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The Blaxploitation Era

THREE OF last summer's popular film comedies—*Barbershop*, *Undercover Brother*, and *Austin Powers: Goldmember*—recalled, in one way or another, the vital, action-packed, sexy, and short-lived 1970s film genre known as “blaxploitation.” The hilarious *Undercover Brother* was a direct blaxploitation send-up; Austin Powers time-traveled to hook up with blaxploitation character Foxy Cleopatra; and *Barbershop* rekindled the debates on black political correctness that eventually doomed the earlier style.

Now a fourth film, the 50-minute documentary *BaadAsssss Cinema*, describes the era in the words of actors and directors who created it. “There were no real studies that took any of those films seriously,” says Isaac Julien, visiting lecturer in Afro-American studies and visual and environmental studies, who directed *BaadAsssss Cinema*. “The films weren’t well received by the black intelligentsia, but they were very popular with both black and white audiences.” The Independent Film Channel,



Actor Ron O’Neal, as Youngblood Priest in *Superfly* (1972), makes a strong fashion statement.

release and BBC broadcast are scheduled for 2003.

Two 1971 films—the detective movie *Shaft*, directed by the esteemed black photographer Gordon Parks Jr., and *Sweet Sweetback’s Baadasssss Song*, a profane, X-rated sexual romp through the underbelly of ghetto life that was produced and directed by Melvin Van Peebles—launched the trend. The Black Panthers required members to watch *Sweetback*, which, despite its flaws, knocked *Love Story* off the top of box-office charts for two weeks. *Sweetback*, so unlike anything before it, stunned black audiences. “In the theater there was not a sound,” recalls Van Peebles on-screen. “You could have heard a rat pissing on cotton.” Previously, black characters—especially *baad* black characters—did not “make it to the end of the movie,” he explains. “But *Sweetback* got away—that never happened in a movie before.”

which sponsored the \$500,000 documentary along with the Ford Foundation, broadcast the film in November; a DVD

Elvis Mitchell, an African-American film reviewer for the *New York Times*, consulted on Julien’s film and observes dur-

ing it, “In the mid 1970s, white cinema was about defeat. There was Nixon, there was Watergate, and feminism was making men rethink their roles. These black movies had heroes who *won*—they could effect change, they had charisma.” In an on-screen interview, actor Samuel L. Jackson says, “The black heroes were antiheroes—they were pimps, drug dealers, gangsters. But they were all fighting against The Man.” Mitchell, however, remains clear-eyed about the fact that the films were made “purely from a commercial impulse—to get as many Afros in the theater as humanly possible.”

That they did. *Shaft*, with its memorable Isaac Hayes score, grossed \$12 million despite a shoestring budget estimated at \$500,000 to \$1.5 million (star Richard Roundtree earned a mere \$13,000). Some credit *Shaft* with saving MGM from bankruptcy. *Superfly* (1972), a film detailing the urban adventures of a cocaine dealer, was another hit. Studios woke up and smelled the cash. “What Hollywood did was suppress the political message and add caricature,” Van Peebles explains, “and blaxploitation was born.” Soon, gangster-movie remakes using black actors, like *Black Caesar*, and horror films, such as *Blacula* and *Blacula*, appeared. Pam Grier in *Foxy Brown* (1973) and Tamara Dobson in *Cleopatra Jones* (1973) were African-American actresses playing tough, sexy babes who set their own terms.

“On the surface, a film like *Blacula* is hysterical,” says Julien. “But if you deconstruct the film, it reveals, in a cinematic sense, the anxiety about race relations in the United States.” Social messages were often present in an “underground code” decipherable by black audiences, Mitchell explains. In one scene, for example, detective John Shaft cannot get a taxi, but a cab that passes him by stops a block away for a white fare.

Organizations like the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People and the Congress of Racial Equality and spokesmen like Jesse Jackson denounced blaxploitation cinema, despite its popularity, for providing poor role models to black youth. (In fact, the

Goddess of sex, sass, and strength: Pam Grier in *Foxy Brown* (1973, inset) and today.

NAACP coined the term “blaxploitation.”) “The seeds of black political correctness began to take hold; the black bourgeoisie was vaguely embarrassed about these films,” says Julien. “There was a double standard in operation, penalizing the blaxploitation films while leaving their white counterparts intact. Unfortunately, the discussion of how these films work cinematically and artistically never gets beyond the question of whether they show positive or negative images of black characters.”

The blaxploitation era ended around 1976, but its influence continues. Actor Fred “The Hammer” Williamson convened a cinematic reunion of several top blaxploitation stars in *Original Gangsters* (1996) and director Quentin Tarantino cast Pam Grier as the title character of 1997’s *Jackie Brown*. Julien agrees with Tarantino that there is “a certain Americanness at the center of these films that got lost. Still,

through popular genres like hip-hop, they live on, almost in the unconscious.”

~CRAIG LAMBERT

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1,000 THINGS THAT DON'T WORK

The Power of Negative Thinking

DOING SCIENCE is always more fun when your predictions prove true and your experiments shine. Positive results are satisfying, significant, even lucrative, and scientists labor long and hard to get them. Like baseball sluggers stepping up to the plate, many scientists hope for home-run outcomes and dread research slumps for good reason: swing and miss too often and maybe your contract, or your funding, won't be renewed.

Although ball players can't win with

bad batting averages, scientists often learn from a good whiff, says Hersey professor of cell biology Bjorn R. Olsen. Many experiments fail, or produce controversial, ambiguous, or unexpected results. For those who bravely—or accidentally—go where few have gone before, Olsen and Christian Pfeffer, a visiting research fellow in pediatrics at Dana Farber Cancer Institute, have created the *Journal of Negative Results in Biomedicine* to push such outcomes into the mainstream.

“The word ‘negative’ is a little bit

