

Blaxploitation films



"You shall pay, black prince. I shall place a curse of suffering on you that will doom you to a living hell. I curse you with my name. You shall be...Blacula!"

~ Dracula, *Blacula* (1972)

Blaxploitation films

- **Blaxploitation** emerges as an ethnic subgenre of the *exploitation* film; low budget, crudely produced films that seek financial success by exploiting a current trend in culture (e.g. horror, pornography, melodrama).



Taking revenge against patriarchal forms of authority in *Coffy* (1973) and *Dolemite* (1975)

- These films initially become popular in the U.S. during the 1970's, as a way of giving African American communities a cinematic presence.
- Films were largely directed by, for, and about African Americans, and centered on prominent cultural issues of the time (poverty, crime, miscegenation, racial injustice, etc.).

Blaxploitation films

- Blaxploitation films borrowed from, and extended out into various genres, including crime/gangster, action, martial arts, westerns, horror, and musicals.
- Protagonists were powerful, victorious, charismatic, and seductive black characters who stood out as active antagonists of dominant patriarchal culture.



Little Caesar (1931) remade as *Black Caesar* (1973) Hong Kong martial arts in *Black Belt Jones* (1974)

- In this coming together of genres, a sense of solidarity developed between the colonized subjects of of the world, and the burgeoning Black Power movement in the United States.

Blaxploitation films

- Robert Stam and Louise Spence argue that blaxploitation films have the tendency to slip into “naïve integrationism”, and can be problematic if they simply reverse stereotypes by inserting “new heroes or heroines, this time drawn from the ranks of the oppressed, into the old functional roles that were themselves oppressive”.



Gordon Parks' *Shaft* (1971) and *Super Fly* (1972) as stereotypical, or subversive?

- A contrary perspective contends that blaxploitation films are subversive, in that rather than exploiting the African American community, filmmakers take advantage of Hollywood's wealth in order to to create diverse representations.

Blaxploitation films

- When preparing to make *Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song*, Melvin Van Peebles created a manifesto of sorts:
 - 1) No Cop Outs - "I wanted a victorious film"
 - 2) Must Look Good - "a film in color and 35mm"
 - 3) Entertainment-wise, a motherfucker - "No didactic discourse"
 - 4) A Living Workshop - 50% has to be "third world people"
 - 5) Bread - there was an expectation that money would be scarce
 - 6) Monkey Wrenching - the unions must be kept in the dark
 - 7) Unknowns and variables - flexibility is of the utmost importance



Written & Directed by
Melvin Van Peebles

Yeah Productions,
(1971) 97 mins.

Guerilla filmmaking in *Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song*