

# Blaxploitation Movies as a Political Attempt against Racism

Nguyễn Lê Hùng\*

*Faculty of Linguistics and Cultures of English Speaking Countries*

*VNU University of Languages and International Studies, Phạm Văn Đồng, Cầu Giấy, Hanoi, Vietnam*

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**Abstract:** The term “blaxploitation” is coined from the two words “black” and “exploitation”, reflecting on the core of this movie genre, which is the exploitation of black characters to appeal to the black population themselves. At their height during the 1970s, blaxploitation movies were an attempt to tell different stories about the black community, and were directors’ response to public criticism that black characters had always been stereotyped as the bad guys in Hollywood movies. In this article, the writer investigates the blaxploitation movies in their historical contexts to see how the anti-racism thoughts and movements of the time were manifested in the movies. The writer also reviews criticism about the losses and victories of blaxploitation movie as a genre in trying to win the race battle. At the same time, comparisons are made between the blaxploitation movies with more recent movies made in the 1990s and 2000s on racial relationships, zooming in the way black and white characters are constructed and how the power relations are established among them. Such comparisons also reveal that racial crashes have taken a new tone, advocating conciliation instead of conflicts.

*Key words:* Blaxploitation, racism, film studies, popular culture.

## 1. Introduction

### 1.1. Statement of research topic

“Power is the ability not just to tell the story of another person but to make it the definitive story of that person.”

“Show a people as one thing, only one thing, over and over again, and that is what they become.”

(From *The Danger of a Single Story* by Chimamanda Adichie)

The blaxploitation<sup>1</sup> movies as a genre, at its peak during the 1970s, can be considered an attempt to tell different stories about the black community, a response to the criticism at the time that Hollywood movies had always portrayed black characters as negative [1]. However, as it turns out, to avoid telling a single story also means to be subjected to various interpretations. Even attributing the

<sup>1</sup>“Blaxploitation” is coined by combining “black” and “exploitation”, referring to a film genre that exploits the images of the black people in America, and is considered an ethnic sub-genre of the general category of exploitation films.

\* ĐT.: 84- 982325483

Email: lehuong0483@gmail.com

resistant force to blaxploitation movies can be problematic because there are disputes surrounding the extent to which these works were a conscious endeavor to fight racism and the extent to which they were merely commercial tryouts to fix the financial crisis Hollywood filmmakers had to face. The messages these movies sent to their viewers were confusing due to the controversial tools and techniques that they utilized to code the ideas in cinematographic language, drawing the audience to distractions that may or may not be intended by the producers and pointing them away from the political contents. Or worse, there have been criticisms that blaxploitation movies were a stab into the black community's own heart, projecting their exaggerated deteriorating images while trying to undo the very stereotypes grappled on them. Nevertheless, it will be a haste to come to any conclusion about the values of blaxploitation movies without reconsidering the links between what was projected on the screen and what was going on in the contemporary society, the links between the fictional characters and the living persons who played them and those upon whom their images and personalities were constructed. What this article does is, thus, to put the blaxploitation movies back in the historical contexts of the 1970s to see how much they are true reflections of racial thinking and the movements against racism at the time.

### 1.2. Methodology

To demonstrate how the sex and violence formula exploited by blaxploitation movies was both winning and losing, I deliberately choose several movies that featured single male and female lead roles to see how male and female sexuality was used accordingly. Pam Grier's

movies including *Coffy* (1973), *Cleopatra* (1973) and *Foxy Brown* (1974) are chosen for the peculiar links between the characters she played and her real life as well as the film's references to historical figures regarding racial concerns. *Jackie Brown* (1997) is selected for comparison because it features the same blaxploitation star with a twist in the source of her power and agency. The original *Shaft* (1971) and its sequel *Shaft* (2001) are chosen for the same reason: The fact that the original movie and its sequel are made in times far apart enables me to make comparisons about the links between the films and their historical contexts, how historical contexts may or may not change the perception towards racism. *Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song* (1971) seems to be the odd case, but it is included in the analysis mostly for the heavy criticisms against its sexual scenes. Apart from *Jackie Brown* and *Shaft* (2001), *Pulp Fiction* (1994) is chosen for even though it does not belong to the blaxploitation genre, its director Quentin Tarantino, who also directed *Jackie Brown*, made a deliberate point in applying many cinematographic features typical of the blaxploitation movies, like the use of sex and violence, but with a much more complicated plot and racial power shifts. *Crash* (2004) does not have any direct link with the blaxploitation genre, but shares one thing with *Pulp Fiction*: It features a very different racial relationship.

Close watching and re-watching of the selected movies and re-reading reviews and criticisms of such movies in their history enable me to re-acknowledge the success and failure of the blaxploitation genre in sending an anti-racial message, analyze their connection to real history, and point out how the racial relationships have been portrayed differently.

## 2. Development

### 2.1. Blaxploitation movies as a historical reflection

Made in an attempt to draw the black audience to the cinemas in a time of financial crises, the blaxploitation movies shared several typical traits of the genre. They were made with limited budget, targeted at the audience segment of youths, and “exploited” a sex-and-violence formula. Above all, they are reflections of racial ideologies and strategies for racial revolutions at the time. The years between the mid 1960s and mid 1970s were the era of the Black Power Movement with the reviving spirit of black beauty and the hostile demand of a militant take-over heightened by the extreme members of the nationalist Black Panther Party. Reflections of these historical bits can be easily traced in major blaxploitation movies.

#### 2.1.1. Promotion of black beauty

In terms of visual aesthetics, blaxploitation movies were full of lead male and female actors wearing afro, or “the natural”, short, unstraightened hair. In the mid of the “black is beauty” movement, the afro was not just a hairdo, but a symbol of black pride and a rejection of white beauty standards, an embrace of African tradition and of authentic blackness. The heroines in blaxploitation movies, especially Pam Grier’s trademark characters *Coffy* and *Foxy Brown*, were modeled on the real revolutionary women of the time like Angela Davis and the Black Panther Party chairwoman, Elaine Brown. Powerful women of highly educated and professional backgrounds chose to wear afros as their political statement, a manifestation of their

pride and self-control over their image, or their own definition of beauty. This hairdo thus made its way into the movies as an inevitable part of the “tough mamas”. [2]

Similarly, the chemically straightened conk, which used to be a symbol of manhood for stylish young black men, was replaced by the short unpressed hair. Heroes in such movies as *Shaft* and *Sweet Sweetback’s Baadasssss Song* refused to wear a hairstyle associated with “criminal element” to put on a “bold” look that went with the afro.

In later movies addressing racism, the afro no longer took on that symbolic meaning for black pride and power and simply disappeared from the screen. In Tarantino’s 1997 movie *Jackie Brown*, for example, Pam Grier finally escaped her “badass mama” image with the defining afro. Her power was portrayed in her wits and bravery in carrying a perfect plan that gained her money and freedom to control her own life instead of in a hairdo. Likewise, the detective *Shaft* in the 2000 Sequel did not need an afro to assert his boldness, though he still needed his manly violence and sexual attraction. The afro, hence, remains a central feature of blaxploitation heroes and heroines.

#### 2.1.2. Promotion of military self-defense

While the afro was never just a fashionable hairdo, but associated with much cultural and political meaning, it is still a reflection on the surface. A closer look at the movies reveals that they deeply reflected the ideologies of the Black Nationalist movement during the 60s and the 70s. This was the time when the Black Panther Party claimed their purpose was to “establish revolutionary economic, social, and political equity across color and gender lines through the use of militant self-defense” [3] and rejected integration altogether. What they

wanted was a separate nation of the blacks, an idea promoted by Booker T. Washington and Malcolm X. and many nationalists of the time. Although this period was also marked by the debates over using nonviolent methods against white brutality, as manifested in the conflicts between Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), in the movies, the violence advocates were obviously winning.

In most, if not all, blaxploitation movies, the world was reconstructed as a bipolar picture with clear contrasts and no shady grey. Blacks and whites were put against each other in a non-compromising war in which nothing but violence could bring about justice. The characters were straightforwardly fictionalized as either good or bad, and there was no “civilian”, neutral whites or blacks presented in the movies. The characters were cast in a limited range of roles: the harmless black victim (*Coffy's* little sister), the good black hero harmed in their deeds (*Coffy's* police friend, *Foxy Brown's* boyfriend), the wasted hustler (*Foxy Brown's* brother), the angry woman seeking revenge (*Coffy*, *Foxy Brown*), the black man who was oppressed by the Man (understood as the white police) and broke away (*Sweetback*), etc.. The movies featured a black community forced into lives of criminals and victims under the pressure of both the white cops and the top-most white bosses in the criminal world. The films resonated with the racial ideologies of the period in their solution to the problems of inequity. In reality, the Black Panther Party advocated militant self-defense; on the screen, the black heroes and heroines resorted to vigilante justice as the only non-compromising weapons to regain their dignity and rights. Hence, we see characters like Coffy

and Foxy Brown shoot and blow up one enemy after another without seeking any lawful help, which the directors seemed to hint that she would not get anyway since the whole legal system was as dominated and corrupted by the Man as was the underworld.

## 2.2. *The resistant attempt and the means: heroes, weapons, enemies, and friends*

Blaxploitation movies have been criticized for their excessive use of sexuality and violence that reinforce the negative black stereotypes instead of raising voice to protect the black community [1:384]. However, as a genre, blaxploitation movies have made significant contributions to creating new types of black characters that did not exist before. Additionally, the movies need to be acknowledged for making the first attempts to broadcast black political claims to the audience. In this section, I will try to decode the processes of making black heroes and heroines, of how sexuality and violence were used as their powerful weapons, and of how political messages were expressed through their relationships with friends and enemies.

### 2.2.1. *Female sexuality & violence*

In order to understand why the construction of the sexy, commanding heroines who kill at will have the resistant power by itself, we need to look at how the female blacks had been portrayed in the American visual history. Before the blaxploitation era, female black bodies had been presented as over-sexualized freaks or whores, desexualized mummies, or ignorant, stupid girl servants who are not yet sexually active. The black female sexuality was perceived to be a threat to the female whites, and the white society at large; thus, it was either

exaggerated into an animalistic trait that turned normal black women into promiscuous whores or was totally deprived of them. The American public was introduced to black female sexuality through the representative images of the Black Venus Sartje Bartmann whose different genital structure became symbolic of a primitive kind less than a human being. Whites ensured their dominant oppressing roles by perpetuating the desexualized mammy figures who completely identified with the white masters' culture, who served their masters with loyalty, and would be at loss without the white master's guidance. Scarlet O'Hara's Mammy in *Gone with the Wind* is a typical character of this model, while the little black girl who knew nothing but lied all the time in the same novel surely stood for the ignorant girl servant. Black female figures had oftentimes been represented in family pictures as caregivers, even minimalized to a breast feeding the hungry (white) babies, or a background to keep the baby in place for a picture to be taken. The dominant whites enjoyed the luxury and security of being served by a black woman, even if it was a fictional security brought about by a made-real Aunt Jemima. Black female bodies that are pretty, dignified, and respected were simply non-existent until the blaxploitation movies came into picture. At one time, to counter the promiscuous images, black women resolved to the so-called politics of respectability, which basically dictated that they should be always dressed and conducted themselves in the most proper manner possible in public, and that they had to suppress their sexual selves in order to be appreciated for their talents, not their curves. Revolutionary third-wave feminists like Shayne Lee would see this compliance with the "social transcripts" an act of conforming to the oppressors' norms. Interestingly enough,

contemporary erotic revolutionaries such as Janet Jackson and Beyonce Knowles can see themselves in this early generation of empowering women including Coffy, Foxy Brown, and Cleopatra Jones, who use sexuality as their weapons for justice.

Keeping this history of the represented black female bodies in mind, the audience would find it easier to accept the sexy, militant characters in blaxploitation movies as a daring effort to counter the mainstream transcripts written for black women. The sexually provocative images of the lead female characters, besides, can be justified by the goals of their actions. Sexuality was celebrated because it helped put women like Cleopatra Jones at equal footing with men or was utilized to trick their enemies into situations where they had to pay for the crimes they had done to the characters' loved ones as well as the black community at large. No wonder black audience enjoyed seeing these chicks rampaging the neighborhoods in search of the bastards that forced them into black miseries.

#### 2.2.2. Male sexuality and violence

Sexuality was also used to empower black men in blaxploitation movies. The recurring theme is to portray black men with white girlfriends or prostitutes depicted as sexual toys to satisfy the men's desires and never as a subject of respect. Viewed out of the historical context, this objectification of women's bodies should be heavily criticized, but contextualized in the black power era, it could be interpreted as a resistant act against the social script that forbade black men from courting white women. The heroes "waived black sexuality in the audience's face" [4] as a way of resisting the authority, or in Van Peebles' word, a way of "sticking it to the Man". For people at the

bottom of the society like the male prostitute Sweetback, sexuality and violence, the confirmation of their manhood, may be their only resources of resistant power.

Yearwood in "Black Film as a Signifying Practice" explains how violence gives power to the oppressed men, calling it "a cleansing force" [5].

"It frees the native [the oppressed] from his inferiority complex and from his despair and in action; it makes him fearless and restores his self-respect." [5]

In *Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song*, it was violence that freed Sweetback from witnessing his fellow brother killed without lifting a finger. Using the handcuffs to hit the policemen until they were covered in blood, Sweetback saved the revolutionist MooMoo from the inevitable ending of death. At the same time, the spontaneous surge of violence transformed Sweetback from an objectified sexual being into a man of agency with control over his own decisions. In *Shaft*, the man was able to stand by himself as an independent detective, succumbing to neither the Man, nor the criminals only because he was skilful at using violence to protect his independence. It is also his ability to handle dangerous situations, his boldness not to give in that earns Shaft the trust of his fellow brothers: *Who's the cat that won't cop out / When there's danger all about? / SHAFT! (Theme voice)*. In other words, being sexual and violent gained the black man their self-esteem, turned them from helpless victims into independent individuals and made them trusted leaders of their own communities.

### 2.2.3. Black agency

The means by which blaxploitation heroes and heroines gained their power to resist

authority can be controversial, but the agency they assert was well claimed. Coffy expressed some hesitation about her vigilante vengeance with her cop friend at first, but from that moment on, the audience saw her taking full responsibility for her conscious actions. Coffy got almost everything planned out, from choosing the disguise of a prostitute, stimulating a catfight to provoke the desire in her enemies, tricking her enemies to suspect each other, to consciously putting herself in dangerous situation in exchange for a sure chance to kill her foes at closer distance. When bad things came up against her will, the viewers never saw Coffy whining about her tricky situations. Instead, they witnessed her clever use of her attractiveness to get herself out of troubles.

Shaft also possessed a lot of agency as he allowed himself to be dependent on no one. He stood firmly in between the two worlds, demanding both the cops and the criminals to negotiate with him and made them play according to his rules. In this respect, Shaft was perhaps the character with most control over his own fate of all the blaxploitation heroes. He had the power to say no to both the police and the criminal boss; and the only reason he decided to find the kidnapped daughter was her innocence regardless of her father's misdoings.

In *Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song*, the audience even had a rare chance to see the transformative process through which Sweetback gained his agency in choosing for himself a difficult path. Sweetback traveled a great way from being urged by spontaneous anger to hit the policemen and free MooMoo to making a conscious political decision. When the motorcyclist informed Sweetback that he could only take one person, the man

intentionally chose to give MooMoo the chance, hinting that MooMoo was more worthy to the cause than himself. By giving MooMoo the chance to live a second time, Sweetback consciously put himself at risk. He had to pay a dear price for his decision, driving himself on a permanent run from his predators, but by acting altruistically, Sweetback gained the self-respect for a worthy man who took his fate in his own hands.

#### 2.2.4. A political call to the community

When Yearwood named the chapter analyzing the transformation of the character Sweetback “The Dawning of a Political Consciousness” [6:196], he was not referring to the particular case of this male prostitute, but to the new political consciousness in blaxploitation movies in general. A conscious attempt was made in *Foxy Brown*, *Shaft* and *Sweet Sweetback’s Baadasssss Song* to construct the model of a hero/ heroine who acted on behalf of the community’s benefits, and appealed to the community’s participation in the common cause. By the end of the movie, Foxy Brown no longer acted alone, but was supported by the neighborhood committee, some sort of organized political group. On his runaway path, Sweetback also received help from different individuals and communities, even non-black ones, a sign of the black struggles reaching out to other ethnic groups and even reaching beyond the American border. Likewise, Shaft was depicted not only as a “sex machine”, a “cat that won’t cop out”, but also someone who “would risk his neck for his brother man”. From violent spontaneous revenge to organized political actions, the heroes and heroines in blaxploitation movies went a long way in their racial ideologies.

#### 2.3. The tools that dismantle the master’s house

[T]hey have pointed fingers at their egomaniacal selves instead of the oppressor. They have captivated the mind of an entire nation – only to entertain it; and they have wrestled thunder from the fists of the gods – only to make small noises”

B.J. Mason in Sieving’s “She’s a stimlatin’, fascinatin’, assassinatin’ chick!” - Pam Grier as Star Text” [6]

Despite some significant political messages they helped broadcast during the Black Power Era, blaxploitation movies have been criticized as an exploitation of the black community. Pressured by the falling box office records, Hollywood filmmakers seemed to have used an overdose of sexuality and violence to lure young black audience to the cinemas. Claiming themselves to be politically conscious efforts to revert the racial hierarchy by asserting positive black characters, the blaxploitation movies of the 1970s indeed reinforced the negative images of the black community. As Koven puts it, ‘Blaxploitation’ was, in part, the representation, not just of black people, but of people as BLACK – a defiant African American identity. [4]

He defines blaxploitation movies as films that “exploit our desire to see black people, especially African-Americans, on screen, doing presumably what one expects or wants to see African-Americans doing” [4]

True to this definition, blaxploitation movies are full of black stereotypes, featuring black men as pimps, drug pushers and criminals, and black women as prostitutes or at least hypersexual beings. The most controversial scene may be the one beginning *Sweet Sweetback’s Baadasssss Song*, which shows the image of a female prostitute having

orgasm with a boy stiffly lying between her legs. This scene is followed by Sweetback's entertainment show in a porn-like manner. These two scenes do not seem to contain any important message, but are merely baits to get people to the cinemas. Similarly, female leads like Coffy and Foxy Brown are unnecessarily exposed in repeated scenes. Their dresses are specially designed to accentuate their exuberant curves and are easily slipped aside to reveal their much-appreciated breasts.

Even violent fighting scenes are spiced with some nudity for the gaze of the viewers. Clearly the "tough mamas" are performing not only to the gaze of the males in the movies, but the males among the audience as well. Taking this audience's gaze into perspective seriously undermines the empowering effect of female sexuality as used in blaxploitation movies. The catfights in both Coffy and Foxy Brown are obviously aimed to satisfy the male voyeurism. These scenes particularly downplay the power of female sexuality, since they are nothing but women hurting each other for men's entertainment.

The objectification of black women by men of their own race further promotes a negative image of the black community. Black men are depicted not just as corrupted criminals, but also as male predators incapable of true love, who use women to satisfy their sexual demands then discard them without a second thought, especially when they have to choose between their women and "business" relationships with other men. Coffy's boyfriend refused to admit her to be his fiancé the moment she put his career on jeopardy by attacking his protected client, called her a whore and went home to have sex with a white woman, not a single thought about whether Coffy was alive or dead.

The empowering quality of female sexuality and violence as promoted by blaxploitation movies was strongly refuted by critics in view of the gender politics prominent at the time for both the characters' real-life models and the stars that played them. Elaine Brown, who was supposedly the model upon which the character of Foxy Brown was constructed, indeed used by her boyfriend, the ex-chairman of the Black Panther Party, Huey Newton, as a strategic political move. Being aware that women were despised in the politics of the Black Panther Party, deemed at least "irrelevant" [2], Newton appointed Elaine Brown his successor only so that he could remain his control while in exile [3].

Similarly, contrary to her powerful character, Pam Grier in real life did not have control over how her image was constructed in the movies and how it was sold to the public. Posters for Grier's movies had her depicted as a sexually provocative woman with deadly weapons, an image "over which she seemingly had the least control, and over which her employers exerted the greatest control." [5]

As a black female actress in the filmmaking industry, Grier had no voice in deciding what kinds of roles she wanted to play or how she should play her roles. She was given the same types of roles (Coffy and Foxy Brown are pretty much molded in the same styles) and told how to act by the directors. "AIP's policy was to give the niggers shit," she claimed to the press later [5]. All Grier's efforts to be acknowledged for her acting instead of her body were in vain until almost twenty years later when she finally got her dream role as Jackie Brown in Quentin Tarantino's 1997 production. It was in this movie that she finally could give up her trademark afro, her revealing dresses, and her killing weapons to wear a different hairdo, put on the uniform of a flight



attendant, and use her wits to gain control over her life. During the blaxploitation period, Grier was “a product that was carefully packaged for a particular market... For five years she was the biggest, baddest ‘mama’ of them all.” [5].

#### 2.4. Reconstructed racial power relationships

The somewhat simplistic reconstruction of the world as a compilation of straightforward non-negotiating power relations between blacks and whites (cf 1.2) was greatly transformed in later movies like Paul Haggis’ 2004 feature *Crash* and Quentin Tarantino’s 1994 crime film *Pulp Fiction*. In these movies, the viewers started to see white characters at a lower rung in the hierarchy of powers, black characters with higher economic status, and some switching of power relations instead of a fixed static whites-over-blacks situation or the reversed black-vigilante-heroes/ heroines-over-corrupted-whites. In *Crash*, the viewers were introduced to the miseries of the lower-class whites through the life of Ryan, the racist policeman, and his sick father. Despite his position of power as a representative of law, Ryan had to beg for sympathy from a black female social worker, who refused to help because of Ryan’s previous racist verbal conducts. The audience were also introduced to an upper-class black couple, who despite their economic and social status, still succumbed to the power of the white man, of which Ryan was the representative. This lack of courage to stand for oneself later caused conflicts between the couple and self-hatred in the man. By the end of the film, the black director somehow gained back his self-respect when he refused to give up his car to the young robber and got angry being stopped by the police. In this movie, the characters were no longer stuck in one power rung, but moved up and down the hierarchy depending on the

situations they found themselves in. Here we could also see the violence held back repeatedly. Tension was pushed to the verge of exploding, and even a gunshot was heard in the scene in which the storeowner confronted the key mechanist, but no one was killed. The black film director was also pushed to the point where he was ready to fire, but no gun was pulled out by the end. The only death of the detective’s brother was caused by misunderstanding, as officer Hill got panic about an imagined hidden gun. The filmmakers sent a clear message to the audience that racial conflicts were mostly caused by misunderstandings between different groups and suggested that all conflicts could be reconciled by love. Ryan rescued the woman he molested; the couple got back together; and the little daughter “saved” her daddy thanks to the impenetrable invisible cloak.

Similar notions of power mobility and advocacy of racial conciliation can be observed even in the satirical crime movie *Pulp Fiction*, directed by a white director who was famous for his black humor. Unlike in the blaxploitation movies of the 1970s, in which the top bosses were always the white men or (lesbian) ladies, the big man in *Pulp Fiction* was Marsellus Wallace, a powerful black guy controlling a bunch of white handy men, including Vincent Vega and Butch Coolidge. Again here we saw Vincent as a white man on the lower rung of the power ladder, getting so panic when he was assigned the task of entertaining Marsellus’ wife, a white chick. However, there was a switch of power relations when Marsellus got raped by the two white homosexuals on his way of chasing Butch after the boxer violated the contract with him. The notion of reconciliation came into picture when Butch decided to stay and save his enemy instead of taking the first chance to run away from Marsellus. The sexual politics so

commonly used in blaxploitation movies is brought back in *Pulp Fiction*, where Tarantino plays with ideas of miscegenation and homosexuality again, but to create a much more complex message.

Though very different in their styles, *Crash* and *Pulp Fiction* seem to share a common emphasis on racial power relations as non-static and negotiable and both suggest that reconciliation is possible with good will. These voices may get loud enough to create an impression that racism has taken on a new face and promising solutions are on the horizon. The bipolar racial conflicts with fixed (though can be reversed) power relations projected in the old blaxploitation movies thus appear inadequate to reflect the modern racism, which is obviously more “colorful” with the participation of other ethnic groups, including the Hispanics and Asians. However, this seems to be the right moment to bring back the issue of the single story, or to be more specific, the question of who is telling the story. Using a racial lens to scrutinize these two movies, we can realize that these two directors are both white and the films appeal to a general audience instead of focusing on the black viewers as the blaxploitation movies claimed to. The latest sequel of *Shaft*, which came out in 2000, also targets a more general audience and has adopted a more complex cinematic language in constructing its characters and their relationships. However, racial struggles as depicted in the 2000 sequel of *Shaft* go much in line with the 1971 trio of *Shaft*, *Shaft's Big Score*, and *Shaft in Africa* in its non-negotiating tone. The young *Shaft* does make an attempt to tackle racism from a more official channel, being part of the legal system, but he is frequently frustrated by the impotence of the system in bringing justice to poor voiceless victims. The white oppressors still have the

systemized support that cannot be overthrown. Finally, the problem is solved in that vigilante style we are familiar with in blaxploitation movies. It is surely not a coincidence that the director of *Shaft 2000* is a black man, which makes critical viewers re-question the current ideologies of racial revolutions. Which racial picture should we believe in? And what do exactly the black community want? Will non-violent measures work to fix racial problems or will there be a possibility that we will come back to the non-compromising militant ways?

### 3. Conclusion

Viewing the cinema as a mode of production, Yearwood calls it “a narrative world that is manufactured and fabricated according to ideological, political, symbolic and economic constraints” [6]. The blaxploitation movies as a genre are reflections of the racial politics in America during the 1960s and 1970s, bound by the historical contexts of the rising Black Power movement. As observed in more recent movies, racial relationships in America have been perceived to be more non-static and more negotiable though not necessarily a view shared by all. The blaxploitation movies were successful to a certain extent in creating new types of empowering black characters, but they were also a failure given their tricky cinematic language of sexuality and violence that significantly demeaned the black community while attempting to do just otherwise. However, to be fair to the filmmakers, every told story has to face with unpredictable interpretations by its audience, and the filmmakers have to take on the responsibility to educate viewers of their new approaches.

*[But] [T]he problem facing filmmakers who seek to reformulate the familiar with new*

*cinematic approaches is the need to re-educate the audience and motivate new ways of seeing.* [6]

The above quotation should serve as a suitable ending to this article, as it reminds storytellers to get prepared to see their stories interpreted in myriads of ways once they want to experiment with a new language.

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# Thông điệp chống phân biệt chủng tộc trong thể loại phim blaxploitation

Nguyễn Lê Hoàng

*Khoa Ngôn ngữ và Văn hóa các nước nói tiếng Anh, Trường Đại học Ngoại ngữ, ĐHQGHN,  
Phạm Văn Đồng, Cầu Giấy, Hà Nội, Việt Nam*

**Tóm tắt:** "Blaxploitation" (được cấu thành từ hai từ "black" và "exploitation") là thể loại phim mà đặc trưng của nó là khai thác hình ảnh của người da đen nhằm lôi kéo chính khán giả người da đen đến rạp. Các phim thuộc thể loại blaxploitation ra đời rầm rộ nhất trong những năm 70 như một nỗ lực nhằm kể những câu chuyện "khác" về cộng đồng người da đen, và là lời đáp trả của các đạo diễn Hollywood trước sự chỉ trích rằng các nhân vật da đen trong phim từ xưa đến nay luôn bị gán cho những tính cách phản diện. Trong phạm vi bài viết này, người viết sẽ đặt lại các bộ phim blaxploitation vào bối cảnh lịch sử ra đời của chúng với mong muốn đánh giá cách thức các phong trào và tư tưởng chống phân biệt chủng tộc trong giai đoạn lịch sử đó được thể hiện trong các phim blaxploitation như thế nào. Bài viết cũng so sánh các bộ phim blaxploitation với các phim về đề tài phân biệt chủng tộc được làm trong những năm 1990 và 2000 để làm nổi bật lên cách thức các nhân vật da trắng và da đen được xây dựng trong phim và cách thức thể hiện mối quan hệ quyền lực giữa các nhân vật trong phim. So sánh các bộ phim về đề tài phân biệt chủng tộc trong các giai đoạn khác nhau cũng cho thấy những va chạm chủng tộc đã mang một sắc điệu khác trong ngôn ngữ điện ảnh: đó là xu hướng cổ vũ hòa giải thay cho xung đột.

*Từ khóa:* Blaxploitation, phân biệt chủng tộc, phân tích phim, văn hóa đại chúng.