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Appalling! Terrifying! Wonderful! Blaxploitation and the Cinematic Image of the South

Abstract: The so-called blaxploitation genre – a brand of 1970s film-making designed to engage young Black urban viewers – has become synonymous with channeling the political energy of Black Power into larger-than-life Black characters beating “the [White] Man” in real-life urban settings. In spite of their urban focus, however, blaxploitation films repeatedly referenced an idea of the South whose origins lie in antebellum abolitionist propaganda. Developed across the history of American film, this idea became entangled in the post-war era with the Civil Rights struggle by way of the “race problem” film, which identified the South as “racist country,” the privileged site of “racial” injustice as social pathology.¹ Recently revived in the widely acclaimed works of Quentin Tarantino (*Django Unchained*) and Steve McQueen (*12 Years a Slave*), the two modes of depicting the South put forth in blaxploitation and the “race problem” film continue to hold sway to this day. Yet, while the latter remains indelibly linked, even in this revised perspective, to the abolitionist vision of emancipation as the result of a struggle between idealized, plaintive Blacks and pathological, racist Whites, blaxploitation’s troping of the South as the fulfillment of grotesque White “racial” fantasies offers a more powerful and transformative means of addressing America’s “race problem.”

Keywords: blaxploitation, American film, race and racism, slavery, abolitionism

The year 2013 was a momentous one for “racial” imagery in Hollywood films. Around the turn of the year, Quentin Tarantino released *Django Unchained*, a sardonic action-film fantasy about an African slave winning back freedom – and his wife – from the hands of White slave-owners in the antebellum Deep South. In spite of controversies, such as the alleged overuse of “the n-word,” the film received five Oscar nominations (including for Best Picture) and two Oscars. That summer, as the Black Lives Matter movement began to take shape, Steve McQueen’s *12 Years a Slave* – an adaptation of a nineteenth-century slave narrative by Solomon Northup – debuted to widespread critical acclaim. It went on to win the Best Picture Oscar at the 2014 Academy Awards ceremony. Both films were historic in their separate ways. *Django Unchained*’s ultra-violent revenge plot allowed Jamie Foxx’s Django to embody a menacing Black masculinity without remorse in a violent fantasy of a slave avenging himself on slave-owners. *12 Years a Slave*, on the other hand, repeatedly hints at universal images of “racial” violence, such as lynching photographs. As a headhunter, Django is consciously anachronistic, a parody of blackface minstrelsy’s Zip Coon – an “uppity” Black dandy (Lott 23; Nama 117). As a slave, Solomon Northup is a virtually transparent victim of a historic injustice – made more accessible than his literary model at the expense of the source’s cognitive weight (Stevenson 106-118). Both films thus represent the Black experience as a historical event, using symbols and images that have a determinate history, but from a thoroughly contemporary angle.

1 Throughout the text, the words “race” and “racial” are put in quotation marks to highlight the questionable status of the pseudo-scientific notion undergirding systems of dehumanizing oppression.

Yet, the manner in which this is achieved is by no means unproblematic. Django's story only begins in earnest when he is set free by a White German headhunter, Dr. King Schultz, who seeks to exploit the slave's intimate knowledge of a group of renegades. Indeed, it is Schultz's death that propels the film toward the grotesque, painstakingly choreographed final bloodbath that betrays Tarantino's fascination with 1970s exploitation film. While Northup's story is hardly as spectacular, it features a similar dramatic leap. Before his kidnapping, Northup is an insignificant figure, a "middling" man, whose Blackness is a superficial fact.² Once he becomes a slave, his very existence in itself becomes proof of the injustice of the slave system. Like Django, who travels across a progressively dystopian slave country, Northup slowly descends toward the bleakest side of slavery, where no benevolence can hide the inherent cruelty of the system. Then, like Django pulled out of insignificance by the will of one White man, Northup is saved by a White Canadian artisan who empathizes with the slave. Neither protagonist carries much significance without the intervention of the White "participant observer" – a figure as old as the slave narratives (Stepito; Olney 46-73). Without Dr. Schultz, *Django Unchained* is traumatic and inaccessible; it is his investment in Django's story of lost love that creates space for audience identification with both characters: not as quirky and ultra-violent vagabonds, but as relatable people (Johnson 13-21). By the same token, Brad Pitt's cameo as the Canadian artisan grants the character not only an attractive physique, but also a simplicity and frankness that is otherwise absent from *12 Years a Slave*, thus helping to frame the "message" of the film.

It is mostly because of these White witnesses that both texts gain universal ramifications. At the outset, Django only seeks vengeance and reunification with Broomhilda, the wife he was separated from. Schultz's progressive empathy transforms Django's quest into something deeply human. The transformation also explains Schultz's demise: unable to bear the inhumanity of racism, he sacrifices Django's personal happiness by killing the perverse, pretentious slave-owner Calvin Candie – a true Enlightened man denying recognition to a despicable impostor (Dassanowsky 21-23). Though not as dramatic, the contrast between the anti-slavery White Northerners and slave-owning White Southerners in *12 Years a Slave* is also disturbingly stark. The film conjectures a North of "racial" equality, where Northup can pursue an American Dream for himself and his family without facing White oppression, in contrast to the unequal and inhuman South. Northup's kidnapping conjures up the specter of the basic inequality between Blacks and Whites in antebellum America (Stevenson 108-109). White "racial" duplicity then contrives to move Northup further and further South, until he reaches the hell of a Louisiana plantation – a place whose distance from the protagonist's family home serves to underline the basic humanity of his struggle.

In both cases, the (proximate) presence of slavery provides the backdrop to a peculiar morality play. On the one hand, these films narrate a struggle between good and evil, set in terms common to nineteenth-century abolitionist propaganda. The body of the slave becomes a stake in the contest between two visions of Whiteness: White (Western) civilization as a moral mission (Dr. Schultz) or as the pursuit of power and

2 Pero Dagbovie points out that this characterization is at odds with the realities of life of free Blacks in New York (Dagbovie 95).

wealth (*12 Years a Slave*'s Master Epps) (Dyer 35-36). Thus, the Black body is only available as a means by which the Western man achieves supremacy, either as a man of God, or as a man of capital (Baker 19-25). On the other hand, the slave's initial destitution and later resurgence is symbolized by the absence or presence of familial bonds. Here, too, the Black body provides the necessary reflective surface for a White tale. The moral failure of the Godless man of capital, after all, consists not merely in the act of trading in human bodies, but rather in a psychological regression expressed on the level of civilization and family relations. It is not enough that Calvin Candie be an amoral exploiter of human beings; he must also be a fake, putting on the airs of an educated Western man and maintaining questionable relations with multiple female members of his household, including his own sister. By the same token, Epps must both express inhuman excesses of power as a slave-owner and exercise his sexuality on a female slave while neglecting his White wife – and implicitly dragging her into the mud of his moral depravity.

The manner in which Tarantino and McQueen negotiate these perspectives provides a crucial connection between the legacies of abolitionist propaganda (as well as its blackface parody) and the post-World War II aesthetic revisions coinciding with the Civil Rights and Black Power movements. In the figures of the docile, enduring slave and the assertive, resisting freedman, the two filmmakers capture the spirit of two divergent traditions of Black representation, rendered in two major post-war Black-themed genres of American cinema: the “race problem” film and blaxploitation. In this context, Northrup represents the assimilationist ambitions of the Civil Rights movement, driven by a belief in the ultimate triumph of justice and the perception of racism as a curable ailment of the individual. Django, on the other hand, stands for the desire for self-assertion and independence, made readily apparent by his embrace of the figure of the frontiersman. Both aesthetic currents focused on ideas of masculinity and the family, positing slavery and “racial” oppression as a form of emasculation and denial of patriarchal privilege and deploying an idea of the South as a signifier for the perversion of patriarchy. However, as the contrast between *12 Years a Slave* and *Django Unchained* demonstrates, the decay the South comes to represent, rather than containing the “racial” drama initiated by slavery, carries within itself the power to destroy “race.”

I.

Perhaps the prime example of abolitionist propaganda, Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* played a vital role in establishing stereotypical ideas about slavery and Blackness that continue to inform American popular culture today. The story of a slave's collapse from forced labor in the fields of Kentucky to physical and psychological terror in the plantations of Louisiana dramatizes the contrast between slavery as an educational institution and as a means of inhuman exploitation. Though critical of the institution, Stowe nevertheless upholds notions of Black inferiority, portraying “mixed-race” characters as more intelligent and attractive than “pure racial types” and reducing the latter to stereotypically comic or melodramatic roles not far removed from stage caricatures known from blackface minstrelsy. The tenor of

the descriptions of the slaves seems peculiarly aligned with the conditions in which they were brought up; religious Blacks reside adjacent to religious slave-owners and “unruly,” amoral “pickaninnies” next to sinful White wretches. As a result, slavery in Kentucky is presented as a form of paternalism, if marked by anxieties over what was already being called “miscegenation” and its impact on the system. However, once the plot moves to Louisiana, two divergent versions of slave management emerge: one typified by St. Clare, whose name (and world-weary attitude) imply old European noble roots and, in consequence, whole generations of experience in slave-ownership, and another by Simon Legree, a *nouveau-riche*, godless Northerner. While Legree’s evil is diametrically opposite to Tom’s goodness, it also represents a melodramatic rendition of a type common to slave narratives – of a ruthless White “slave breaker” willing to countenance even loss of property if it fails to submit to his will.

Legree’s significance as a symbol cannot be overstated. Like the Wedgwood medallion depicting the slave with his shackled arms raised in a two-dimensional plea for recognition as man, Stowe’s devilish slave-owner is both true to the period and highly unrealistic. However, while other instances of masters wronging their slaves in the novel are motivated by either economic hardship or ignorance – Black persons being treated as property even when they are virtually members of the family – in his case, the wrong is committed out of a desire for supremacy that seems to be a product of the specific setting of the act. The incident of Legree’s settlement in Louisiana is explained primarily by the potential for wealth accumulation that a cheap Southern plantation provides to a sharp, ruthless Northern moneymaker. The novel justifies the slave master’s evil ways by describing him as a coarse man who subscribes to the frontier idea of masculinity, favoring mobility and acquisition over domesticity and family. Designed to represent the worst of the South’s “peculiarity,” he is also the product of a failed family, inevitably reproducing the failure in his own household (Stowe 485-486). Viewed from this perspective, the destruction of Tom is also an expression of a perverted notion of patriarchy, devoid of its normative paternalism.

By denying the devilish Legree the privilege of paternalism, Stowe disputed a common argument made by proponents of slavery before emancipation. Antebellum slave-owners argued that enslavement was a natural condition for Blacks, either because it was practiced in Africa, or because Africans were perceived as congenitally unfit to exercise full citizen privileges. For some, slavery provided a fitting transition into full manhood, helping transform savage people into civilized men through hard work and character formation – albeit without a specified deadline (Pieterse 39-51). Once slavery was abolished, its apologists foresaw a complete destruction of society, with Whites disenfranchised and Blacks left without necessary guidance or control (Fredrickson 79-82). Already perceived as savages, freedmen were now subjected to increasing amounts of violence, justified through notions of Black hypersexuality encapsulated in the myth of the black rapist (Davis 172-201). The influence exerted by this narrative is best illustrated by the impact of one of its most well-known cultural expositions – D.W. Griffith’s ground-breaking Civil War epic, *The Birth of a Nation*. A story of two families – one from the North, one from the South – divided by the exigencies of American “racial” politics, the film provides ample visual evidence to the benefits of slavery, particularly through the figure of

the Black Mammy (played by a White male actor in blackface), who commands the domestic spaces of the White family home and scolds “uppity” Blacks for transgressing the “racial” rules of the South (Robinson 59-62). Emancipation figures as a moment of anarchy that leads directly into injustice, with veterans of the war denied a voice in their own communities, now taken over by rough, ignorant, and brutal Blacks. Inevitably, Black misrule leads to a major transgression when a rogue Black Union soldier (again, a White in blackface) stalks the little sister of the film’s main protagonist – a Confederate officer. The girl’s suicide – committed in defense of her virtue – prompts the lynching of the soldier by a group of men in white hoods, a symbolic birth of the Ku-Klux-Klan.³

While Griffith’s film thus helped enshrine the myth of the Black rapist in American culture, the literary sources for the film, written by Thomas Dixon, Jr., offered a somewhat more contrived notion of “racial” relations. Dixon professed the view that slavery, in fact, had a negative impact on America because it introduced into the purely White community a foreign, inferior element. With its arrival, the American nation itself was degraded; sexual relations between the “races” produced a class of unhinged individuals driven by the urges of the bestial Blacks, but possessive of the ambitions and a modicum of the intellect that typified Whites. In the film, the impact of this group of people is depicted through the figures of Lydia Brown and Silas Lynch – two characters whose hypersexuality is blamed for both the outbreak of the war and the implementation of Reconstruction.⁴ Brown, the housekeeper of Congressman Stoneman, a major Northern politician (modeled on Thaddeus Stevens), seduces the man and drives him to push for the war; Lynch, Stoneman’s protégé, promotes the cause of “miscegenation” in Southern state legislatures while lusting after the politician’s daughter. Individual sexual depravity thus leads to the collapse of morality and threatens the integrity of White families (Rogin 150-195).

II.

Griffith’s retelling of Dixon’s narrative achieved immense popularity in its day, but the viability of both texts also stemmed from their resonance in a segregated US. The early twentieth century saw the Great Migration begin to alter the image of major American cities. At the same time, the Lost Cause narrative, in tandem with mainstream cultural tendencies, served to reinforce the image of the South as an idyll of benevolent, courteous masters, lazy, but ultimately obedient slaves, and idealized, pure mistresses. Perfected in the romanticized portrayal of the Old South in Hollywood’s plantation genre, these Southern Belles, epitomized by Vivien Leigh’s Scarlett O’Hara in *Gone With the Wind*, represented a devious and deceptive mode of hyperfemininity set in melodramatic plots centering on the transformation of a “jezebel” into a “respectable” (noble)woman (Robinson 123-124). Typified by heightened sensuality, whimsicality,

3 The film is credited with reviving the Klan after a period of nonexistence (Robinson 114-115).

4 Susan Gubar highlights the “racial” ambiguity of the “mixed-race” characters – again, played by White actors in brownface – who can plausibly be claimed to look Jewish (Gubar 61). Cedric Robinson identifies the story of Leo Frank – a Jewish American lynched for allegedly raping a young White woman – as a major inspiration for the film (Robinson 112-114).

and treacherousness, Hollywood's Southern Belles unavoidably invoked the specter of "miscegenation" – of "race" as a biological threat to White "racial" purity, but also as a stumbling block in social (and family) relations. In fact, with the arrival of the post-World War II "problem film," "racial" conflicts were increasingly traced to failures of the family and, by extension, to a certain culture of bigotry.

Whether viewed from the perspective of sexual, labor, or social relations, "problem films" blamed racism on the South and its inherent perversities. In Elia Kazan's *Pinky*, the revelation of Black ancestry turns the main protagonist from a respectable figure into a pariah fit for abuse (including sexual) by backward Southerners (Bogle 147-154). Other films, such as *Home of the Brave*, pitted sympathetic Blacks against ragingly ignorant Whites (De Rosa 52-73). During the 1950s, the blame for antisocial – particularly racist – behavior became more explicitly tied to Southern family dysfunction. Stanley Kramer's *The Defiant Ones* traces the progress of two escaped convicts in the South, one White (Tony Curtis), one Black (Sidney Poitier). Poitier's Noah Cullen spends most of the runtime re-educating his racist companion, who is increasingly exposed as a victim of failed upbringing. Toward the end of the film, Noah's efforts are thwarted by the appearance of a single White mother who clings to Joker, the White convict, as her chance for an escape; to that end, she reinforces Joker's racism with her own and proceeds to misdirect the Black convict into a nearby swamp in the hope that he will die or be caught. When Joker learns of the woman's duplicity, he immediately rallies to Noah's side, in spite of being shot by the woman's son. The two men achieve complete mutual recognition just before the search party finds them stranded by a railway line – a fact signified by Poitier's rendering of the Black folk song "Long Gone," a symbol of the "colorblindness" of the fugitive's plight.

The "problem film's" notion that America's "racial" problem is individual and should be administered to by patient, exemplary Negroes paralleled the media image of the Civil Rights struggle. Around the turn of the 1950s, American viewers were routinely treated to images of White violence against peaceful Black protesters, mostly in the South. The notion of the South as "racist country," psychologically attuned to a backward, hateful ideology, became ingrained in the public imaginary (Berger; Walker 41-66). Hollywood played its part, too: in figures such as Atticus Finch from *To Kill a Mockingbird*, acting as the healthy, liberal conscience of a wayward people, the industry established a paradigm for representing rural White Southerners. In the film, Finch defends a Black worker accused of raping the daughter of a poor White farmer. As the prosecutor ramps up the racist rhetoric, the defense studiously disputes the assertions of the victim, who is eager to sacrifice the man to hide her own fascination with him (Graham 160-165).⁵ Failing families also feature prominently in such films as *Pressure Point*, where Poitier plays a psychiatrist treating a White Nazi sympathizer.⁶ The man's hateful ideology is explained as a result of hateful upbringing

5 Allison Graham sets *To Kill a Mockingbird* against *Cape Fear*, another contemporaneous Gregory Peck vehicle, to highlight the way in which the backward "redneck" fills the part of the liberal Southerner's repressed (Graham 162-165).

6 Poitier's reminiscence of the fact is prompted by a problematic case involving a Black adolescent filled with hatred of Whites – another failed family scenario which curiously resonates with the conclusions of the so-called Moynihan Report (discussed below).

in a broken home; inevitably, he fails the test of manhood, pursuing supremacy by socially unacceptable means.

Toward the end of the 1960s, as the Civil Rights movement fizzled out following the legislative changes it had clamored for (including the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965, both of which greatly reduced the potential for public mistreatment of Black people across the country), American culture was gradually forced to face the fact that the problem of racism was not limited to the South. As cities in the North burned in the latter half of the 1960s, set ablaze by Black populations frustrated by the persistence of “racial” oppression, Hollywood offered a highly guarded response to the challenge. In *Guess Who’s Coming to Dinner*, Poitier portrays a ridiculously overqualified doctor who woos a young, White, San Franciscan socialite from an upper-class, liberal family. His proposal proves unsettling to the girl’s parents, who justify their perplexity by invoking an idea of the South ensconced in the “anti-miscegenation” prejudice of “those people.” The young ones’ wish is ultimately granted, but only at the cost of reinforcing the dominance of the patriarch: the father’s consent, ostensibly giving in to their demands, is in fact proof of his power. In other words, if “racial” progress is hindered by backward convictions and lack of civilization, the best solution is to reinforce “traditional family values” against the bigots and the radicals alike (Courtney 187-217).⁷

Poitier’s other major hit of 1967, *In the Heat of the Night*, transports him into the South as a Philadelphia policeman apprehended as a suspect in a murder case. Though he has a cast-iron alibi – he has only arrived to the town’s train station for a nightly layover on his way back from his mother’s place – this fails to prevent disrespectful behavior and racist statements from the local officers. Once his identity is confirmed (via phone, by his – presumably White – superiors), he is released and finds himself enlisted as an expert, gradually winning over the local sheriff. During the investigation, Poitier’s Virgil Tibbs grows increasingly suspicious of a local patrician: a large landowner who runs a cotton plantation not unlike those found in the antebellum South. When challenged, the man responds to Tibbs’ accusations with typical White slave-master’s indignation, slapping the Black officer across the face, to which Tibbs replies in kind. The detective’s unwillingness to follow “racial” protocol eventually prompts a mob to descend on him. The seemingly inevitable lynching is only averted when the killer steps forward – an unhinged young man who committed the murder unintentionally whilst robbing a wealthy local to fund his girlfriend’s abortion. The film’s ending, which offers a promise of reconciliation in the figure of Rod Steiger’s Sheriff Gillespie (a role that earned the actor an Oscar), ultimately only reaffirms the common theme of the South’s intransigence and moral degradation (Baldwin 44-49, 57ff.).

III.

By the late 1960s, the “race problem” traveled from the South up to major cities in the North. Following a series of urban riots prompted by various instances of White violence – from social exclusion, through police brutality, to outright murder – the

⁷ The film’s premiere coincided roughly with the conclusion of the *Loving v. Virginia* Supreme Court case concerning “miscegenation” laws; the court ruled such laws unconstitutional.

narrative shifted: the performatively passive Civil Rights movement gave way to Black Power, and the liberal audiences that used to flock to “race problem” films now became increasingly perturbed by images of Black violence and lawlessness (Berger 47-50). This change coincided with broader trends in politics, culture, and the state itself. As the Vietnam War was ramped up, the economy lost momentum. The liberal coalition that Lyndon Johnson hoped to mobilize for his War on Poverty crumbled in the face of unrest in the streets and on university campuses. Johnson’s own withdrawal from the 1968 presidential elections, followed by the death of Robert Kennedy, arguably the only candidate capable of withstanding the conservative challenge, and battle scenes outside the Democratic Convention in Chicago, marked a sea-change (Patterson 637-709). Meanwhile, demographic shifts in the inner cities, accompanied by legal challenges to vertical integration – the extension of studio control to all levels of film production – meant that Hollywood, already behind the times in terms of aesthetics, had to seek new ways of speaking about the current crises. In addition, Black political organizations exerted pressure to increase diversity both in front of and behind the camera (Cook 2-4).

Aside from these challenges, Hollywood was experiencing a major crisis of its own, prompted by declining film audiences and rising costs of production. In order to address these issues, the studios came to increasingly rely on the production methods and style characteristic of exploitation film, which came to prominence in the late 1960s (Cook 171). This shift also affected the manner in which Hollywood addressed “race,” leading to the emergence of the style of film-making described as “Black exploitation,” or blaxploitation. Where “problem films” routinely looked to the South as the locus of racism and bigotry, blaxploitation turned its attention primarily to Northern urban centers. In addition, isolated, idealized Black protagonists were replaced by grittier individuals operating within what Paula Massood calls a “ghetto chronotope” (Massood 79-116). Still, the main focus remained on masculine figures, braving a “racially” oppressive reality by exercising their sexuality and honing their personal style. In Gordon Parks’ *Shaft*, the main protagonist – a private detective – cuts a striking figure, traversing the streets of New York with the swagger of a middleweight boxer and talking down Whites, including the police, as if he is immune to their power. Sporting fashionable clothes, he presents an irresistible attraction to women of all “races” (Wlodarz 729-731). Placed in the real-life context of downtown areas of major cities, characters of this kind constituted a direct rebuttal of established narratives about Black masculinity – yet, inadvertently, they carried over many of the previous, hugely limiting assumptions.

The contours of this type of masculinity derived partly from the disenchantment with Poitier’s portrayals of Black manhood in films of the 1950s and 1960s, and partly from a social concern about Black males best expressed in the infamous Moynihan Report. Entitled *The Negro Family: The Case for National Action*, this policy paper devoted significant attention to the dissolution of patriarchal families among urban Blacks, a trend expressed through the increasing prevalence of single-mother households. The author of the paper, sociologist Daniel P. Moynihan, believed that the absence of father figures inevitably contributed to criminality and lack of social cohesion. Attributed to legacies of slavery, this development produced incomplete

men, denied the patriarchal privilege of “strutting” – visibly asserting their masculinity; instead, raised in highly emasculating contexts, Black men became stereotypically fickle, irresponsible, and asocial (Moynihan). Blaxploitation put forward a travesty of both the assimilationist, “respectable” Blackness promoted by the “race problem” film and Moynihan’s “strutting,” masculine performance by depicting Black male “bantam roosters” capable of exercising patriarchal privileges in a spectacular fashion while being treated as “respectable” regardless of their social background or source of income.

Even as blaxploitation shifted attention to the North, the South continued to operate as a signifier within the genre in several different ways. One early example was Melvin Van Peebles’ *Sweet Sweetback’s Baadasssss Song*, which, though set in post-industrial Los Angeles, repeatedly deploys images reminiscent of slavery in the South, with the thinly-veiled racism of latter-day police officers serving to connect contemporary abuses to age-old wrongs. The main protagonist himself, an empty signifier that reflects a projected image of Black masculinity, plays the part of a fugitive slave pursued by deranged, unabashedly racist Whites (Massood 94-101). Other action films with Black leads go further into the “racial” mythology of the Old South, its perversity now no longer attached to “White trash.” In Jack Starrett’s *Slaughter*, starring football Hall-of-Famer Jim Brown as the title character, a Green Beret pursues his parents’ killers to an indeterminate South American locale, where he faces off against a network of mafia-style operators. Though the aging head of the organization is willing to compromise with Brown’s *Slaughter*, the man’s heir apparent, played by Texan Rip Torn, goes into a frenzy over *Slaughter*’s fling with a White female subordinate from the organization. The resulting battle pits the straight-talking Brown against the deranged White Southerner – whose accent and demeanor clearly signify at the Old South.

Due to its low cost and profitability, blaxploitation is often said to have “saved Hollywood” during times of economic decline; *Shaft*, *Slaughter*, and their followers clearly allowed the film industry to maintain a viable “racial” market without incurring additional cost. Almost all blaxploitation films were made for less than one million dollars, not even a half of the average cost of a Hollywood film (Cook 337). Though statistics from the period are limited, many of the early exponents of the genre can be said to have made upwards of ten times as much as they cost. On the other hand, the films generated a significant amount of negative publicity, both from film critics and from Black political organizations. The latter continued to call out Hollywood’s racism while criticizing the “Black exploitation” of gullible urban viewers by a handful of shady Black operators and their much more numerous White backers (Quinn and Krämer 184-198).⁸ With the arrival of the blockbuster, heralded by *The Godfather* (1972, dir. Francis Ford Coppola) and *The Exorcist* (1973, dir. William Friedkin), two films which fared very well with Black urban audiences, major studios lost the incentive to invest in the Black market – something they only ever did to a very limited

8 Many contemporary critics described the films in terms of “mind genocide,” arguing that young viewers were incapable of distinguishing the fictions (which were shot on location) from the reality – an interpretation seemingly supported by fan investment in film-related paraphernalia (Lyne 42-44; Quinn, “‘Tryin’ to Get Over’” 99-100).

degree, anyway, as evidenced by their reluctance to support Black artists in more high-quality productions (Guerrero 105). By 1973, even as the Academy nominated several Blacks for Oscars (most notably Cicely Tyson and Paul Winfield for *Sounder*, set in Great Depression-era South), Black-themed films were virtually monopolized by B-movie studios specializing in exploitation film.

IV.

If anything, the consigning of “race” to the low-budget, topical approach of B studios only reinforced blaxploitation’s interest in the South as a potentially titillating signifier. Indeed, sexploitation films with “mixed-race” casts had appeared around the same time the blaxploitation fad started, combining sexuality with tropes of enslavement and revenge. By 1973, American International Pictures – a major producer of exploitation films – had become a primary purveyor of Black-themed exploitation, churning out not only profitable, but also culturally significant titles, which continued to invoke the South as a common signifier, even as many of the films were explicitly set outside of the region (Cook 263-265). One classic example of an AIP blaxploitation film, Jack Hill’s *Foxy Brown*, features Pam Grier in the title role of an upwardly-mobile woman from the ghetto who exacts revenge on the White underworld for killing her policeman boyfriend. Infiltrating the local crime syndicate as a prostitute, she exposes the hypocrisy and perversity of those in power, both within the organization and beyond. In one scene, she teams up with a friend, enacting a sadomasochistic play to destroy the reputation of a local judge – a role reversal with serious “racial” overtones. Eventually caught, she is put away in a small hut in the middle of nowhere, bound to a bed and overseen by two aging White men who proceed to feed her heroin and use her body for their own pleasure. As one of the men describes it, having easy access to the Black woman’s prostrate body brings back “that old feeling.” When Foxy finally breaks free, she proceeds to dismantle the crime organization with the help of local Black Power activists, exacting an equally brutal revenge on its two leaders: the willowy matron Katherine and her restless partner Steve (Dunn 118-130).

While the raping brute invokes the specter of the South almost directly (“that old feeling” signifying the sexual exploitation of Black women under slavery), the two latter characters link the film to the world of *Gone With the Wind*, parodying White sexual stereotypes received from plantation melodramas. The willowy maiden who trades in other women’s bodies, particularly “colored,” is a latter-day Southern Belle – near-comically feminine, but also extremely exploitative. Her counterpart enacts the roguish charm of a Southern gentleman while being an unstable sex addict, deranged and unfaithful to his consort, yet curiously unquestioned in his attitude or power. The incompatibility of the two figures is readily apparent: Steve exhibits visible annoyance at Katherine’s advances while courting every girl he can. The role of Black sexuality in this scenario is captured in a scene which depicts Steve’s raid on the apartment of Link, Foxy’s drug-dealing brother. Having forced their way in, Steve and his henchman find Link on a bed with his White girlfriend. The sight causes Steve to erupt in unpremeditated violence, murdering the pair with apparent relish. By the end of the film, having been, in effect, lynched by Black Power activists (at

Foxy's behest), Steve's significance is reduced to his mutilated genitalia, which Foxy delivers to Katherine, prompting a curiously powerless outburst of rage. Though a White penchant for perversity provides a common thread throughout the film, it is the specter of the South that helps expose this perversity as sexual paranoia undergirding the "racial" order.

Blaxploitation's forays into the South were amplified for broader audiences by Albert R. Broccoli and Dino De Laurentiis, two veteran film producers well-acquainted with topicality in film. In 1973, at the height of the genre's popularity, Broccoli oversaw the filming of *Live and Let Die*, an adaptation of Ian Fleming's James Bond novel which pitted the MI6 agent against a Black Caribbean drug lord in the US. The villain, Mr. Big, is powerful, but superstitious, and retains his own expert female Tarot card reader, the celibate White Southerner Solitaire. However, "Black magic" plays an even more significant part in the film through the figure of the apparently indestructible Baron Samedi, cast as a virtual host of the show. Like the New York ghetto of Chester Himes' *Cotton Comes to Harlem*, famously adapted by Ossie Davis in one of the forerunners of blaxploitation, the South is a world unto itself, governed by an inscrutable logic and immune to White man's "civilizing" influence (Massood 86-93). The film also flirts with the idea of "interracial" sexuality, Bond being briefly paired with a duplicitous Black CIA operative; in the end, though, the notoriously promiscuous agent beds Solitaire, thus rendering her useless to Mr. Big as a fortune teller. *Live and Let Die* quite consciously codes Blackness in stereotypical terms, though it is also possible to read the "racial" signifiers as signs of incompatibility – cultural or otherwise – between the two groups. When action shifts to New Orleans, the Deep South is immediately understood as the end of White man's civilizing mission: the destruction of White enterprise, the supremacy of Black intransigence and subterfuge, and the intermingling of death and sex.

Much of the same symbolism accrues with De Laurentiis' production of a popular slavesploitation pulp novel, Kyle Onstott's *Mandingo*, shot at a time when blaxploitation was slowly ebbing away. The film is set in 1840s Louisiana and tells the story of the destruction of a wealthy landowning family caused by "racial" tensions. The plot focuses on Hammond Maxwell, son of a well-respected local magnate, and his investment in Blackness by way of Ellen – his sex slave – and Mede, a physically imposing "Mandingo fighter." As Hammond's fascination with Black bodies intensifies, his estranged wife Blanche grows increasingly unstable, troubled by the fiction her life has become. Hammond's cousin, she hoped marriage would free her from a sexually abusive family, but once the husband – himself a rapist of Black slaves – learns of her motivation, he finds her repulsive. When Ellen becomes pregnant with Hammond's child, Blanche deliberately beats the slave, leading to a miscarriage. The care Hammond shows his sex slave leads his wife to force herself on Mede. Eventually, Hammond's father demands an heir, but Blanche gives birth to a "mixed-race" child. In response, her husband throws Mede into a vat of boiling water, prompting a slave revolt that kills Hammond's father. This fall of the house of Maxwell binds the historical conjecture of bare-knuckle slave fighting with an incongruous "interracial" romance, unraveling the mythology and pseudo-science of slavery even as it satirizes the image of a Victorian, aristocratic South permeated by a perverse fascination with "race" and sexuality.⁹

9 Indeed, casting itself highlights the themes of a collapse of mores; the pairing of the impotent

V.

If the “race problem” film viewed the South as a region ripe for a moral reconstruction, blaxploitation seems to suggest that it has become necessary to burn the house of Whiteness in order to save its inhabitants. One common view of the “racial” politics of the genre is that the films effect a simple reversal, “putting in the place of the bad old essential White subject, the new essentially good Black subject” (Dunn; Hall 445). However, the protagonists of blaxploitation, though fetishized as privileged objects of the gaze and marked by boundless potency, do not represent a mere transposition of White Hollywood “normalcy.” Indeed, like Foxy Brown, they actively negotiate their positions throughout the texts, seeking a place – and a voice – to express their identities. What the South comes to signify in blaxploitation is not the collapse of Western civilization under the weight of “race,” but rather the cognitive limits of “race”; its destruction does not consist in a role reversal, but in the violent dismantling of the “racial” edifice, so that “the last shall be the first” (Fanon 2-3). To the extent that this project requires a reclamation of Black masculinity and femininity, it inevitably puts forward a critique of the normative, White family extolled by conservatives of Moynihan’s ilk, with at times radical overtones.

It is here that the disparity between McQueen’s and Tarantino’s visions of the South becomes apparent. *12 Years a Slave*, though set in the South under slavery, focuses primarily on the drama of wrongful conviction and incarceration, the main protagonist being robbed of his identity and forced into unfamiliar roles. Northup’s primary concern is to protect his inner self, to ensure that he does not succumb completely to oppression. Captured in the scene of his hanging, evocative of images of turn-of-the-century lynchings, as well as the increasing self-enclosure that Northup establishes as a defense mechanism, it provides the central dramatic aspect of the entire story. By focusing on the universal (male) struggle for survival, for recognition as a subject in the midst of a totally dehumanizing institution, McQueen inevitably downplays the significance of the slave society, sacrificing its variety at the altar of the singularity of the unjustly oppressed (Stevenson). In this sense, his story – while illustrative of the excesses generated by slavery – ultimately remains one of human resilience rather than of the inhumanity of enslavement. Like the presence of the abolitionist talking over the autobiographer in a slave narrative, the appearance of Northup’s savior certifies that the wrong can be remedied; that, through proper moral reformation, the horrific South of slavery can achieve redemption. Even after Northup had told his tale, the system that enabled the “racial” order remained in place; even after the Civil War, which broke out with the express purpose of dismantling it, slavery continued to define the South and still casts a shadow on America – a fact clearly indicated by the continued validity of the “race problem” film formula, however advanced in its aesthetics.

James Mason with the smooth Perry King signifies the corruption of a pampered generation of exploiters who inherit the sins of their ignorant fathers. The choice of Susan George – the hysterical wife of Dustin Hoffman’s aloof mathematician in Sam Peckinpah’s *Straw Dogs* (1971, dir. Sam Peckinpah) – to play Hammond’s wife underlines the role of White womanhood in establishing and maintaining slavery and segregation.

In contrast to McQueen's work, *Django Unchained* – though flawed – proposes a more radical challenge to “racial” representation. Starting from the opening gesture, the half-lawful acquisition of Django by Dr. Schultz which enables the slave to tell his story, the film provides a striking illustration of the paradoxes of emancipation and subjectivity in a “racial” democracy. One such paradox is the fact that the slave's speech is always mediated through the experience of slavery; even though his heritage presumably stretches beyond the Middle Passage, the earliest event depicted in the film is the violent separation of Django and his wife. Perhaps because of this limitation, the freed slave expresses himself through excess. Asked to play Dr. Schultz's valet, he dons a striking blue costume, making him hypervisible even as he is supposed to act as a spy; then, he dresses up as a frontiersman and rides to a Louisiana “big house” on horseback.¹⁰ Down in the “devil's empire,” however, the spectacle of a Black man exercising his freedom in such an arresting manner turns out to have been anticipated by racist anthropology: as Calvin Candie is all too happy to indicate, Django merely represents the accidental genius, a travesty of the DuBoisian “talented tenth,” whose destiny, like that of Stowe's “mulatto” George Harris, lies in Africa, not America. This symbolic containment of spectacular Blackness is accompanied with its visual dissolution. As he ventures deeper into the stereotypically hellish Louisiana, the freed slave is treated to brutally realistic vignettes of human cruelty that serve to ensnare him in a spiral of dehumanization, pulling the story into *Mandingo* territory.

Yet, the aesthetic transition that follows the death of Calvin Candie and Dr. Schultz moves the film's enactment of exploitation beyond *Mandingo*. Fleischer's film, while radical in its implications, could only illustrate the unsustainability of “race,” its inherent tendency toward excess and disintegration. By shifting between the different modes of exploitation film – spaghetti western, blaxploitation, revenge film, slavesploitation – Tarantino eventually reaches a point where the framing of the story can no longer contain it. In this light, the role assigned to Candie's most trusted advisor – Samuel L. Jackson's ridiculously subservient house slave, Stephen – seems far from incidental. As the last man standing after the bloodbath visited upon Candie's “big house” by the unstoppable Django, Stephen throws away his cane and stands tall as the guardian of the “racial” order, turning into the embodiment of the Blackness established by slavery, a repository of “racial” stereotypes and knowledges. When Django locks Stephen in the big house and blows it up, this act of radical violence symbolically enacts Fanonian revolution against colonialism, razing the social structure imposed by White power along with its non-White agents, the colonial bourgeoisie (Fanon 8-10). The destruction of the “racial” edifice obliterates not just the moral taint of slavery, but Whiteness and Blackness as stable, clearly defined entities in themselves. It is at this point that Tarantino, with astonishing incongruity, pulls the viewers back to the safer waters of romance, having Django and Broomhilda enact courtship in broadly comic tones. Rather than a teary-eyed moment of release in a romantic tale of love

¹⁰ Adilifu Nama argues that Django's attire serves as one of the visual cues communicating the internalization of American Gothic as the mode of representing slavery (Nama 106-109). It should be noted, however, that the comedic aspect of Gothic narratives tends to manifest itself as satire, consciously parodying sentimentalism – the proper mode for depicting a tale of lovers reuniting against all odds – in particular.

lost and regained, this scene envisions a completely new beginning in a world without Whiteness. Turned inside out, the scaffolding of the cinematic Old South is still there: an ironic backdrop to the joyful reunion of a Black man and a Black woman that dismisses Moynihan's anxieties about the Black family while ridiculing the plantation melodrama's oblivious romances.

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