and an homage at the same time.

The film is almost entirely set in a West Philadelphia rowhome; the idea from the beginning was to treat the space as an archive. I've been a bit of an archivist ever since I started collecting records as a teenager. I wanted the story to revolve around individuals being politicized by materials that they were coming into contact with. The idea of the protagonist inheriting a house filled with books and records and then turning that space into a collective for radical thought seemed like the best way to explore the relationship between sociopolitical objects and ideas and sociopolitical actions. The idea was to shoot the film on location in Philly, but after about a year of getting funding rejections, I decided to take up a long-standing offer by the

Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute's Experimental Media and Performing Arts Center to shoot the film in their black box studio in Troy, New York. Once I accepted the conditions of studio filmmaking, the black box became my blank canvas and I built the set design color by color, object by object. I spent about nine months traveling around to different stores and markets buying the objects that provide much of the mise en scène. I also used a lot of materials from my personal collection. Every book, poster, painting, piece of fabric and furniture was handpicked.

In 2017, I premiered the final film in a series of shorts called "The Diaspora Suite" (2011–2017). During the making of these films, I settled into a rhythm of shooting on location, editing and teaching, and then traveling again to share the work. I've noticed how this can become a regular pattern for a lot of filmmakers, and I personally felt as though I had gone as far as I could with that approach. In order to challenge myself, I decided to work on something in long-form, focused on a story from my real life, with a script and a somewhat definitive structure. But I also left gaps in the screenplay so that I could improvise and fill in certain sections with montage sequences; for example, the archival footage of Shirley Chisholm's presidential campaign, and of the 1985 MOVE bombing.

I was going through a very hard time during the early stages of the project. Both my mom and sister passed away unexpectedly while I was writing the script. Around that time, the poet-activist icon Sonia Sanchez, who was an integral figure in the Black Arts Movement in the 1960s, gave me some personal advice. She told me that her generation has been holding the torch for us and that it was time for that torch to be passed on. She also reminded me that "our red carpets don't look like theirs." That our work often goes unacknowledged and will never win the biggest prizes, but that I should never forget that our "red carpet" is unfurled every time we get together as revolutionaries. She reminded me that the fact that we are alive, together, making art, and sharing it amongst ourselves was truly the greatest accomplishment one could attain. Lastly, she gave me one of the warmest hugs I've ever felt and said, "Keep going, young brotha."

I knew that I wanted to honor her in the film. When I told her about the script, she agreed to appear, but a few days before the shoot, I found out that she couldn't make it to the set to film one of her scenes. It occurred to me then to reach out to the poet Ursula Rucker, who anyone from Philadelphia will tell you is the voice of the city. I knew her presence would give the film that Philly feel that was so key to the whole project. Having both women in the film—Ursula studied with Sonia, and they are extremely close—seemed to fit with the broader theme of inheritance. With my work, I am always trying to draw connections between individual lives and a broader, shared history.

— As told to Jordan Cronk

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