BLAXPLOITATION FILMS OF THE 1970s

Blackness and Genre

Novotny Lawrence

Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group

Studies in African American History and Culture

Edited by
Graham Hodges
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A Routledge Series

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Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group
New York London

First published 2008
by Routledge
270 Madison Ave, New York, NY 10016

Simultaneously published in the UK
by Routledge
2 Park Square, Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon OX14 4RN

This edition published in the Taylor & Francis e-Library, 2007.

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Routledge is an imprint of the Taylor & Francis Group, an informa business

Portions of Chapter Two were published previously in the journal *Screening Noir*

Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data
Lawrence, Novotny.
Blaxploitation films of the 1970s : Blackness and genre / by Novotny Lawrence.
p. cm.— (Studies in African American history and culture)
Filmography: p. 107
Includes bibliographical references and index.
ISBN 0-415-96097-5
1. Blaxploitation films—United States—History and criticism. I. Title.
PN1995.9.N4L37 2007
791.43'652996073—dc22 2007023659

ISBN 0-203-93222-6 Master e-book ISBN

ISBN10: 0-415-96097-5 (hbk)
ISBN10: 0-203-93222-6 (ebk)

ISBN13: 978-0-415-96097-7 (hbk)
ISBN13: 978-0-203-93222-3 (ebk)

For Rachael, Cheyenne, Jordan,
Andrew, Alexis, and Allison:
Always remember that you can achieve
your greatest ambitions.

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Acknowledgments

First, I would like to thank God for all of the blessings that He has bestowed upon me. Through Him, all things are possible.

I wish to recognize Professor Tamara Falicov, Co-Chair of my dissertation committee, for her guidance throughout this project, as well as for her continued support throughout my professional career. Additionally, I would like to acknowledge Professor Chuck Berg, Co-Chair of my dissertation committee, for his enthusiasm and commitment to this project. I would also like to thank the remaining members of my committee, Professor John Tibbetts, Professor Kevin Willmott, and Professor William Tuttle for their support and valuable commentary, which contributed to the successful completion of this volume.

Furthermore, I would like to acknowledge Dr. Manjunath Pendakur and Dr. John Downing for their valuable guidance and assistance throughout this project and my career. I am also grateful for the continued support of my colleagues in the College of Mass Communications and Media Arts at Southern Illinois University-Carbondale. Moreover, I wish to thank Mary Lou Kowaleski for her excellent work and assistance with this project.

On a more personal note, I would like to thank my parents, William and Virginia Lawrence, for their love and support, as well as the values that they instilled within me. Without them, this project would not have been possible. To my brothers, Cornell and Courtney, thank you for your love, encouragement, and friendship throughout my education and my life. Together we have grown from boys to men.

I also wish to acknowledge Sarah Lynn Lawrence. I greatly appreciate your unwavering support, love, patience, and understanding. You are my strength and motivation. Thank you for being the wonderful person that you are.

Additionally, I would like to recognize the numerous members of my extended family as well as the following individuals: Lloyd Ballou, Germaine Brown, David Rooks, Christopher Manning, Chris Meissner, Fernando Arenas, Sam Joshi, Faye Riley, Fred Holiday, John Ahearn, Mike Boring, Joy Baze, Dr. Mary Karen Dahl, Dr. John Sweets, Dr. Larry Ehrlich, and Dr. Gregory Black. Thank you for supporting me throughout this journey.

Finally, thanks to all of my students for making academe an exciting and fulfilling career.

Introduction

The Historic Labeling of Blackness in Cinema

Since the development of the motion picture industry in the late 1800s, the medium has presented blacks in a manner that reflects their sociopolitical status in America. Considered inferior by the white majority, blacks were depicted as such in films. Early film titles, such as *Pickaninnies Doing a Dance* (1894), *Dancing Dark Boy* (1895), *A Nigger in the Woodpile* (1904), *The Wooing and the Wedding of a Coon* (1905), and *For Massa's Sake* (1911), reinforced prevalent racist attitudes. These films, in addition to many others from the period, depict blacks as the objects of ridicule not to be taken seriously unless they are sacrificing themselves for their white masters.

The aforementioned films were a prelude to what several film historians call the greatest motion picture ever made—*The Birth of a Nation* (1915), which was adapted from Thomas Dixon's novel *The Clansman*. Dixon, a minister and lecturer, wrote *The Clansman* to offer what he felt was an accurate view of the South during the Reconstruction era. His book stereotyped African Americans as wild, sex-starved beasts and glorified the actions of the Ku Klux Klan, who were in his view the savior of Southern whites tormented by black savages.

The production of *Nation* was difficult, but D. W. Griffith[1] effectively converted Dixon's novel into motion-picture form. Shooting was suspended three times due to a lack of funds. Finally, after two years of work and a budget of $500,000, the film was completed, and in early February of 1915, *Nation* was privately screened at the Clunes Auditorium in Los Angeles (Cook 110–11).

Nation tells the story of the Old South, the Civil War, the Reconstruction period, and the emergence of the Ku Klux Klan. It focuses on the Cameron family, who live in Piedmont, South Carolina. Before the war, the family lives in an idyllic "quaintly way that is to be no more." Dr. Cameron

and his sons are gentle, benevolent "fathers" to their child-like servants. The slaves themselves could be no happier. In the fields they contentedly pick cotton, and in their quarters they dance and sing for their masters. In the Big House, Mammy joyously goes about her chores. All is in order. Then the Civil War breaks out, and the order cracks (Bogle, *Toms* 11–12).[2]

The war years take their toll. In Piedmont, the Cameron family is terrorized by a troop of black raiders, and the entire South undergoes "ruin, devastation, rapine, and pillage." Then comes Reconstruction, and "uppity niggers" from the North move into Piedmont, exploiting and corrupting former slaves, unleashing the sadism and bestiality "innate" in the Negro, turning the once-congenial darkies into renegades and using them to "crush the white South under the heel of the black South." "Lawlessness runs wild," says one title card. The old slaves have quit work to dance. They roam the streets, shoving whites off sidewalks. They take over political polls and disenfranchise the whites. This results in a black political victory and a congressional meeting depicts the ruling blacks eating chicken legs, drinking whiskey, and legalizing interracial marriage. Matters reach the peak when Gus, a black soldier and a renegade, sets out to rape the youngest Cameron daughter. Rather than submit to his aggressive wooing, she throws herself off a cliff. Her bravery becomes the catalyst and inspiration for the Klan to retake the South. Klan members hunt Gus down and lynch him. In the meantime, the mulatto Silas Lynch is attempting to force the white Elsie Stoneman to marry him. After hearing of Gus's death at the hands of the KKK, he commands his black soldiers to reestablish order in Piedmont (Bogle, *Toms* 13).

The last reel of the film is a series of crosscutting between scenes of the black mob in the Piedmont streets, Elsie bound and gagged, the siege at a cabin, and the Klan riding cross-country to the rescue. The Klan soon arrives and restores order in Piedmont, thwarts Lynch's marriage plans, and rescues the group at the cabin at the last possible minute. The final segment of the film shows the Klan dominating the next election by barring blacks and their white supporters from the political process. Black rule is ended, and Margaret and Phil and Ben and Elsie are shown on a double honeymoon, symbolic of the reunion of North and South (Leab 31–32).

Despite its racist content, many critics recognized that *The Birth of a Nation* was technically innovative. Griffith presented the story using unique camera angles and difficult shots that displayed his command over the medium. The *New York Times* credited the film as "an impressive new illustration of the scope of the motion picture camera" ("Mayor" 9:4), and the trade magazine *Variety* called *Birth* "the last word in picture making. . . . Mr. Griffith set such a tone and pace in the film that it will

take a long time before one can come along that can top it in the point of production, acting, photography, and direction" ("Birth" 8).

C. F. Zittel's review in Hearst's *Evening Post* comes the closest to giving a sense of the enthusiasm experienced by early viewers of the film.

> First of all children must be sent to see this masterpiece. Any parent who neglects this advice is committing an educational offense, for no film has ever produced more educational points than Griffith's latest achievement. *The Birth of a Nation* will thrill you, startle you, make you hold on to your seats. It will make you cry. It will make you angry. It will make you glad. It will make you hate. It will make you love. It is not only worth riding miles to see, but it is worth walking miles to see. (qtd. in Schickel 267)

While some heralded *Birth* as a masterpiece, its ludicrous portrayal of blacks outraged both African Americans and liberal whites alike. Specifically, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) formally protested against the film, and many intellectuals attacked *Birth* for its inherent racism. For example, Garrison Villard stated that the production was "immoral, improper and unjust" (qtd. in "Mayor" 9). In addition, Frederick C. Rowe, U.S. Commissioner of Immigration, characterized the skewed portrayal of blacks as "cruel, vindictive, and as untrue" (qtd. in "Mayor 9). The president of Harvard University stated that the film perverted white ideals. Jane Addams, the founder of Hull House, was also greatly disturbed over the picture and wrote vigorously against it (Mintz and Roberts 47).

Despite the controversy surrounding *Birth*, it was an extremely successful motion picture. The film had extended runs at both Clunes and New York's Liberty Theater of seven months and eleven months, respectively (Mintz and Roberts 47). Furthermore, it grossed more than $10,000,000 and is still considered the first epic motion picture ever made.

Unfortunately, *Birth*'s contribution to the motion picture industry extended far beyond the aforementioned proportions. The film's racist content proved equally, if not more, detrimental to the motion picture than its technical innovations were progressive. Significantly, *Birth* solidified the five major stereotypes that circumscribed black performers in Hollywood cinema—the noble, loyal manageable Toms, the clownish coons, the stoic, hefty mammy, the troubled, tragic mulatto, and the brutal black buck (Bogle, *Blacks* 21). In *Blacks in American Films and Television*, Donald Bogle notes, "All the types had appeared in previous short films; indeed they were carryovers from popular fiction, poetry, and music of the 19th

century. But never had they been given such a full-blown dramatic treatment—and in a film seen the world over" (21). Indeed, *Birth* helped further position blacks as the quintessential Other.

Birth's assault on black life prompted Emmett J. Scott, a former secretary of Booker T. Washington, to make a black film to challenge the epic. The film, which was originally planned as a short, was titled *Lincoln's Dream*. However, the project grew when scriptwriter Elaine Sterne expanded the screenplay into a feature-length film (Bogle, *Toms* 103). Scott enlisted the black bourgeoisie to finance *Dream*, and the film was shot in Chicago and Florida. According to Bogle, the film's production proved extremely difficult due to bad weather, poorly designed and constructed sets, an inexperienced cast and crew, and inadequate lighting facilities (*Toms* 103). The production also ran into financial difficulties, and Scott had to seek support from white backers, who altered the film in both theme and content. *Dream*, finally completed after three years and retitled *The Birth of a Race*, was promoted as "A Master Picture Conceived in the Spirit of Truth and Dedicated to All the Races of the World" (Bogle, *Toms* 103). *Race* premiered on December 1, 1918, at Chicago's Blackstone Theater, one of the most fashionable theaters of the day (Leab 62).

The *Birth of a Race* begins with the Kaiser and his counselors discussing when to open hostilities. A workman, who seemingly represents Christ, breaks in on the meeting and for over an hour relates the history of the world since the Creation, including such unrelated episodes as the expulsion from the Garden of Eden, the Jewish flight from Egypt, the Crucifixion, and the discovery of America by Columbus. The second part of the film is set during World War I and deals in extremely melodramatic fashion with sabotage, suicide, murder, and the divided loyalties of a family of German Americans (Leab 64).

Race proved to be both a financial and artistic disaster after its release. For example, *Variety* described the production as "a ghastly example of terrific waste. . . . Magnificent gorgeous settings run alongside of shoddy drops. . . . Stock battle cut-ins are used in a manner which advertise their 'stockness'" ("Birth of a Race" 39). In addition, *Billboard* characterized *Race* as "perhaps the worst conglomeration of mixed purposes and attempts ever thrown together" ("Birth of a Race" 48).

Although *Race* failed to successfully combat *Nation*'s racist propaganda, the film inspired black filmmakers to challenge the anti-black bias that permeated all levels of America's ascendant motion picture industry. Significantly, "blacks established a film movement of their own with the purpose, in the words of the pioneering editors of the first black newspaper, *Freedom Journal*, 'to plead our own cause'" (Everett 108). In *Returning the*