

Does My Ass Look Bad in This?

From Bruce Lee to Black Power

By Robbie Edmonstone

“Ghettos are the same all over the world – they stink.”

There are a number of images, sounds and motifs in Robert Clouse’s 1973 *Enter the Dragon* that have contributed to its iconic status. One of these is the enduring image of Bruce Lee in his final battle with Kien Shih’s arch-villain Han, stripped to the waist, covered in scars and poised to attack. It’s an image that has graced student walls the world over for decades, to the extent that one often can’t be sure whether Che Guevara ever took part in an international karate contest on a remote Chinese island or whether Bruce himself pioneered asymmetric warfare in Bolivia. Ditto the first emergence after eight minutes of Lalo Schifrin’s punch, kick n’shriek-filled title theme, which has become as integral to the parody of postmodern, post-colonial, post-bloody-everything culture as fancy-dress karaoke Chinese Christmas buffet nights.

There’s one key moment, however, that I wish to flag up as being of particular cultural importance, and it involves a distinct interplay between both visual and aural iconographies. Cut to an exterior shot of Hong Kong harbour, with Lee (Bruce Lee) making his way on a rowing boat towards the junk ship which will take him to the tournament on Han’s island. Accompanied by a measured, restrained reading of Schifrin’s oriental title motif, we see a close-up of his pensive face before being treated to a flashback which outlines his reasons for entering the tournament – the death of his sister at the hands of Han. We then cut to a similar shot of Roper (played by John Saxon), and bear witness to his flashback, where it is revealed that his reasons for entering the tournament are purely monetary. Again, Schifrin’s theme continues; brooding, unabated, working as a backdrop. It’s after this section, however, that the sequence starts to smoulder. From a close-up of a baby on a rowing woman’s back, the camera zooms out, almost chancing upon the body of Williams (Jim Kelly) – tall, pretty, African-American, cool duds,

impeccably-coiffed afro – and the soundtrack *explodes*. Into the sonic calm barges a wah-wah pedal, accompanied by a funky bassline that rolls effortlessly around one of Schifrin’s trademark stuttering breakbeats. This acoustic intrusion, coupled with the numerous shots of peering, curious Chinese faces and intercut with shots of Williams from every angle, states, argues, points out, practically *screams* one thing – there is no spectacle as engrossing, no on-screen fetish object as cool in 1973 as the muscular body of a black man with a grudge against white America.

On the surface, both *Enter the Dragon* and Guy Hamilton’s *Live and Let Die* from the same year belong to the action / spy genre, but they are also two of the biggest blaxploitation films ever made, standing out as clear referents to a watershed period in mainstream Hollywood’s representation of a counterculture that had hitherto been repressed.

“When you lead your revolution, Whitey better be standing still because you don’t run worth a damn no more.”

The term “blaxploitation” was first coined by *Variety* in 1971, primarily as a response to the success that year of Gordon Parks’ *Shaft*. In the following decade over 200 of these “black” films were released: the majority of which were low-budget grindhouse efforts, a point that can be effectively illustrated by the briefest of glances at some of the titles on offer, for example *Blacula* (1972), *Black Gunn* (1972), *The Legend of Nigger Charley* (1972), *The Black Gestapo* (1975), *Boss Nigger* (1975), *Nigger Lover* (1976) and *The Black Samurai* (1977). Bearing this in mind, it becomes clear that what is *really* being exploited in these often-lamentable genre exercises is a synthesised concept of “blackness” itself, as an examination of Parks’ “seminal” Oscar-winning film demonstrates.

On the surface, at least, *Shaft* represented a milestone for African-American involvement in Hollywood cinema. With its emphasis on Richard Roundtree’s eponymous hero, the film presented audiences with a rugged, hyper-eroticised black male lead whose sexual virility was every bit as important as his crime-fighting ability. Whereas Hollywood’s only significant black lead actor up to that point had been Sidney Poitier, his was generally regarded as a culturally “acceptable” ethnicity, with a distinct majority of his films catering to white audiences. With Roundtree, however, came a more urbanised, tough, jive-talkin’, street-walkin’ black leading man, a template that would be all but exhausted by the slew of films that followed. As Jeff Siegel from *About* summarised: “Before Roundtree, black actors who wanted to be stars had to be like



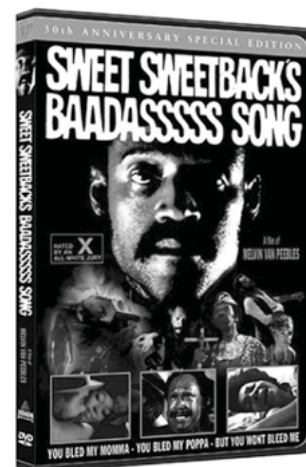
Sidney Poitier – safe enough for a white daughter to bring home for dinner. After Roundtree, black actors could look forward to having the white daughter for dessert”. Finally, it was argued, America’s black underclass had a character that *they* could root for, revelling in what one film critic called “the first picture to show a black man who lives a life free of racial torment”.

But film and cultural histories rarely form in such binary alignments, and any wider ideological project that Parks’ film set out to attempt was diluted by a number of factors, the most discernible being that the famous “black private dick who’s a sex machine to all the chicks” was in fact the creation of a white screenwriter (Ernest Tidyman, who would go on to write *High Plains Drifter* and *The French Connection*) and released by MGM: a white studio with a mainly white workforce making films about mainly white people and catering to a mainly white audience. Seemingly aware of this inconsistency, Gordon Parks hired a second screenwriter to “blacken up” Tidyman’s original script, further clouding the issues of ethnicity surrounding the film, issues which become all the more hazy upon examining the film more closely. For all its wise-crackin’, gun-totin’ Mafia-beatin’ articulation of Shaft’s blackness, the fact remains, ultimately, that race in this film is of secondary importance to the fairly straightforward crime drama surrounding it and a narrative that owes more to Raymond Chandler than it does Langston Hughes: realistically, the lead role could have been played just as effectively by a White, Oriental or Asian actor. While the films’ now-ubiquitous soundtrack and quotable dialogue have contributed to its continuing popularity, it’s fairly clear that the potential for black revolutionary sentiment can be nothing else but muffled in a film depicting a black actor speaking white lines within the generic constraints of a predominantly white filmic tradition. And it’s here that one of the central contradictions lying at the heart of the genre lies, namely the fact that at least 80% of these apparently “racial” films were by all accounts written and directed by whites *for* whites.

John Shaft’s ethnicity, however relevant, is not what defines his character: what’s more important is that he is a) a sex machine, b) the cat that won’t cop out when there’s danger all about, and c) a bad mother-SHUTYOURMOUTH. *Shaft* is, ultimately, the story of a private dick who happens to be black, rather than a black private dick, providing a perfectly non-specific vehicle for cross-racial identification that clearly helped contribute to the film’s popularity with white audiences, a popularity that has continued in the predominantly white middle-class cult DVD market which has reappraised the blaxploitation film based on its kitsch value rather than for any serious racial prerogatives that it possesses. It is at this point, however, that I intend to examine one of the few films made *outside* this white-centric tradition, investigating the radical potential of a film that consciously – and quite militantly – foregrounds blackness both in its cast and crew and in its diegesis.

“They bled my momma. They bled my poppa. But they won’t bleed me.”

“RATED X BY AN ALL-WHITE JURY”. “STARRING THE BLACK COMMUNITY”. “THIS FILM IS DEDICATED TO ALL THE BROTHERS AND SISTERS WHO HAD ENOUGH OF THE MAN”. “WATCH OUT! A BAAD ASSSSS NIGGER IS COMING BACK TO COLLECT SOME DUES”. From its sensationalist promo poster through its title sequence and closing warning, Melvin Van Peebles’ 1971 *Sweet Sweetback’s Baad Asssss Song* is a film that pushes its ideological priorities so far forward they’re practically headbutting you. Made for a comparatively small \$500,000 at the same time as Parks, Tidyman and Roundtree were spending \$1.5m on snaring the mainstream audience, *Sweetback* instead aimed itself almost exclusively at an African-American demographic. Van Peebles – a street performer, actor, astronomer and filmmaker who had cut his directorial teeth in the Dutch film industry – wanted his second film to be, in his own words, “as good as anything the Man had ever done” (“the Man”, of course, being a



derogatory personification of White authority) , and upon viewing the film it's clear that it has as much in common with films like *Shaft* and *Across 110th Street* as does Griffiths' *Birth of a Nation*. The plot is simple, if almost completely superfluous: the film's protagonist, Sweetback, is a live sex performer who witnesses two white police officers beat a black youth after a riot. Enraged, he beats both cops to death and goes on the run and is chased to New Mexico by the forces of white authority, stopping only to talk to, fight with or simply fuck a series of bizarre characters.

What's far more interesting than the threadbare narrative, however, is the film's distinctly countercultural style: rather than work within the confines of established classical (read: "white") genres, *Sweetback* puts forward its ideological project through an obtuse, often distancing film form that owes more to the cinematic "essays" of Godard than anything else. Different scenes are intertwined and overlaid through a series of highly-visible optical effects; characters change position, age and even clothing in a constant stream of jump cuts, speaking in an almost incomprehensible series of jive fragments. Sounds overlap, cut out and are amplified, distorted and detached from visual referents. The only constant, in fact, is the figure of Sweetback (played by a stoic, thousand-yard-stare-flaunting Van Peebles), running down streets, running along motorways, running through the desert, accompanied throughout by Earth, Wind and Fire's unrelenting title theme. The director has no interest whatsoever in *where* his protagonist is running, nor does he care *why* the narrative requires him to run. What's most important here is *who* he's running from, and the fact that he has to run in the first place. It's notable that most of the film's decisive episodic acts – the police brutality, Sweetback murdering the cops, Sweetback getting shot and wounded – take place in abstract noplaces, spaces divorced of any geographical, temporal or spatial continuity. Niggers are always being chased, shot at and fucked over by the Man, and the film's surreal style and use of representative rather than specific characters creates a universality that lends its central message even more potency.

More than anything else, then, *Sweetback* is a film about clashes: racial clashes, class clashes and – on a formal level – split-screen clashes, colour clashes, and soundtrack clashes. It's an immensely confrontational work that positively vibrates with energy, its veins popping out and muscles taut under the weight of the message that it carries. For all Van Peebles' ingenuity and artistic flair, however, the film suffers – as do many other blaxploitation films – from its re-establishment of

the very colour (and, by proxy, class) divides that it sets out to shatter. The Man regards all blacks to be criminals; the film's protagonist is a murderer. The Man views black people as little more than animals, driven only by the desire for bestial sex and money; Sweetback earns a living performing sex acts to white audiences. The Man creates a society based on inequality; in Van Peebles' film women exist only to cry, get beaten up and get fucked by men. This, if anything, is the central polemical shortcoming of *Sweetback* and its peers: attacking yet simultaneously perpetrating oppression, it presents no logical solution to the problem of racism in 1970s America – other than racism itself. That said, the film's influence on African-Americans and subsequent blaxploitation movies cannot be understated: it would go on to gross almost \$20m, earning more than *Shaft* and making it the single biggest independent film ever, a statistic largely arising as a result of Van Peebles' aggressive lobbying of black media and radio stations as well as his incessant pleas for blacks to buy tickets for the film as part of their "cultural duty".

"I told my story the way Muddy Waters plays his guitar, from the black point of view", argued Van Peebles at the time. "I want white people to approach *Sweetback* the way they do an Italian or Japanese film. They have to understand our culture". More telling, perhaps, is his comment on a recent DVD release of the film: "Entertainment-wise... I wanted it to be a motherfucker". And such it is, exemplifying an



effervescent, angry-as-hell style of filmmaking rarely matched in the thirty plus years since its release. All things considered, though, the radical potential that *Sweetback's Baad Asssss Song* offered would be ultimately swept aside and lost in the tidal wave of cash-ins and genre exercises that

followed. While it seemed for a brief period that Sweetback, Shaft, Superfly and Williams could act as proponents of a racial sea change in popular cinema, in retrospect it is perfectly clear that the bad asssss nigger was more likely to be performing roundhouse kicks in China than collecting the dues owed to him by The Man.