

BLAXPLOITATION and its CONTEXTS

Film 4474F/9212

The University of Western Ontario

Department of Film Studies Fall Term 2011

Screening: Tuesday 12:30-3:30 pm (UC 12)

Seminar: Thursday 1:30-3:30 pm (UC-12)

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Office Hours: Thursday 3:30-5:30 pm and by appt.

COURSE DESCRIPTION

In the history of black cinema, seldom has a body of filmmaking been as controversial and as rife with contradiction as the so-called blaxploitation films of the early 1970s. Although the short-lived era remains tainted in the eyes of many due to valid charges of opportunism and exploitation, the cultural significance of blaxploitation cinema cannot be overestimated given its influence on both hip-hop culture and contemporary filmmaking (from Tarantino to John Singleton to the Hughes Brothers). The primary goal of this course will be to unpack the culturally loaded term "blaxploitation" in terms of its relationship to economics, social politics, art, music, stardom, genre, and identity.

While the core of the course will focus on key films such as *Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song*, *Shaft*, *Coffy*, *Superfly*, and *Black Caesar*, the "contexts" surrounding (and informing) these films will be given equal critical attention. We will, for example, read key texts from the Black Power era and look at the rise and fall of the Black Panther party in order to examine the complex intersection of black nationalism and black popular culture during this period. We will also tend to blaxploitation's folkloric and generic precursors, its fraught cultural reception, and the cinematic alternatives (and homages) that it inspires. Other key topics will include: visibility and stereotype, feminism and the black action heroine, the politics of style, screening urban space, blaxploitation in a global context, and the cultural memory of the Black Power era.

Course Objectives: By the end of the course, you will have a thorough understanding of the aesthetic, industrial, and cultural significance of blaxploitation cinema in America of the 1970s and afterwards. You will also be able to frame, discuss, and analyze the relationship of blaxploitation cinema to the Black Power Movement, the Black Arts Movement, and other key political/cultural struggles and debates of the post-civil rights era. Building on the course material and seminars, you will develop and present a final seminar paper that engages with key elements of blaxploitation cinema and its various political, aesthetic, and cultural contexts and that makes an effective and original contribution to the field.

COURSE TEXTS

1. Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*
2. Eldridge Cleaver, *Soul on Ice*
3. Ed Guerrero, *Framing Blackness*
4. Amy Abugo Ongiri, *Spectacular Blackness*
5. Online Coursepack (WebCT) [CP]

COURSE REQUIREMENTS and GRADING GUIDELINES

- Attendance & Class Participation [20%]
- In-Class Presentation/Discussion Leading [20%]
- Paper Proposal and Annotated Bibliography [10%]
- Draft of Final Research Paper [10%]
- Final Research Paper (6000 words) [40%]

Attendance and Participation: You are required to attend all class meetings and screenings. Seminar participation is a critical element of the course and participation marks will be awarded for *active* engagement with the course material and during seminar discussions. Be sure to come to the seminars fully prepared, having read all of the weekly reading assignments and with relevant books and articles *in hand*.

Screenings: In the interest of coverage, and in the spirit of the blaxploitation era, there will be several “double feature” screenings during the second half of the course. Consequently, we will occasionally run over the allotted three hour screening time during Tuesday screenings. The screening room will remain available for the extra 15-20 minutes during these weeks, but if you have a conflict, be sure to view the conclusion of the second film before the weekly seminar. All films screened will be available in UC-1.

Paper Assignments: Your work throughout the seminar will build towards a final research paper of professional (even publishable) quality on an element of blaxploitation cinema and/or its cultural and critical contexts. Since thorough research and revision are key elements of quality graduate (and undergraduate) work, you will also submit an annotated bibliography and a working draft of your final research paper. Both of these assignments will be assessed separately and will help you to expand, enhance, and fine-tune your research project.

In-Class Presentation/Discussion Leading: During one week of the term you will be responsible for presenting on the course material for that week and leading class discussion. You are encouraged to incorporate clips, images, and/or additional research into your presentation as long as you remain thoroughly engaged with the course topics and material for that week. Presentations will likely run about 30 minutes (including discussion).

Late Work: Late papers will be penalized 5% points per day late (including weekends), except in the case of *properly documented* medical emergencies or illnesses.

POLICIES and REGULATIONS

This instructor respects and upholds University policies and regulations pertaining to the observation of religious holidays; assistance available to the physically disabled, visually and/or hearing impaired student; plagiarism; sexual harassment; and racial or ethnic discrimination. All students are advised to become familiar with the respective University regulations and are encouraged to bring any questions or concerns to the attention of the instructor. For Film Studies Department regulations governing Term Work, Exams, Faculty Office Hours, Academic Relief (appeals, petitions, complaints), and other matters, please consult “Information for Students” on our website at www.uwo.ca/film

Plagiarism: You must write your essays in your own words. Whenever you take an idea, or a passage, from another author, you must acknowledge your debt both by using quotation marks where appropriate and by proper referencing such as footnotes or citations. Plagiarism is a major academic offence (see Scholastic Offense Policy in the UWO Calendar. Pg 40).

Plagiarism Checking: All required papers must be submitted for textual similarity review to the commercial plagiarism detection software under license to the University for the detection of plagiarism. All papers submitted will be included as source documents in the reference database for the purpose of detecting plagiarism of papers subsequently submitted to the system. You should register immediately as a new user by going to <http://www.turnitin.com>. I will provide you with the Class ID # and password as soon as possible. Assignments not handed in to turnitin.com will receive a 0.

Prerequisites: Unless you have either the requisites for this course or written special permission from your Dean to enroll in it, you will be removed from this course and it will be deleted from your record. The decision may not be appealed. You will receive no adjustment to your fees in the event that you are dropped from a course for failing to have the necessary prerequisites.

Disabilities: Please consult with me during the first three weeks of class regarding disabilities that might require special accommodations.

Office Hours: I will be available to answer questions, clarify concepts/assignments, and assist you with your coursework during my weekly office hours (posted above). If you have an occasional conflict, feel free to email me and we can set up an alternative time to meet. I will also be available via email M-F from 9-5 and will do my best to respond to your email within two days.

GRADING SCALE FOR MA ASSIGNMENTS

A+ (90+) Work of publishable standard, albeit with some revisions possible. Equivalent to advanced Ph.D. level work.

A (88-89) Excellent: displaying extensive originality.

A- (85-87) Strong performance at MA level, fully equal to that of an average Ph.D. student. Must be well-written and show some originality.

B+ (80-84) Good MA-level work, indicating the student's potential (with some reservations) to work successfully at the Ph.D. level.

B (78-79) Competent MA work, but does not suggest potential to proceed to Ph.D. level

B- Any mark below **78** indicates performance below the level required of a graduate student.

UNDERGRADUATE GRADING CRITERIA

A+ (90-100):

Argument: Clear development of a specific, challenging and original thesis. The writer has taken significant risks successfully; in the resulting piece, distinctive ideas and content have discovered their necessary distinctive form. Detailed reference to appropriate texts, with evidence of individual response. Ability not only to expound subject but to see it around—subtleties and ambiguities, qualifications and concessions, relations to other subjects, etc.

Presentation, structure: Quotations well integrated into text. Proper paragraphs. Almost no typographical errors.

Language Skills: Sentence structure correct, with full range of sentence types (compound, complex, and compound-complex), with full range of punctuation (including semicolons, colons, dashes, parentheses). Graceful style, neither pompous nor breezy, and few errors.

Research/scholarship: Evidence of effective, extensive and independent research, with proper documentation of sources. Quotations used appropriately and purposively.

A (80 to 89):

Argument: The writer has taken risks and most of them succeed. Clear development of a specific and challenging thesis, with proper paragraphs. Detailed reference to appropriate texts, with evidence of individual response. Ability not only to expound subject but to see it around—subtleties and ambiguities, qualifications and concessions, relations to other subjects, etc.

Presentation, structure: Quotations well integrated into text. Proper paragraphs. Almost no typographical errors.

Language Skills: Sentence structure correct, with full range of sentence types (compound, complex, and compound-complex), with full range of punctuation (including semicolons, colons, dashes, parentheses). Graceful style, neither pompous nor breezy, and few errors.

Research/scholarship: Evidence of effective and independent research, with proper documentation of sources. Quotations used appropriately and purposively.

B (70 to 79):

Argument: Clear development of a specific thesis, with proper paragraphs. Adequately detailed reference to texts. Ability to expound reasonably sophisticated ideas with clarity.

Presentation/structure: Quotations well integrated into text. Proper paragraphs. A few typographical errors.

Language Skills: Sentence structure correct, with reasonable range of sentence types and full range of punctuation. Style not too wordy, with errors relatively few and minor.

Research Scholarship: Evidence of adequate research, with proper documentation of sources.

C (60 to 69):

Argument: Reasonably clear development of a thesis, with proper paragraphs. Basic ability to expound ideas, whose development might be rather thin. Effort to support points with references to the text. Tendency to replace analysis with descriptive retelling of plot.

Presentation/structure: Presentation showing lapses in tidiness and/or proofreading. Poor use of paragraphs.

Language Skills: Sentence structure correct, but perhaps overly simple, with tendency to avoid punctuation besides period and comma. Errors relatively few, but occasionally serious, with evident misunderstanding of some point of elementary grammar (comma splices, fragments, semicolon errors, subject-verb disagreements, poorly integrated quotations)

Research/Scholarship: reasonable effort at documentation, but rather thin.

D (50 to 59):

Argument: Difficulty with paragraphing or consecutive thought. Ideas inchoate but clouded by weak expression. Overgeneralization with inadequate support, or examples that run to lengthy paraphrase, with little or no analysis.

Presentation/Structure: Very poor to non-existent use of paragraphs. Inadequate and inaccurate documentation. Multiple typographical errors.

Language Skills: Errors of grammar or diction frequent enough to interfere with understanding.

Research/Scholarship: Little serious effort to research the topic.

F (49 and below):

Argument: Ideas too simple for level of course. Argument completely incoherent. Erroneous content showing little or no understanding of subject.

Presentation/Structure: Very sloppy proof-reading. Documentation virtually non-existent.

Language Skills: writing frequently ungrammatical.

Research/Scholarship: Non-existent. Content largely “borrowed” from sources with no individual distillation, but no apparent attempt to deceive.

0 (Report to Department):

Plagiarism with intent to deceive