TIFF 2020: The Inheritance (Ephraim Asili, US)
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The rate of past insights in [ellipsis] present-day struggles is at the heart of The Inheritance, a playfully erudite and boundary-pushing examination of what performing Black theory, literature, music, and testimony in a contemporary Philadelphia commune might entail in motion. Given ever greater topicality by the current moment, Ephraim Asili’s first feature film has problems transcending its not least in its insistence on continuity and process. Too smart to trade in conventional didacticism and too wary and funny to feel overly academic, Asili’s unique project is ultimately about understanding theory and practice and making sure both are passed on to the next generation, an idea that reverberates far beyond the walls of the house.

The founding of the commune that forms the film’s central setting hinges on a literal inheritance, in the form of the West Philadelphia home that Julian (Eric Lockey) has been left by his grandmother. After he and his on-off girlfriend Gwen (Napheesa McLean) move into the house, reaction ensues, and soon the three are sharing the house with an entire collective: Patricia (Yvonne Liu), Stephanie (Ayisha Fauzi), Mike (Michael A. Lake), and Jamal (Amiel Akers), musicians Old Head (Julian Riccardi Jr.) and Jamal (Timothy Trump Jr.), and, finally, Julian’s old friend Rich (Chris Jarewski). It’s Old Head who first articulates the commune’s goals together with his name: the House of Usu, a place focused on and geared toward the preservation and self-care of Black people.

Little information is provided on the collective’s respective backgrounds and interests, which emerges instead by way of their interactions and involvement in house activities. These are frequently informed by what was also left behind by Julian’s grandmother: an almost bottomless collection of books, records, magazines, newspapers, photographs, postcards, and other materials so casually reverberating and existing that they just so happen to make for a perfect syllabus for learning about the wider Black experience, taking in key works of African American literature, politics, and history while also finding space for other authors and academics examining the African experience as well as other political struggles or post-colonial settings.

Gwen and Julian have a peace through the house delivering sections from Julius K. Nyerere’s Essay on Stockman, Patricia gives the group a workshop on the Nuer language of South Sudan after dancing at Old Head and Jamal’s jazz-inflected jam session, while Julian reads through volumes of Sonya Sanchez’s poetry. While these activities lack their bearings from myriad different sources, they share a similar goal at a superordinate level: embodying past texts in the present to keep them alive while tapping into the fresh meanings and sensibilities they can still trigger.

The grandmother’s collection doesn’t just serve as a jumping-off point for the house’s activities, though, but also comes to adorn the walls, as if to imply that keeping such references visible in everyday life is a fundamental component of the educational and political processes being explored by the commune. If not more generally. When these visual materials are shot front on in close-up against the strongly saturated hues in which the walls are painted, the resultant flattening effect makes them appear more like a theatre set or even part of an art exhibit than some actual lives in abobe. A similar effect is created when the residents themselves are shot front on before the same walls, acting an extra layer of antico to their actions, which are often already performative in the first place.

Taken together with the grandmother’s inanimate curated collection, this all gives the impression that The Inheritance is more about crafting an overtly curated space for political exploration than creating a portrait of a real-life commune. The fact that a poster of Jean-Luc Godard’s La Chinoise (1967) has been placed in prominent position in the kitchen is thus no accident. Furthermore, both films make the walls of their respective settings home to pertinent quotes, written in this case in chalk on a black background between the striking colors and the other wall decorations.

For all this artifice, however, this apparently fictional set-up is actually a “sensitive reenactment” based on Asili’s own experiences in a Black Marxist collective in West Philadelphia. But this is by no means that only way in which life outside the commune’s colourful walls enters The Inheritance. From the outset, Asili interpenetrates the collective’s exploits with images of the West Philadelphia dystopias and apocalyptic interviews with the actors playing its members shot in monochrome, both of which interest with these exploits despite being formally distinct from them. The various murals in the city feature much like the house’s walls in terms of keeping the political in plain sight, while the content of the actors’ interviews barely differs from the content...
They explore in their roles, with the same focus on exploring themes, as he
thought processes they provoke. Old Head may introduce the House of Ushers
character in and out, but it’s easy to imagine him saying much the same thing
as Julian Kozel Jr., particularly if the form of addresses is identical.

These insertions already establish the boundaries between Idle and our
role’s puressa, other elements from beyond the four walls of the house also enter
them to the art further. Archive footage also appears from time to time, such as
when a pan down to Owen’s “Commands of President” window is segue into a
video of the 1977 presidential candidate giving a rousing speech, or when a commemorative
plaque about the 1986 MOUZI bombing appears in a montage of historical TV reports
and written documents on the West Philadelphia action group, over the next scenes
three of their surviving members even come to the House of Ushers themselves to recall
their astounding, narrowing experiences. Two other local figures also make an
appearance: Sonya Sanchez栖s one of her poems, while celebrated spoken-word
artist Ursula Rucker gives a performance at the house that more or less rounds off
the film. Aside from injecting the urgency of action actually experienced into the
fotolocado setting, incorporating these various real-life figures into the film also
influences all the theory on display with a necessary portion of practice, both past and
present. As the Kwame Nkrumah quote that appears on the wall at one point states,“Practice
without thought is blind, thought without practice is empty.”

The fact that Sanchez delivers her poem at her own home is due to an (offscreen)
incident in which one of his friends refers to her as a bitch, much to Owers’s chagrin. The tensions
between Rich, who seemingly comes from a less academically minded background and
knows Julian from a very different context, and the rest of the commune, form a running
gag of sorts, whether through his unwillingness to abide by the house’s no-late
nights or his cluelessness as to the use of pinocchio. Humor also emerges in other
conversations too, such as when Steffi tells Owen about her experience of being
picked up at a café by a white woman who is dismayed when Steffi doesn’t like the
Black film they watch on their date. In addition to casually teasing the film’s
considerable quantities of politics and theory, these very quickcut moments ultimately
also feed into the same idea of how theory cannot exist in isolation from practice. A
political commune can only function if its members are able to navigate living together
too; any revolution is rooted in the everyday.

Once the film’s closing performance comes to an end, thoughts turn quite literally to the
future generation in the form of an unplanned pregnancy, which also readily serves to
extend the line connecting the different temporalities that flow through The Intelligentsia.
Starting from the generation of the grandmother, whose thoughts were already
informed by texts stemming from further back, passing through the endeavors of the
MOUZI group and their contemporaries to reach the efforts of the commune,
the film represents an era now only in the past, what are political stances,
themes, cultures, images, artifacts, and stages there for it not to be passed on and thus
progressively transformed, also into cinema? The next generation’s inheritance is
already here.

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