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**Blaxploitation: An Empowering and/ or Disempowering Genre of
Black Americans**

**Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment for the Degree of
Master in Literature and Interdisciplinary Approaches**

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Abstract

Blaxploitation is a term coined in the United States during the early 1970s. It refers to a subgenre of exploitation films. In the United States, prior to the 1960s, black individuals and black culture, it should be pointed out, were portrayed through the lens of violence and brutality. On the contrary, with the emergence of this genre, they were in lead roles and at once able to incorporate Black Revolutionary Nationalism. In other words, Blaxploitation allowed black actors to be the stars of their own narratives. To understand Blaxploitation, this dissertation looked into this new genre. It revealed how Blaxploitation films came to light and how they were perceived not only by black Americans and Civil Rights Activists but also by white people. Our argument was that this genre had resulted in the opposite of the desired effect. Thus, slavery and its far-reaching consequences, for instance, were overshadowed and therefore seemed less damaging than they had actually been.

Keywords: Blaxploitation, Movies, Black Nationalism

DEDICATION

I dedicate this work to my father for his endless support and help.

To my beloved mother for her encouragements

To my dear brother and sweet sisters who kept on motivating me all the way long.

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General Introduction

Right after the presidential Emancipation Proclamation issued by United States President Abraham Lincoln in 1863, the white middle class –which was and still is Hollywood’s biggest audience –started leaving the cities and headed to the suburb. Consequently, and in the absence of a white audience, the cinemas went empty and their revenues declined. In the meantime, the black people who left the South formed the majority of the cities’ dwellers and became working class people. In 1964, although they celebrated the passing of the Civil Rights Act which granted them the right to vote, these black Americans were left adrift by the respectability politics of the black middle class and they felt without representation. Furthermore, they did not agree with the messages Hollywood’s movies used to convey about them.

Black men in American movies were depicted as pimps, drug dealers, and individuals taking the law into their own hands. As for women, they were often shown as servants. The criticism, which ensued, lied in that these movies portrayed crime and made the African American –and the Black American in general –accountable for it. This was the main criticism against these films. As a good instance of this was the situation that Melvin Ven Peebles, a black filmmaker, had faced.

Angered by such portrayal, Ven Peebles felt that he could make movies that accurately represented the experiences of the African American working class. With his independently financed feature *Sweet Sweetback’s baadassss song* (1971), he lit the match that would ignite the blaxploitation subgenre. In the course of time, more precisely, starting from the 1970s, the African/ Black Americans had an actual representation; those were the actors, whom they could watch and relate to and identify with. To investigate this representation, the following research questions were formulated: did these movies help African/ Black American artists to be more visible? And did they have relevance and real connection with both Black and white audiences? To answer these questions, this study examines and analyses a number of interviews starting from the 1930s and till the 1970s. It also analyses the shift in representation of African/ Black American culture during these periods.

The aim of this study is to reveal how the African/Black Americans went from being portrayed as the bad part of the society to being the protagonists of their own movies. By comparing and contrasting the movies of the 1930s and 1970s, this study attempts to explore if blaxploitation had had an impact on black and white communities and if it was an empowering or a destructive genre.

There have been many books and movies in the field of Black culture, especially in the United States. Yet, very few of them have dealt with the representation of real issues the African /Black Americans were facing. To this respect, this dissertation is divided into three chapters. The first chapter deals with the historical and socio-cultural background of Blaxploitation. The second chapter deals with the emergence of this genre while the third one revolves round standpoints, that is, Blaxploitation as an empowering and as a destructive genre. To back the present research, the researcher analyzed the following:

The 1930s

The Birth of a Nation, originally called *The Clansman*, is a movie which was produced in (1915)

Murder in Harlem (1935)

Gone with the Wind (1939). The film features a slave nursemaid as a prominent supporting character

The 1970s

Shaft (1971)

Foxy Brown (1974)

Twenty First Century

Django Unchained (2012)

Black Panther (2018)

Chapter One

Blaxploitation: Historical and Socio-Cultural background

Chapter One

Blaxploitation: Historical and Socio-Cultural backgrounds

Introduction

Although movies are seen as amusement, they may simultaneously constitute an incredible enticing power which can impact opinions through an intense blend of sights, sounds, and feelings. This is the case with some of them like *The Birth of a Nation*, *Murder in Harlem*, and *Gone With the Wind*. This chapter seeks to define the term Blaxploitation and to analyze the characterization of African Americans in movies before this genre's birth. By comparing these different examples and the directors and audience's reviews this chapter also aims to evaluate whether they had an impact on African Americans' social and mental consciousness or not.

1.1. Defining Blaxploitation

Blaxploitation, as its name imports, is a combination of two words: "black" and "exploitation." The term signifies an ethnic subgenre of exploitation films which emerged in the United States during the early 1970s. The term Blaxploitation was coined by Junius Griffin. The latter served as the head of an association that sought to improve the social status of the black minority. This organization was known as the Los Angeles National Association for the Advancement of Colored People. (NAACP)ⁱ

It is worthy to note that "before the genre's birth in the 1970s, the typical depiction of the black American in television and films was that of a sidekick or victim (Well 2018). Consequently, much criticism was addressed to the American film industry. The reason lies in the fact that this industry conveyed rather negative images of these people. In this light, Griffin intended his term to emphasize that Hollywood film industry was not only exploiting black audiences but also blackness itself.

1.2 Portrayal of the Black Americans in Pre-1970s Movies

Before the emergence of Blaxploitation and its consequences in embracing revolutionary black nationalismⁱⁱ worldwide, Hollywood movies directors used to show the Afri

can Americans in second roles. They always showed them under white people's services as servants, handmaids, or as criminals. Trere'vell Anderson, a journalist, who occupied the office of Director of Culture and Entertainment at *Out* magazine, writes in his article entitled "A look back at the blaxploitation era through 2018 eyes":

Prior to the early 1970s, representation in Hollywood for black performers was limited, to say the least. The roles most often involved being maids or servants. Even in the rare cases in which characters had some semblance of agency, they were usually alone in a sea of white faces and always remained safely subservient (Anderson 2018).

A good example for this depiction can be found in the following movies: *The Birth of a Nation* (1915), *Murder in Harlem*, (1935), and *Gone With the Wind* (1939), to name a few.

1.3 *The Birth of a Nation*

The Birth of a Nation, originally called *The Clansman*, is a movie which was produced in 1915 by David W. Griffith Corp. Company. The film was based on the book and play titled *The Clansman: A Historical Romance of the Ku Klux Klan*, written by a white supremacist, Thomas Dixon Jr.. The peculiarity of *The Birth of a Nation*, beside the fact that it was made by a supremacist, resides in that it encompassed many periods which contributed in making the history of the United States. These periods included the assassination of President Abraham Lincoln, the Civil War, and the Reconstruction Era. The movie starred many white actors painted in black who played the role of African-Americans.

Interestingly, the makeup, which was used by non black performers, was referred to as black face. The latter turned out to be a very popular theatrical form in the 19th century as it aimed to stigmatize and ridicule black people and in so doing it amused the whites a lot. The African American was depicted as an individual who was "unintelligent and sexually aggressive towards white women." The movie was perceived by many as a glorification and an attempt to revive the Ku Klux Klan (KKK), which in fact was revived in the 1920s, more precisely, in 1915.

The KKK stands for Ku Klux Klan. It is derived from the Greek Kuklos which means circle. The Klan is an American racist organization group whose primary target is the Black American. The Klan appeared three times during the history of the United States. The first was founded in 1856 and believed in the idea of white supremacy. In 1915, the second, the Revived Klan was based, as already mentioned on the wildly popular film, *The Birth of a Nation*. William J. Simmons, an Atlanta evangelist and insurance salesman, revived it because he wanted to purify southern culture.

The white costumes and burning crosses, which are until presently waved by its members are also inspired by the movie as observed by a young man named Ben Cameron. He witnessed white children disguising as ghosts to scare black children. The second Klan, however, did not fight only Black Americans. The second Klan fought the bootleggers,ⁱⁱⁱ wife beaters, adulterers, the Catholic Church, the Jews, and immigrants. As per the third Klan, it opposed the civil rights movements and desegregation, the practice of ending separation of people on account of race, which started in 1946. Although it still exists, this cult has split in numerous similarly motivated organizations.

The Birth of a Nation's portrayal of African Americans as dangerous and moral degenerates was sharply criticized and was at the origin of many riots in several American cities. Even more, it was banned by the NAACP. According to Ellen C. Scott, author of a recently published work *Cinema Civil Rights: Regulation, Repression, and race in the Classical Hollywood Era* (2015), "The film is one of the most racist films ever made. Maybe the most racist film ever made." She grounded her opinion in the fact "This film actually depicts lynching as a positive thing" and that its "politics....was essentially to say certain black people are worthy of being lynched. In that sense it's extremely racist." (Scott 2015)

Journalist Alexis Clark, an adjunct professor at Columbia Journalism School, quotes Paul Mc Ewan, a film studies professor at Muhlenberg College and author of *The Birth of Nation (BFI Film Classics)*: "The film argues that giving black people rights was a terrible, terrible error, that they did all sorts of horrible things that actually they didn't do, and that the noble Ku Klux Klan (KKK) was this wonderful saviour that saved America....It could not be any more wrong" (Clarke 2018). In order to counteract the negative por

trayal of blacks, African American film directors managed to make films which gave the other side to the story; among these one finds *Murder in Harlem*.

I.4 *Murder in Harlem*

Produced and directed by Oscar Micheaux in 1935, *Murder in Harlem*, was also released as *Lem Hawkins Confession*. Before making movies, Micheaux had embarked upon writing novels. He wrote seven in total and also short stories. In order to keep a total control of his literary production, he created his own publishing company, *Western Book Supply Company*. Micheaux, who is regarded as the pioneer of African American cinema, was contacted by *Lincoln Motion Picture Company*, which sought to adapt to cinema one of his books about race *The Homesteader*.

The novel, *The Homesteader*, takes place in South Dakota. It tells the story of a Scottish girl, Agnes, who was caught in a blizzard. She found refuge in an isolated house. She was not the only one. No sooner had she escaped from that terrible wind than she heard cries of Jean Baptiste, a Black homesteader, whom she rescued. Agnes was black but did not know it. As per Jean Baptiste, who fell in love with her, he was unable to overcome the social barriers. He resolved to leave Agnes and headed east. He married Orlean, the daughter of “a vain and greedy minister.” The latter and his other daughter, Ethel, persecuted Jean Baptiste. Later, Orlean went insane and committed suicide. Baptiste “returns to South Dakota; he finds Agnes and discovers that she is really Black. The two are able to be together and find happiness at last.”

Murder in Harlem tells the story of an African American night watch who found the murdered body of a white woman. Although he reported the incident to the police, he was soon accused of having murdered her. In the course of time, it appears that it was actually committed by a white man. Micheaux, in fact, based his movie on an actual trial which took place in 1913. It was that of Leo Frank who had been accused of having raped and murdered white Mary Phagan. She worked at a factory and was thirteen years old. As per Frank, he was a New York-born Jew who moved to Marietta, Georgia.

Through *Murder in Harlem*, Micheaux tried to bring to light the situation that the African Americans faced after the Emancipation Proclamation, which made of them free people, and the XIIITh Amendment, which abolished slavery. Thus, even though they were set free by law, they were always accused of being criminals and mentally enslaved. In this light, Micheaux sought to portray the negative incrimination stereotypes they used to face. In sum, he shed light on the fact that they were considered as second-class citizens and that whites agreed that a black man who may turn to the police for any sort of help was basically and necessarily a criminal.

In sum, a close look at the books, and later films, authored by Micheaux, helps notice that he wanted through his works to restore black people's dignity. In other words, as Matthew Bernstein put it in *Cinematic Justice Across the Color Line*, Micheaux' works "were composed of an exuberant *bricolage*^{iv} that drew upon whatever personal experiences and storylines he felt would amount to a compelling narrative compatible with his views about the place and conduct of blacks in America." (Micheaux 2004)

To restore black Americans' dignity, Micheaux resorted to the detective genre. In so doing, he sought to introduce different fields and thus gain more recognition in cinematography. It is no wonder that his contribution secured him the title of "pioneer producer-director, whose films offered a positive image and an alternative for African Americans in the 1920s and 1930s." (Micheaux § Leo 2004)

1. 5 *Gone With the Wind*

Despite the movie's assumed innocence and "absence" of racism, another movie, *Gone With the Wind* has been described as "the next leap forward, the Technicolor, talkie equivalent of *The Birth of a Nation*" (Marche 2014). Written in 1936 by a white novelist, Margaret Mitchell, this novel is, broadly speaking, a romance story during the Civil War and the Reconstruction Era. In her book, one of Mitchell's characters is an African American woman. She plays the role of a white person's servant. For the anti-racist critiques, Mitchell not only showed this woman in the motif of "the faithful servant" but also tried to show that she was rather happy and satisfied with her status.' (Ross 14) In reality, it cannot be denied that such women did exist.

The Civil Rights Leader, Malcolm X, in one of his famous speeches, which he delivered at Michigan State University on January 23, 1963, referred to this category of population as House Negroes. It is worth mentioning that Blacks abhorred such a status. However, since they were held as property, slaves' bodies and services belonged to the master. In sum, *Gone With the Wind* casted a black actress as a servant. In so doing, the "mammy" image became associated with blacks. The latter were type casted in this role and the whites made it look quite normal as they were born to occupy such positions. Yvonne D. Sims writes in her book *Women of Blaxploitation: How the Black Action Film Heroine Changed American Popular Culture* (Sims 2014):

Hollywood had found a new place for the Negro- in the kitchens, laundry rooms and pantries...historically, white women, in film were portrayed as models of self respect, self-control, and modesty- even sexual purity, but black women were often, portrayed as innately promiscuous, even predatory. The film industry used these stereotypes to reinforce and not challenge the preconceived notions of largely white audiences of black femininity (Sims 2014).

Conclusion

In conclusion, the African American male as well as female became an object on display. Thus, even though proclaimed free with the executive order issued by United States President Abraham Lincoln in 1863, they were still indirectly enslaved and objectified. A century of gruesome enslavement was somehow normalized and justified by white film makers through the way they portrayed them and the hidden messages they displayed. Consequently, they undertook to change this image. Black consciousness and urban riots compelled the American film industry to show the Black American in more dignified roles. This phenomenon is known as blaxploitation, the theme of chapter two.

Chapter Two: The Emergence of Blaxploitation

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Introduction

Right after the Civil Rights movement and a long struggle for social equality, the African Americans had finally access to cinematography as they could direct and produce their own movies. This was a chance for them to introduce themselves to the world and break down taboos that had been set previously. This chapter examines the reasons and causes behind the emergence of blaxploitation and how they were portrayed.

2. 1. Portrayal of Blacks in Blaxploitation

In the 1970s, Hollywood movie industry began to make films with all black casts. The black Americans' attempt to build up a realistic cinematic representation of themselves without stereotyping and humiliation was finally granted after urban riots had spread devastation throughout the country in the late 1960s. At this point, Revolutionary Black Nationalism was empowered and still is upon today.

The shift can be noticed with the rise of diverse movements which aim at fostering racial pride, self-sufficiency, and equality. Among these one find "Black History Month" and "Black Lives Matter." Many members of the African American community felt empowered as they eventually could introduce the world to Black power through books, music, street art, and movies. Insofar as movies are concerned, one finds to name a few, "Shaft", "Foxy Brown", "Django Unchained", and "Black Panther."

2.2. The Emergence of Blaxploitation

There are two fundamental causes behind the emergence of Blaxploitation. The first cause, as already mentioned, can be traced to the urban riots of the late 1960s. Hollywood movie makers realized that the African American was no longer disposed to accept his fate and the stereotypes which had been imposed on him. Consequently, the new cine

matic movement of the 1970s deemed it had better revalorize his image. This cinematic movement undertook to show them in more dignified and prominent roles. In other words, Hollywood embarked upon this enterprise and started rethinking its approach. In an article entitled *The History of Blaxploitation* (2018), Vidy Well argues:

The 1960s were not only a turbulent time for race relations in America, but also for Hollywood as well. With the resurgence of television and the rapid decline in popularity for musicals, the film industry was bleeding out and facing the possibility of bankruptcy. With the proud proclamations of “black power” becoming progressively more audible throughout America, it became impossible or Hollywood to ignore African American society, making it easier for black filmmakers and actors to begin to penetrate the system.” (Well 2018)

The second fundamental cause behind the emergence of this new genre of cinema was related to the political and social consciousness following the Civil Rights Movement. The latter was an era through which they voiced their thoughts to end racial segregation, oppression and through which they pointed out the idea of equality through violent and nonviolent protest. The movement was fuelled with blacks’ intolerance of years of enslavement and discrimination.

The African Americans had more than enough of prejudice and violence against them. The era started in 1954 as the NAACP activist, Rosa Parks, refused to give up her seat in a public bus to a white man. By 1968 they gained a greater social and economic mobility. They started expressing themselves through movies; the era of blaxploitation era had come to light. Under this head, the black film historian and professor of *Film and African-American studies* at New York University, Ed Guerrero, writes in his book *The Rise and Fall of Blaxploitation*. (2011)

These films were made possible by the rising political and social consciousness of black people (taking the form of a broadly expressed black nationalist impulse at the end of the civil rights movement), which translated into a large black audience thirsting to see their full humanity depicted on the commercial cinema screen. This surge in African-American identity and revolutionary politics led also to an outspoken, critical dissatisfaction with Hollywood's persistent degradation of African-Americans in films among black leaders, entertainers, and intellectuals. (Guerrero 2011)

2.3. *Shaft*

Originally produced in 1971 by Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer, *Shaft* was reproduced in 2019 by *Cinema, Davis*, and *Netflix Original Films*. It was distributed in the United States by *Warner Bros. Pictures* and internationally by *Netflix*. The film is a crime action movie. It shows for the first time a Black James Bond. The film tells the story of John Shaft, a black detective played by Richard Roundtree, “the first black action hero.” (Sam 2020)

Shaft first finds himself up against the leader of a crime mob, then against Black nationals and finally comes to work with the white mafia. This film prompted the recognition of Black actors on the screen. As actor, although he did not appear, Jim Brown, the famous African American footballer, declared: “I looked at it as an opportunity for me to break down taboos. To play roles that had never before been played by black actors.” (Walker et al 2009)

2.4. *Foxy Brown*

Shaft was not the only movie with a black cast. The idea is that if Gordon Parks' *Shaft* can be regarded as the match that sparked the ignition of the blaxploitation movement, then Jack Hill's *Foxy Brown* was the fuse that lit the dynamite. *Foxy Brown* was produced and distributed in 1974 by *American International Pictures*. Written and directed by white film maker, Jack Hill. This movie reinforced black women's image within society. It tells the story of one Foxy Brown, a black woman, who seeks to avenge her boyfriend who had been killed by a government agent. To reach her goal, she uses her afro identity and her gun as deadly weapons.

The movie's important aspect is that it gives a more dignified image of the Black American woman. The latter does not appear anymore as the servant, the vulnerable resilient and weak gender. Furthermore, it shows that Black women can stand up for themselves and for what they believe in. In an interview, Black actress Pam Grier, said about the movie:

The 1970s was a time of freedom and women saying that they needed empowerment. There was more empowerment and self-discovery than any other decade I remember. All across the country, a lot of women were *Foxy Brown* and *Coffy*. They were independent, fighting to save their families not accepting rape or being victimized... This was going on all across the country. I just happened to do it on film. I don't think it took any great genius or great imagination. I just exemplified it, reflecting it to society (Yvonne 76).

Despite the movie's validation and admiration by many African Americans, *Foxy Brown* underwent sharp criticism. In her book *Women of Blaxploitation*, the African American novelist, Yvonne D. Sims writes:

In a time when African Americans were making progress politically, socially, and culturally, *Foxy Brown's* heroine contradicted the image they were creating for themselves in society. Though Foxy is considered a heroine in this film, her role as vengeful black woman willing to pose as a prostitute and exposing herself throughout the film goes against some of the characteristics one would expect in a heroine. It also addresses the stereotype of the objectification of black women.”

2.5. Django Unchained

The production of blaxploitation movies, which spread in the United States, has embraced other fields such as music. Black people introduced the world to Soul, Funk, R&B and Jazz. They also created their own soundtracks to revive the slaves who imposed their own hymns and rhythms. In fact, they have always been known for their rhythmic, danceable music as they sang during plantations to ease up their pain. Regarding movies, *Django Unchained*, produced by *The Weinstein Company* in 2012 centers on a slave trying to rescue his wife from a Mississippi plantation.

With the help of a German bounty hunter, it was shown that during slavery, some white supported the case of Blacks and stood against the idea of white supremacy. A perfect example for such action was the trans-cultural appeal witnessed in *Selma*. Produced by Cloud Eight Films and Harpo Films, the movie is about the Civil rights leader Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr and his march from Selma Alabama to the state capital. During the March people whatever their religion or color of skin including priests, nuns, ministers, and rabbis joined in and supported the American black in his pursuit of equality, freedom, and justice.

2.6. *Black Panther*

Another Blaxploitation movie which is worth mentioning is *Black Panther*. Produced by Marvel Studios, and distributed by Walt Disney Studios, the movie recounts the story of a prince named T'challa who had been crowned king in his country, Wakanda. Later on, he faced many obstacles and enemies that put the fate of Wakanda and the entire world at risk.

The movie is considered by some as a revolutionary step forward for Black superheroes and superhero movies overall. During the 1970s many imitations of classics were made. Thus "*Dracula*" became "*Blacula*." Further interpretations like "*Black Jesus*", "*Black Caesar*" or the "*Black Godfather*" were also made. In sum, the African American had for the first time his own superheroes. He therefore could look up to them and be inspired from them.

As it includes the theme of feminism, the movie also shows the empowerment of women and their primordial impact within society. "Women are shown as a formidable figure and not just a decorative film. The role of women was importantly significant for the success of King T'Challa as he managed to solve the problems that occurred in Wakanda, ranging from lover T'Challa Nakia (Lupita Nyong'o), mother T'Challa Ramonda (Angela Basset), and his sister Shuri (Letitia Wright)

Conclusion

To conclude, this movie chief merit lies in that it glorifies Blacks and Blackness itself. It shows Africa as a land of futuristic rich resources and not as some primitive backward land as it was shown previously. The movie *Black Panther* takes place in a futuristic Africa which has the world's leading source of vibranium, a metal known for its technological powers. "The movie was perceived as a game changer a landmark in term of representation of black people in cinema and consideration of issues facing Africa and Africans, and a new way of telling black stories to a mass audience." (Besnah 2020) Despite the diverse opinions and perception of these movies and the messages they displayed. The genre was overall considered as an empowerment by most African Americans and a step forward towards black power.

Chapter Three

Blaxploitation: An Empowering and/ or Disempowering Genre of Black Americans

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Introduction

Blaxploitation came at a time when African/Black Americans craved for a real representation devoid of stereotypes and taboos. Although their dreams may have come true, many Black directors and actors do not agree with the genre's portrayal as they deem it to be either indirectly racist or simply dissatisfactory. This chapter examines the different opinions which see in this kind of films either a destructive or an empowering genre.

3.1. Blaxploitation as Destructive Genre

As blaxploitation genre grew and became globally recognized, many African American and Black American directors and actors stood against the messages which were being conveyed. One instance is that of actor Will Smith. While sharing a talk about Race relations in the United States on *The Late Show* with the black comedian Stephen Colbert, he pointed out: "Racism is not getting worse, it's getting filmed" (Colbert 2016). According to him, the fact that white movie directors are making movies with black casts does in no manner mean that the African Americans would see in them an empowering genre. And many do not.

The best example is that of *Django Unchained* by the white movie maker Quentin Tarantino. Shortly after the release, a myriad of Black/African Americans argued that Quentin had been rather disrespectful in his tackling of the burning issue of slavery. Others argued that this Blaxploitation movie was made by a white filmmaker rather than a black. In this light, it was quite logical and normal that he did not go deep into the sufferings which the enslaved had endured for centuries. Among those who sharply criticized this movie, one finds the African American movie maker, Spike Lee, and the African American Civil Rights leader, Louis Farrakhan.

Spike Lee criticized *Django Unchained* on the ground that it was disrespectful to his ancestors. In passing, according to estimates, between eleven and thirteen million Africans were taken to North and South America as slaves. They were enchained and packed aboard overcrowded ships. During the crossing of the Atlantic, many were thrown overboard when the crew noticed a shortage of food or in case of control of the ship after the trade had been declared illegal by the United States Constitution. Upon their arrival, the slaves were sold at the auction block. The families were separated with no prospect of a future meeting.

Part of the slaves worked inside of the house of their masters; they were known as House Negroes. The majority, which worked in plantations, was known as field Negroes. Whatever their status, both their bodies and services belonged to the owner. Those who tried to escape were hunted by dogs and were returned to the owner in case they were not killed. In short, for four hundred years, innumerable African Americans lived under bondage; they were killed, raped, lynched etc.

In *Django Unchained* both the House and the field Negroes looked well dressed and well fed. Most important, although Tarantino dealt with the issue of slavery, the living conditions in his film did not appear as harsh as in reality. Consequently, Spike Lee's reproach was that Tarantino did not give a true picture of the brutality, abuse, and cruelty that Lee's ancestors had been through.

Given the shortcomings of this film, Lee, made it plain that black stories should be told by his people. Furthermore, he refused to see it and claimed "...All I'm going to say is that it's disrespectful to my ancestors. That's just me I'm not speaking on behalf of anybody else.... American slavery was not a Sergio Leone spaghetti western. It was a Holocaust. My ancestors are slaves. Stolen from Africa." (Dillon, 2012).

Likewise, for the leader of the Nation of Islam^{iv}, Louis Farrakhan, *Django Unchained* could stir controversy and to borrow, "it's preparation for race war." The reproach in this case is that almost all the white casts were shown as evil people. Consequently, both the whites and blacks would be, although for different reasons, infuriated. The former's

anger will be rooted in the fact that all whites are bad which contradicts the role some had played in helping the Blacks gain their freedom. As per the latter, as already mentioned, the issue of slavery had been dealt with in a superficial manner. Dr. Farrakhan's feeling after watching the film was:

Well, how does a white person see that? How do white people who feel the guilt of what their fathers have done to us, how do they feel? Do you think that they don't think that if Black folk had a chance to do to them what they had done to us – that's what the movie is saying – that one out of ten thousand will be like that and maybe more? (Watkins 2013)

Insofar as casts, direction of movies, The African American historian W.E.B. Du Bois went further. In "Back in 1926", he explains in *Crisis Magazine* that theater plays produced for a black audience must be 'about us', 'by us,' 'for us' and 'near us" (Du Bois 2013). Despite the critics, the movie was also seen through a positive perspective and received gratitude and applause for it included the themes of heroism and courage. The Black hero avenges his wife and people and "triumphs over his evil oppressors." In this light, the idea of avenging his people for the 100 years of horrific enslavement that they went through in reality empowered the African community.

3.2. Blaxploitation as an Empowering Genre

Blaxploitation is an empowering genre as it may be seen as a genre that reflects the society's dominant ideologies and influences different belief systems. This is due to the fact that it contains greater employment since white movie makers use all black casts and positive depictions of their history. In sum, this genre gives them the chance to recount their own stories. However, despite the "positive" aspects, Black/African Americans think that movies made by blacks themselves would convey the message better than when made by whites.

Reliance is a major defining characteristic of the whole genre. Instead of relying on the white authority and seeking for a good perception, African/Black Americans were supposed to rely on themselves. Many Black and directors had to finance their own movies. This was

the case of the previously mentioned “Shaft.” The latter inspired many African Americans as John Shaft played by Black actor, Richard Roundtree. He was shown through a heroic figure. For critic Rathburn: “These were not just movies, they were manuals on how to survive as a black man in a changing world. They became icons of masculinity and provided an African American hero when both were in short supply in a racist American society.” (Rathbun 2018)

Blaxploitation also allows women to speak up for their rights and prove they have a role to play within the society. Far from being shown as maids and round mammies Blaxploitation has managed to restore their dignity by showing them in more considerate positions. Marquita R. Smith in her article titled *Sexual Politics and Gender Inequity in the Liberation Struggles of the Black Militant Woman* writes: “Blaxploitation movies provided alternative images of black femininity that signified empowerment and liberation for many African American women who were tired of viewing filmic images of black women as maids or seductresses” (Smith 2009).

As per Yvonne D. Sims, for whom these casts defined a new generation role models for black women to look up to, she writes in her book *Women of Blaxploitation: How the Black Action Film Heroine Changed American Popular Culture*:

Hollywood has always produced films with strong heroine’s, but the action genre had been dominated by white male actors until blaxploitation movies were released. Given the historic representation of African American women in cinema, a black actress starring in a genre dominated by actors was unheard of until the early 1970s. (2006).

Conclusion

After having presented different standpoints regarding the role of Blaxploitation movies in empowering or disempowering Black and African Americans, opinions regarding Blaxploitation are still divided. A myriad of Black and African Americans continue to think that it undeniably constitutes an empowering genre and a step towards equality and acceptance. Others deem that that the stories and characters of Blaxploitation films are destructive and disrespectful.

General Conclusion

In order to achieve their political, social and human rights, the black Americans went through a long journey of struggles and efforts. Their struggle for freedom aroused more consciousness. They started emphasizing self-reliance through literary and artistic movements. They also created their own movies through Blaxploitation. However, this genre is regarded as a double-edged sword. In fact, it has both a positive and negative impact and influence on American society. Even though it somehow allows the black Americans to mark their territory and impose themselves, many conflicts were raised upon it. Thus, they were not ready to forgive the 300 years of gruesome enslavement their ancestors had been through and nor were some whites ready to stop racial oppression and accept the idea of one race, the human race.

Throughout this work and after analyzing different movies, articles and reviews, we came to the conclusion that although Blaxploitation is a huge leap towards a better future, the black Americans are still living in segregation and racism. Despite the movie's aim for visibility, numerous white Americans still refuse to accept and integrate. They continue to treat them upon their skin. From racist comments they face daily to a racist system, the struggle continues. The perfect example for this struggle is the "Black Lives Matter" movement against police brutality, violence, and racism. America is facing a tumultuous situation owing to the police departments and its 400 years history of racism.

It is worth to note that this genre is both destructive and empowering. On the one hand it allows them to voice their demands for justice and to gain a role within the American society. It makes the whole world question: What would America be without American Blacks and/or Black Americans? The latter introduced to white Americans to their music and art, their food, their style of worship, and their sense of community, and in the process re-shaped America's own identity and its vision of itself. Today, if we think about many elements of American culture, we notice it has some of its roots in Black American culture.

On the other hand, racism and discrimination have increased. Numerous white American movie makers keep on stereotyping blacks and casting them. Consequently, it is not surprising to see Black Americans stand against the idea of whites making movies about the horrible events they had been through for the simple reason that they were not in their place and will not be.

Notes

ⁱ **National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP):** Interracial American organization created to work for the abolition of segregation and discrimination in housing, education, employment, voting, and transportation; to oppose racism; and to ensure African Americans their constitutional rights. The NAACP was created in 1909 by an interracial group consisting of W.E.B. Du Bois, Ida Bell Wells-Barnett, Mary White Ovington, and others concerned with the challenges facing African Americans, especially in the wake of the 1908 Springfield (Illinois) Race Riot. Source: Encyclopedia Britannica.

ⁱⁱ **Revolutionary Black Nationalism** is an ideology that combines cultural nationalism with scientific socialism in order to achieve Black self-determination. Proponents of the ideology argue that revolutionary Black Nationalism is a movement that rejects all forms of oppression, including class based exploitation under capitalism. Source: Wikipedia

ⁱⁱⁱ **Bootlegging:** In U.S. history, illegal traffic in liquor in violation of legislative restrictions on its manufacture, sale, or transportation. The word apparently came into general use in the Midwest in the 1880s to denote the practice of concealing flasks of illicit liquor in boot tops when going to trade with Native Americans. Source: Encyclopedia Britannica.

^{iv} **Bricolage:** In art or literature) construction or creation from a diverse range of available things. Source: Wikipedia

^{iv} **The Nation of Islam (NOI)** is an African American political and new religious movement, founded in Detroit, Michigan, United States, by Wallace D. Fard Muhammad on July 4, 1930. Its stated goals are to improve the spiritual, mental, social, and economic condition of African Americans. Source: Wikipedia

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