HOLLYWOODGLEE, LLC
1226 N Salsipuedes Unit C 1(805)704-5994 |https://hollywoodglee.com Larry@HollywoodGlee.com



Birth of a Blaxploitation

Description

Posted by Larry Gleeson



Sweet Sweetbackâ??s Baadassss Song

The birth of Blaxploitation began with Melvin Van Peeblesâ?? *Sweet Sweetbackâ??s Baadassss Song*, with initiating a new black identity and reached its zenith with Gordon Parks, Jrâ??s. *Superfly.* In its purest form, blaxploitation gave these filmmakers voices to explore the prominent social and cultural issues and characteristics, including police brutality, prostitution, illegal drug distribution conspiracies and attempts by law enforcement officials to establish control and maintain order in large, inner-city, urban environments in their respective films, *Sweet Sweetbackâ??s Baadassss Song,* and *Superfly*, while using creative license in themes, costumes, props and soundtracks to shape characters.

At their peak, exploitation films were dominated by American International Films and by hungry directors eager to exploit popular cultural and social trends often resulting from sensational news stories. Most scholars consider Roger Corman to be the father of the exploitation film. Corman came to light in particular with his early 1960 adaptations of Edgar Allen Poe tales. Audiences were hungry for these classic stories and Cormon capitalized with three successive films. Other examples of early exploitation films were *Child Bride* (1938), depicting older men marrying much younger women in the

American Ozark Mountains and the classic *Reefer Madness* (1936) depicting the foibles of drug use, and *Sex Madness* (1938). Audiences ate these films up and box office revenues swelled. Shortly, thereafter, Orson Welles shocked the world with his radio show spoof, â??War of the Worlds.â?• Soon, the advent and fascination with Space spawned a new style of the science fiction genre with the films and â??Invaders from Mars.â?•













These films were cheaply made and had low production values. After the Paramount decision in 1948, the studios were looking for profits. As a result, the Grindhouse cinema emerged further exploiting audiences with biker films and beach films. Marlon Brando starred in the first widely released biker film, *The Wild Ones* (1953). A series of low budget motorcycle, hot rod and juvenile delinquent films followed in the remainder of the decade. Filmmakers engaging in making and producing exploitation films did so initially without the full support and financial backing of the major film studios. However, if a director made a profit, the studio would support the next venture. (Hammond, 2006)



The 1960â??s brought Corman and the production company American International into the mainstream exploitation film market. Most scholars consider Roger Corman to be the father of the exploitation film. Corman came to light in particular with his early 1960 adaptations of Edgar Allen Poe tales. Audiences were hungry for these classic stories and Cormon capitalized with three successive Poe adaptation films. American International profited on the conservative element of Hollywood with its beach party films showcasing the California Surf subculture with seven films between 1963 and 1966 despite the proliferating Civil Rights Movement.

As the political climate evolved and protests of the Vietnam War began so did the Black Power movement. (Harpole, 2000) Black Power attempted to overcome the racial oppression experienced by

African Americans and sought to nurture and establish an autonomous identity for African Americans. (Harris & Mushtaq, 2013) In 1971 Melvin Van Peebles wrote, directed and produced a landmark film, *Sweet Sweetbackâ??s Baadasssss Song*, sparking a new genre of blaxploitation films. (Christian, 2014) Usually set in large, urban areas the films had anti-establishment heroes and contained graphic sex, gratuitous violence and open drug use, blaxploitation films were generally action films made for black audiences with black actors in leading roles and more often than not were written, directed, produced and crewed by blacks. (Hammond, 2006)



Van Peebles funded *Sweet Sweetbackâ??s Baadasssss Song* himself under the guise of making a pornographic film performing his own stunt scenes including the graphic sex scenes himself. He enticed the popular rock nâ?? roll band Earth, Wind and Fire to score the title track and released the soundtrack before the film to promote audience interest. The filmâ??s questionable subject matter led to a minute two theater release. For example, the opening scene depicts a female prostitute taking the boyâ??s virginity and while doing so calls out â??Sweet Sweetback,â?• due to the boyâ??s penis size and sexual prowess. (Wikipedia, n.d.)

Technically, Van Peebles utilizes the jump cut effectively in providing visuals to support the filmâ??s narrative with Sweetback quickly becoming an adult starring in live adult sex shows with gender identity issues. Also, Van Peebles is providing a sense of social commentary consistent with the political environment in 1970-71. In the film the police have decided to politicize the arranged arrest of a black male to appease the police captainâ??s constituents with the intention of releasing him for lack of evidence after a short questioning and holding period. However, the plan goes off kilter when the police team spot an intoxicated young Black Panther, arrest him and decide to brutally assault him in front of Sweetback. In disgust, Sweetback retaliates and savagely beats the officers to a pulp primarily with the aid of his handcuffs.

The remainder of the film is a visual adventure as Sweetback escapes to Mexico. Van Peebles montages have a powerful grindhouse effect. With Sweetback on the run he interacts with Hells

Angels, hippies and heavy industrial sites. (Craddock, 2009) Van Peebles dramatizes Sweetbackâ??s escapes to the Mexico border with bloodhounds in hot pursuit of Sweetbackâ??s scent. The film ends with large white titles declaring â??WATCH OUTâ?• followed by â??A BAADASSSS NIGGER IS COMING BACK TO COLLECT SOME DUESâ?¦

Sweet Sweetbackâ??s Baadassss Song grossed an estimated $10 million dollars. $10 million was quite a sum for 1971 and as a result, the studio responsible for epic films like *Gone With The Wind,* MGM, hired Gordon Parks, Sr., to direct *Shaft,* a black inner-city type of James Bond that navigates the black ghettos and the whitesâ?? world, in hopes of capitalizing on the sprouting black audience box-office. The film was a hit grossing a quick $12 million and establishing a blueprint framework for blaxploitation films. The success of these two films got studio executives attention and took ahold of Hollywoodâ??s purse as it â??realized the power of the black ticket-buying public, which accounted for more than thirty percent of the box office in major cities and quickly seized upon the potential profitability of the new formula.â?• (Seperate Cinema, n.d.) The making of blaxploitation films proliferated in 1972 and by 1976 approximately 200 blaxploitation action films were made rehashing almost every conceivable genre story line and plot with almost all using the black versus white power dichotomy. (Seperate Cinema, n.d.)

What Van Peebles started with *Sweet Sweetbackâ??s Baadassss Song,* and with the methodology Gordon Parks, Sr., perfected, Gordon Parks, Jr. in *Superfly*, brought to fruition a new black anti-hero that not only stood up to â??The Man,â?• but came out victorious. *Superfly* tells the story of a young African-American adult male, Youngblood Priest, who wants to get out of the underground cocaine drug business. The character Priest is portrayed by a well-grounded, Shakespearean actor, Ron Oâ??Neal. Throughout the film, Priest drives a customized Cadillac Eldorado, dresses in high fashion, is trained in the martial arts and keeps a beautiful woman in his neighborhood and in Uptown Manhattan.



The film opens with Priest being mugged by two junkies. Priest immediately thrashes the first junkie and chases down the second after an extended foot chase. Parks, Jr., takes advantage of the scene to provide a rundown urban setting full of decay and despair. Parks Jr. continues to provide social and cultural artifacts as the narrative arc progresses. As Priest and his partner Eddie wait for a drug supplier they are approached by three black activists demanding monies for their Black Power activities on behalf of the black brethren. Priest refuses and the drug deal is made.

In another scene, Priest and Eddie consult with members of their organization as soul musician Curtis Mayfield performs â??Pusher Man.â?• Mayfieldâ??s soundtrack would eventually out gross the film and is regarded by Rolling Stone Magazine as one of the top 100 greatest albums of all-time. The music of Curtis Mayfield and the music of Isaac Hayes in *Shaft* added an element of sophistication and depth to both of these Blaxploitation films. (Seperate Cinema, n.d.)

In the final scene of *Superfly*, Priest has the embodiment of a sophisticated, street-wise character as he is confronted by the Police Commissioner. The commissioner has murdered Priestâ??s friend, mentor and primary connection ordering a lethal heroin overdose injection. The commissioner belittles Priest telling Priest that â??you just want to be another black junkieâ?¦.and youâ??re going to work for me until I tell you to quit,â?• as he pokes Priest in the chest. Priest has taken a bump of cocaine while the commissioner talked. Parks, Jr., utilizes an extreme close up as Priest responds vehemently with, â??You donâ??t own me Pig and no motherfucker tells me when I can split.â?• The commissioner, in disbelief, counters with â??who the fuck do you think youâ??re talking to?â?• The camera stays focused in a dirty single extreme close up of Priest. Priest appears confident and defiant as he comes back at the commissioner with, â??Iâ??m talking to you you redneck faggot.â?• At this point one of the commissionerâ??s goons strikes Priest knocking Priest into a garbage pile.

Priest recovers, regains his footing as the shot goes to slow motion with a non-diagetic musical score coupled with diagetic grunts and sound effects. Priest grabs a trash can lid and decimates the goons in a urban martial art alley free-for-all complete with Priest launching one goon head first into a nearby rubberized trash can. The camera, still in slow motion cuts to the commissioner brandishing a pistol ordering Priest â??to freeze.â?• The camera pulls focus on the pistol.

This is a pivotal moment. In a typical analysis, the man with the gun has the power and it holds true here as well. However, Priest has contracted a mafia hit in the event he comes to an unlikely death. Unaware, the commissioner lambasts Priest as naÃ¯ve and without the financial means to carry out a â??for hireâ?• contract hit. Unknowingly, the commissioner took possession of an identical suitcase containing dirty clothes to the one filled with money. Priest only moments earlier had passed the money filled briefcase to his girlfriend posing as a bag lady. Priest informs the commissioner heâ??s his own man, gets in his customized El Dorado and drives off while the commissioner dumps the briefcase and sees the dirty clothes he is left with.

Youngblood Priest provided black audiences with someone that they could relate to. Having been on the opposite end of the law for so long, audiences reveled in one of their own winning out against the man. Not all blacks, however, felt this new black identity was good. Pressure groups, including the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) felt the stereotypes featured were decidedly negative and took away from the advances made in forming positive role models in the black community. The genre had been so thoroughly exploited audience grew weary of the cheap film making with many of the same or similar story lines and plot characteristics. Consequently,

blaxploitation films came to an abrupt end.



The legacy of the African-American films, however, remains positive. The assimilation of black culture into Hollywood continued in the 1980â??s with the emergence of actor Eddie Murphy followed by present-day A-listers Denzel Washington, Will Smith, Halle Berry, Samuel L. Jackson, Spike Lee and Mario Van Peebles, the son of *Sweet Sweetbackâ??s*, Melvin Van Peebles. In retrospect, one can see over and over in the history of film a reflection of the social and cultural mores occurring at any point in time and space. (Seperate Cinema, n.d.)

And, Blaxploitation films are no different. As blacks emerged from the Civil Rights era and took hold of their citizenship, filmmakers, musicians and artists forged a new identity that reflected not only who they were but also their experiences that helped to define their blackness. The groundbreaking work of Melvin Van Peeblesâ??, *Sweet Sweetbackâ??s Baadassss Song* initiated a new identity in the character Sweetback while the work of Gordon Parks Jr., *Superfly,* and the character Youngblood Priest dramatized it to â??a larger than lifeâ?• embodiment solidifying a new black identity into the history of Hollywood filmmaking.

Works Cited

Christian, M. (2014). Can You Dig It? *Ebony*, 116-134.

Craddock, J. (2009). Superfly Film Review . *VideoHoundâ??s Golden Movie Retriever* , 967.

Hammond, M. a. (2006). *Contemporary American Cinema .* England: McGraw-Hill.

Harpole, C. (2000). *Lost Illusions : American Cinema in the Shadow of Watergate and Vietnam, 1970-79 .* New York: Charles Scribnerâ??s Sons.

Harris, A., & Mushtaq, O. (2013). Creating Racial Identities Through Film: A Queer and Gendered Analysis of Blaxploitation Films. *Western Journal of Black Studies*, 28-38.

Seperate Cinema. (n.d.). Retrieved from Seperate Cinema: http://www.separatecinema.com/exhibits_blaxploitation.html

Wikipedia. (n.d.). Retrieved from Wikipedia: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sweet_Sweetbackâ??s_Baadasssss_Song

Category

1. Academic Paper

Tags

1. Actor
2. blaxploitation
3. Cinema
4. Director
5. Film
6. Gordon Parks Jr.
7. Melvin Van Peeebles
8. Paramount Decision
9. Producer
10. Reefer Madness
11. Roger Corman
12. Superfly
13. Sweet Sweetback's Baadassss Song
14. The Wild Ones

Date Created
May 27, 2016
Author
hollywoodglee