

BLAXPLOITATION and ITS CONTEXTS

FILM 3363G—Screening Race

Western University—Winter Term 2023

Screenings: Asynchronous weekly screenings—links posted on OWL

Lecture/Discussion: Wednesdays 12:30-2:30 pm*

*(synchronous lecture/discussion via Zoom)

Dr. Joseph Wlodarz

Email: jwlowarz@uwo.ca

Online Office Hours: Wednesdays 2:30-3:30 pm; Thursdays 12:00-1:00 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. An outgrowth of the collapse of the Hollywood studio system, the civil rights and Black Power movements, the counterculture, feminism, and gay liberation, the blaxploitation films embody the cultural crises of seventies America. 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. The primary goal of this course will be to unpack the culturally loaded term “blaxploitation” in terms of its relationship to economics, audience, identity politics, art, music, stardom, and genre.

While the core of the course will focus on key films such as *Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song*, *Shaft*, *Coffy*, *Superfly*, *Blacula*, and *The Mack*, the contexts surrounding (and informing) these films will be given equal critical attention. We will, for example, 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 music and style, screening urban space, blaxploitation in a global context, and the cultural memory of the Black Power era.

Course Objectives: This course uses the blaxploitation era of the 1970s to examine the history, theory, and ideology of screening race in American cinema, particularly the fraught relationship of Hollywood cinema to black audiences, black liberation politics, and black independent cinema. The course introduces students to key concepts in critical race theory, while putting these terms in dialogue with the diverse forms and strategies of black American cinema from the 1960s to the present.

Learning Outcomes: In addition to enhancing your formal analysis and critical thinking skills through class discussion and research papers, you will acquire the basic tools necessary to analyze film history and representation through the lens of critical race theory. Class projects and papers will also further develop your research skills so that you can conduct more advanced film historical research, which can then be applied to the study of a wide range of cinema and media.

COURSE TEXTS

1. Weekly readings from E-Journals and scholarly books available on OWL [OWL]

COURSE REQUIREMENTS and GRADING GUIDELINES

- Class Participation (synchronous online and/or online forums) [10%]
- Discussion Leading (Questions and Clip Analysis) [10%]
- Take-Home Midterm [15%]
- Marketing and Reception Analysis (1500 words) *or* Digital Media Project [20%]
- Final Research Paper (2500 words) [25%]
- Take-Home Final Exam [20%]

Class Participation: Attendance and participation are *required* during our weekly zoom-based class sessions at 12:30pm on Wednesdays. If you miss a class due to illness, however, you may also participate asynchronously by responding to questions/clips that will be posted in the Forum section of OWL. Your final Class Participation grade will be based on the quantity *and* quality of your participation in these discussion sessions and forums.

Discussion Leading: Working with one of your fellow classmates, you will lead discussion at least once during the term on the weekly screenings and readings. I will provide a list of guidelines and tips, but each discussion leader will be responsible for presenting a specific question about the film and/or the course readings as well as engaging your fellow students in a discussion about that element. You will need to coordinate with your co-presenter to prepare and organize the discussion questions/material, and in most cases I will assess the group as a whole based on the overall quality of the discussion leading. Discussions will take place via zoom.

Exams: There will be one 90-minute take-home midterm (Due Feb. 10) and a 3-hour take-home final exam for the course. The midterm and final exams will be posted to OWL at least 48 hours before the submission deadline in order to allow for any potential technological or accommodation-based issues that may arise. The midterm and final exams will include clip analysis, paragraph responses, and/or essay questions.

Paper Assignments: You will have at least one (possibly two) paper assignments for the course. The first paper will ask you to research and analyze the *marketing and reception* of a blaxploitation film from the period. The final paper for the course is a more extensive research paper that will provide you with an opportunity to explore the broader historical and theoretical parameters of the blaxploitation phenomenon. I will provide several potential topic questions for the final essay, but you may also propose a topic of your own.

Digital Media Project: In lieu of the Marketing and Reception paper assignment, you may instead produce a digital media project either individually or as a group. These projects may take a variety of forms, but they should be focused on key themes, films, or concepts related to blaxploitation cinema of the 1970s. We will both screen and discuss the videos/media projects produced in class.

Late Work: Course papers must be turned in complete and on time. Late papers will be penalized 5% points per day late (including weekends), except in the case of *properly documented* medical emergencies or illnesses (see below). *****While daily late penalties apply, papers that are over ONE week late—without any approved accommodation—will automatically receive a zero.***

Note on Screenings: All weekly film screenings will be available via streaming sources. You are required to view weekly screenings before each Wednesday lecture/discussion. Links to the weekly screenings can be found in the Resources tab on OWL, and they will be posted by Monday afternoon. ***There will also be screening introductions and guiding questions posted each week in the OWL Forum section.***

I encourage you to view the films on as large a screen as possible so that you can pay close attention to the visual style and formal construction of the films. Most screening links will also have optional subtitles/closed captions that you will be able to turn on (or off). You may also make an appointment to view any of the course films in the Film Study Center [UC-1126] by contacting the Film Library Assistant, Rachel Gunn (rgunn4@uwo.ca) (Phone: x85730).

*****Since this is a course on exploitation cinema, you should be prepared for potentially offensive and/or triggering content in many of the films being screened. Our goal throughout the course, however, will be to engage with this content in thoughtful, critical ways that remain attentive to the historical and industrial contexts in which these films were produced.***

Office Hours: I will be available to answer questions, clarify concepts/assignments, and assist you with your coursework during my weekly, virtual 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. ****Please note, however, that I may not respond to questions about the course that can be answered by simply reviewing the course syllabus.***

COURSE SCHEDULE

Week 1—January 9-11—Screening Race in American Film: A History of Exploitation

Screening: *Mandingo* (Richard Fleischer, 1975, 127 min.)

Reading: [OWL]: Wynter, *Critical Race Theory and Jordan Peele's Get Out* [excerpt] & Wood, "Mandingo: The Vindication of an Abused Masterpiece"

Week 2—Jan. 16-18—From Integration to Revolution: Black Power on Film

Screening: *Black Panthers* (Agnes Varda, 1968, 28 min.)
& *Uptight* (Jules Dassin, 1968, 104 min.)

Reading: [OWL]: Guerrero, "The Rise and Fall of Blaxploitation" (pgs. 69-86)
& Sieving, *Soul Searching*, Ch-4: "The Battle of Cleveland"

Week 3—Jan. 23-25—Blackness, Authenticity, and the Ghetto

Screening: *Cotton Comes to Harlem* (Ossie Davis, 1970, 97 min.)

Reading: [OWL]: Ongiri, *Spectacular Blackness*, Intro: “Cotton Comes to Harlem”
& Massood, *Black City Cinema*, Ch-3: “Cotton in the City” (pgs. 79-107)
& Hall, “What is This ‘Black’ in Black Popular Culture”

Week 4—Jan. 30-Feb. 1—Black Macho/Black Music

Screening: *Sweet Sweetback’s Baadasssss Song* (Melvin van Peebles, 1971, 97 min.)
& *Shaft* (Gordon Parks, 1971, 100 min.)

Reading: [OWL]: Quinn, *A Piece of the Action*, Ch-4 (pgs. 137-145)
& Ongiri, *Spectacular Blackness*, Ch-5 (pgs. 159-185)
& Dyer, “Music and Presence in Blaxploitation Cinema”

Week 5—Feb. 6-8—Hustlers and Pimps: The Politics of Style in Blaxploitation

Screening: *Superfly* (Gordon Parks, Jr., 1972, 93 min.)
& *The Mack* (Michael Campus, 1973, 110 min.)

Reading: [OWL]: Quinn, *A Piece of the Action*, Ch-4 (pgs. 146-166)
& Stutesman, “Costumes as Melodrama”
& Guerrero, “The Rise and Fall of Blaxploitation” (pgs. 95-111)

****Take-Home Midterm Due to OWL by 10pm on Friday Feb. 10****

Week 6—Feb. 13-15—Visibility, Resistance, and Racial Performativity

Screening: *The Spook Who Sat By the Door* (Ivan Dixon, 1973, 102 min.)

Reading: [OWL]: Reich, *Militant Visions*, Ch-6, “The Last Black Soldier”
& Ongiri, *Spectacular Blackness*, Ch-2: “Radical Chic” (pgs. 58-87)

****Marketing and Reception Essay OR Digital Media Project
Due to OWL by 5pm on Friday Feb. 17****

Week 7—Feb. 20-22—Reading Week—No Classes

Week 8—Feb. 27-March 1—Revolutionary Women?

Screening: *Coffy* (Jack Hill, 1973, 91 min.)
& *Claudine* (John Berry, 1974, 92 min.)

Reading: [OWL] Quinn, *A Piece of the Action*, Ch-5 (pgs. 178-206)
& Gomer, *White Balance*, Ch-2: “Keep Away from Me, Mr. Welfare Man”
& Sieving, ““She’s a stimulatın’, fascinatin’, assassinatın’ chick!””

Week 9—March 6-8—Cleopatra Jones at the Crossroads

Screening: *Cleopatra Jones and the Casino of Gold* (Charles Bail, 1975, 96 min.)
& *Badass Supermama* (Etang Inyang, 1996, 16 min.)

Reading: [OWL]: Brody, “The Returns of Cleopatra Jones”
& Ongiri, ““He Wanted to Be Just Like Bruce Lee””
& Chong, *The Oriental Obscene*, Ch-4: “Kung Fu Fighting” (pgs. 173-177; 198-207)

****Final Research Essay Proposals Due to OWL by 5pm on Friday, March 10****

Week 10—March 13-15—Genre Anxieties: The Horrors of Racism

Screening: *Blacula* (William Crain, 1972, 93 min.)
& *Sugar Hill* (Paul Maslansky, 1974, 91 min.)

Reading: [OWL]: Lipsitz, “Genre Anxiety and Racial Representation in 1970s Cinema”
& Benschhoff, “Blaxploitation Horror Films”
& Lawrence, “Fear of a Blaxploitation Monster”

Week 11—March 20-22—Reframing Blaxploitation: The L.A. Rebellion

Screening: *Bush Mama* (Haile Gerima, 1975/1979, 97 min.)
& *A Day in the Life of Willie Faust* (Jamaa Fanaka, 1972, 16 min.)
& *Four Women* (Julie Dash, 1975, 8 min.)

Reading: [OWL]: Horak, “Tough Enough: Blaxploitation and the L.A. Rebellion”
& Massood, *Black City Cinema*, Ch-3: “Cotton in the City” (pgs. 107-116)

Week 12—March 27-29—Richard Pryor and the Crossover Star

Screening: *Car Wash* (Michael Schultz, 1976, 97 min.)
& *Richard Pryor: Live in Concert* (Jeff Margolis, 1979, 78 min.)

Reading: [OWL]: Dyer, “Is *Car Wash* a Musical?”
& Haggins, *Laughing Mad*, Ch-1: “From Negro to Black” (pgs. 50-68)
& Corson, *Trying to Get Over*, Ch-2: “Our Man in Hollywood” (pgs. 24-41)

Week 13—April 3-5—Blaxploitation Today?

Screening: *Black Panther* (Ryan Coogler, 2018, 134 min.)

Reading: [OWL]: Dossier on *Black Panther*

****Final Research Essay Due to OWL by 5 pm on Monday April 10****

*****FINAL EXAM: SEE SCHEDULE for DATE and TIME*****

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 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

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.

Intellectual Property/Copyright

All instructor-written materials (e.g. PowerPoints, lecture notes, oral lectures) for this course are created solely for students’ personal use within the course, and remain the instructor’s intellectual property. Further reproduction, fixation, distribution, transmission, dissemination, communication, or any other uses, without securing the consent of the copyright owner (the course instructor) may be an infringement of copyright. You may not distribute, email, or otherwise communicate these materials to any other person. These limitations extend to recording, photographing, or sharing lectures (online or in-person) and lecture material without permission. Posting the instructor’s content from this course to online course sharing sites like OneClass or Course Hero without permission is both an infringement of intellectual property law and a violation of academic integrity guidelines. The instructor will pass these cases on to the Western University Ombudsperson or their Department Chair as appropriate.

Accommodation Policies

Students with disabilities work with Accessible Education (formerly SSD) which provides recommendations for accommodation based on medical documentation or psychological and cognitive testing. The accommodation policy can be found here: [Academic Accommodation for Students with Disabilities](#).

Medical/illness Accommodation

Students seeking academic accommodation on medical grounds for any missed tests, exams, participation components and/or assignments worth (either alone or in combination) 10% or more of their final grade must apply to the Academic Counselling office of their home Faculty and provide documentation. Academic accommodation cannot be granted by the instructor or department.

Documentation shall be submitted, as soon as possible, to the Office of the Dean of the student's Faculty of registration, together with a request for relief specifying the nature of the accommodation being requested. The Student Medical Certificate (SMC) can be found at https://www.uwo.ca/univsec/pdf/academic_policies/appeals/medicalform.pdf.

The full policy is set out here:

https://www.uwo.ca/univsec/pdf/academic_policies/appeals/accommodation_medical.pdf

Religious Accommodation

Students should consult the University's list of recognized religious holidays, and should give reasonable notice in writing, prior to the holiday, to the Instructor and an Academic Counsellor if their course requirements will be affected by a religious observance. Additional information is given in the [Western Multicultural Calendar](#).

Academic Offences

Scholastic offences are taken seriously and students are directed to read the appropriate policy, specifically, the definition of what constitutes a Scholastic Offence, at http://www.uwo.ca/univsec/pdf/academic_policies/appeals/scholastic_discipline_undergrad.pdf

Plagiarism:

Students must write their essays and assignments in their own words. Whenever students take an idea or passage from another author, they must acknowledge their debt both by using quotation marks where appropriate and by proper referencing such as footnotes or citations. Plagiarism is a major academic offence.

Plagiarism Checking:

All required papers may be subject to submission for textual similarity review to the commercial plagiarism detection software under license to the University for the detection of plagiarism. All papers submitted for such checking will be included as source documents in the reference database for the purpose of detecting plagiarism of papers subsequently submitted to the system.

Use of the service is subject to the licensing agreement, currently between The University of Western Ontario and Turnitin.com <http://www.turnitin.com>.

All instances of plagiarism will be reported to the Chair of Undergraduate Studies. Proven cases of plagiarism will result in a grade of zero for the assignment. Subsequent offences will result in failure for the course.

Support Services

Registrarial Services <http://www.registrar.uwo.ca>

Student Support Services <https://student.uwo.ca/psp/heprdweb/?cmd=login>

Services provided by the USC <http://westernusc.ca/services/>

Academic Support & Engagement <http://www.sdc.uwo.ca/>

Mental Health: Students who are in emotional/mental distress should refer to Mental Health@Western for a complete list of options about how to obtain help.
<http://www.uwo.ca/uwocom/mentalhealth/>

Complaints: If students have a complaint concerning a course in which they are enrolled, they must first discuss the matter with the instructor of the course. If students are still not satisfied, they should then take the complaint to the English Department chair. These regulations are in place because a failure to follow these procedures creates the potential for injustices of various kinds affecting either the instructor or the students themselves, or both parties. Concerns should not be allowed to fester but should be raised with the instructor in a timely manner, so that they can be addressed in time to make a difference to the course.

Recordings: All of the remote learning sessions for this course will be recorded. The data captured during these recordings may include your image, voice recordings, chat logs and personal identifiers (name displayed on the screen). The recordings will be used for educational purposes related to this course, including evaluations. The recordings may be disclosed to other individuals under special circumstances. Please contact the instructor if you have any concerns related to session recordings.

****NOTE: Participants in this course are not permitted to record the sessions, except where recording is an approved accommodation, or the participant has the prior written permission of the instructor.***

Statement on Online Etiquette

Some components of this course will involve online interactions. To ensure the best experience for both you and your classmates, please honour the following rules of etiquette:

- please “arrive” to class on time
- please use your computer and/or laptop if possible (as opposed to a cell phone or tablet)
- ensure that you are in a private location to protect the confidentiality of discussions in the event that a class discussion deals with sensitive or personal material

- to minimize background noise, kindly mute your microphone for the entire class until you are invited to speak, unless directed otherwise
- [suggested for classes larger than 30 students] In order to give us optimum bandwidth and web quality, please turn off your video camera for the entire class unless you are invited to speak
- [suggested for cases where video is used] please be prepared to turn your video camera off at the instructor's request if the internet connection becomes unstable
- unless invited by your instructor, do **not** share your screen in the meeting

The course instructor will act as moderator for the class and will deal with any questions from participants. To participate please consider the following:

- if you wish to speak, use the “raise hand” function and wait for the instructor to acknowledge you before beginning your comment or question
- remember to unmute your microphone and turn on your video camera before speaking
- self-identify when speaking.
- remember to mute your mic and turn off your video camera after speaking (unless directed otherwise)

General considerations of “netiquette”:

- Keep in mind the different cultural and linguistic backgrounds of the students in the course.
- Be courteous toward the instructor, your colleagues, and authors whose work you are discussing.
- Be respectful of the diversity of viewpoints that you will encounter in the class and in your readings. The exchange of diverse ideas and opinions is part of the scholarly environment. “Flaming” is never appropriate.
- Be professional and scholarly in all online postings. Cite the ideas of others appropriately.

Note that disruptive behaviour of any type during online classes, including inappropriate use of the chat function, is unacceptable. Students found guilty of Zoom-bombing a class or of other serious online offenses may be subject to disciplinary measures under the Code of Student Conduct.

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. Failure to follow the course assignment and guidelines.

0 (Report to Department)

Plagiarism with intent to deceive.