

BLAXPLOITATION FILMS

“Understanding Movies”

South Carolina State University

Sources: Wikipedia, YouTube, others



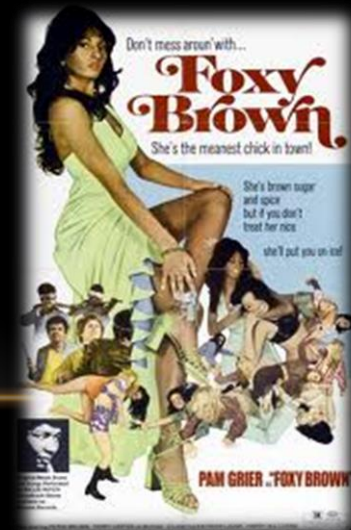
WHAT WERE “BLAXPLOITATION” MOVIES?

- **Blaxploitation** or **blacksploitation** is a film genre that emerged in the U.S. in the 1970s
- It is considered an ethnic subgenre of the general category of exploitation films
- Blaxploitation films were originally made specifically for an urban black audience, although the genre's audience appeal soon broadened across racial and ethnic lines
- The term “blaxploitation” was coined in the early 1970s by the Los Angeles NAACP head, and ex-film publicist Junius Griffin
- Blaxploitation films were the first to regularly feature soundtracks of funk and soul music as well as primarily black casts
- *Variety* credited *Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song*, released in 1971, with the invention of the blaxploitation genre while others argue that the Hollywood-financed film *Shaft*, also released in 1971, is closer to being a blaxploitation piece and thus is more likely to have begun the trend



A SAMPLING OF THE GENRE

- “Sweetback's Baadasssss Song” (1971)
- “The Guy From Harlem” (1977)
- 1970s Best Blaxploitation Movies
- Quentin Tarantino Talks Blaxploitation (2012)



DEFINING QUALITIES OF THE GENRE

- When set in the Northeast or West Coast, blaxploitation films are mainly set in poor neighborhoods. Ethnic slurs against white characters, such as "crackers" and "honky", and other derogatory names are common plot and or character elements. Blaxploitation films set in the South often deal with slavery and miscegenation (interbreeding of people of different racial types)¹
- Blaxploitation includes several subtypes of films including crime (Foxy Brown), action/martial arts (Three the Hard Way), westerns (Boss Nigger), horror (Abby, Blacula), comedy (Uptown Saturday Night), nostalgia (Five on the Black Hand Side), coming-of-Age/courtroom drama (Cooley High/Cornbread, Earl and Me), and musical (Sparkle).
- Following the example set by Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song, many blaxploitation films feature funk and soul jazz soundtracks with heavy bass, funky beats, and wah-wah guitars. These soundtracks are notable for a degree of complexity that was not common to the radio-friendly funk tracks of the 1970s, and a rich orchestration which included instruments rarely used in funk or soul such as the flute and the violin.^[5]
- Following the popularity of blaxploitation films in the 1970s, films within other genres began to feature black characters with stereotypical blaxploitation characteristics, such as the Harlem underworld characters in Live and Let Die (1973), Jim Kelly's character in Enter the Dragon (1973), and Fred Williamson's character in The Inglorious Bastards (1978)

BLAXPLOITATION STARS AND FUTURE STARS

- Billy Dee Williams
- Bill Cosby
- Pam Grier
- Jim Brown
- Richard Roundtree
- Fred Williamson
- Nichelle Nichols
(Lt. Uhura/Star Trek)
- See link above for full list



CONTROVERSY: STEREOTYPING?

- The genre's role in exploring and shaping race relations in the US has been controversial. While some held that the Blaxploitation trend was a token of black empowerment,^lthe movies were accused by others of perpetuating common white stereotypes about black people. As a result, many called for the end of the genre. The NAACP, Southern Christian Leadership Conference, and National Urban League joined together to form the Coalition Against Blaxploitation. Through their influence, during the late 1970s, they contributed to the demise of the genre.
- Blaxploitation films such as Mandingo (1975) provided mainstream Hollywood producers, in this case Dino De Laurentiis, a cinematic way to depict plantation slavery, with all of its brutal, historical and ongoing racial contradictions and controversies, including sex, miscegenation, rebellion and so on. In addition, the story world depicts the plantation as one of the main origins of boxing as a sport in the U.S. In the late 1980s and early 1990s, a new wave of acclaimed black filmmakers focused on black urban life in their movies, particularly Spike Lee's Do the Right Thing and John Singleton's Boyz n the Hood, among others. These films made use of elements of Blaxploitation, but also incorporated implicit criticism of the genre's glorification of stereotypical "criminal" behavior

LATER INFLUENCES AND MEDIA REFERENCES

- Blaxploitation films have had an enormous and complicated influence on American cinema. The acclaimed filmmaker and noted fan of exploitation film, Quentin Tarantino, for example, has made countless references to the Blaxploitation genre in his films. An early blaxploitation tribute can be seen in the character of "Lite," played by Sy Richardson, in Repo Man (1984). Richardson would later go on to write Posse (1993), which could be described as a kind of blaxploitation Western.
- Later movies such as Austin Powers in Goldmember (2002) and Undercover Brother (2002), as well as Tarantino's Jackie Brown (1997), Kill Bill Vol. 1 (2003), Death Proof (2007), and Inglourious Basterds (2009) feature pop culture nods to the Blaxploitation genre. The parody Undercover Brother, for example, stars Eddie Griffin as an afro-topped agent for a clandestine organization satirically known as the "B.R.O.T.H.E.R.H.O.O.D.". Likewise, Austin Powers in Goldmember co-stars Beyoncé Knowles as the Tamara Dobson/Pam Grier-inspired heroine, Foxy Cleopatra. In the 1977 parody film The Kentucky Fried Movie, a mock trailer for Cleopatra Schwartz depicts another Grier-like action star married to a rabbi. In addition to Jackie Brown, in a famous scene in Reservoir Dogs, the main characters engage in a brief discussion regarding Get Christie Love!, a mid-1970s blaxploitation television series. Similarly, in the catalytic scene of True Romance, the characters are seen viewing the movie The Mack.



MORE INFLUENCES/MEDIA REFERENCES

- John Singleton's *Shaft* (2000), starring Samuel L. Jackson, is a modern-day interpretation of a classic blaxploitation film. The 1997 film *Hoodlum* starring Laurence Fishburne, portrays a fictional account of black mobster Ellsworth "Bumpy" Johnson, recast gangster Blaxploitation with a 1930s twist. In 2004, Mario Van Peebles released *Baadasssss!*, a movie based on the making of his father's movie in which Mario played his father. 2007's *American Gangster*, based on the true story of heroin dealer Frank Lucas, takes place in the early 1970s in Harlem and has many elements similar in style to blaxploitation films, specifically when the theme Across 110th Street is played.
- Blaxploitation films have made a profound impact on contemporary hip-hop culture. Several prominent hip hop artists including Snoop Dogg, Big Daddy Kane, Ice-T, Slick Rick, and Too Short have adopted the no-nonsense pimp persona popularized first by ex-pimp Iceberg Slim's 1967 book *Pimp* and subsequently by films such as *Super Fly*, *The Mack*, and *Willie Dynamite*, as inspiration for their own works. In fact, many hip-hop artists have paid tribute to pimping within their lyrics (most notably 50 Cent's hit single "P.I.M.P.") and have openly embraced the pimp image in their music videos, by including entourages of scantily-clad women, flashy jewelry (known as "bling-bling"), and luxury Cadillacs(referred to as "pimpmobiles"). Perhaps the most famous scene of *The Mack*, featuring the "Annual Players Ball", has become an often-referenced pop culture icon; most recently by *Chappelle's Show*, where it was parodied as the "Playa Hater's Ball". The genre's overseas influence extends to artists such as Norway's hip-hop duo Madcon.^[7]