



HÁSKÓLI ÍSLANDS

Hugvísindasvið

Blaxploitation Unchained

*An historical analysis of Blaxploitation and how Django
Unchained fits within the Blaxploitation cycle.*

Ritgerð til BA prófs í ensku

Marvin Lee Dupree

Febrúar 2014

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Abstract

The main aim of this thesis is to examine *Django Unchained* within the context of the Blaxploitation cycle of films. Although this film was automatically assumed, by many to belong to this genre, it does not fit easily within such a rigid label. Indeed, it has been suggested that its director, Quentin Tarantino, a well-known film connoisseur, is paying homage to Blaxploitation. This essay attempts to critique *Django Unchained* and present the film in a new light by examining the history and genealogy of Blaxploitation films. This is carried out by first identifying the tropes and characteristics of Blaxploitation films and thereby more clearly delineating their generic borders. In addition, the essay examines the sociocultural background out of which these films sprung forth, that is to say from early cinema and the Hollywood studio system. Finally, since the terminology of Blaxploitation is itself problematic, it was crucial to take a thematic approach heavily influenced by notions of intertextuality, as well as to include a historical appendix to assist with the interpretation.

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Introduction

In 1971, the release of two films featuring African-American actors in lead roles had a decisive impact on American cultural history. The two films in question were *Shaft* (dir. Gordon Parks. MGM, 1971) and *Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song* (dir. Melvin Van Peebles. Yeah, 1971). Their significance lies in the fact that they gave rise to a paradigm shift within the American film industry. They were the first to be labeled with the term Blaxploitation.¹ Many African-American critics deplored the advent of these two films since these films in their minds reiterated the Hollywood studio system's perpetuation of African-American stereotypes. Since the inception of the classical Hollywood studio system, Hollywood had maintained tight control over stars images and had been in collaboration with puritanical forces within America in the guise of the Hay's code. Producers had immense powers and could blacklist screenwriters or directors according to their whims; therefore they could enforce political or "artistic" adherence to the Hollywood system. A poignant example of this power is the RKO film noir *Macao* (dir. Nicholas Ray. RKO, 1952), during the production of the film Josef von Sternberg was fired and Nicholas Ray was put in charge of finishing the film². Within the studio system only major studios thrived such as RKO pictures³. Block-booking and vertical integration, through ownership or manipulation of distribution and exhibition was the normative practice within Hollywood, as well as actors being under restrictive contracts.

¹ The label itself is problematic especially due to arbitrary popular culture usage of the term. It is more beneficial to speak of a cycle of films displaying certain genre characteristics. As for the term itself it was coined by Junius Griffin.

² This is just one of the many examples of how economic principles trumped artistic values.

³ The other majors were 20th Century Fox, MGM, Paramount Pictures, Universal Studios, Warner Bros, Columbia Pictures and United Artists. Tino Balio's *Grand Design: Hollywood as a Modern Business Enterprise, 1930-1939* is an excellent primer on the history of Golden Age Hollywood.

Accordingly, the portrayal of African-Americans⁴ was in the hands of a powerful cartel composed of moguls such as Adolph Zukor, Jack Warner and Louis B. Mayer along with a few others. With the sheer amount of films produced from the major studios, it was accepted among cinema spectators that these portrayals of African Americans were contrived to denigrate and mock African-Americans and most importantly control the limited portrayals of African-Americans. These portrayals embedded within the Hollywood studio system resonate with Fanon's analysis of Western discourse, which illuminates how the Eurocentric framework controls the social-cultural construction of race and color, in order to maintain the hierarchical myth of cultural superiority among those who are not deemed as "Other". As Fanon states, "[i]f there is an inferiority complex, it is the outcome of a double process; - primarily, economic; - subsequently, the internalization - or, better, the epidermalization - of this inferiority" (11). In both pre-cinematic culture and in early cinema and in Hollywood studio system, and until the formation of the cultural and cognitive revolution of New Hollywood, African-American individuals were mainly portrayed as being inferior and, at best, could only hope to emulate the "superior" Caucasian dominant culture.

However, an ideological rupture occurred within this caste system of representations. For the first time, African-American males were depicted as being sexual beings and there was not just a single African American, Sidney Poitier, who functioned

⁴ In the paper, I will use this term for a myriad number of reasons. First, because it has important associations to the cultural memory of African Americans, while also having a connotation to positive aspects of the civil rights movement, which is a phenomenon largely ignored in the analysis in films featuring African-American actors whether they are Blaxploitation or not. Donald Bogle uses the terms Negro, black and African-American "discriminately and in their proper historical context" (Bogle 24). However, I will use the term blackness or black when appropriate; especially since the term "black" defines a cognitive stance towards African-Americans and how their bodies are visualized or controlled. This is vital since because of dichotomy apparent in early cinema through Western literary history. I touch upon this in the appendix of this paper: the categories of white/civilization/good as opposed to black/the untamed/evil.

as a safe signifier of the African-American male for white audiences.⁵ Instead there were numerous representations of African-American masculinity and female sexuality. This paper aims to contextualize the recent film *Django Unchained* (dir. Quentin Tarantino. Columbia Pictures, 2012) and by examining its place within the Blaxploitation cycle of films. In addition, it will show how the film appropriates and revises certain tropes from the Blaxploitation cycle. By examining the place of *Django Unchained* within this context, it becomes possible to trace the origins of Blaxploitation and analyze its impact within a discussion of what have come to be regarded as some of the genre's key films.

Chapter I: Early cinematic portrayals of African-American individuals.

Indeed since the beginning of the motion picture industry, films have relied on stock plot elements and non-threatening imagery to create the framework of the dreams they offer as commodities. Its ability to lure audiences into worlds of fantasy and escape has always been part of the Hollywood magic. The allure of the silver screen is often greater than people realize. Not only do films offer people solace just as Lady Philosophy offered Boethius consolation, they also offer the heartbroken, downtrodden and the poor, such as Cecila in *The Purple Rose of Cairo* (dir. Woody Allen. Orion Pictures, 1985) hope.

Unfortunately, the insidious side of film is its treatment of people of they are considered to be the "Other" because films help perpetuate myths and stereotypes in the milieu of society⁶, creating a narrative where "The Other" is mocked and demonized; furthermore

⁵ Of course race is a social construct; nonetheless like gender is created and maintained by focusing on "Othering" and binaries.

⁶ For the sake of simplicity in this paper, I do not wish to discuss the social construction and dimensions of what "white" is or is not. By default cultural productions within Western civilization have defined "whiteness" in contrast to "non-white" others. Dyer resists this approach in *White* by making the familiar strange by exploring "whiteness" through gender and class, which is an important point also raised by Thomas Sowell in his analysis of race relations in American history since Irish people, Polish and Italian

films help create these myths and stereotypes in the first place because they accentuate the hyper-visibility of “The Other” because as Pickering elaborates “[t]hose who are socially marginalized are not necessarily rendered invisible.”⁷ Quite the opposite might be the case. Racist stereotypes make those represented hyper-visible, so that their social marginality attains symbolic centrality in popular forms of discourse and representation” (Pickering 46). The power of films in creating myths and stereotypes is immense and often these images become ingrained into the milieu of society and they then constitute a collective cognition that often seeks to reinforce the cinematic representations.⁸

In fact, a quick glance at Hollywood’s history elucidates how stereotypes of blacks were used to sustain and help keep an ideology of inferiority. As Donald Bogle notes, blacks were shown as coons, zip coons, black bucks, Sambos, Uncle Toms,

people were not considered “white” but ethnic. In the case of Italian-Americans, there were negative portrayals that included casting Anglo-American actors as Italian immigrants who then displayed melodramatic acting and exhibited the supposed stereotypical “excited nature” of Italian-Americans and Mafia elements. This cycle of films include *The Black Hand* (dir. Wallace McCutcheon, 1906) and *The Italian Blood* (dir. D.W Griffith. Biograph Company, 1911). In addition, whiteness has always been tied to civilization including by the synthesis of ideas such as color theory, via optical perception such as Goethe’s theories, philology and eugenics. Nicholas Mirzoeff points this out in his *An Introduction to Visual Culture*.⁷ For a relevant discussion of pre-cinematic cultural representations of black individuals and including the tendency sometimes to conflate Moors with Africans, and later African Americans, see my explanatory “Turning Turk into “Othello black brute””. In this appendix I examine the social stigma and the stereotypes that provide the basis for stereotypes such as those found in *The Birth of a Nation*. In doing so I am tracing a social-cultural phenomenon that can be found in Medieval Literature, being passed on to the Renaissance and finding its way to minstrelsy shows and vaudeville, which were crucial in forming the early cinematic stereotypes of black individuals.

⁸ Of course, this is true for many societies, for example the nature-city dichotomy in Icelandic film and films shot in Iceland. Among the interpretive community Icelandic nature has become a stereotypical topological site indicating unbridled and untamed nature in films such as *Oblivion*, *Thor: The Dark World* and *Batman Begins*. When Icelanders consume these cultural representations they help ease the anxiety over being overwhelmed by the American simulacrum, and Icelandic nature is politicized for monetary reasons and tourism and at the same time reinforce the stereotypical images of Iceland and its nature as being unique and untamed. In the case of African-American images in cinema, within the American collective consciousness, it has followed the argument Durkheim put forward: “[a] social fact is to be recognized by the power of external coercion which it exercises or is capable of exercising over individuals, and the presence of this power may be recognized in its turn either by the existence of some specific sanction or by the resistance offered against every individual effort that tends to violate it” (8).

mammies, tragic mulattoes and generally buffoons.⁹ Hattie McDaniel the first African-American to win an Academy Award, was forced to read a studio-written acceptance speech while she had been “allowed” to sit in the back during the awards ceremony. (Bogle 48). In fact, McDaniel’s film roles were always limited to playing the mammie. As Bogle points out a mammie is usually portrayed as being “big, fat and cantankerous” and a role that “Hattie McDaniel was to perfect in the 1930s” (Bogle 9)¹⁰. Similarly, black child actor Farina (Allen Clayton Hoskins), who came from New England and was well educated in stagecraft, was forced to speak in a stereotypical manner because he was cast as a pickanninny and therefore expected to speak in a “black register” (Bogle 26-7). Performers such as Stepin Fetchit were typecasted as buffoons only to be despised by many of the African-American community. From the beginning of film, many black cinemagoers paid to see their fellow citizens of color humiliated on the silver screen and had few opportunities to see realistic portrayals.¹¹ It is helpful, in this context, to incorporate the theoretical views of art and film scholar Erwin Panofsky’s in order to examine “the underlying principles that reveal the basic attitude of a nation, a period, a

⁹ Donald Bogle and Peter Noble both researched early black films and considered these to be the dominating images of blacks in film during the first half of the century. Bogle’s book takes its name from these images. However, in *Forgeries of Memory and Meaning: Blacks and the Regimes of Race in American Theater and Film before World War II* Cedric J Robinson finds fault with Bogle’s thesis “of constantly repeating forms. Empirically, the problem becomes evident if we ask ourselves whether or the performances of Sidney Poitier and Harry Belafonte during the 1950s and 1960s, or more recently, of Denzel Washington, Don Cheadle ... fall neatly into the constructions of toms, coons, mulattoes, mammies or bucks?” (84). Nonetheless, Robinson seems to think that Bogle is perhaps both right and wrong and he speaks of “the cycles of minstrelsy and neo-minstrelsy” (84). These cycles which include many comedians and actors after Blaxploitation, as well as how some actors like Poitier do fit into these constructions.

¹⁰ In addition to this Bogle also mentions the connection to Aunt Jemina, a culinary and cultural icon of America. The Aunt Jemina, the vintage icon, was connected to the mammie stereotype and vaudeville. In the *Oxford Companion to American Food and Drink*, it is stated that “Aunt Jemima pancake flour, the first nationally distributed ready-mix food and one of the earliest products to be marketed through personal appearances and advertisements featuring its namesake, was created by combining advances in manufacturing and distribution with popular nostalgia for the antebellum south”. Evidently, it is important to take a synchronic and diachronic approach, especially since these images are so intertwined.

¹¹ There are notable exceptions, but these films did not circulate as widely, including Oscar Micheaux’s contributions to cinematic history.

class, a religious or philosophical persuasion” (Panofsky 7).

Taking Panofsky’s iconological analysis as a framework, one can deconstruct the ideological agendas that were often encoded in early Hollywood cinema’s portrayal of African Americans in both feature and animated films.¹² As mentioned above, the earliest portrayals of African Americans were very unflattering. The majority of representations were in the strain of the following colonial assessment or mindset invoked by Lord Lugard:

In character and temperament the typical African of this race-type is a happy, thriftless, excitable person. Lacking in self-control, discipline, and foresight. Naturally courageous, and naturally courteous and polite, full of personal vanity, with little sense of veracity, fond of music and loving weapons as an Oriental loves jewelry. His thoughts are concentrated on the events and feelings of the moment, and he suffers little from the apprehension for the future, or grief for the past. His mind is far nearer to the animal world than that of the European or Asiatic. (37)

The first narrative film featuring African Americans was Edwin S. Porter’s film adaptation, under the aegis of Edison, of the famous novel *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*,¹³ which many believe was the spark that began the Civil War. The film version is perhaps the beginning of a celluloid race ideology. The film itself is a milestone in film history,

¹² Animated films were often part of the film programs since it is important to remember the hegemony certain companies had with block booking and double bills; included were animated shorts that are now shown as cartoons, e.g. *Popeye* and Warner Bros cartoons. These cartoons were often self-reflexive and made use of intertextuality and reiterating offensive stereotypes.

¹³ The *Uncle Tom* representation in cinema can be seen as being connected to the Romantic vision of Rousseau’s noble savage as Pickering argues in *Blackface Minstrelsy in Britain* (23). Furthermore, it is important to remember how popular *Uncle Tom* and *Jim Crow* were for intertextual reasons. Pickering mentions the commodification of these mythologies which one could argue are a precursor to the synergy that reached its zenith with *Jaws* and *Star Wars*, but had historical precedents in numerous films including *Shaft*.

however it is composed of Anglo-American actors in blackface with African-American performers only cast as extras.¹⁵ Despite the difficulty in obtaining legible film prints of the film, the stereotypes are apparent. Even the person portraying Uncle Tom is a white actor in blackface, making it even more offensive yet historically associated with the minstrelsy tradition. In one of the stills from the film, one can see Uncle Tom shown crouching in fear when being visited by a pure, white angel.¹⁶ This was how blacks would often be portrayed for the next four to five decades, spineless, inferior and childlike, essentially perpetuating the representations that were “created during the vaudeville period. Hollywood took over the minstrel-show tradition by presenting denigrating representations of black subjects who needed the civilizing influence of slavery to keep them in check. In the years following emancipation, through the use of makeup and dialect, whites inhabited the black body in enactments that sought to control, contain and define the meanings of blackness“ (Forbes 24).

Not only do the African American extras bow down to white actors, they also dance around the screen as to indicate their primitive and simple nature, much in the manner outlined by Lord Lugard.¹⁷ One scene is strikingly potent since it prefigures many of the scenes to appear in later films, At 5:38, Topsy breaks into a furious dance (a very common trope associated with African Americans in cinema throughout the years) and steals her mistress’s ribbon, after which she is flogged like a silly child. Of course the

¹⁵ This was in fact the norm of Tom Shows, sprung from vaudeville, to have actors in blackface, whether African-American or “white” as was the case with Bert Williams. Porter’s adaptation seems to be influenced by the popular stage version of the novel *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*. Porter’s film was a series of one-shot scenes of famous episodes in the novel, linked by printed inter-titles: the first such known to have been used in an American film. Porter derived this technique from a G. A. Smith film. (Bordwell 30)

¹⁶ See Appendix Photo 1.

¹⁷ Pickering mentions the historical connotations of blacks and their “inherent” musicality and how it is caricatured in minstrelsy, but also the carefree life of the plantation and how it is celebrated in dance and song (131-133).

importance of vaudeville and minstrel shows in forming ideological agendas was paramount, it was no monetary coincidence that this material was filmed:

No statistician has the figures of how many times *Uncle Tom's Cabin* has been played in America since its first performance in 1852. If they could be assembled, the result would be staggering. No play in the world, probably, has ever had half so many productions. Tom has appeared in the very biggest cities and the most gosh-awful tank towns. He has humbly but smugly remarked to Simon Legree that you may kill my body, mas'r, but you can't kill my soul, in the largest metropolitan theatres, the dinkiest kerosene-lit halls over the headquarters of volunteer fire-engine companies, and every kind of a show-tent that ever a weary crowd of troupers ranted in. (Davis)

In fact, by portraying African Americans on the screen in such a manner it helped “to maintain the myth of the Gothic Old South and deny the changes in our contemporary society” (Diawara). One of the more deplorable scenes and typical lost paradise motif for African Americans is the St. Clair's slave auction.¹⁸ In the following still, one can see the aforementioned dance stereotype continue.¹⁹ Interestingly though in the last silent version of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (dir. Harry A. Pollard. Universal, 1927), which was produced by Carl Laemmle, blackface was still used. Moreover, the pickaninny caricature is used in the case of Topsy, as she is portrayed in blackface and as pickaninny as can be seen in this still and this would later resonate in the Warner Bros Cartoon *Uncle Tom's Bungalow*²⁰ Despite the appearance of filming African-American material, the portrayals

¹⁸ When I say lost paradise I am referring to the idyllic portrayal of the South, where blacks knew their place and were happy, e.g. Disney's *Song of The South*.

¹⁹ See Appendix Photo 2.

²⁰ See Appendix Photos 3-10. It is important to realize the extent of influence, as intertextuality, of

in *Uncle Tom's Cabin* films are universally agenda driven.

Edison's portrayal of African Americans in early film is fairly disturbing. A *Morning Bath* (dir. James. H White. Edison Manufacturing Company, 1896), one of his oldest films or actualities, shows a black woman bathing her child in a tub²¹, it is filled to the brim with soap and the still camera emphasizes her washing the "filthy child" while she seeks reassurance from an off-screen presence. The screenshot might suggest the preferred image of the baby: where it ceases to be black and becomes a fictionalized white self. The imagery recalls the famous opening lines of William Blake's *Little Black Boy*: "[b]ut I am black, as if bereaved of light" (17). This presumably harmless actuality might actually be one of the many influences for the following animation still taken from

vaudeville on film and on this film in particular since "[p]roductions were tailored to appeal to different audiences—abolitionist for the North, minstrel for the South, and spectacle for both, including a loose adaptation by P.T. Barnum". (Pierce) In addition to the juxtaposition of Eliza (Margarita Fischer), a mulatto in the novel, an angelic, comely white girl in the film as opposed to the insidious portrayal of Topsy (Mona Ray). Interestingly enough, Fischer played Topsy in 1913 production of *Uncle Tom*. In the photo appendix I juxtapose *Uncle Tom's Bungalow* captions to the 1927 production to highlight the Othering of Topsy and appropriation of Eliza because of her half-breed status since as I argue further miscegenation is a concern in many films and is vital in many Blaxploitation films.

²¹ The term is coined from the French word *actualités* via the French brothers Auguste and Louis Lumière, early cinema pioneers. It refers to the ability of cinema to depict real life. Tom Gunning has categorized early cinema as a "Cinema of Attractions" and some argue for the term pre-cinema. Essentially, this is the time period of 1896 to 1908 where film depicts daily life or is representing it. With *The Birth of a Nation* there is a break since too many it was indeed "history written in lightning". Here, the truth claim of Tom Gunning should be briefly mentioned because the indexical nature of photography/film helped usher in an accuracy of representation, which to succinctly point out created a crisis regarding art objects themselves thus this debate is directed tied into Walter Benjamin's thesis "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction", which led to a "decline of autonomous aesthetic experience" (Larsen). Furthermore, to clarify actuality even more, Mirzoeff argues that the "traditional image obeyed its own rules that were independent of exterior reality". This is what Mirzoeff argues is the perspective system which relies on one point or eye. This cognitive approach or perspective claim to reality has been lost somewhat since cinema and photographs no longer index reality, instead are open to manipulation or multiple readings. For example, one can easily point out to the doctored photos of Nicolae Ceausescu. Since film's claim to veracity is not absolute as it was once cultural practices and codes must be explored. Finally, a synchronic and diachronic analysis is also important as is intervisuality, a term coined by Nicholas Mirzoeff. However, previous audiences would have identified and interacted with film in different ways, e.g. many would take racist imagery as a valid reality, whereas modern audiences would not as viscerally to horror films for example as previous ones. Thus when I refer to actualities I refer to the cognitive approach taken by cinemagoers during the days of early cinema as well as the academic term of labeling these early "non-narrative films" to distinguish them from narrative forms of cinema that later emerged and became the dominant form.

Scrub me Mamma with a Boogie Beat (dir. Walter Lantz, Universal, 1940).²² Animated films such as this one only continued the tradition set forth by cinema pioneers Edison and Porter, that is to say an agenda that can be understood in the following manner: “once slavery ended, white supremacy could be effectively maintained by the institutionalization of social apartheid and by creating a philosophy of racial inferiority that would be taught to everyone” (Bell Hooks 109). Other early portrayals of African-Americans such as *The Wooing and Wedding of a Coon* (dir. Ignacio Coyne, Selig Polyscope Company, 1907) and the one-shot film *What Happened in the Tunnel* (dir. Edwin Porter, Edison Manufacturing Company, 1903) depict racist imagery that shows African Americans as inferior²³. In the latter film the masher tries to force himself on the Anglo-American female, but the train goes into a tunnel and because the female switches roles with the “mammie”, the masher ends up kissing the African-American female. The racism of this reel is constituted by the hilarity of “white” male kissing the mammie. Early cinema often portrayed African-Americans as childish and ignorant, with emphasis on watermelon pictures²⁴. Even light skinned African-Americans such as Bert Williams were put into blackface. However, the most dangerous stereotype was the trope of the “white” damsel in distress and the brutish African-American male as depicted in *Avenging A Crime, or Burned at the Stake* (Paley and Steiner, 1904). In it many racist conventions can be seen and it is a transitional film to films such such as *The Birth of a*

²² See Appendix Photo 11. As mentioned previously in my footnote regarding animation, I stress the importance of animated films is not to be ignored. In this short all the African-American caricatures are displayed, including heavy eating of watermelons set in a supposedly antebellum Elysium called Lazytown where all the blacks are lazy and love to dance. Lena Horne’s star body also seems to make an appearance, despite not being under contract with Universal. Horne also calls the “mammie” a mammie. This particular short is, however, only one of the many done by Universal, Warner Bros and MGM in this vein. Many are now banned in the United States. The list includes: *Boogie Woogie Bugle Boy*, *Tin Pan* and *Alley Cats*.

²³ *The Wooing and Wedding of a Coon* features blackface.

²⁴ They include the Sambo and Rastus features from Lubin. Lubin’s, a Jew himself, studio was renown for films that played on ethnic stereotypes. (Eckhardt 139)

Nation that would appropriate and celebrate these conventions²⁵.

Indeed, By 1915 African Americans had been firmly rooted in the caricatures that emphasized their childlike ignorance and total dependence of the master race or as bell hooks argues these images were “constantly reminding us of our marginalized status” (110). In fact, most films oscillated from either depicting African Americans in cinema as childlike buffoons or by emphasizing the monstrous danger inherent in the black individual, especially the dangers posed by the savage black buck. Robin Coleman Means points out this trope in *Horror Noire*, which has been present in early cinema from the beginning and appears in the actuality *An Execution by Hanging* (Biograph, 1898), which depicts the hanging of an African-American male (38). The film itself is not verisimilitude of a hanging but rather an actual execution, invoking associations with lynching and other cultural practices that were commonplace during the era²⁶. In fact, this violent strand of racial imagery would reach its zenith with *The Birth of a Nation* (dir. D.W. Griffith. David W.Griffith Corp, 1915), a film that would have the greatest impact of African-American portrayals and subsequent portrayals for years to come or in the words of Deleuze: “The American cinema constantly shoots and reshoots a single fundamental film, which is the birth of a nation-civilisation” (152). And in this unique masterpiece the nation building was done by ostracizing African Americans since they were subhuman “citizens” of the American nation. What makes *The Birth of a Nation* unique as a cinematic masterpiece is its use of narrative, cross cutting and various film techniques

²⁵ Robert Jackson argues this in *American Cinema and the Southern Imaginary*.

²⁶ Forty years later, Billy Holiday would record *Strange Fruit*. It is important to analyze the socio-cultural background of many of these films because of the interpretive community’s reaction to certain films. Within the white community they helped codify the social reality by keeping in place these stereotypes because of the immense power of cinema, hence my disagreement with Gregory Currie in a later footnote regarding the Likeness, Transparency and Illusionism debate. In addition, Oscar Micheaux’s *Within Our Gates* is a reactionary film and deals with lynching and hybridity or miscegenation. It is important to emphasize the visual immediacy of film especially in its infancy.

which can attributed to D.W. Griffith's skills as a film director.²⁷ It is also a landmark film because as Gunning argues it is the culmination of cinema as a narrative art form, from the cinema of attractions to the period of 1908-1915 which he calls the "Cinema of Narrative Intergration" (Gunning 6)²⁸. The importance of *The Birth of a Nation* is that it not only depicted these representations, but it also helped revitalize the representation of African-American males as violent and viral creatures or as shiftless coons,²⁹ because as Fanon writes: "[f]or not only must the black man be black; he must black in relation to the white man" (78). With *The Birth of a Nation* the narrative strategies and racist ideology was enshrined into Hollywood.

Furthermore, *The Birth of a Nation* as a film is indicative of a nation's attempt at nation building its past or, to quote Sir Arthur Keith: "[a] nation always represents an attempt to become a race ... nation and race are but different degrees of the same evolutionary movement" (117). Essentially, *The Birth of a Nation* caused as much furore among parts of the black community as Blaxploitation would later do since it garnered the attention of the newly formed NAACP³⁰ or as historian Marcia Landy notes "*The*

²⁷ However, Bordwell and other scholars have pointed out he may not even be the pioneer of these techniques.

²⁸ In my footnote regarding actualities I discuss the importance of mimesis in cinema. The reason for doing so is that *Birth of a Nation* is so seminal and influential in its racism due to its mimetic nature. I disagree with Gregory Currie who argues against Illusionism's weaker claim in *Image and Mind: Film, Philosophy and Cognitive Science* (23-25), to which I would counter that people did react to *The Birth of a Nation* as a possible reality since it helped foster a Ku Klux revival and due to the voyeuristic nature of this new medium. Indeed, the famous chase scene is immensely powerful or as Gunning argues "[t]he spectator can identify with the camera's power to unmask and penetrate into the hidden feelings of the figure of the screen" (262).

²⁹ It is important to realize the connotations with Jim Crow. Pickering argues that Jim Crow had specific cultural references to the Yankee character and Americans in general in British circles, but also that T.Daddy Rice's persona of Jim Crow was delineated into "Ethopian operas" and burlesques of Shakespeare's *Othello*. So as I argue in my appendix: Moors and Blacks were often historically conflated together and it is vital to trace this development and the divergence which seems to begin with early cinema.

³⁰ The NAACP's interest in motion pictures dates back at least to the fracas over D. W. Griffith's *The Birth of a Nation* (1915), when the organization stood at the forefront of legal attempts to restrict showings of the

Birth of a Nation became the founding text for apologetic discourse on “film art” that for decades tried to relativize the films racist infraction” (201) and the film did lay unprecedented claim to the construction of national history and thus demonstrated the stakes of national memory for the history of the present” (202). Moreover, the most vital contribution of *The Birth of a Nation* is its *weltanschauung*, which is to say it helped create such an ideological world view among the interpretive community by ushering in a paradigm shift within cinematic imagery. This paradigm shift would later have an immense impact on the representation of African Americans on the screen. In *Hollywood Fantasies of Miscegenation*, Susan Courtney elaborates on the place of the *The Birth of a Nation* in America’s cultural memory. She states that this film is the primal fantasy of miscegenation and its ancestry can be found in slew of short genre films, especially films directed by Griffith at the studio Biograph (23). Indeed, the most influential scene of *The Birth of a Nation* is the chase scene where the fragile white flower, Little Sister, is pursued by an atrocious African-American soldier, Gus, and her chasity is celebrated by the camera, and the white male gaze, because she chooses to fling herself off a cliff to avoid the unwanted advances of Gus. This scene and others like it in early cinema is what Susan Courtney has described as being a melodramatic agony with its “use of white women as a synecdoche for the white family, white property, and white culture when these are represented as threatened by outside forces” (27). And because of *The Birth of a Nation*, representations of black males helped foster a master narrative dichotomy where black males were either buffoons or dangerous savages that were a threat to white

picture in a number of American cities (Sieving 34). In addition to this legal process, the NAACP and other individuals did produce race films, or race friendly films as a counterweight to *The Birth of a Nation*.

females and the patriarchal WASP system.³¹ In fact, *The Birth of a Nation* gave birth to numerous tropes such as the “race traitor” or Uncle Tom, which is Jake in *The Birth of a Nation* since he sides with his master, as well as the fear of miscegenation³². These representations and tropes were later codified by less than flattering portrayals as well as with more coded anxieties of miscegenation such as the film version of *The Murders in Rue Morgue*, along with RKO’s *I Walked With a Zombie* or more famously in *Planet of the Apes* or as Eric Green states in *Planet of the Apes as American Myth: Race, Politics, and Popular Culture*:

In the sixties Heston seemed to be perpetually fighting a “last stand” battle to defend a fort or outpost of Western “civilization” against the onslaught of hordes of non Western, dark-skinned “barbarians.” This persona goes back at least to *The Naked Jungle* (1954), in which Heston is a plantation owner who is convinced he is bringing “civilization” to South American natives and fights off a massive horde of killer ants. In *El Cid* (1961), Heston is the white man against hordes of North African Muslims; in *55 Days at Peking* (1963), Heston becomes a white man against hordes of Chinese; in *Khartoum* (1964), the white man has to defeat hordes of Arabs; and in *Planet* (1968), the white actor as Taylor defends civilization against the apes and fights off the darkest of the apes, the gorillas.

³¹ Of course there are notable exceptions including the oeuvre of Oscar Micheaux and the filmography of Paul Robeson as well as the Lincoln Motion Picture Company. However, in the case of Micheaux he was an outsider and not part of the studio system. Furthermore, a systematic overview of films such as *Harlem on the Prairie* would not be feasible for such a short thesis; nor to explore different readings of the roles of Stepit Fetchit and Mantan Moreland. In fact, the race-film industry collapsed due to a myriad of reasons, presumably the Depression, block booking, racial politics and the Hays Code.

³² Since African Americans also saw these films, I argue these tropes that appears in many Blaxploitation films and is a prominent feature of *Django Unchained*. In *Movie Censorship and American Culture* Francis G. Couvares argues that the subtle reference to an interracial relationship in Oscar Micheaux’s *A Son of Satan* would have indeed been disturbing for censors. (171). However, the film was still distributed and shown due to Micheaux’s guile and the fact that it was seen chiefly by an African-American audience.

Thus, I refer to Jacobs' casting of Heston as Taylor as astute because by the time *Planet* was filmed in 1967, Heston's repeated appearance as the central hero in films where racialized struggles between white and nonwhite peoples were coded as struggles between "civilization" and "savagery" had deeply encoded Heston's screen persona with the very issues of Western dominance and racial conflict at the heart of the film. (41)

Chapter II: The Precursor to Blaxploitation: Sidney Poitier or "They call me MISTER Tibbs!"

"There are colored men that do things". Ruby Dee from *Raisin in the Sun*

"What are you an Uncle Tom?" – from *The Mark of The Hawk*

African Americans have always frequented the cinema both before and after WWII, even more so when cinemas were desegregated. Today their purchasing power is similar or more to white cinema-goers, they also pay to go view the same films, yet they also frequent the cinema more often and have multiple viewings as Mia Mask points out in *Contemporary Black Cinema* (18). Yet, as mentioned earlier entities such as the NAACP deplored the representations of blacks in cinema. *In Soul Searching: Black-Themed Cinema from the March on Washington to the Rise of Blaxploitation*, Christopher Sieving discusses this in detail. For as he says the NAACP repeatedly petitioned the movie industry to phase out the use "of Negro stereotypes to the exclusion of individualized characterizations". Apparently gains in these areas were visible in a postwar cycle of race message movies, notably *Pinky*, *Intruder in the Dust*, *Lost Boundaries*, and *Home of the Brave*" (37). Yet, as Sieving rightly points out:

But what would constitute a “fairer representation”? In 1957, White’s successor, Roy Wilkins, addressed a meeting of the Association of Motion Picture Producers (later the Motion Picture Association of America, or MPAA) and declared: “Negroes should be portrayed in roles commensurate with their positions in American life”. Though by then a familiar refrain, Wilkins’s plea nonetheless signifies a subtle change in NAACP objectives from wartime to the postwar period. White, making his request in an era of virtual invisibility for blacks on American screens, felt that the quantity of blacks onscreen should correspond to their actual proportion within the population. (38)

This question came to the forefront a little more than a decade later when Junius Griffin of the NAACP wrote an article in *Vanity Fair* deploring the current trend in the film industry: “We must insist that our children are not exposed to a diet of so called black movies that glorify black males as pimps, dope pushers, gangsters and super males with vast physical prowess but no cognitive skills” (Guerro 45). This was his response to the Hollywood studio system exploitation of blacks in the urban areas³³. After a decline in revenue caused by changing attitudes in the population and failed movie spectacles, as well as the threat from television Hollywood “discovered the purchasing power of urban, black audiences” (Guerro 17). In Griffin’s opinion these portrayals were unkind yet the socioeconomic reality of African-Americans was not as noble as *Raisin in The Sun*. Indeed, around the same time, or in 1965, the Moynihan Report came out which revealed the legacy of Jim Crow laws and systematic oppression; yet at the same time Hollywood was releasing numerous films with Sidney Poitier as a magical negro, which Spike Lee

³³ It was mainly aimed at *Superfly* (dir. Gordon Parks Jr. Warner Brothers. 1972), which was directed by an African American.

would later name the role and would include performances by Will Smith and Denzel Washington.

When trying to systematically define Blaxploitation it is important to bear in mind the importance that Poitier had as a black film star and the role he had in shaping and portraying black masculinity in his roles. Mia Mask gives a nice synthesis of the debate that has raged on when she writes:

When Blaxploitation emerged in the late 1960s and early 1970s, Poitier had already become something of a scapegoat for African-American misrepresentation in American cinema. In 1967, he was the number one box office star in America – of any race. ... However, the growing tide of black activism, civil rights unrest, Black Panther Party machismo and antiwar protest engendered a culture of dissent. The new, youth-driven counterculture prompted a tide of critical sentiment against Poitier's politically assimilationist, sexually emasculated cinematic heroes. (26)

Given the plethora of roles he has played, it is prudent to focus on those that are significant in the development of black images before Blaxploitation, not to mention the fact that some films have inter-textual references.³⁴ These films include: *Blackboard Jungle*, *The Defiant Ones*, *A Raisin in The Sun*, *A Patch of Blue*, *In The Heat of The Night*, *They Call Me Mister Tibbs!* and *The Lost Man*.³⁵ When dealing with Blaxploitation films it is impossible to ignore these films especially since many scholars argue that his roles were formative in contributing to and forming Blaxploitation masculinities. Nonetheless, Poitier's roles were quite diverse and the films dealt with a

³⁴ Most notably *Watermelon Man*.

³⁵ I am excluding *Lilies of The Field* since it does not deal directly with racism, which many Blaxploitation films deal with later.

myriad of racial issues. In *The Defiant Ones* (dir. Stanley Kramer. UA/MGM, 1958) Poitier plays a chain gang prisoner Noah Cullen on the lam that happens to be chained to John “Joker” Jackson (Tony Curtis) a fellow white prisoner.³⁶ In the film Noah endures racial abuse from Joker; and the Joker even asks him “just because I called you a nigger” and then goes on to state that it does not constitute a reality, it is just a word used. Later in the film they are captured and Noah is forced to spit on a white man by a racist, thus giving the mob grounds for lynching both of them. Towards the climax of the film, Noah must navigate a white domicile with the aid of Joker since both the white boy of the house is afraid of Noah, as is the woman of the house.³⁷ Eight years earlier Poitier played M.D. Luther Brooks in *No Way Out* (dir. Joseph Mankiewicz. 20th Century Fox, 1950). In this film he portrays a doctor that is hounded by a psychotic felon, played by Richard Widmark, who believes that Brooks killed his brother by accident in the prison ward. In this film we also see Poitier’s character need of assistance in inhabiting white spaces.³⁸ Always unsure of himself Poitier seeks guidance in M.D. Dan Wharton (Stephen McNally). Throughout the film the audience is reminded of racial tension and even a race riot occurs within the film. What all these films share is bringing the race question to the forefront in mainstream cinema, yet relegating Poitier’s character towards passive resistance by accepting the status quo and working in tandem with the establishment. Another poignant reason for examining this film is the fact that Sidney Poitier would later star in *The Long Ships* (dir. Jack Cardiff, Columbia, 1964) with Richard Widmark. Poitier

³⁶ In fact this film is the first interracial buddy film, now a famous formulaic trope in the *Lethal Weapon*, *Rush Hour* and *48 Hour* films.

³⁷ She does not know Joker and knows he is a criminal and decides to elope with him.

³⁸ Criticism of *Django Unchained* was similar, in particular Schutz’s character in connection to Django. However, I argue that Schutz is only a familiar mythological figure in the vein of Joseph Campbell and the other formalists.

plays a Moorish prince, thus reverberating the historical connotations mentioned in my appendix, whilst Widmark played a Viking that ultimately triumphs over the prince while also making him a cuckold.

Poitier's roles in *A Patch of Blue*, *A Raisin in The Sun*, *In The Heat of The Night*, *They Call Me Mister Tibbs!* and *The Lost Man* however deal with precursory elements of Blaxploitation and resonant when examined within the tradition. In *A Patch of Blue* (dir. Guy Green. MGM, 1965), Poitier plays Gordon Ralfe a journalist that meets a Selina (Elizabeth Hartman), a blind girl that comes from an abusive household. During the course of their friendship, Poitier teaches her non-cognitive skills to help her navigate,³⁹ both literally and physically, in the world. One of the main critiques against this film is that Poitier seems to be playing a "magical negro", a phrase coined by Spike Lee by addressing the paucity of roles played by African Americans or as he said: [t]hey're still doing the same old thing ... recycling the noble savage and the happy slave" (Lee). However, this film is more progressive than *Guess Who's Coming To Dinner* (dir. Stanley Kramer, Columbia, 1967) since the audience is privy to the kiss of an interracial couple, it is not coded as in *Guess Who's Coming To Dinner*.⁴⁰ Yet, the most interesting film of his filmography, especially when analyzed along with the tradition started with *The Birth of a Nation* and then subverted by Blaxploitation, is *The Lost Man*. In *The Lost Man*, Poitier plays a radical Black Panther member who is disenchanted and jaded, however his character is courted by Cathy Ellis, who is played by Joanna Shimkus.⁴¹ The most notable element of this film is that it is a break with the gentle image that Poitier

³⁹ Also known as soft skills by the economist James Heckman.

⁴⁰ See Appendix Photo 12. I will touch upon this subject later since the fear of miscegenation is a source of anxiety throughout American cultural history, and as I argue above is a paradigm established, or at least codified by *The Birth of a Nation*.

⁴¹ They would later marry in 1976.

had. Although he is not overtly radical or violent in the film, given the socio-cultural reality of the time this film would have been considered a radical choice. Its cinematography is also quite striking, especially in comparison to the Blaxploitation film *Trick Baby* since both films emphasis close-ups, tracking shots and both place much emphasis on the urban reality of blacks.⁴² Even though Kovic in his analysis of Blaxploitation films is often gravely mistaken and guilty of simplistic synopses he is correct when he argues about the social reality of African Americans:

... although location shooting was becoming the norm in the 1970s American Cinema, depicting the gory details of Harlem street life emerges most strongly in Blaxploitation Films. Really, for the first time, African-Americans were able to see the world as they experienced it, not in the squeaky clean world of a Sidney Poitier movie. (17)⁴³

In addition to this, Poitier has a sexual relationship with Cathy Ellis thus shattering some of the unfair critique levied against Poitier at the time. Because he was such a popular actor, Poitier was an easy foil and to demonstrate how popular he is, it might help to invoke an interesting intertextual racially encoded scene from a film from the early 90s. In *Six Degrees of Separation* (dir. Fred Schepisi. MGM, 1993), which is based on true story and was a celebrated play, Will Smith plays an African-American con man that cons his way into the homes of upper middle class New Englanders by casually revealing his father is Sidney Poitier. Of course, the people become more congenial when learning this

⁴² This is important because it is tied to the “white flight” to suburbs. *Lost Man* commences with a montage of the social reality of urban blacks, in fact most of the introduction goes into establishing this urban reality. The story then begins with a peaceful protest that is stopped by the police.

⁴³ However, he fails to point out that his is not only limited to Harlem. *In Together Brothers* it is in Texas, while other Blaxploitation films exhibit ghettos in California or the urban landscape of Chicago or other cities. It is therefore the sociocultural black urban reality that is at the core and not racist clichés of Harlem.

fact and accept Smith's character into their homes since he claims to be Poitier's son. However, other African-American males in lead roles were not so lucky as Poitier during the postwar era⁴⁴. Duane Jones plays Ben in the seminal horror film *Night of the Living Dead* (dir. George Romero. Image Ten, 1968). In the film Ben, the protagonist, survives the zombie onslaught only to be shot down by rednecks, thus reverberating the social anxieties in American cultural during that era. These anxieties and the African-American socio-cultural reality came into foreplay with the arrival of Blaxploitation films.

Chapter III: Blaxploitation and "The Running Coon" arrive on the scene.

"We are sick and tired of being exploited"⁴⁵

"This term was not invented until somewhat after I made these movies. We just called them black pictures" – Jack Hill

"How can anyone think that black is a compliment?" – Turner from film *The Story of a Three Day Pass*

Although the offspring of Poitier might have been welcome in WASP homes the same did not ring true for Blaxploitation. "In the 1970s, a new type of cinema exploded on to movie screens: it featured black brawn, foxy mommas and flamboyant fashions set to pulsating soundtracks" (*Hell Up in Hollywood*). This is how the documentary *Hell Up in Hollywood: Soul Cinema and the 1970s* (dir. Bryan Richert. Prometheus Entertainment, 2003) begins, giving the modern audience an interesting take on the reception of black action films. In the beginning there is a scene Pam Grier is shown where the main focus is on the the revenge motif and the aforementioned drug theme in her films is alluded to

⁴⁴ The film *Nothing But a Man* (dir. Michael Roemer. 1964, DuArt, Nothing but a Man Company) is an exception.

⁴⁵ Taken from *The Black Godfather*.

by the words: “The end of your rotten life, you dope pusher” (*Coffy*, dir. Jack Hill, A.I.P., 1973) not to mention her self reliance. The documentary then immediately begins with a barrage, literally, of gun shots, pimps and soul dancing with pan-Africa imagery and the star bodies of Fred Williamson and Jim Brown. In this manner many Blaxploitation films are described in both scholarly tomes and in popular culture circles, however many were reactionary in the sense that they deconstructed former stereotypes, which many considered to be the mostly asexual roles of Poitier, and worked to reverse the internalization of inferiority of blacks that radiated from unkind film-screen portrayals or as Larry Neal writes regarding representations of blacks “[s]ometimes we are locked into such a prison of distorted symbols and images that the very attempt to extricate ourselves only leads to more confusion” (“Beware of the Tar Baby”).

Nonetheless, not all Blaxploitation films were reactionary and even those that were still exhibit intrinsic formulaic tropes that many Blaxploitation films share as a cycle. Yet, a new paradigm for understanding these films must be set forth since within the genre there are sub-genres; furthermore there are other key factors that must be taken into account such as the idea of star theory, cultural convergence, audience reception,⁴⁶ production values, creative collaboration, para-texts and cinematic para-texts, and finally the thematic structure of certain Blaxploitation films thus demarcating them from others. When examining these nodal aspects it is apparent how vital it might be to reexamine the use of the term Blaxploitation. Within the Blaxploitation genre there are canonical texts since these are the same films being analyzed or mentioned by scholars and popular

⁴⁶*In Perverse Spectators: The Practices of Film Reception*, Janet Staigler argues for the importance of ethnicity and race in producing oppositional gazes and also as important the metatextuality (167). Unfortunately, detailed inclusion of paracinematic (paratexts) texts or reception would be too time-consuming for this paper.

culture; and by analyzing a few of these key texts along with lesser known Blaxploitation films I will argue for shared tropes and thematic strands common in diverse Blaxploitation films.

The consensus for most is that the first Blaxploitation films are: *Shaft* and *Sweet Sweetback's Baadaasssss Song*.⁴⁷ *Sweet Sweetback* was released in theaters first and received both positive reviews and immensely negative reviews. Novotny Lawrence argues in her book, *Blaxploitation films of the 1970s: Blackness and genre*, that Blaxploitation began, according to her, with *Cotton Comes to Harlem* (dir. Ossie Davis, MGM, 1970). Interestingly she argues that these films showed “blacks in a variety of three dimensional roles and solidified the characteristics that came to define the Blaxploitation movement” (18). Mikel J Koven has a similar argument regarding the genesis of the genre and he argues that “three films have been identified by scholars and historians as starting the Blaxploitation movement” (11). These films are *Sweet Sweetback*, *Across 110th Street* and *Cotton Comes to Harlem*, he analyzes all three in attempt to introduce the major themes in his analysis: these are “the notion of the tough, black detective” (24) which is exemplified by the female film vehicles such as *Foxy Brown*, *Coffy* and *Friday Foster*. Furthermore, he argues that *Sweet Sweetback* ushered in the sexual theme that Blaxploitation films, and that “Blaxploitation films not only had balls, they had dicks and boobs (14). The third and final theme is the anti-authority attitude that peppers many blaxploitations films or as he argues the idea of “sticking it to

⁴⁷ I will refer to the film as *Sweet Sweetback* afterwards, the character within the film will be referred to as Sweetback. However, some scholars such as Koven, and Lawrence above, and influential sites such as Wikipedia tend to predate the genre further back by a year at least by including *Cotton Comes to Harlem* and even *They Call Me MISTER Tibbs!* However, they lack the aesthetic concerns and dynamics often displayed in Blaxploitation films, although *Cotton Comes to Harlem* does have an allusion to Marcus Garvey and Afro-centrism. Of course it would be interesting to examine them in a more comprehensive overview.

the Man” (17). The problem with this analysis is that ignores a huge amount of the Blaxploitation corpus, especially the films that are unfairly labelled as being Blaxploitation, e.g. *Cooley High* (dir. Michael Schultz. A.I.P., 1975), *Ganja and Hess* (dir. Bill Gunn. MGM, 1973) and *The Together Brothers* (dir. William Graham. 20th Century Fox, 1974).⁴⁸ Therefore, by analyzing as many Blaxploitation films as possible with the canonical texts as references, from its genesis to the nadir and its current resurgence and recent homages, it is possible to reorient Blaxploitation’s position as being considered as simplistic films to a more nuanced appreciation of the movement.

Unfortunately, there seems to be a differing consensus among film scholars on how the genre, or these cycle of films, started and unfortunately some ignore how connected studio controlled images, which had prevailed since the beginning of film, were to Blaxploitation and its black viewers during that period. On the other hand, others such as Bogle dismiss Blaxploitation films outright on this basis. However, Lawrence states that “both Poitier and Brown’s motion pictures were significant precursors to the Blaxploitation movement” (42). Furthermore, in *Lost Illusions* the genre is said to have “its origins in the Civil Rights movement of the 1960s and the numerous mainstream eras of the era that featured black actors like Sidney Poitier ... on an equal footing with white performers and that these were “new-style black films” (259), films which “coincided with the anti-establishment spirit of the more radical youth-cult movies” (259). Both of the thesis arguments by Kovac and Lawrence might seem solid – nonetheless they fail

⁴⁸ African-American film scholar Ed Guerro is dismissive of the Blaxploitation cycle entirely by stating that they were “the production of sixty or so Hollywood films that centered on black narratives, featured black casts playing out various action-adventures in the ghetto, and were released roughly between 1969 and 1974” (98). Not only is the reception ignored, but also the dynamics of independent studios and the intertextuality of the texts, e.g. *Friday Foster* being a comic strip, featuring the first black protagonist heroine, before being filmed.

when Blaxploitation films are closely scrutinized and situated within black film history. First, Lawrence's thesis in her book is to analyze black film by narrowing the genre's temporal parameters down to five years; therefore ignoring films that came out after 1975,⁴⁹ including *Black Shampoo* and neo-Blaxploitation films.⁵⁰ She states that "for the purpose of this book, Blaxploitation films are defined as movies made between 1970 and 1975, by both black and white film directors alike, to exploit the black film audience" (134). Not only is her chronological demarcation limiting her ideological underpinnings are as well, especially when considering the subversive Blaxploitation films in conjunction with their reception, thus ignoring the interpretative community.

Despite the fact that Blaxploitation as an encompassing terminology did not begin along with the critical reactions until after *Sweet Sweetback* came out, the term itself was coined by Junius Griffith in reaction to *Superfly*. However, many of the important historical events that helped foster the genesis of Blaxploitation, which were also shots heard around world, were more akin to earthquakes in the ghettos. With the murders of Malcolm X and Martin Luther King Jr a rift within the African-American community and ghettos began. The Watts riots and other uprisings and this legacy would be featured in some Blaxploitation films including such films as *Black Gunn* (dir. Robert Hartford-Davis. Columbia Pictures, 1972) and *Trouble Man* (dir. Ivan Dixon. 20th Century Fox, 1972). In just a span of a few years, two prominent black leaders were murdered. However, it is important to distinguish how different these two men were during the peak of their fame. Each one represented a different mindset and what would seem

⁴⁹ Donald Bogle reiterates the same thesis by stating that "really by 1975 the Blaxploitation era is really over" in Ice-T's television documentary on Blaxploitation.

⁵⁰ One can argue there are two current trends of defining neo-Blaxploitation: black remakes such as *Guess Who is Coming to Dinner* or the films and cultural productions of Tyler Perry or black oriented films such as *New Jack City* or *South Central*, that are gritty, but realistic.

incompatible values while they garnered black support in America. Malcolm X preached black power and separatism while Martin Luther King had a dream of a perfect world where racial harmony and integration of the races was ensured. This ideological dualism, along with binary black masculinities, was evident during the sixties in films. Former NFL fullback Jim Brown represented a new version of the African-American male,⁵¹ on the other hand Sidney Poitier was the classical “Uncle Tom”, or race traitor⁵², whose main appeal was to the black bourgeoisie or the buppies while Brown was the star that drew in box office dollars from the younger African-American audience that was more radical and considered more authentically black⁵³. However, as a cycle Blaxploitation had already begun with the influx of certain films that came out before *Sweet Sweetback*. Evidently more African-American actors were finally getting roles within mainstream cinema.

Nonetheless, *Shaft* and *Sweet Sweetback* are the progenitors of these cycle of films. *Sweet Sweetback* is a political statement and must be situated within Melvin Van Peeble’s oeuvre to better understand its position within the movement and to exhibit how fundamentally different its subtext is in comparison to *Shaft*. Melvin Van Peeble’s first film, and the first African-American directed film since Oscar Micheaux’s and Spencer William’s films, is the notoriously unappreciated *The Story of a Three Day Pass* (dir. Melvin Van Peebles. Xenon Entertainment Group, 1968), which was filmed in France in its entirety. One of the more famous anecdotes surrounding this film is that it was

⁵¹ Bogle speaks of the new version of the black buck (245). Recently, this debate was depicted in contemporary media when Jim Brown attacked the NBA superstar Kobe Bryant on the basis of this binary on the Arsenio Hall show since Kobe does not understand “culture”, presumably black since he was brought up in Europe.

⁵² Of course I am only referring to the perception of him that sprung forth during this “radical” era.

⁵³ Here I use black to denote the black power movement, which was an import factor of African-American culture, e.g. Billy Paul’s song “*Am I Black Enough for You?*”

accepted to numerous film festivals within the United States, yet many of the festival coordinators were unaware of the fact that the film director was himself an African-American man which led to interesting encounters. Furthermore, *The Story of a Three Day Pass* is remarkable in many aspects, not only for its themes, its use of leitmotif and its indebtedness to the *La Nouvelle Vague*, but especially when compared to story of *Paris Blues* (dir. Martin Ritt, United Artists, 1961) which features Paul Newman and Sidney Poitier. In the film Poitier has amorous relations with an African-American female, obviously since depicting an interracial relationship would have been a topic of immense *risqué*⁵⁴. One of the themes brought up immediately in *The Story of a Three Day Pass* touches upon double consciousness in a literal manner on the screen.⁵⁵ In Dubois's *The Souls of Black Folk*, he writes about the dilemma of the African-American:

... the Negro is a sort of seventh son, born with a veil, and gifted with second-sight in this American world, -- a world which yields him no true self-consciousness, but only lets him see himself through the revelation of the other world. It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his twoness, -- an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder. (56)

The protagonist, of the film, Turner (Harry Baird), understands this dilemma whilst

⁵⁴ The most notable example before Van Peebles' directorial debut was *One Potato, Two Potatoes* (dir. Larry Peerce. Bawalco Picture Company, 1964) which was shown at Cannes but did not focus on sexuality, but rather on the social theme or message and therefore it has a thematic connection to earlier "race films".

⁵⁵ See Appendix Photo 13.

pondering whether or not he is an Uncle Tom and when viewing his own self including to none African Americans.⁵⁶ The most important thematic element dealt with in this film is the fear of miscegenation.⁵⁷ After receiving a stern talk from his captain, Turner is aware of the veiled threats that he should not attempt any dalliances with local Parisian women or as Turner says to Miriam (Nicole Berger): “He thinks I am a good negro. That is a negro you can trust ... and to be frightened to go out with a white girl” (*The Story of a Three Day Pass*). Indeed, throughout the film Melvin Van Peebles uses mirrors and double consciousness by literally having Turner have a double consciousness that undermines his confidence especially in the final scenes.⁵⁸ In fact, other scenes and shots that indicate this double consciousness are when Turner is driving to Miriam to the beach and we are treated to a jarring musical repetition every time Miriam’s sexuality is emphasized with close-ups of her body and his gnawing fear that she is a prostitute unwillingly to like him since he is black. These scenes resonate with the car scene in *Guess Who’s Coming to Dinner* (dir. Stanley Kramer. Columbia Pictures, 1967) where Joey Drayton and John Prentice, played by Sidney Poitier and Katharine Houghton respectively, have an “amorous” scene, however, in *The Story of a Three Day Pass*, this is reversed.⁵⁹ As can be seen from the caption in the appendix, their kiss is only revealed through a rear mirror, thus fetizishing it since the kiss is viewed through, literally through the eyes, of a white male. This same gaze is utilized by Van Peebles by having characters often directly talk to Turner from his point of view, especially the establishment portrayed

⁵⁶ See Appendix Photo 12.

⁵⁷ In Iceland this fear was so immense that there was a covert agreement with the American military complex industry to forbid black GIs to set foot on Icelandic soil. This story is also mocked in a famous parable in the Icelandic novel *Tómas Jónsson Metstölubók*.

⁵⁸ See Appendix Photo 13-15.

⁵⁹ See Appendix Photo 16.

by his captain and the gospel singer towards the end of the film reiterating the boundaries he cannot overstep by having relations with Miriam. This is stated by the captain in a spatial manner when he says he went too far by transgressing boundaries set by the military regarding Turner's physical distance from the base, but this interaction is meant to invoke the fear of hybridity by addressing his transgression.⁶⁰ And the viewer is constantly reminded of racial dynamics enfolding even within France, since the white gaze is also portrayed by his fellow soldiers who gaze down up him literally, while he is lying on the beach, when they realize he is with Miriam⁶¹. The fear of miscegenation is also invoked by Van Peebles by using stereotypical imagery of Africa and Africans while reminding the viewer immediately of the buck stereotype and the chase scene in *The Birth of a Nation*.⁶²

This fear of miscegenation was an acute concern of many white Americans in society or in the words of Herman. E Talmadge, the former senator of Georgia and a Democrat: "The decline and fall of the Roman empire came after years of intermarriage with other races. Spain was toppled as a world power as a result of the amalgamation of the races. . . . certainly history shows that nations composed of a mongrel race lose their strength and become weak, lazy and indifferent". Thus, what makes the films *Guess Who is Coming to Dinner*, *The Story of a Three Day Pass* and *100 Rifles* (dir. Tom Gries. 20th Century Fox, 1969) even more intriguing all appear within a one year time span of each other and are the first cinematic portrayals of African-American males kissing white

⁶⁰ Even though racial differences are social constructs, the reality of the time was focused on this – and still is, since we have yet to live in a post racial world.

⁶¹ See Appendix Photo 17. The powerful scenes in this film recall to mind George Yancy's "white gaze", which he discusses in *Black Bodies, White Gazes: The Continuing Significance of Race* by analysing it with the discourse of Fanon as well, and how the black body is deformed and becomes an ontological problem by the white gaze (77).

⁶² See Appendix Photo 18.

females;⁶³ yet all portray them in a wildly different manner. In *The Story of a Three Day Pass* their kiss is made out to be a mundane event in the sense that it is just two lovers, nothing else. In fact, the scene has a comical undertone to it since both stop to try and fix a creaky nightstand; thus normalizing an event that had always been portrayed as either evil or animalistic in films⁶⁴. However, their love is constantly undermined including when they visit a club and the singer states “*senorita ojos grandes y señor negrito*” (*The Story of a Three Day Pass*), which enrages Turner and he is thrown out of the nightclub only to howl to Miriam “I am not a nigger, I am a man, I am a person” (*ibid.*). The film ends on a glum note with a mirror conversation Turner is having with himself, reminding the audience of double consciousness, realising that he cannot transgress racial boundaries.

Nonetheless, before transgressing racial boundaries with *Sweetback* and re-imaging black masculinity and before his independent success of *Sweet Sweetback* director Melvin Van Peebles became one of the first African-American film directors within the studio system with his second film,⁶⁵ *Watermelon Man* (dir. Melvin Van Peebles. Columbia, 1970). In his guide to *Blaxploitation Cinema* Josiah Howard describes this film as being “shrill, one note, and ugly to behold, the only point of interest about this picture is that at the time of its release, the subject matter titillated audiences” (48). Such critique comes of as being shallow and avoids analyzing an interesting film by an African-American director who had control over the image of the main protagonist as

⁶³ In *100 Rifles* Jim Brown takes Raquel Welch sexually in an animalistic manner that invokes Hitchcock’s *Marnie* and *The Birth of a Nation*.

⁶⁴ Here I am referring to the coded and not so coded imagery of blacks, or blacks as animals, violating or trying to violate white female bodies.

⁶⁵ As I discussed earlier, Hollywood was keen on trying new formulas since its golden age had ended and they needed to attract audiences again and so were more experimental.

opposed to *Finian's Rainbow*, which also features the same concept: a white male becoming black⁶⁶. *Watermelon Man* has the distinction along with *The Spook Who Sat By The Door* (dir. Ivan Dixon. United Artists, 1973) as being two of the most fascinating black films of the Blaxploitation era, and they are often categorized as Blaxploitation films however they stand as powerful testaments to the current affairs of the day; racial strife, affirmative action and civil rights and the flight of white America to the suburbs laying the groundwork for the return of the rigid control of the studio system with its racial imagery as well as its utopian Caucasian world of blockbusters.⁶⁷ *Watermelon Man* came out in 1970, thus it cannot be categorized as being a Blaxploitation film due to temporal parameters and since the template for such films would appear later in the decade. Nonetheless, *Watermelon Man* “is a transitional film on the way to Blaxploitation. It has many of the earmarks of such films: a low budget, the experimental techniques of independent film, a black director, a black star, black music, (also by Van Peebles), a black focused plot, and unsympathetic white characters. But it is a comedy that lacks the macho heroism and violence of the Blaxploitation genre” (Vera 191).

However, *Watermelon Man* is important since it belongs to Melvin Van Peebles' oeuvre and it deals with some of the issues of being black in America in a comedic manner and is a precursor to Blaxploitation. *Watermelon Man* features the talents of Godfrey Cambridge who also starred in the “Blaxploitation” precursor *Cotton Comes To Harlem* the same year. In the film Cambridge plays Jeff Gerber a middle class American

⁶⁶ This concept had already been tackled by the Lubin studio film *He Wanted Work* in 1914, except for the fact that it is an African-American male that disguises himself as an Irish worker.

⁶⁷ In the *Warmth of Other Suns*, Wilkerson documents the Great Black Migration, which for many whites was “a growing menace,” and an “invasion of black hordes”. It is vital to understand that changing cinema habits had much to do with the changed urban landscapes. Blaxploitation of course was part of this wave along with Midnight Movies, pornographic films and New Hollywood.

in the suburbs who is “a suburban white bigot [that] wakes up one morning to discover that he is black!” (Van Peebles), this turns out to be an unfortunate fact of course since he is happily married and has two ideal white children. The interesting part of *Watermelon Man* is its concept: Cambridge plays whiteface and then himself.⁶⁸ Of course, this invokes the blackface minstrelsy and the cinematic practice of using white actors to play blacks as is the case in *The Birth of A Nation*. The beginning of the film has Cambridge in whiteface and there he boxes and invokes Muhammed Ali, even chiming how he is “a credit to his race” (*Watermelon Man*). The film then introduces his family as they are befuddled over the television and its images which are also represented to the film audience; the television shows images of police in riot gear handling race riots. The family then is shown facing the audience while they comment on the images, including such comments “they are getting very dangerous” and “aren’t you concerned with the civil rights issue?” (*Watermelon Man*). The scenes recall to mind Life Magazine’s five part series which they named “Segregation”, in which the writer Robert Wallace asks the poignant question: “Who, or What, is a Negro? While pondering these questions, families that fled into the suburbs could at gaze at the African Americans, who were rioting in the spatially isolated areas designated for them, on television⁶⁹. Thus, supporting Neil Postman’s smiling face thesis regarding mass media and its “dominant influence on the formation of the culture’s intellectual and social preoccupations” (9) and the molding of implicit and explicit biases.

If anything Gerber, as a typical male of the era, is characterized as an overbearing

⁶⁸ Columbia wanted a white actor, however Melvin Van Peebles wanted a black actor to play the role.

⁶⁹ Here the connection is to *Raisin in The Sun* along with the debate regarding the Fair Housing Act and in fact that unfair housing was institutionalized in the system. African Americans were systematically discriminated against thus this is a poignant critique by Van Peebles but also a thematic tie to most Blaxploitation films.

suburbanite explicit racist, who as soon as he arrives on the bus, after running⁷⁰, starts spewing out racist comments; this is especially apparent when he questions the man working in the café whether or not there had been any rioting in the neighbourhood the night before⁷¹. The scene is even more remarkable because Mantan Moreland, black star and best known for his eye bulging antics and as Charlie Chan's sidekick, is the waiter serving Gerber.⁷² Another scene displaying Gerber's over the top racism is when he points his hand at the elevator service man, who happens to be an African-American man, and Gerber says: "This is a hijack. Take this elevator to Harlem" (*Watermelon Man*). As a transitional film, *Watermelon Man* is an underrated goldmine and its most salient critique is Melvin Van Peeble's sendoff of the values set forth in *Raisin in the Sun*. The intertextuality and previous knowledge expected of the viewer is the famous "speech" given by Poitier, who decides to not take the white community's money and to move into their neighbourhood⁷³, thus retaining his dignity and his family's pride. And despite, being poor the family relocates to a white neighbourhood, whereas Gerber turns the scene on its head by offering to relocate after a bidding war. Not only is this intertextuality important, but it also invokes the sociocultural background of The Fair Housing Act and the "high-income white noose" that politicians spoke of during the time, including former governor of Michigan George Romney. Topological urban reality is a staple of almost all Blaxploitation films; drugs, police brutality and various other factors are projected in

⁷⁰ This recalls to mind the running black male phenomena Boerman discusses, which I mention later. Indeed, when he becomes black he experiences the racial gaze directed at him and he does not catch the bus. See my reference to Postman above.

⁷¹ Thus reiterating the point I make throughout my paper that visual media has a powerful grasp on the "hearts and minds" of Americans.

⁷² There were few black stars and those that were stars were immediately recognized by members in the audience, not only by blacks but by whites as well. Neo-Blaxploitation is in a certain sense a return the type of characters played by Mantan Moreland and Stepin Fetchit. The debate over African-American images is still in full swing, including Spike Lee's criticism of Tyler Perry's roles.

⁷³ Despite the Fair Housing Act legislature it was never enforced implemented entirely.

these films and became embedded into the political reality and if anything helped foster political awareness among the African-American interpretive community.

Likewise, Melvin Van Peeble's *Sweet Sweetback* is a seminal film in cinematic history, and black film history, since it an independent film feature steeped in the French New Wave,⁷⁴ yet it captured a large swaths of the urban audience that were not accustomed to art house cinema.⁷⁵ However, with *Sweet Sweetback* it tapped into the social cultural awareness of the time. In a lecture given by Tessa Boerman during a special screening of *Sweet Sweetback*, she discussed the similarities between *Watermelon Man* and *Sweet Sweetback* noticing the theme of the running black male as a racial marker that is prominent in both films as a threat to white suburban society.⁷⁶ With the advent of *Sweet Sweetback*, especially after many demeaning years of African-American representations, despite estimates of around 30 percent of the cinema market in urban areas, African-American moviegoers started to see more fluid versions of themselves, therefore reflecting the turbulent times (Cook 261). Suddenly, instead of the shiftless coon or shameless Uncle Tom, the superspade and field negro vaulted on the scene. The field negro was the antithesis of the Uncle Tom image. However, Donald Bogle writes that because "the guises were always changing, audiences were sometimes tricked into believing the depictions of the American negro were altered. But at the heart beneath the various guises, there lurked the familiar types" (18). Essentially, Bogle argues that *Sweetback* is the "new-style defiant buck hero" (234). Therefore he is only a new

⁷⁴ Bill Cosby funded the film.

⁷⁵ This is discussed by Sieving in *Soul Cinema*, in which he states: "Indeed, many of the black-themed movies of the early 1960s adhered to a typical art-film distribution pattern: a premiere at a major European festival—*The Cool World* and *Nothing But a Man* debuted at Venice in 1963 and 1964, respectively, and *One Potato, Two Potato* played at Cannes in 1964—followed by a limited release in major U.S. cities through an established distributor of independent or foreign films" (45).

⁷⁶ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uVpbXhMKzUA> Boerman even mentions that the running black man is even special phenomena in judicial law in The Netherlands.

stereotype lurking beneath hip clothes. Nonetheless, nothing could be further from the truth because Bogle himself contradicts his own thesis by stating that it was a new paradigm that a black man met violence with violence and triumphed over the corrupt white establishment, which appealed not only to the mass black audience (particularly, the black youth, who flocked to it) but to some young white audiences as well. Furthermore, taken into context with Melvin Van Peebles' film, this analysis is detrimental and demeaning to the aesthetics Van Peebles injected into black film. However, of course, the political philosophy of Malcolm X and the Nation of Islam had much to say about the radical stance and current within and surrounding Blaxploitation; yet it was also becoming mainstream not to be passive as a black male which is even notable in *In The Heat of The Night* when Sidney Poitier as Virgil Tibbs slaps a modern day plantation owner for slapping him⁷⁷. After decades of comical asexual black male characters and especially during the 1950s when Poitier and Belafonte, while considered sexually attractive, were rarely permitted to be sexual beings in their films, audiences were ready for a sexual black movie hero as Bogle himself states (235). Not only was this new assertiveness displayed in character portrayals like *Shaft*, but also by Gordon Parks senior accentuation of the protagonist's prowess by utilizing low angle shots emphasizing his power and masculinity.

The visual portrayal of African-American males' masculinity within Blaxploitation was in many early films a reaction to the buck stereotype that Hollywood helped solidify. This stereotype was at its core a fear of miscegenation⁷⁸; and in these

⁷⁷ The scene is made more tense by the fact that the exterior shot reveals a racist coon jockey statue and, thus showing the owner blatant racism.

⁷⁸ Means points out in *Horror Noire* that in the film *The Emperor Jones* (dir. Dudley Murphy. John Krimsky and Gifford Cochran Inc, 1933) the actress Fredi Washington was considered too "white". This

portrayals the black buck never obtains the white female. Admittedly, Bogle concedes that Sweetback is a sexual hero however he insists that he is only a stereotype, thus he chooses to ignore the black aesthetic that Melvin Van Peebles injects the film with, not to mention the French New Wave influences. Bogle, makes a mistake in his analysis: Sweetback fornicates with a willing white woman in the film, transgressing the miscegenation boundaries that cinema had touched upon and feared ever since *Birth of a Nation*. Sweetback is a prototype of future Blaxploitation characters, yet he is distinct from many of them. Sweetback creates a new image that calls to mind the shackles that Turner faced in *The Story of Three Day Pass*, instead of fighting with double consciousness and excepting his fate, and being haunted by the societal anxiety of dating a white female. Sweetback is the sexually charged black male that seeks out conquests and battles the “Man”, or as Bogle says “the idea is that the black man has a penis and he is going to use it” (246). Nonetheless, that is oversimplifying the matter. Melvin Van Peebles was creating a paradigm shift and overthrowing the caste system of stereotypes. Evidently though it was unavoidable that the *Shaft* and *Sweet Sweetback* mold would later develop into exploitation and soft porn under the aegis of white produced and directed pictures as was the case with *Black Shampoo*.⁷⁹ When Sweetback ran, as Boerman pointed out above, onto the scene he was a modern, urban African-American male before the Hollywood studio system reappropriated the black image again. Melvin Van Peeble’s manifesto was to challenge the system and its master narrative, not to

was because she had a light complexion and green eyes, so she was instructed to wear make up “darken” herself before kissing Paul Robeson in a scene.

⁷⁹ Films during the New Hollywood period flaunted sexual themes and provoked taboos after decades of censorship and the Hay’s code. One can argue that the Reagan era helped sweep in the blockbuster and family friendly Hollywood, thus making these films seem more extreme than they really are compared to others.

become a part of its narrative strategy.

In fact one of the many facets of Blaxploitation that is ignored, despite the emphasis on black male and female sexuality, is the fascinating issue of interracial relationships especially considering early cinema such as *The Birth of a Nation*. Previously before *Sweet Sweetback*, one other interracial love scene between a black male and white female had occurred before in mainstream Hollywood, in *100 Rifles* starring Raquel Welch and Jim Brown.⁸⁰ In the love scene, *100 Rifles*, Jim Brown's character Lyedecker becomes overtly sexually aggressive towards Sarita, she barely manages to stop him, reiterating the black buck image as Lyedecker seems to be raping Sarita. However, she relents and submits her to him and they make love. With this scene the germination of some important tropes of Blaxploitation were born, thus it predates *Cotton Comes to Harlem* and Lawrence's hypothesis.⁸¹ The myth of the asexual black male which the white studio system had propagated received a terrifying blow that year. Sidney Poitier was no longer an avatar for the correct prototype of a black male; after decades of struggle: African Americans would soon have a say in how their images would be used in film.⁸² Bogle summarizes the importance of Jim Brown's star persona in his aptly named chapter, Jim Brown: Black Buck Hero for a Separatist Age. Because "[b]efore Jim Brown, the black leading man had been physically self sufficient, but never overpowering (219)... Jim Brown suggested a violence and power, a dash and daring

⁸⁰ In the fairly obscure *Honky*, which many consider to be Blaxploitation film now, there is an interracial relationship between a rich, black girl and a poor, white boy. In a New York Times review no mention of Blaxploitation is made, obviously because the term had not been coined therefore sucking every black oriented film into the genre. However, the production quality of the film is questioned: "Honky" is awful. It also happens to be an interracial love story, about the kindest comment it warrants". (Thompson) However, the film is based on a novel just as *Shaft* was.

⁸¹ Two years later *Hammer* would touch upon this issue along with *Slaughter*. The *Hammer* and *Slaughter* are two entirely different films within the genre as I discuss later.

⁸² My point is that independent features such as *Sweet Sweetback* and black directed ones such as *Superfly* and *Shaft* can resist such monolithic readings as given by Bogle.

never before exhibited by a black male (Bogle 220). Shortly after *100 Rifles*, one of the more famous names of New Hollywood, Hal Ashby would touch upon the issue in reverse in his directorial debut, *The Landlord*, where a white male impregnates a married African-American female.

Therefore, the question begs to be asked. Do all Blaxploitation films deal with miscegenation? The simple answer is quite frankly: no. Nonetheless, many reveal tensions that have to do with hybridity and miscegenation. In *Trick Baby*, the main protagonist is a white actor, who can be seen as applying blackface to own face. However, there is an ontological twist. In the film *White Folks*, played by Kiel Martin, is actually mixed since his mother is an African-American, thus subverting many of the scenes in the film including the elaborate scheme of some shady Caucasian investors that intend to perform complete surgical gentrification of an African-American neighborhood.⁸³ When discussing their disparaging remarks about blacks, they also mention the importance of letting the more intelligent ones gain some form of social mobility thus rendering them into Uncle Toms while *White Folks* is at a dinner party with his white girlfriend⁸⁴. However, *White Folks* along with his black partner Blue con these men by pretending to own the deed to the properties in question. The question of race mingling is also brought up in the film *Halls of Anger* (dir. Paul Bogart. Mirisch Corporation, 1970), a film many consider to be a Blaxploitation film. The film stars Calvin Lockhart, who at the time was being promoted as the new Sidney Poitier, as well as a young Jeff Bridges. The plot is essentially that young white students are transferred

⁸³ As I mentioned previously, the cinematography of *Trick Baby* emphasizes urban reality, yet also calls to mind the argument I made about *Watermelon Man* and *Raisin in The Sun*.

⁸⁴ This scene is even more ideologically loaded since it has shades of the South, since there are African-American servants that are privy to the conversation, but are powerless, invoking antebellum times.

to a less than desirable school, which consists mainly of African-American students. Racial tensions flare up including the overt interest that white females present in the classroom; thus sexual intermingling is a common trope in many Blaxploitation films. Yet, another reason for *Halls of Anger* complexity is due the socio-cultural background. For many Americans the Supreme Court's ruling in the case of Brown v. Board of Education was a pivotal moment in race relations yet few individuals recognize the importance of the ruling in Milliken v. Bradley. In the latter case it affirmed Detroit's legal right not to integrate public schools. Therefore, films such as *Halls of Anger* reject the simplistic label of Blaxploitation. *Halls of Anger* is a film that exhibits tropes Blaxploitation film, but also belongs to a long tradition of problematic coming of age stories, often consisting of troubled youth in urban areas that feature a mentor that is an outsider as can be see other films that follow this formula such as *Dangerous Minds* (dir. John N. Smith. Hollywood Pictures. 1995)⁸⁵, *187* (dir. Kevin Reynolds. Icon Entertainment International, 1997), *Blackboard Jungle* (dir. Richard Brooks. MGM, 1955), *To Sir With Love* (dir. James Cavell, Columbia Pictures, 1967), *Up the Down Staircase* (dir. Robert Mulligan. Warner Bros, 1967) and even the satirical *High School High* (dir. Hart Bochner. Tri Star Pictures, 1996). Therefore, it is not enough to have African-American actors in films from the 70s in order to situate films in

⁸⁵ *Dangerous Minds* is an excellent example of the problematic nature of categorization, which is human nature, and all of us are guilty of in our cognitive processes. In the Wikipedia entry to the film, it is categorized as a hood film which are defined as films that feature aspects of African-American culture, revolving around violence and poverty. Coincidentally, one has to ask is this film neo-Blaxploitation and therefore closely linked to *Cooley High*? Or should one judge each and every film according to its own merits and multiple readings? The film itself spawned a television spin-off. Nonetheless, the most interesting part is that the author of the book on, which the screenplay is based on, went on the record on *This American Life* by stating: "I think the movie really promotes racial tension by constantly pitting black against white, having the kids call me "white bread," which never happened. It just, it didn't happen". Here, we have a poignant example of Hollywood commodifying perceptions of race.

Blaxploitation⁸⁶.

Nonetheless, there are other films that deal with other tropes that include just action-oriented themes, or black male empowerment, but there is usually a deeper subtext⁸⁷. The genesis of these films may be sought out in *Sweet Sweetback* and the *Shaft* trilogy, yet in 1972, two of the most famous actors of the Blaxploitation period starred in their own Blaxploitation films; in a sense commencing their careers within these cycle of films. It was in 1972 that the black action films began propagating at a furious speed and with it two stars were born. Jim Brown, in *Black Gunn*, plays an African-American club owner named Gunn, who seeks revenge on the mafia for murdering his brother that robbed them to fund black radicalism, which is a common thread in many Blaxploitation films that is to say black radicalism⁸⁸. The other film that Brown starred in that year was *Slaughter* (dir. Jack Starett A.I.P., 1972) in which Brown plays a former Army special-forces soldier that seeks revenge on the mob. Whereas, Fred Williamson plays a talented yet brash boxer, in the film *Hammer* (dir. Bruce D. Clark. United Artists, 1972) that is brought up the ranks only to be ordered to throw a fight, by the Mafia, to a white boxer. The other film that came out that year starring Fred Williamson was *The Legend of Nigger Charley* (dir. Martin Goldman. Paramount Pictures, 1972),⁸⁹ which deviates from the mob action oriented formula that is most connected to these two actors. However, both actors did not get their start in acting by solely acting in Blaxploitation films. As I mentioned previously, Jim Brown starred in *100 Rifles*, which is an important milestone

⁸⁶ Calvin Lockhart and Sidney Poitier are both of Caribbean origin; therefore the term African American is problematic.

⁸⁷ This definition is the most simplistic one and the one most attached to Blaxploitation films.

⁸⁸ Usually connected to Malcolm X or the Black Panthers.

⁸⁹ This film in particular inserted black masculinity into the Western genre and would spawn additional films with Fred Williamson as a cowboy, including the more lighthearted *Adios, Amigo* featuring Williamson and Richard Pryor.

in black film history. Fred Williamson on the other hand began his film career by acting in Robert Altman's *MASH*. A part of their oeuvre is the mafia-revenge cycle of Blaxploitation films which all share similar traits - yet with important differences. In *Hammer* the race traitor is shown, which is a trope Tarantino utilizes in *Django Unchained*, in *Black Gunn* drugs are touched upon and their effect on the community, a theme echoed in *Black Gestapo* (dir. Lee Frost. Bryanston Distributing, 1975). *Black Caesar* is essentially a remake of *Little Caesar* set in Harlem. The main protagonist of *Black Caesar*, played by Fred Williamson, is crippled slightly as a teenager after a racist Irish cop attacks him, and the same cop tries to destroy him later when he reaches the top of the crime ladder. Even though this was a remake of a popular Hollywood gangster film it revealed many black urban anxieties.

In fact, all these aforementioned mafia cycle films, including *Trick Baby*, deal with urban life with black experiences at the forefront. A vital date in film history is 1972 because in that year *The Godfather* (dir. Francis Ford Coppola, Paramount Pictures, 1972) was released and greeted with critical and commercial success, especially among black audiences as was the case with *The Exorcist* (dir. William Friedkin. Warner Bros, 1973) a year later.⁹⁰ In all of these films The Mafia is a vital part of the plot, often being the catalyst for the plot. In *Black Gunn*, directed and penned by Robert Hartford, Gunn is played by Jim Brown who is drawn in to warfare with The Mafia after the mob tortures and kills his brother Scotty leaving him in the front lawn, thus invoking a very powerful

⁹⁰ Of course the studio system made a Blaxploitation version of the *Exorcist* called *Abby*, mainly dealing Yoruba and other African heritage. I will discuss it later in this paper because it is a very interesting companion piece to *Blackenstein*, both *Blacula* films, *The House on Skull Mountain* and the art "Blaxploitation" film *Ganja and Hess*.

image of lynching and cultural trauma⁹¹. *Black Gunn* is for some reason though often overlooked within the Blaxploitation cycle despite its very interesting subtexts. In the beginning of the film, there is shot of “a janitor” framed within a cage as if he were in prison which was and is still immense factor in the socio-cultural experience of young black males due to discriminatory laws⁹². Later on in the film, Scotty, reveals to his brother Gunn that he is one of the robbers and in a speech echoing the philosophy of Malcolm X, he says that B.A.G is taking it to “*The Man*” and that their struggle must continue by *any means necessary*,⁹³ These individuals in B.A.G. are ex Vietnam veterans in addition to ex-convicts because “they are brothers too” (*Black Gunn*). Thus the framing image, in the appendix, gains more significance then at first sight as does the framing shot in the beginning the robbers also wear white hoods invoking a connection to the Ku Klux Klan, which is no coincidence since later on in the film, as mentioned previously, Gunn discovers his brother’s body in a scene that has similar imagery to when Ku Klux Klan members would terrorize blacks.⁹⁴ In fact, instead of the Ku Klux Klan in the urban area, African Americans have The Mafia now and “The Man” to harass them and exploit in these films. The question that the mob members ask the janitor is “What do you want, boy”? (*ibid*) is thus answered by the actions of the Black Action Group. They simply want to overthrow the repressive system to fight what bell hooks describes in

⁹¹ I touched upon this earlier.

⁹² See Appendix Photo 19. It was very common to espouse hatred and racism on a political platform by associating black males with criminality during the late 60s and throughout the 70s and finally culminating in the visual portrayal of black males as predators and black females as welfare queens or as lifetime subscribers to welfare. This was done by Ronald Reagan’s political team. The legacy of the judicial system in its systematic unfairness has led to surreal statistics in regards towards incarcerated African-American males.

⁹³ In the background the audience is treated to a very visible image of Malcolm X. “The Man” is just the system itself controlled by WASP males.

⁹⁴ This imagery is especially apparent in Pam Grier’s revenge motif scenes, especially when dealing with the race traitor.

Killing Rage as the “white supremacist values [that] were projected into our living rooms, into the most intimate spaces of our lives by mass media. Gone was any separate space apart from whites where organized militant resistance could emerge” (110). On the other hand, *Three The Hard Way* (dir. Gordon Parks Jr. Allied Artists Pictures, 1974) diverges from the subtext discussed above in many ways. First, it is a star pairing of the most recognizable Blaxploitation actors.⁹⁵ One of the most notable scenes in the film occurs at the beginning when a young African-American male enters the compound and hides; meanwhile the audience is treated to an onslaught of montage. Corpses of black males lie on gurneys. After managing to escape from his white pursuer, the young male starts to flee again in what seems to be a reenactment of a slave scene: white men chase him down and he finds help by a couple in the midst of a love session. They whisk off to the city and he is discovered by his friend Jimmy Lait played by Jim Brown. After the young man is murdered in the hospital by these sinister men, Lait’s girlfriend is abducted as well. Jimmy sets off to Chicago to meet Jagger Daniels, played by Fred Williamson. Shortly after meeting up with each other they are ambushed by white supremacists; later on they meet Mister Keyes, played by Jim Kelley,⁹⁶ in the middle of the street shortly after the audience is introduced to a slow motion montage of him beating up police officers in the middle of the street because they had tried to plant dope on him, thus echoing a popular sentiment at the time. This sentiment is the disillusionment of the black community with police officers, a very common visual and aural trope which appears in *Superfly* and *The*

⁹⁵ Later this would be a very common occurrence, including in the lesser known film *The Big Score* starring Fred Williamson and Richard Roundtree of *Shaft* fame, and much later in the Blaxploitation sendoff *Guess Who Is Going to Get ya Sucka!?*

⁹⁶ Jim Kelley’s star body led to a surge in martial arts within the urban community following his role in *Enter The Dragon* and has had phenomenal impact on black urban culture, including the famous rap band Wu-Tang Clan and in turn one of the members, RZA, has collaborated with Tarantino including *Kill Bill* and even accompanied the director to a special screening of his kung-fu films in Iceland.

Mack as well as a myriad of other Blaxploitation films.

Moreover, *Three The Hard Way* itself is not as subtle in its plot as other films. The plot is that a mad scientist along with a wealthy loon have decided to eradicate the black race by concocting a poison that only works on blacks, and their plan is to release this poison into the water systems the urban areas of Detroit, Chicago and LA – where blacks were, and still are, a large portion of the community. Interestingly, enough this plan is revealed after the trio capture one of the men from the white supremacist army, who goes on to reveal the plan. However, he only does so after being tortured by three ladies. How they torture him is never revealed except we witness them semi-nude onscreen, implying torture of a sexual nature. Despite the problematic nature of some elements in these films that are nowhere as nearly as problematic as other genres within the Blaxploitation cycle.

Chapter IV: Horror, Homos, Crazy Bitches, Django and Dead Honkies.

“You shall pay, black prince. I shall place a curse of suffering on you that will doom you to a living hell”. From *Blacula*

When discussing Blaxploitation the debate often focuses on the imagery of African-Americans subverting previous racial hierarchy in a negative way, whether it be pimps, lone wolfs, angry black men or self reliant black females; especially since blacks had been subjugated to roles where they were either inferior, childish and untrustworthy or all of the above.⁹⁷ Numerous scholars have pointed out the attributes that form the basis of what a Blaxploitation film is. For example, in the chapter on Blaxploitation and what films actually constitutes Blackploitation, Koven summarizes his arguments on

⁹⁷The scholar Todd Boyd in *Hell up in Hollywood* called this a sense of empowerment.

what the themes of Blaxploitation are. First, Blaxploitation is defined as all or some of the following criteria: a black detective ushered in by *Cotton Comes to Harlem* and followed by films such as *Shaft*, *The Mack*, *Truck Turner* and numerous other films (20),⁹⁸ the documentary feel of films depicting street life in Harlem, the sexual theme and “sexually insatiable black man or woman ... and quite literally in the case of *Sweet Sweetback’s Baadasssss Song*, waving black sexuality in the audience’s face. It is an aggressive sexuality and, to pick on this poor actor again, not the safe kind of sexually neutral image of Poitier” (22), and finally “sticking it to the Man” (23). Such an analysis is very common amongst film scholars today and various film critics – thus the entire sub-genre of horror within the cycle is often ignored.⁹⁹ This is unfortunate since many Blaxploitation films within the horror genre and horror in general focus on the “symbolic defense of a culture’s standards of normality; the genre employs the abnormal, only for the purpose of showing it to vanquished by the forces of normal” (Caroll 212). In fact, some Blaxploitation films follow this ideology to reaffirm black masculinity and sexuality, while others continue the tradition of racial codes of portraying “blackness” as something as inherently subhuman or wicked¹⁰⁰.

Incidentally, one of the more remarkable Blaxploitation Horror films is *Abby* (dir. William Girdler. A.I.P., 1974) which stars William Marshall who had already enjoyed onscreen success as *Blacula* in the Blaxploitation films, *Blacula* (dir. William Crain. A.I.P., 1972) and *Scream, Blacula, Scream* (dir. Bob Kelljan. A.I.P., 1973). Prior to acting in these films during the Blaxploitation era he starred in films such as *The Boston*

⁹⁸ Of course he ignores the more problematic vehicles of Poitier in his sloppy analysis, which were sequels to *In The Heat of The Night*.

⁹⁹ Kovic ignores it mostly.

¹⁰⁰ See my analysis on *The House on Skull Mountain*.

Strangler, and Marshall did guest appearances on such television shows as *Star Trek* and *The Man from U.N.C.L.E.* Marshall is thus one of the few Blaxploitation actors to have had enjoyed some modicum of success before the onslaught of black themed films dubbed Blaxploitation. In *Abby*, Marshall plays the role of a theologian thus echoing the smash hit thriller *The Exorcist*, which had “crossed all social boundaries, attracting a large black audience in their inner cities, something that Warner Brother’s hadn’t anticipated” (McCabe 137). Consequentially, it is important to remember the importance of studio systems in this case study of *Abby* since this film is a direct reference or rather “rip-off” of another successful film: *The Exorcist*. *Abby* was produced by A.I.P., a significant purveyor of grind-house and exploitation films including such Blaxploitation films as *Blacula* and *Scream*, *Blacula*, *Scream* and with *Abby* they intended to cash in on the black urban audiences since: “African-American audiences liked horror films, especially those that transformed other, more realistic horrors in cinematic ones. Given the influence of religion in the African-American community, several of the seventies horror films that appealed to black audiences dealt with pseudo-religious subjects” (Stempel 96). And in *In Women of Blaxploitation: how the black action film heroine changed American popular culture* Sims gives an example of how much revenue Blaxploitation films seemed to generate for the A.I.P. studio, in 1970 the total film revenue was \$ 22,370, 213 up from \$ 20,509, 744 from the previous year; by the year of 1973 after having producing a slew of Blaxploitation films the revenues had risen to \$ 424, 500, 043 (140). And as Stempel points out the sudden influx of black oriented films was not due to an ideological shift within the studio system, in fact: “before the seventies, segregated theatres played films- usually made on a low budgets – aimed specifically at

African-American audiences. What changed in the seventies is that films that were aimed at such audiences found their way into integrated mainstream theatres” (Stempel 98).

Abby was directed by William Girdler, legendary cult/grind-house director, whose film credits up to that time included *Three on a Meathook* (dir. William Girdler. Studio 1 Productions, 1973), loosely based on the serial killer Ed Gein, and *Asylum of Satan* (dir. William Girdler; Studio 1 Productions 1972). However, these two films were financed locally by Kentucky businessman (Brown). Despite enjoying limited critical and box office success, Girdler would as a result of making these films meet David Sheldon an A.I.P. executive whose production credits include Blaxploitation films such as *Blacula*, *Black Mama*, *White Mama*, *Black Caesar*, *Scream Blacula Scream*, *Slaughter’s Big Rip-off*, *Friday Foster*, *Cornbread Earl and Me*, *Cooley High* and *Friday Foster*. Girdler thus began a career as a “Blaxploitation” director as well as writing the screenplays for *Abby*, *The Zebra Killer* also known as *The Get-Man* and *Sheba, Baby*. With his first foray into the Blaxploitation genre, Girdler decided to “borrow” extensively from the *The Exorcist*; and with the casting of William Marshall film audiences would immediately recognize him from his previous roles in *Blacula* and *Scream, Blacula, Scream*.

In the beginning of *Abby* we are introduced to the protagonist Bishop Garnet Williams (William Marshall) that discusses his interest in Yoruba culture and the mischievous trickster god Eshu “Eshu the trickster, creator of whirlwinds, chaos” (*Abby*). After revealing his intention to help the people of Nigeria after natural disasters, his students present Bishop Williams with a large cross necklace and ominous music begins to play with a fadeout to the title screen where funky music replaces the slow ominous music. Despite the fact that all filming took place in Louisville, Kentucky the film has a

mise e scene which is reminiscent of Africa, because Afrocentrism is a common trope of Blaxploitation films. The film then starts off with Bishop Williams in a cave examining a relic and examines it and describes it including by alluding to the “erect penis”, thus concluding that it can be no other god than Eshu. Shortly afterwards Bishop Williams opens the relic, thus letting loose the god Eshu as is implied by the short flashes onscreen of the demon just like in *The Exorcist*. In the next scene we see Abby (Carol Speed) and her mother moving into an affluent neighbourhood, echoing *Abar: Black Superman* (dir. Frank Packard. Mirror Releasing, 1977) and *Raisin In The Sun*, although she is not harassed as the protagonists in those films. In following scenes Abby is introduced to the viewers along with her family, they are sitting on the front porch eating fried chicken thus invoking a common stereotype about blacks the past centuries in America: a fact that is made more relevant by the fact that Girdler and his associates wrote the screenplay¹⁰¹. After her husband wakes up suddenly due to a stir in the house, they have a short chat and have an erotic talk, which is then followed by foreplay and then next scene begins with an establishing shot of the house from the exterior and then there is a shower scene with Abby. She is alone in the shower and starts to moan and the audience finally can only see her silhouette while she moans louder until we see a silhouette of the demon itself. These two scenes recall to mind one of the first scenes where a young protege of Bishop Williams says “that is when Eshu became the god of sexuality and uh ... happily became a phallic symbol running around the bush“ (*ibid.*). From the beginning we can see Abby is an eroticized version of *The Exorcist*; where the black bodies of Abby invoke the same old stereotypes of the sexually obsessed black female and male or as Abby

¹⁰¹ Like I mentioned previously, there was a cycle of films dealing with this racial stereotype.

screams “you don’t got enough to satisfy me, you impotent son of a bitch” (*ibid*)¹⁰².

Indeed, it is the horror sub-genre of Blaxploitation that often presents the most problematic readings and the most racialized ones and *The House on Skull Mountain* (dir. Ron Honthaner. 20th Century Fox, 1974) is one of those films especially since it seems to follow the tradition of demonizing blacks within horror films. Such films include *Ingagi* (dir. William Campbell, Congo Pictures, 1930), *King Kong* (directors. Merian C. Cooper and Ernst B. Schoedsack. RKO, 1933) and *White Zombie* (dir. Victor Halperin. RKO. 1932). Produced by “A Chocolate Chip and Pinto” this film commences with drums being played by some unseen black person thus indicating a voodoo connection¹⁰³. In the beginning of the film there is establishing shot of the house in matté, indicating the ominous presence to be found there and calling to mind other films such as *The House on Haunted Hill* (dir. William Castle, United Artists, 1959), after the establishing shot there is quick shot of the outside door that is outfitted with skeleton medievaesque door handle; then the skeleton fades only to reveal the sickly Pauline Christophe. The priest is reading the last rites and gives her the bread of Christ. This scene may seem superfluous nonetheless it immediately invokes to mind the liminal status of blacks. From the onset of the film, there is divisive duality represented not only by blacks and white, although there are only three white males shown in the film and one of them is a cop shown in a neutral light,¹⁰⁴ but also by the juxtaposition of African culture/voodoo opposed to

¹⁰² Means also makes note of this trope in early horror films that depicted black females as hypersexual and also in their animalistic sexuality (37).

¹⁰³ In *Horror Noire* Means traces the indictment of Blackness through Voodoo themed films such as *White Zombie* and how they are used to demonize and “Other” Blacks. Although she does not state it, Haiti or any thematic link brings immediate association with black revolt, which was anathematic to many white audiences.

¹⁰⁴ That it itself is different from many other Blaxploitation films including *Superfly* since police officers are often depicted “The Man”, called honkies or pigs and are used as markers for black frustration with the societal framework.

Catholicism. Despite the fact that Dr. Cunningham (Victor France)¹⁰⁵ states that since Pauline was a descendant of Henri Christophe she most likely believes in voodoo and he says that “one does not exclude the other. In Haiti, for example, the Virgin mother is just another aspect or manifestation of the goddess Erzuli, which is a voodoo goddess” (*The House on Skull Mountain*) He reveals this shortly after Phillippe Wilette (Michael Evans) asks him who the honky in the wood pile is (*ibid.*)?¹⁰⁶ In fact, throughout the film Dr. Cunningham is privy to secret knowledge, and the black characters are not. After Wilette is killed by the voodoo priest/butler, Dr. Cunningham examines his body only to find a voodoo relic, not revealing his suspicions to the others. This interpretation is reiterated when the voodoo priest tells Dr. Cunningham that “their ignorance was their destruction” (*ibid.*). The film’s subtext seems to contribute to the “[association] of Black identity and the natural or even supernatural world, while White identity goes with the material world of intellect, power and success” (Entman 7). Especially since Dr. Cunningham states that he studied voodoo in college. Thomas Pettione (Jean Durand) is the only black character that seems to be aware of Christophe’s ancestry and reveals this to the others before Dr. Cunningham’s arrival, thus setting himself up as an antagonist to Dr. Cunningham. Nonetheless, his knowledge is confined to the supernatural and voodoo dolls whereas Dr. Cunningham is seen reading about voodoo, thus depicting him as a more rational being.

Furthermore, the opposition between voodoo and Christianity is displayed when in one of the earlier scenes of the film Pettione kills Wilette by using a voodoo doll.

Pettione is intent on killing all the descendants of the Christophe, which itself is a Christian name derived from the Greek meaning bearer of Christ. When Wilette is half

¹⁰⁵ The name itself recalls to mind Creole culture, hybridity and other intermingling.

¹⁰⁶ A nigger in the wood pile is famous saying in the English language and it becomes important since the context is switched when the entire subtext of the film is examined.

asleep and still in a drunken stupor he opens the elevator door only to reveal a spectral image of Lorena Christophe (Janee Michelle), he tries to grasp her as he is attracted to his cousin, however he falls to his death due to the voodoo of Pettione. Later in the film, it becomes apparent that both Pettione and Dr. Cunningham desire Lorena – and before their sword-fight Lorena is shown asleep while a snake slithers across her body, thus invoking Christian symbolism¹⁰⁷. This symbolism is part of the duality within the film, Harriet Johnson (Xernona Clayton) is bitten by a snake after she is shown looking at a statue of the Virgin Mary encircled by a snake. The same snake seems to be an important part of the voodoo dance ritual later in the film when Louette (Ella Woods) is tied to a pole and the snake crawls around her body and it also paraded around by the voodoo dancer. Dr. Cunningham, being Christian and rational, however manages to avoid the snake all together when he is lurking in the basement of the mansion watching the voodoo ritual. Of course, the importance of the snake is underlined by the fact that Pettione has a snake tattoo on his forehead during the climatic apex of the film when the ritual takes place. An important factor in the film that seems to warrant attention is the significance of the skulls: every black character sees some sort of vision of a skull. Harriet sees a figure that reminds the audience of a hooded Death figure twice, while both Willette and Lorena see skeletons and other sinister figures. Dr. Cunningham only once comes into direct contact with a skull: it occurs when he picks up a staff with a skull as its emblem which Pettione then strikes. This leads to sudden shrills by both Pettione and Lorena and the screen fades to black and all of a sudden there is fire flickering revealed to be Dr. Cunningham standing in the cave with a torch with only Louette being the only person left, seemingly dead on the pole and he does not even bother to check on

¹⁰⁷ See my appendix about Blacks in Christianity.

Louette.¹⁰⁸ This scene is striking since Louette has voiced concerns to Pettione regarding the outsiders and she worries over Pettione's overt interest in Lorena. Earlier in the film, Wilette had been sexually aggressive towards Louette while Pettione stood idly by and shortly before Wilette is killed, he is sexually aggressive in trying to pursue his cousin Lorena only to be stopped when Dr. Cunningham arrives to which Wilette responds: "Who do you think you are, nigger? The white knight?" (*ibid.*)¹⁰⁹. Ironically, enough that would seem to be the case since he is the only one left at the end of the film since it is implied that Lorena will leave the mansion and he will stay to seek out knowledge: he wishes to explore the house, study it and there are questions he would like answers to. She replies: "I would be afraid to find the answer, I would even be afraid to ask the questions. I want to forget. I want to forget there ever was a Skull Mountain" (*ibid.*) to which he responds "that is going to be very hard for you to do because half of this place is yours and always will be" (*ibid.*). Of course, this answer recalls to mind the words he said to Wilette "That is why I am here, for information not inheritance" (*ibid.*). Dr. Cunningham expressed his desire for knowledge since he did not even know what color he was and yet is the sole survivor of the film. Despite the fact that Lorena does not die and he promises her half of the the mansion, the film leaves an important unresolved issue. The duality of Lorena herself. She seems to be the only black member of the bloodline that showed any interest in her ancestry and asks Pettione numerous questions about the family and even remembers reading about her newly discovered royal forefather. While Pettione is performing a voodoo ritual, her "self" seems to be split into

¹⁰⁸ Louette seems to lack any duality unlike Lorena.

¹⁰⁹ In this sense this film differs from many other Blaxploitation films, since black masculinity is downplayed in this film – and if anything it reminds the audience more of the "token first", id est the black person that is often the first to die. This is a trope common in many horror films.

two different people literally on screen, calling to mind Dubois's double consciousness. It becomes apparent that, this might be her irrational and rational sides, yet she chooses the "irrational side" (black side) in the end as indicated by her parting words. Dr.

Cunningham seems to choose an idyllic mansion, reminiscent of both the slave plantation and the modern day suburbia and miscegenation. The miscegenation element is hard to ignore since this is one of the few horror films which cuts to a city scene montage and different location settings, of Lorena and Dr Cunningham, *in media res* of the horror climax.¹¹⁰

Hitherto, I have discussed miscegenation, masculinity, hybridity and the spatial aspects of Blaxploitation. Yet, one of the most peculiar features of Blaxploitation films is the often highly homophobic sub-text, or progressive sub-text, depending on one's readings in certain films such as *Blacula* and *Black Shampoo*. In *Black Shampoo* (dir. Greydon Clark, Dimension Pictures, 1976), John Daniels plays Johnathan Knight a successful hairstylist that employs two gay men; one black and the other white although they are not a couple like the interracial couple in *Blacula*, Knight is invited to a homosexual party which differentiates it from other Blaxploitation films. However, there is also a problematic reading since a mobster violates a homosexual in *Black Shampoo* with a curling iron. Yet, in *Blacula* even though the couple are attacked by *Blacula*, they are an interracial couple therefore invoking a progressive reading while also recalling to mind hybridity¹¹¹. Another important feature of *Blacula* is that the "film is open to Afrocentric viewers who would enjoy the pleasure of identifying with an African hero" (Medovoi 15). In fact, Afrocentrism is perhaps one of the most defining tropes of Blaxploitation

¹¹⁰ Their drive to the town is fascinating since it breaks many horror film conventions.

¹¹¹ Some scholars (Benshoff included) have pointed out the homophobic readings of *Blacula*.

films since many deal with some aspects of the then current contemporary Afrocentrism and black nationalism thought which was popular at the time due to the Black Panthers and other individuals. Benshoff argues that “in Blaxploitation horror films, the monster often becomes an allegory for the historical experience of African Americans. *Blacula*’s vampirism is an expliciting metaphor for slavery” (7). When analyzing *Django Unchained* this important trope is missing, there is no historical link to Africa and there is in fact no mention of Afrocentrism. This fact is highlighted even more due to the intertextuality of the subject material because in 1977, *Roots* aired on American national television and in fact the most famous scene has to do with Afrocentrism, when Kunte Kinte finally gives in after a vicious beating by his slave master to accept his name: Toby. Nonetheless, *Django Unchained* does share other tropes with the Blaxploitation cycle of films and Medovoi’s following analysis on *Blacula* sheds light on the matter:

Blacula is an unusual film in the way that it integrates the Hollywood representation of African-American slavery addressed by Guerrero along with a Blaxploitational representation of the urban present. In so doing, *Blacula* represents the rare issue (for a popular film) of black historical change. Like more recent films set in South-Central Los Angeles, *Boyz ‘n the Hood* (John Singleton, 1991) and *Menace II Society* (Allen and Albert Hughes, 1993), *Blacula* begins with a past-tense scene that frames its representation of ‘black-on-black’ violence in the present. In the case of both *Boyz* and *Menace*, however, the past-tense scenes assert a social continuity between past and present *Boyz* shows us the childhood of its protagonist, Tre, in the 1970s as a moment hardly less threatening or dangerous than his adolescence in the 1980s. *Menace* similarly begins with

footage of the Watts Riots and the precarious lives of its protagonists' parents before moving forward into an unchanged present. *Blacula*, however, reaches much farther back, to the eighteenth century, finding a past that allows it to place the urban violence it depicts into a broader historical field. The vampire's aggression in present-day America is tied to the destructive legacy of the slave trade. (7)

Indeed, one more common if not the most common tropes, along with Afrocentrism, in Blaxploitation is the emphasis on self perpetuated black violence whether it be in *Superfly*, *The Mack* (dir. Michael Campus. A.I.P, 1973) or *Truck Turner* (dir. Johnathan Kaplan A.I.P, 1974). In certain Blaxploitation films it is displayed by a "race traitor",¹¹² someone who sells out his community for his own benefit. In *Cotton Comes to Harlem* this is summarized perfectly by Gravedigger Jones, played by Godfrey Cambridge: "One more word, soul brother. You had it made. Black folks would have followed you anywhere. You could've been another Marcus Garvey or even another Malcolm X. But instead you ain't nothin' but a pimp with a chicken-shit backbone". In *Django Unchained*, the Uncle Tom/Uncle Remus is Stephen who is played by Samuel Jackson¹¹³. Not only does Stephen think of his own benefit but he betray the lovers, and he is the one that wishes to see Django suffer the most or as Stephen says: "Django, you uppity son of a". It is impossible ignore this important trope since it is a vital part of Blaxploitation and it reverbeates in many Blaxploitation films and is the basis of one of Malcolm X's most famous speeches:

The house Negro usually lived close to his master. He dressed like his master. He

¹¹² The radical and subversive cartoon and comic strip *Boondocks* has its own extreme version of this character: Uncle Ruckus.

¹¹³ As I mentioned previously this trope appears in *The Birth of a Nation*.

wore his master's second-hand clothes. He ate food that his master left on the table. And he lived in his master's house--probably in the basement or the attic--but he still lived in the master's house. So whenever that house Negro identified himself, he always identified himself in the same sense that his master identified himself. When his master said, "We have good food," the house Negro would say, "Yes, we have plenty of good food." "We" have plenty of good food. When the master said that "we have a fine home here," the house Negro said, "Yes, we have a fine home here." When the master would be sick, the house Negro identified himself so much with his master he'd say, "What's the matter boss, we sick?" His master's pain was his pain. And it hurt him more for his master to be sick than for him to be sick himself. When the house started burning down, that type of Negro would fight harder to put the master's house out than the master himself would.

(MSE of The Autobiography of Malcolm X)

As a matter of fact, as mentioned previously most of the critique against Poiter was in this vein, he was considered part of the establishment. Another trope of Blaxploitation that is visible in *Django Unchained* is the mention of hybridity or miscegenation. In the scene where Schultz, played by Christopher Waltz, pretends to be having sexual relations the sexual availability of black females during slavery is pointed out. This is important because Pam Grier films often pit her against white males whom wish to force themselves upon her. Indeed, Stephanie Dunn argues in *Baad Bitches and Sassy Supermamas: Black Power Action Films*, that the rape scene in Foxy Brown is particularly troublesome because in her view it reveals how Jack Hill manipulated racial tropes to eroticize white supremacists against black female bodies (126).

Still, the most important trope utilized by Tarantino can be summarized by the following words: “Well I am looking for freedom, looking for freedom ... and to find it may take everything I have” (Hamilton, Anthony and Boyton). Taken from the soundtrack of the film *Django Unchained* this song is part of the digenetic music when Django witnesses his wife being punished and taken away from him. In *Jackie Brown*, Tarantino utilizes Pam Grier’s star body and the famous track from *Across 110th Street* to signify his homage to Blaxploitation. Indeed, in *Django Unchained* Tarantino makes use of the music trope, which is an important staple of numerous Blaxploitation films. Or as Richard Dyer argues *In the Space of A Song*: “Blaxploitation, on the other hand typically connects the music more expliclity with the character’s space” (167) and furthermore he states that this important trope of “Blaxploitation films affirms that their music is part of their worlds and paraphrasing Paula J Massood, argues there is an immediacy between city culture visualed on screen and the music” (168). The importance of this as Dyer goes on to say is that this reveals the white flight from the urban area and how they had become predominantly spatial residences for blacks (169). Within *Django Unchained*, Django’s navigation is not through urban black space, but through the white plantation space, and throughout the film the audience is guided by music to accompany such spaces including the hotbox. However, there is a spatial and topographical link in *Django Unchained* that has historical ties with Blaxploitation and that is the numerous Westerns that Fred Williamson starred in during the 70s. Indeed, most of these Westerns were focused on a revenge motif with a dash of spaghetti western mixed in them. Although Tarantino includes the Ku Klux Klan, or a precursor to it, in *Django Unchained* it lacks the immediacy of Williamson’s westerns since the racism was less explicit in them and

was not subverted directly on screen but more in the sub-text, and as Entman describes white middle class anxiety:

Blacks long functioned in the mainstream national culture (outside the White-dominated South) largely as quaint symbols of nostalgia and innocence. Blacks' new political assertiveness and power after World War II, and their large scale emigration from the South, spread White anxiety and resentment throughout the nation. (3)

In these aforementioned Westerns this anxiety is played upon, yet it is lacking in *Django Unchained*. The Ku Klux Klan elements are there yet there is no deconstruction or reactionary *à propos* akin to the scene in *Blazing Saddles* (dir. Mel Brooks. Warner Bros, 1974 where Bart says to the Klansmen: "Hey, where the white woman at?"

Furthermore, *Django Unchained* cannot be considered a Blaxploitation film for three vital reasons. One is due to the postmodern aesthetic that Quentin Tarantino employs, which is intertwined with the second reason, which is cultural reception and spectatorship, and thirdly due to cultural politics and discourse which *Django Unchained* is situated within as a massively popular cultural product. To clarify the first two reasons, it is important to reiterate the importance of another film I mentioned previously *In The Heat of The Night*, especially since it represents a breakthrough in the portrayal of black male portrayals¹¹⁴. Poitier does not simply stand by passively but responds aggressively and with the advent of Blaxploitation, African Americans ceased to be depicted solely as passive agents; in addition to this the word "nigger" functioned as signifier for

¹¹⁴ Again, Poitier is black not African-American. I mentioned how Sidney Poitier was slapped and reciprocated the gesture to his interlocutor.

reactionary resistance in many Blaxploitation films¹¹⁵. In fact, it is important to remember the social-cultural history of the word, especially because it becomes atrophied in *Django Unchained*¹¹⁶. This powerful use of this pejorative before is visible in *Django Unchained*' spiritual ancestor *Blazing Saddles* for example in the exchange between Taggart and Bart: "Taggart: Well, holy mother of pearl! It's that nigger that went and hit me over the head with a shovel! Now, just what do you think you're doin' with that tin star, boy?! Bart: Watch that boy shit, redneck! You're talkin' to the sheriff of Rock Ridge!" If one contextualizes this the cultural debate, then one can see the difference in the usage of the word. For instance, Paul Mooney, a comedian and close friend of Richard Pryor, wrote the landmark sketch in television history, for Saturday Night Live, in relation to racial identity politics¹¹⁷. In the sketch, Pryor and Chevy Chase are in an office and Pryor is interviewing for a position as a janitor. Chase proceeds to give Pryor a word association test where the most offensive ethnic pejoratives are uttered: "negro", "whitey", "tarbaby", "jungle bunny", "cracker", "spearchucker" and "white trash". These words are used for a cathartic effect or as Mooney himself states in *Furious Cool*: *Richard Pryor and the World That Made Him*: "It's like an H-Bomb that Richard and I toss into American's consciousness ... [a]ll that shit going on behind closed doors is now out in the open. There's no putting the genie back in the bottle. The-N word as a weapon, turned back against those who use it, has been born on national TV" (145). In his own autobiography Pryor claimed that the use of the word gave him fortitude: "and so this one

¹¹⁵ As I pointed out earlier, the protagonist in Melvin Van Peebles *The Story of a Three Day Pass* howls "I am not a nigger, I am a man, I am a person".

¹¹⁶ On youtube, one can listen to a recital of the word "nigger" its frequent usage in *Django Unchained*: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cwkAFYdoADI>

¹¹⁷ It must be noted that Pryor was heavily involved in the script of *Blazing Saddles* and was slated for the role of Bart, but the studio did not want him since they viewed his substance abuse with disdain. In *Furious Cool: Richard Pryor and the World That Made Him* the authors quote the film scholar Paul Monaco and wonder about the powerful impact Pryor would have had as does Monaco.

night I decided to make it my own. Nigger. I decided to take the sting out of it. Nigger. As if saying it over and over again would numb me and everybody else to its wretchedness. Nigger. Said it over and over like a preacher singing hallelujah” (Pryor 57). At the time of their reception Blaxploitation films were centered around black pride in the wake of the civil rights movement and the main criticism came from within the African-American community, however *Django Unchained* has been criticized from all circles of American society. An example of this can be seen in the Washington Times where Jeffery T. Kunher writes in response to Jamie Foxx’s joke on SNL about being able “to kill all the white people in the movie”:

Anti-white bigotry has become embedded in our postmodern culture. Take *Django Unchained*. The movie boils down to one central theme: the white man as devil—a moral scourge who must be eradicated like a lethal virus. For decades, Hollywood, U.S. textbooks and higher education have stressed that America was founded upon slavery, sexism and genocide. In other words, white European civilization is the root of evil and imperial subjugation around the world.

Tarantino has faced similar criticism from his fellow director Spike Lee who has repeatedly attacked Tarantino for his use of the word “nigger”¹¹⁸. Spike Lee has even gone so far as to state on his Twitter account that he will never see *Django Unchained*. In the film *Bamboozled*, Spike Lee condenses all the visual degradation of African Americans into a sombre montage at the end of the film and this is the reason that *Django Unchained* Blaxploitation credentials fail. *Django Unchained* is a form of escapism as is

¹¹⁸ Randall Kennedy’s argues in his book *Nigger: The Strange Career of a Troublesome Word* that there are three theoretical positions for Spike Lee to disagree with Tarantino. One is the history of the word and its subordinating power. Secondly, through oppression there are cultural and ethnic ownership rights. Thirdly, the lack of knowledge of “black culture”. Kennedy then argues that they are flawed since the diminish cultural contributions.

Inglourious Basterds, since both are intended to reinterpret tragic history into a two-hour guilt free cinematic experience¹¹⁹. *Django Unchained* is a lighthearted affair compared to a film such as *The Spook Who Sat by the Door*, which tackles political affairs and contemporary issues. Because at the end of the *Django Unchained*, slavery still exists, Jim Crow will come into play and the federal government will be openly hostile to African Americans through racial zoning laws. African Americans will have higher interest rates on loans or less access to loans, inferior education and countless of African Americans would be killed based on the color of their skin despite Django's revenge.

Coincidentally, The socio-cultural reality of all these systematic problems, which are still epidemic today, were at the core of many Blaxploitation films or as the Ernie Hudson states in an interview:

we came out and did pictures where we had the dominant roles in the film – we weren't getting kicked in the ass and beat upside the head – then they termed it as Blaxploitation. I think it is extremely crude to us as a people. It is crude and insulting to black people as the word nigger would be. You call the nigger this, nigger that. Well Blaxploitation is just as crude. (Walker *et alii* 129)

Django Unchained is a genre-hopping auteur piece at its heart. It takes tropes and elements and even entire scenes from spaghetti westerns, Blaxploitation and films like *Blazing Saddles*. Thus, though *Django Unchained* might display certain tropes of Blaxploitation films such as overt machoism and glorification of violence including appropriation of film scenes and tropes of *The Legend of Nigger Charley* (dir. Martin Goldman. Paramount, 1972) and its sequels, *The Soul of Nigger Charley* (dir. Larry G. Spangler, Paramount, 1973) and *Boss Nigger* (dir. Jack Arnold. Dimension Pictures,

¹¹⁹ I would argue that it fails Ernst Bloch's escapism optimism.

1975) it is not a Blaxploitation film proper, nor is *Live and Let Die* (dir. Guy Hamilton. United Artists, 1973)¹²⁰, since it more a playful and subversive reimagining of historical events while Blaxploitation films deal are more concerned with identity politics, sexuality and political gains, whether or they intentional because contemporary concerns of the filmmakers cause slippage into the films.

Conclusion

During the past decade there has been a renewal of the aesthetic template that has often been dubbed “Blaxploitation”. Two notable examples are *Black Dynamite* (dir. Scott Sanders. Sony Pictures, 2009) and *Django Unchained*. Upon their release they were immediately labeled as Blaxploitation films. In the former case it is a playful homage utilizing tropes of the Blaxploitation cycle, whereas *Django Unchained* uses tropes to create a pastiche film that is neither completely a Western nor a Blaxploitation film. Nonetheless, it is a film that does exhibit features of Blaxploitation films yet lacks the social cultural and political immediacy associated with the cycle, as I argue, that Blaxploitation films exhibit in previous chapters.

Having examined the historical basis of many stereotypes through history, one can see how Blaxploitation films can enter the foray and contribute to this tradition; nonetheless there are too many Blaxploitation films to successfully sustain such an argument. Many are playful and subversive though nonetheless quite political while others deal directly with societal issues of the time including race relations, crime and the depressing socioeconomic reality of blacks. These issues would enter the mainstream

¹²⁰ The James Bond series took notice of the cultural currents and utilized many tropes from Blaxploitation films, a fact critics have picked up on: “if he and Seymour were black, the picture could pass as one of the black exploitation films of the day.”(Peary 244)

once again with directors such as John Singleton and the Hughes brothers. Yet, without Blaxploitation films these films and directors like Spike Lee might have never sprung forth on to the scene. Unfortunately, some scholars seem to be monolithic structuralists that group Blaxploitation films into one negative sphere however that is impossible,¹²¹ but they all do share the zeitgeist sung by William De Vaughn: “you may not have a car at all but remember brothers and sisters you can still stand tall and just be thankful for what you’ve got”.

¹²¹If anything these films helped with *conversion* in the sense of Moscovici’s terminology of social psychology. Forsyth goes into detail on Moscovici’s “Conversion Theory of Minority Influence” in *Social Dynamics* (191).

Appendix: Turning Turk into “*Othello black brute*”.

Before trying to understand Blaxploitation as a concept, it is vital to demarcate its genealogy,¹²² and to show how it was a reaction to various socio-cultural representations of ethnicity as well as a response to changing cinema habits within the U.S. Furthermore, it also looks at pre-cinema because there is a continuous dialogue in African-American representations that originates in various other art forms. As Landy argues in book *The Historical Film*, “the past and present are constructed in relation to each other. Further, the synchronic and diachronic dimensions of historical experience are made visible so that the emphasis is upon continuity as well as change”(219). In fact modern audiences tend to not realize the importance of radio, minstrelsy and music halls and their intertextuality with early film. Cultural artifacts such as *Amos and Andy* and Cotton and Chick Watts’ Blackface Minstrel Show Comedy are examples of this intertextuality. Yet, before discussing continuity it is prudent to examine some of the first representations of African Americans in cinema that mostly include the actualities of Edison and Edwin and James White.¹²³ These films were often focused on one theme, for example watermelon eating contests and were simply reiterations of black males eating watermelons.¹²⁴

¹²² As I argue in my thesis, Blaxploitation is a multifaceted reaction with multiple readings depending on the interpretive community; nonetheless it would not exist without the stereotypical imagery and representations of early film and films of the 20th century and these representations have historical roots in vaudeville and minstrelsy, which in turn have their own historical roots which I outline briefly.

¹²³ Tom Gunning and André Gaudreault introduced the terminology of “cinema of attractions” within film studies, which has since been discussed and redefined in the book *The Cinema of Attractions Reloaded*. Essentially this terminology is useful in examining early cinema. Actualities were mimetic in nature and wished to reveal an objective view of the world, which is impossible due to the subjective nature of editing and choice of film material. However, “the cinema of attractions” is historically a pure continuation of the visual forms of popular culture I mention later by quoting Thompson and Bordwell. Curiously enough, one of the main proponents of this latter form of early cinema Méliés produced *Off to Bloomingdale Asylum* where a troop of actors transforms back and forth into clowns and into blackface. Thus to reiterate my point: early cinema had intertextuality between art forms.

¹²⁴ The titles themselves fluctuate from names such as *Watermelon Contest* or *Watermelon Eating Contest*. An important point to make is that there is historical continuity or as Pickering writes “[i]n song after song, they [i.e. Blacks] were depicted as continually lusting after food, showing an insatiable appetite in

Actualities such as these were only the beginning of the caste system employed by Hollywood or as Guerro states:

Once many plantations grew cotton; today, some grow movies. But the imperatives remain pretty much the same. As evidence of the incessant need to control black folk's dreams, commercial cinema in the United States, from its inception in Thomas Edison's 1890 "peepshows" to the mega budget entertainment packages of present day Hollywood, has pretty consistently devalued the image of African Americans and other racial minorities by confining their representations within an ideological web of myths, stereotypes and caricatures. (45)

The ideological agenda that Guerro speaks of however was only a continuation of representations that had embedded itself in the culture memory of America or as Diawara says "[e]very stereotype emerges in the wake of a pre-existing ideology, which deforms it, appropriates it and naturalizes it" (28) This cultural memory has its roots in the tradition of English theater and how the "Other" was portrayed, or rather how dark individuals were depicted, which itself can be summarized with the following biblical quote "sum nigra sed Formosa" (*Vulgate*, Canticum Canticorum. 1:5) The black individual has for over two millennia lived in a binary schema where white is the norm and the standard of aesthetic beauty and value. In his seminal work *Black Face, Maligned Race: The Representations of Blacks in English Drama*, Barthelemy discusses representations of blacks in English theatre and furthermore how Moors and Blacks were conflated into one entity especially in representations of Othello. However, this was not

earlier minstrel songs for racoon and possum, in later songs for watermelons, pumpkins and chicken-flesh" (Pickering:128) Needless to say these tropes are still vibrant representations in depicting blacks or used as racial references in modern day society.

the case in the early 19th century as Lindsey R. Swindall argues in *The Politics of Paul Robeson's Othello* (29). In fact, this bias continued into the 20th century when Paul Robeson was slated to play Othello, it caused an uproar and critics spoke out against “black skinned” individuals portraying a Moor and Robeson himself took part in the discourse (*ibid*). However, critics were less vocal when Laurence Olivier appeared in blackface in the 1965 *Othello* film based on the play from the National Theatre Company. It is no coincidence that the systematic degradation of black individuals has been ingrained into the cultural memory of Western Civilization; and in his intriguing book *White* Richard Dyer also points out Caroline Spurgeon’s textual research into Shakespeare and how the color white is associated with purity and beauty (43).

Indeed, this genealogy of culture memory goes back even further than the Jacobean and Elizabethan era, it can be traced back to the reorientation and creation of Europe as a concept in a binary against the Ottoman Empire and the East.¹²⁵ Or as Said argued in his magnum opus *Orientalism*: “[t]here are Westerners, and there are Orientals. The former dominate; the latter must be dominated, which usually means having their land occupied, their internal affairs rigidly controlled, their blood and treasure put at the disposal of one or another Western power” (55). This sentence can easily be transferred to the history of black individuals in America since their forced relocation from Africa. At first it may seem problematic to invoke post colonialism and Orientalism within medieval history might however as Lampert-Weiss argues “post colonialism is not a project solely intended for “Modernity” (2) because “it is itself problematic to define the essence of modernity, since it grants the privilege of determining what things or

¹²⁵ See for example Nancy Bisaha, “New Barbarian or Worthy Adversary: Humanist Constructs of the Ottoman Turks in Fifteenth-Century Italy”.

individuals are in fact modern” (2). Nor should one concern oneself with “anxieties of anachronism” (Warren 116). Understanding how blacks have been racialized and dealt with in the culture memory of Western Civilization is crucial since it is not solely a modern phenomena.

Furthermore, this cultural memory can be found throughout the Middle Ages. In one of the more popular chivalric romances of the Middle Ages *Yvain, ou le Chevalier au lion*¹²⁶, the antagonist meets a protagonist who comes across as a man-beast and is described as having a feral physicality and appearance, that is to say he is described as being “[l]ike a Moor” (Hartmann 24). Later on in the text, the protagonist, who appears as a forlorn lover, Iwein has become a raving lunatic outside the boundaries of society, into the wilderness and takes on the resemblance of a Moor because he has become so filthy and marginalized, in essence emphasizing a “racialized body”. The hybrid man-monster is a liminal being that exists outside the social utopia of Camelot or a reminder to the reader of the normativity of whiteness, and of the white racial body, as the guarantor of normalcy, aesthetic and moral virtue. In fact this dichotomy of white versus black, nature versus culture is a fixture of Western culture memory.¹²⁷ Bhabha notes this when he says: “those dualities in which the colonial space is traditionally divided: nature/culture, chaos/civility” (124). In the second example the fear of hybridity that exists with boundaries seems to be exposed.¹²⁸

Not only were blacks and Moors interchangeable in the minds of Europeans

¹²⁶ This text which was authored by Chrétien de Troyes during the Middle Ages was wildly popular and was translated into Middle High German, Old Swedish and Old Norse. In the Old Norse version the antagonist is portrayed as being black.

¹²⁷ I discuss this in my analysis of the fear of miscegenation that is displayed in certain Blaxploitation films.

¹²⁸ This is a key term in my paper since I will revisit it when discussing certain films, especially since it is connected to the paradigm shift of the film *The Birth of a Nation*.

during the Middle Ages, but both “ethnic groups” were associated with the devil himself. Eulogius of Córdoba called Mohammed the prophet an angel of the Devil thus displaying the level of vile sentiments. Moreover, the correlation of blackness to the devil is quite implicit during the Middle Ages in Western Europe. In one of the Latin manuscripts of *The Passion of Jude and Simon* after fighting the treacherous magi of Persia and the Near East, Jude and Simon witness two nude, black Ethiopians, indicated to be demons, springing forth from a statue. Interestingly enough in this manuscript blackness is equivalent to evil.¹²⁹ However, this is not surprising since as Russell argues in his book *Lucifer: The Devil in The Middle Ages*, the devil himself is most often connected to the color black (69). Furthermore, Russell argues via other sources how Ethiopians were connected to Devils, and at the Council of Toledo in 447 the Devil himself described as being grotesque and black (69).

At first, tracing such cultural history to early film and stereotypical images of African Americans might seem problematic. Nonetheless, an understanding of the historical background to cinematic representation is vital in fact the most immediate representations of blacks can be traced to vaudeville and minstrel show, which in turn built their cultural hegemony on vilifying the “Other”, whether it be a black individual or a Moor.¹³⁰ Or as Pickering states “[p]rejudiced attitudes and hostility to black people were manifest before the nineteenth century, but became more definitely channelled into stereotypical forms during the period of minstrelsy’s emergence and consolidation”

¹²⁹ Interestingly enough one of the pioneers of cinema Méliés made the film *Le Diable Noir* in 1905. The devil was also connected to the color blue through Byzantine theology; interesting enough Nordic men visited the court and the Icelandic tales often refer to blacks as blue people.

¹³⁰ As Pickering argues in *Blackface Minstrelsy in Britain* by the early twentieth century, minstrelsy had merged into various other forms of art including ragtime, vaudeville and musical comedy and he also states that “a relatively new addition to this heterogeneous assortment of turns was a form of proto-cinematography”: “The Vitagraphs” (30-31).

(122). In fact, the scholar Robert Toll argues that minstrelsy is more helpful in revealing the development and functioning of American racial stereotypes better than any other source (65-66). This consolidation was also strengthened with the emergence of cinema especially since it has historical roots in vaudeville, that is to say cinema was born from this phenomenon. In their seminal book on the history of film Thompson and Bordwell argue that “the nineteenth century saw a vast proliferation of visual forms of popular culture” (13) while also mentioning that in America “numerous dramatic tropes toured, performing in the theaters and opera houses that existed even in small towns” (13). Furthermore, this dominant medium that was to become cinema, it could “offer a cheaper, simpler way of providing entertainment to the masses. Filmmakers could record actors’ performances, which then could be shown to audiences around the world. Travelogues would bring the sights of far-flung places, with movement, directly to spectators’ hometowns. Movies would thus become the most popular visual art form of the late Victorian age” (13). Indeed with this new art form one can argue nation building became easier or as Balibar says in *Race, Nation and Class: Ambiguous Identities* “the formation of the nation thus appears as the fulfillment of a “project” stretching over centuries, in which there are different stages and moments of coming to self-awareness” (86). A perfect example of this would be the depiction of the Spanish American war of 1898-1902:

The Edison Manufacturing Company and the American Mutoscope and Biograph Company produced these films. They were popular attractions within vaudeville and variety stage shows. Both companies sent film crews to Cuba and the Philippines to satisfy what the Edison catalog called “the craving of the general

public for absolutely true and accurate details” of the US war effort. (Karush
“Spanish-American War in Motion Pictures”)

The emergent art form of cinema helped create an “absolute truth” of what African Americans were, thus depicting black people as they had been perceived through the racial gaze of Western Civilization for many centuries; in many cases changing the perception into something worse or more comical. And thus cinema only cemented and disseminated these perceptions further into the hearts and minds of Americans.

Photo Appendix



Figure I: *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. 1903 production. Uncle Tom is abjected and facing the angelic whiteness.



Figure II: Topsy is dancing and is later flogged. This reiteration and dance motif of slaves is taken directly from vaudeville shows.



Figure III: *Uncle Tom's Bungalow*. Eva's depiction is quite suggestive of what a perfect little girl should look like.



Figure IV: Again from *Uncle Tom's Bungalow*. Here Topsy and Eva are juxtaposed, a very common feature from vaudeville and theater e.g. as The Duncan sisters did. See pictures below.



Figure V: Here Topsy and Eva switch color for shock and amusement for an *Unheimliche effect*.



Figure VI: The Duncan sisters on a publicity still. This is an example of how paratexts can facilitate intertextuality.

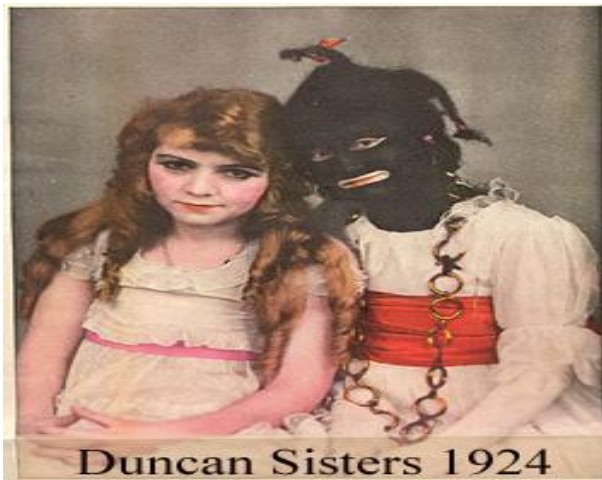


Figure VII: The Duncan Sisters.



Figure VIII: Margarita Fischer as Eliza in the 1927 version of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, noticeably not biracial.



Figure IX: Margarita Fischer as Topsy.



Figure X: Mona Ray in blackface. Topsy is made even more absurd.



Figure XI: *Scrub me Mamma with a Boogie Beat*



Figure XII: The passionate kiss viewed by the patriarchal white male gaze, and codified for the audience.



Figure XIII: The protagonist in *The Story of a Three Day Pass* observes himself numerous times in the mirror, emphasizing the double consciousness. One shot in the film has Turner talking to himself or his “doppelganger”.



Figure XIV: The protagonist looks at himself directly.



Figure XV: This particular shot is especially jarring when contrasted with the final scenes of the film, where the double consciousness – mirror theme is displayed and the protagonist acknowledges to himself the futility of love relationship with a white female.



Figure XVI: This kiss is quite different from *Guess Who is Coming to Dinner* and later there are scenes of semi-nudity.



Figure XVII: Here Turner is subjected to the white male gaze. They report this to his superior who in encoded language had warned him of not seeking love among the natives. Melvin Van Peebles accentuates this when he has a close up shot of the superior chastising Turner for breaking “the rules”.



Figure XVIII: *The Birth of a Nation* resonance.



Figure XIX: A symbolic shot from *Black Gunn*.

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