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Back to the Grindhouse: Neo-Exploitation in Contemporary American Cinema

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Back to the Grindhouse: Neo-Exploitation in Contemporary American Cinema

By

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B.A., Colby College, 2006

Advisor: Dr. Michele Schreiber

An abstract of
A thesis submitted to the Faculty of the James T. Laney School of Graduate Studies of
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Abstract

Back to the Grindhouse: Neo-Exploitation in Contemporary American Cinema
By Mike O'Brien

This thesis examines contemporary examples of exploitation films in American cinema. Discussing these films as neo-exploitation, I consider the ways in which certain directors are appropriating styles and themes from 1970s exploitation cinema. I argue that in doing so, the directors are intentionally using references to a film period and type in order to comment on their own contemporary moment. While the films I analyze may seem like gratuitous cinematic spectacles, I contend that they are in fact deeply layered films and proceed to discuss them critically.

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Neo-Exploitation: An Introduction

In the fall of 2010 a friend and I drove in his pickup truck to the Starlight Six Drive-In in Atlanta. We were going to see Robert Rodriguez's newest feature, *Machete* (20th Century Fox, 2010). As we settled in the truck bed, a nostalgic crackle came over the sound system signaling the film's commencement. The marred stock of the introductory segment recreated the look of a deteriorating 35mm print. What followed was violence, sex, humor, and much more violence. What would have been obnoxious and distracting in a cinema, became lots of fun as the drive-in patrons laughed, screamed, and generated the energy of an audience actively consuming a film.

This must have been what it was like to see exploitation movies in the 1970s. Leaving the drive-in, I marveled at how fun both the film and the viewing experience had been. There was also something in *Machete* that I felt drawn to – it seemed to me to be both overtly and yet subtly political. Rodriguez was packaging a revolutionary fantasy about the border with style, dialogue and action that, in combination, made it easy to dismiss the seriousness of its anti-anti-immigration stance. Here was one of the first, if only, American big budget films with a leading role given to a male Latino playing alongside such iconographic actors such as Robert De Niro and Steven Seagal. When was the last time a Hollywood-released film had positively depicted or even addressed a Mexican theme? What was the film suggesting about immigration and US-Mexico border policy?

There exist strong connections, both visually and conceptually, between this film and exploitation films of the 1970s. Scholars have retrospectively argued, sometimes in an overdetermined fashion, for political readings of those films on which *Machete* was

modeled. My goal is to recover what *Machete* and other films are doing when appropriating styles and themes from 1970s exploitation films. I argue that contemporary filmmakers are making conscious and thoughtful decisions in using what could be dismissed as fairly trashy materials.

Certainly not all contemporary exploitation films have the level of political engagement that I see present in *Machete*. This was also true of the original 70s blaxploitation cycle. Some films are indeed merely imitative of their predecessors, but with digital special effects. The films I have chosen to focus on are those that possess a complicated layering that represents conscious reappropriation of a particular *type* of exploitation film, putting them in dialogue with one another. Ultimately, these films are making unique racial and/or gendered commentaries. I propose that *Machete*, *Black Dynamite* (Apparition 2009), and *Death Proof* (Dimension Films, 2007) all belong to a unique category of films I will call *neo*-exploitation[1]. These neo-exploitative films are specifically intended to evoke the exploitation independent film cycle that peaked during the 1970s in America. Stephen Thrower, in his introduction to *Nightmare USA: The Untold Story of Exploitation Independents* provides a useful description of 1970s exploitation:

> Although the claims to be made for individual exploitation pictures must not be overstated, their great value was in decentering the film industry, providing variance, aesthetic and topical; offering pleasures above and beyond the more conservative major products; and even suggesting to the viewer that their home towns, their friends and acquaintances, could partake in the dream-structure of America. They provided balance against the feeling that cultural power in cinema was located entirely in

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[1] I am describing these films as neo-exploitation and am uncertain as to the "real" source of this category. What I mean to suggest is that exploitation cinema is not "post," (or emptied of meaning) but instead remade and part of a continuous cycle, one that often engages with politics of cinematic history and representation.

Hollywood, and encouraged optimism and engagement in the medium at a local level (13).

Neo-exploitative films are drawing on many of these aspects and using them to address contemporary concerns. The films I discuss are presenting utopian situations that suggest ways in which both cinematic and historical realities could or should be rewritten and even remade.

Based on Thrower's definition, I propose several key characteristics of a neo-exploitative film (in no particular order): (1) A "decentering" aesthetic that usually consists of visual cues that incite nostalgic reflection, thus aligning the films with their ancestors. For example, *Machete* and *Death Proof* both have marred film stock. This likens them to the poorly treated prints of the original exploitation films and serves to establish an immediate link between the two cinematic periods. (2) A strong level of self-conscious irony. These films are aware that they are using a style that likens them to camp or kitsch. The power of their political message lies in this awareness. (3) A focus on the "other", a population that is either grotesquely caricatured or entirely ignored in mainstream or classical exploitation cinema. This effectively enables those often cinematically marginalized peoples to connect to previously unconsidered images. (4) Gratuitousness or hyperbole that link a particular movie to the cycle of films that it is exploiting. As Thrower alludes to, these films had to offer something that was not present in mainstream cinema. Coupled together, these characteristics result in a reinvention of the grindhouse/exploitation feature, hence, neo-exploitation. The importance in recognizing these films as such stems from the ease with which they are usually and characteristically dismissed as trashy and self-indulgent. I am arguing that there is much more to these films. In fact, and quite ironically, they are often *more* complex than many

Hollywood films. Those involved with the films clearly recognize this, and I want to suggest ways in which the audience may reach similar conclusions.

In Chapter 1 I will be looking at Quentin Tarantino's *Death Proof*. Packaged as part of a double-billed feature, *Grindhouse* (Dimension Films, 2007), the film represents the most subtle example of neo-exploitation in this thesis. The violence is toned down and the trajectory is different from the films that the visual cues suggest it invokes. It both creates a link to and distances itself from the 70s cycle. In doing so, Tarantino is questioning the ability of film to comment on anything other than its own cinematic past. How are genres, cycles, and conventions recycled and to what effect? The film is political precisely because it strives to be apolitical in its historical references. *Death Proof* has an aesthetic evoking exploitation cinema of the 70s, but its references are dehistoricized and depoliticized. Further, the film has only contained moments of excess, calling attention to how violence is used in the film. It complicatedly explores post-feminist/feminist ideas in questioning how women can exist in the exploitation world. Its narrative structure suggests that they could have positive portrayals in the past not, but that now they can.

In Chapter 2, I look at how the movie *Black Dynamite* fits into the neo-exploitation framework. The film revisits the blaxploitation film cycle through attention to nostalgic-inducing details (costuming, narrative elements, music, masculinities, technical 'mistakes', and black cultural mythology) but removes many of the problematic stereotypes associated with classical blaxploitation. Despite a limited budget, the director and cast prove they need *not* make some of the concessions that the originators of the cycle were forced to make in the 1970s. For example, the film ends with Black Dynamite posing in the White House having defeated President Nixon in one-on-one combat.

In Chapter 3 I similarly evaluate the film *Machete*. While it has a bigger budget and bigger stars (typically uncharacteristic of classical exploitation), it certainly fits comfortably into the neo-exploitation category outlined above. Rodriguez claims, "But the difference between our movie and the grindhouse movies of yesteryear is that we can actually afford to make a really great movie that is full of great characters, dialogue, and story. We're taking this classic, forgotten genre and turning it into something big, exciting, and new" (372). The production company he started, Troublemaker Studios, enables him to have an enormous amount of creative authority over his film. This also enables him to hire Latinos on a level unprecedented in Hollywood history. This kind of control was very important in fostering the exploitation film boom of the 70s and was due largely to a completely collapsed censorship system. Further, Rodriguez employs strategies of violence that align him not only with these exploitation films, but also the New Hollywood movement that essentially thrived *because* of the success of exploitation films. This aesthetic strategy is discussed in Chapter 3 in order to demonstrate the ways in which a low budget film mode can be appropriated to a big budget spectacle in very provocative ways. There are Latino myths coded into the film that would be familiar to his audience.[2] The use of ethnic mythology represents one of several notable similarities between *Machete* and *Black Dynamite*. Both films confront a still racist society with a retrograde aesthetic strategy and valorized, ethnic male hero. This gives identifying

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[2] Charles Ramirez Berg notes the recurrence of one particular myth in Rodriguez's oeuvre: La Llorona – "…she returns to haunt the male order, either as a ghost or a madwoman…Rodriguez continues the tradition of cinematic Lloronas [in *Bedhead*]" (223). This character is most literalized in *Machete* when Luz (Michelle Rodriguez) returns from the dead.

spectators something to cheer. Further, both these muscular male heroes fight for the larger causes of their community.

The three films in this study are exemplary cases of neo-exploitation cinema because of the ways in which they essentially exploit the very idea of exploitation cinema. Not many people in the seventies were taking these films seriously upon their release. They were fun, if not trashy. There has been a recent critical move by scholars such as Jeffrey Sconce and Eric Schaeffer to redeem these texts as socially relevant and potentially politically radical. Rather than let these films go underappreciated and unconsidered, I want to study them now and reflect on the ways in which they are politically engaged and culturally subversive.

Chapter 1: Enter the Grindhouse

The seventies represented an uncertain and experimental time in American movie history. The Hollywood studio system had collapsed due to financial instability. Censorship regulation was significantly weakened through the abandonment of the Production Code Administration and the declining influence of the Catholic Legion of Decency. Quite noticeably, certain low budget films such as *Vanishing Point* (Twentieth Century Fox, 1971) and *Night of the Living Dead* (Continental Distributing, 1968) were making improbably large profits. Many of these movies appealed to an urban youth market looking for something sensationalistic and graphic. They were drawn to countercultural films that reflected a broken and anxious society. They found these films in the grindhouse. The fan site www.grindhouse.com defines a grindhouse in the following way:

> …an American term for a theatre that mainly showed exploitation films. It is also a term used to describe the genre of films that played in such theaters. Grindhouse films are also referred to as 'exploitation films' Grindhouses were known for non-stop programs of B movies, usually consisting of a double feature where two films were shown back to back. Many of these inner-city theatres formerly featured burlesque shows which included 'bump and grind' dancing, leading to the term 'grindhouse.' Beginning in the late 1960s and especially during the 1970s, the subject matter of grindhouse films was dominated by explicit sex, violence, bizarre or perverse plot points, and other taboo content.

The seventies were the golden age of the grindhouse. These venues resulted from the pervasive white flight out of cities and into the suburbs in the 1970s coupled with urban decay. No longer guaranteed the financial promises of yesteryear, the newly dubbed grindhouses showed cheap films, such as pornography, slashers, blaxploitation, and dubbed martial arts film.

A discussion of the Quentin Tarantino/Robert Rodriguez double feature *Grindhouse*[3] is crucial to my argument, as its title refers specifically to the genre on which neo-exploitation is based. Tarantino has used his films as meditations on media violence in the past, notably *Reservoir Dogs* (Mirimax Films, 1992). This film was the first in a series that helped to establish him as *the* American cult auteur. Damien Love, in an interview in *Cineaste*, comments on the pervasive marketing campaign of cult films and Tarantino's role in starting that trend: "Some of this is probably the fault of Quentin Tarantino's initial success, but he shouldn't be blamed. His obsessive love of cult gives his films a different vibe; in a strange way, simply by so relentlessly mashing-up, referencing, replaying, and magnifying moments by filmmakers that have moved him, his work actually begins to feel deeply personal" (45). Tarantino's generic pastiche represents a strong move toward a form of cinematic deconstruction. This move becomes more tangibly political when it comments on the ability of film to refer only to itself. Tarantino is concerned with cinema's history and the role that recognizable visual cues can play in highly referential movies. In many ways, he can be seen as having popularized the trend that reinvigorated 1970s exploitation cinema. *Grindhouse* is representative of this. Working with Robert Rodriguez, the two created a double feature that invokes that time period through the use of trailers, marketing materials, and special effects. *Grindhouse* represents the increased control over the directors have gained over

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[3] The marketing campaign for the film's theatrical release was intended to recreate the experience of going to the grindhouse (through use of a double-billing, exploitation movie trailers, and film stock effects) where exploitation movies were played almost continuously for the price of one admission.

their movies in light of the financial success of their past films, some of which have been described as exploitation.[4]

Because of the financial success of their past films and their own cinephilia, these two directors found themselves able to use their artistic freedom to create movies that are conscious reworkings of memorable grindhouse films. Based on aesthetics and structure, the two films of *Grindhouse* would certainly qualify for inclusion in the neo-exploitation category.[5] In this chapter I focus on the Tarantino section of the double bill, *Death Proof,* because of the subtle ways in which it comments on the *act* of exploitation appropriation. It represents the possibilities and potential of reconsidering a cinematic past. While the film suggests its relationship to several exploitation genres, it only really exists as a hybrid "rape"-revenge/slasher film with a car chase sequence. Importantly, the women are at the helm, creating an exploitation film unlike any that would have appeared in 1970. Tarantino highlights this maneuver through a unique dual narrative structuring that sets up a contrast between two moments in cinematic history. I will examine how this narrative structure works to suggest a unique commentary on cinematic history. This will demonstrate the differences between how Rodriguez and Tarantino are reappropriating grindhouse strategies to add very different layers of depth to their films.

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[4] Charles Ramirez Berg calls *El Mariachi* a "hybrid exploitation film".

[5] David Lerner, in his essay, "Cinema of Regression: *Grindhouse* and the Limits of Spectatorial Imagination," explains: "In its original theatrical release, the filmmakers included additional textual feature beyond the two narratives, including preview cards to replicate 1970s theater ads for coming attractions and feature presentations, mock concessions advertisements, vintage animated clips that provide warnings of adult content, and four trailers (for nonexistent films) that seek to valorize other unrepresented 1970s trash genres." (360). Further, each film features a missing reel; sprocket holes are shown, and the 35mm film stock is scratched.

First, I will provide a brief discussion of Rodriguez's film *Planet Terror* as an example of the different ways in which two cult auteurs can politically exploit a neo-exploitative film. There has been a strong critical tendency in recent years to retrospectively redeem the 1970s exploitation films as having some political implications. I will be looking at how these directors are using styles and themes from the past to comment on contemporary cinematic and political realities, thereby demonstrating the versatility and efficacy of neo-exploitation films.

Planet Terror

It is important look at how *Planet Terror* fits into the neo-exploitation genre in order to contrast it to the ways that its companion piece, *Death Proof*, also fits. Rodriguez's choice of the zombie sub-genre is significant since this genre has been read as critiquing a zombified American culture. The sub-genre does so both through its portrayal of zombie epidemics and also by creating a racial, gendered, or socioeconomic dynamic between the zombies and the selectively chosen survivors. George A. Romero is probably the closest thing to a zombie auteur: *Night of the Living Dead* has been read as dealing with racism and Vietnam; *Dawn of the Dead* (United Film Distribution Company, 1979) was primarily a critique of consumerism; and *Day of the Dead* (United Film Distribution Company, 1985) was an allegory for 1980s militarism. Rodriguez employs technical strategies with film form that have the double function of referencing the actual grindhouse viewing experience and of commenting on the filmic action in ways that stress the overall political thrust of the film.

Lerner cites Robert Rodriguez's "emphatic claim that these digital effects of aging film are not intended to be deployed arbitrarily – they must serve a purpose in the diegesis" (368). Both *Planet Terror* and *Death Proof* deploy, in the midst of the narrative, an apology for a "Missing Reel". Both of the omitted scenes are sexual and are meant to suggest that the projectionist, as was common in the grindhouse golden age, had stolen the reel. These ellipses further suggest a feminist refusal on the part of the directors to objectify their protagonist(s).[6] Another example is equally instructive. At one point in *Planet Terror*, a prison guard (Quentin Tarantino) is sexually harassing Cherry Darling (Rose McGowan). The reel takes on a red hue, as they often did in the grindhouse when repeated viewings faded the color balance. For Rodriguez this formal shift serves a double purpose: "it both maintains the "ride" aspect of the film's conceit, keeping viewers immersed in the 1970s experience, and serves to manifest the sexual energy of the scene and perhaps Cherry's rising ire" (Lerner 368). While Tarantino's aesthetic cues successfully invoke a 1970s viewing experience, they do not have the extra-diegetic weight of some of Rodriguez's cues. Here I want to highlight the ways in which Rodriguez self-conscious use of style is different than Tarantino's use of style. Rodriguez is more concerned with allegorical meaning than Tarantino, whose style is instead more frequently used to comment on cinematic history.

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[6] Curiously, in Tarantino's subsequently released unabridged version, the reel is included and shows Pam (Rose McGowan) performing a lengthy strip-tease/lap dance for Stuntman Mike, undermining the gender politics he is working against. However, this gesture should be considered in light of the narrative structuring of the film, which will be examined below. Both films are guilty of these complications. *Planet Terror* opens with an exotic dance performed by Cherry Darling. Her use of her sexuality and a phallic prosthetic limb/gun make the film conducive to a postfeminist reading.

Planet Terror is in many ways updating George A. Romero's contributions to the zombie sub-genre. To a contemporary audience watching *Planet Terror*, the military's experimentation with biochemicals is evocative of today's international concerns regarding potential biochemical disasters/terrorism. Further, as it takes place in a border town, the film's two protagonists, El Rey (Freddie Rodriguez playing a gunslinger turned tow-truck driver) and Cherry Darling (a stripper), lead a group of unlikely survivors across the border to a utopian-looking Mexican beach, reflecting the film's concern with socio-political/economical issues. With their backs to the water, they prepare to defend against any oncoming zombie hoard. Comparably, Romero's film, *Night of the Living Dead*, ended with a lynch-mob-type zombie hoard attacking the black protagonist. Rodriguez's film ends more optimistically with an empowered female amputee and a Mexican-American man heroically defending a pristine, natural setting against a hoard turned mutant by their own government.

Death Proof, meanwhile, stands as a contemporary imitation of a 1970s grindhouse movie with some notable upgrades and striking differences. It is certainly political with its powerful female protagonists and feminist attitude, but Tarantino focuses more heavily on cinematic tropes and visual cues rather than exploiting the allegorical potential of a grindhouse feature to comment on society at large. It includes elements that make its political stance one that is more concerned with cinematic history. As such, his film is closer to what Damien Love describes as one of the ways in which "The mainstream sprays aging 'cult' and exploitation styling on its product to try and look hip" (45). But this is not an empty gesture.

Death Proof

  Death Proof's plot is split into two separate narratives. Throughout, it relies

heavily on Tarantino's signature dialogue and referential visual cues. The first narrative

begins as a group of mid-twenties women drive around the city of Austin, Texas talking

about their recent (hetero)sexual escapades. Despite this talk, the film's refusal to actually

show any romantic coupling (in fact, it is explicitly rejected by the girls in the first part,

despite male attempts to convince them otherwise) is one of the noticeable upgrades to

the exploitation genre. Also, the extensive use of dialogue helps develop a level of female

camaraderie hardly ever seen in exploitation films. Still, the message is a mixed one, as

the first group of girls is ultimately brutalized while the second group of girls survives.

Consequently, it is important to understand the purpose of this split narrative structure.

  Unbeknownst to the first group of women, a deranged stuntman, Stuntman Mike

(Kurt Russell), is stalking them around Austin. They soon encounter him at a bar. The

girls proceed to enjoy a night of revelry, getting drunk and stoned before driving off for a

females-only lake house retreat outside of town. Stuntman Mike, in a vehicle he contends

is "death-proof" passes them; turns his lights off; and drives full-speed into the

unsuspecting carload of girls, killing all of them. Fourteen months later, this episode of

stalking repeats itself with a different outcome. A new group of girls are soberly test-

driving a 1970s White Dodge Challenger with stuntwoman Zoe Bell (cast as herself)

playing "Ship's Mast".[7] Stuntman Mike repeatedly tries to run the girls off the road.

Ultimately, he fails and is shot in the arm. The girls chase down a wounded Stuntman

Mike and eventually run him off the road, flipping his car. The girls get revenge on the

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[7] She crawls out on to the hood of the car, restrained by two belts attached to the car's
doors

sociopathic Stuntman Mike as they heroically punch him, one girl to the next. Finally, he is finished off with a heel-kick from one of the girls that collapses his face.

Tarantino is working with three different subgenres from the 1970s exploitation boom - the road movie, the rape-revenge movie; and blaxploitation[8]. However, his version of genre-mashing is complicated considering the nature of the classical exploitation genres he invokes. Unlike the other films in this thesis, Tarantino's politics are concerned more with cinema than society. His dual focus is to examine and to reinvent the gender politics contained in the seventies cycle of exploitation movies. He certainly could have pushed the feminism further, considering his contemporary position as an unrestricted cult auteur, but this does not seem to be his major concern. An examination of the sub-genres of classical exploitation that Tarantino deliberately invokes show how *Death Proof* is more about cinematic deconstruction than a recycling of allegorical significance and subtextual politics. *Death Proof* is a road movie without concern for the road or what it represents; blaxploitation without an expressed racial trajectory; and a rape-revenge film with metaphorical rape.

Road Movies

Easy Rider (Columbia Pictures, 1969), produced by Peter Fonda and directed by Dennis Hopper, was an important film in establishing a new type of American road movie. The film's realistic depiction of tensions between youth culture and a hostile "regular" America ended with the death of one of its two central protagonists, Billy

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[8] Three of the eight girls featured in the movie are African-American: Kim (Tracie Thoms), Jungle Julia, and Abernathy (Rosario Dawson). Both Kim and Abernathy survive at the end to beat up Stuntman Mike, without having been sexually objectified as female blaxploitation protagonists, such as Pam Grier, often were.

(Dennis Hopper). The film initiated a series of anti-authoritarian road movies that would explore similar tensions in slightly different ways. Tarantino directly invokes two of these road movies in *Death Proof*: *Vanishing Point* and *Convoy* (United Artists, 1978). A.O Scott's review of *Grindhouse* also suggest a third film being referenced, *Two Lane Blacktop* (Universal Pictures, 1971): "*Death Proof* is in part a sincere tribute to the work of Monte Hellman, whose films have ascended from the fetor of their low-rent origins into the purer air of art houses and museum retrospectives, which is where they belong" (1). This is a complicated assessment of the film. Stylistically capturing the look of these movies, Tarantino decontextualizes the significance of the films and, in doing so, voids their historical connection to a generation who were drawn to the films for their existential ambience. He is creating a new film for a different time. In doing so he demonstrates how cinema can comment on its own past and even change that past to suggest a way that things should have and could have been. In *Death Proof*, women are behind the wheel. The car is not a representation of masculine crisis or existential isolation, but a vehicle for empowerment. While Tarantino does not explicitly give a reason for one group surviving and another group being brutally murdered, the aesthetic and narrative structuring of the two segments will show how it is consistent with his ongoing commentary on cinematic history.

Trouble starts for the second group of girls in *Death Proof* when one of the friends, Zoë Bell[9], expresses her interest in test-driving a white 1970 Dodge Challenger while visiting her friends in Lebanon, Tennessee. She and Kim (Tracie Thoms) explain to the other girls how the car is the one driven by the protagonist, Kowalski in the film

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[9] Zoë Bell plays herself in the film. She is a New Zealand stuntwoman who did much of the stunt work for Uma Thurman in Tarantino's *Kill Bill* films.

Vanishing Point. John Beck, in his essay, "Resistance Becomes Ballistic: *Vanishing Point* and the End of the Road," explains, "Richard C. Sarafian's *Vanishing Point* (1971) is the apotheosis of the Vietnam-era exploitation/arthouse existentialist road movies produced in the wake of *Easy Rider*" (35). The film follows Kowalski (Barry Newman) as he drives the car from Colorado to Frisco, California, hopped up on speed and furiously outrunning the pursuing police force – for no real reason. His only crime in the film is speeding and failure to stop. Supersoul (Cleavon Little), a blind African American DJ following and narrating Kowalski's adventure, variously refers to Kowalski as "the last American hero" and "the last beautiful free soul on the planet" (*Vanishing Point*).[10] Beck critiques the film as a "disconsolate Vietnam-era appraisal of the corruption of the American utopian project" (49). He goes on to explain how the film's connection to contemporary America is pronounced because of the way it serves as a critique of governmental power abuse.

The car's destruction in *Death Proof* could have invoked any number of political situations in contemporary America if Tarantino used it in the same way that classical road movies did. He could have easily referenced the economic crisis and the resulting discussion of the dying American automobile industry. However, these middle class girls completely destroy the car and the film ends before any reparations can be made to the owner. Instead, the inclusion of the Challenger is solely intended to give the women a chance behind the wheel. In a *Variety* review, Stephen Zietchik, notes, "The hair-raising stunts are clearly absolutely real, making the sequence, among other things, a massive

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[10] Frustrated with their failed attempts to catch Kowalski, the police make a detour along the way for a relentlessly ruthless and racist physical assault on Supersoul. This added a poignant criticism of the racism running rampant in the American Southwest.

middle finger from Tarantino to the interventions of CGI." Lerner comments on this also: "…this car chase is produced using the same in-camera techniques employed in the 1970s classic chase sequences like those in *Bullitt* (1968), *The French Connection* (1971), and of course *Vanishing Point*" (qtd in Lerner 372). *Vanishing Point* ends with Kowalski crashing the car at top speed into a roadblock rather than submitting to the corrupt lawmen trying to stop him. Beck writes, "The vanishing point of the film's title is, in these terms, an acknowledgment of the welcome oblivion faced by its alienated protagonist when confronted by an almost entirely administered social existence" (42). There is no such critique in Tarantino's film.

One of the most drastic changes from the 1970s road movie formula is the lack of motivation for the antagonist, Stuntman Mike. He is not a lawman pursuing the girls, nor is he shown to be a member of a different economic class. In fact, very little is known about him except that he is a stuntman and a strange type of sexual pervert. As such, he represents an example of generic shorthand from the slasher film (or something like from a gangster film), whereby he does what he is supposed to do, regardless of motivation. The hood ornament on his death-proofed car is an aggressive looking duck. This is a visual cue recalling the male-dominated CB radio/trucker exploitation subgenre, particularly Sam Peckinpah's *Convoy*.[11] In Peckinpah's film, Martin 'Rubber Duck' Penwald (Kris Kristofferson) leads a convoy of truckers across the American Southwest. Penwald's CB name is Rubber Duck, taken from the hood ornament on the front of his Mack truck. The convoy begins when three truckers (Penwald, Bobby 'Love Machine' 'Pig Pen' (Burt Young), and Spider Mike (Franklyn Ajaye)) encounter the corrupt Sheriff

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[11] The movie is based on C.W. McCall's song of the same name

Lyle 'Cottonmouth' Wallace (Ernest Borgnine). After the Sheriff extorts money from them, the three continue on to a diner. The Sheriff follows them here with a larger police force looking for more money. In a scene that once again highlights American power abuse and racism, the Sheriff threatens to take Spider Mike to jail because he talks back to him. A brawl ensues and the truckers take to the road where they slowly amass a much larger following of truckers. They eventually reach Arizona where they are given political asylum as part of a publicity stunt for the governor there. One member of the crew departs because his wife is about to deliver twins – Spider Mike. Spider Mike is consequently detained and beaten in a Texas jailhouse, inciting Penwald to action. He and a community of truckers literally run over the small Texas town, freeing Mike. The convoy, discontent with the larger faults and hypocrisies of America, flee to Mexico. Penwald, like Kowalski, refuses to stop for the law and his truck is blown up on a bridge.

Again, Tarantino empties iconic visual cues of their original political meaning. This in turn is a *cinematically* political gesture. The hood ornament in *Death Proof* is a more sadistic looking duck, resting in front of the skull painted on Stuntman Mike's car. Kurt Russell looks eerily similar to an aged Kristofferson. While the women in *Death Proof* are not combating allegorical lawmen, they are combating masculinity gone awry. While the original road movies were largely quests for freedom, none of this is really present in the film. Another scene contained in the uncut version of *Death Proof* shows the girls on a quest for a copy of Italian *Vogue*. Tarantino is constantly distancing his film from the original road movies. Technical aspects aside, it is hard to see how this film is a worthy tribute to one of the most celebrated directors of the genre, as Scott suggests, but it certainly can be read as a uniquely gendered reappropriation.

Tarantino deserves credit for the way he fetishizes the cars in the film, and this does evoke a sense of Hellman's film *Two-Lane Blacktop*. Danny Peary writes, "Hellman spends much screen time with his camera on The Car, lovingly panning along its frame, or exploring what is under the hood with fascination and awe" (364). In the DVD commentary to *Two-Lane*, Hellman explains how he had to prove to financiers that a road movie was capable of being visually stimulating. He claims that he came up with twenty-four various shots showing the inside of the car. However, this wasn't the reason the film resonated with most audiences. The film spends more time focusing on the characters than on their races, giving up completely on the cross-country one towards the end. Again, Tarantino's film certainly does this, with a near-excessive amount of dialogue written for the girls (Hellman's film has hardly any between the two main characters). Peary explains:

> The rift that develops in the men's symbiotic relationship might be healed easily except for the fact that The Driver and The Mechanic are incapable of communicating with each other about anything other than cars…It is a conservative country, where longhairs are looked on with suspicion and the past is revealed through the various cars we see, which date back to 1932 (365).

Tarantino's "girls" (as they're introduced in the credit sequence) do not develop any sort of rift; they bond. Their relationships with one another are deprived of any allegorical significance. The only real examination of a conservative country and its past resides with the redneck (Johnathon Loughran) from whom they rent the Challenger, and he is played comedically.

Aside from the fact that it has cars and one extended chase scene in it, *Death Proof* is really not much of a road movie. Instead of exploring the United States, the film centers on two reckless rides occurring near city limits. The film then falls more

comfortably into the rape-revenge genre of the seventies that Carol Clover discusses at length in *Men, Women, and Chainsaws*, but Tarantino even destabilizes this genre, as its re-employment serves no real political purpose other then to imitate a much-imitated cycle. But this imitation is his aesthetic point.

"Rape"-Revenge

The narrative structure of *Death Proof* certainly diverges from Hollywood norms, and in this way can be seen as an extension of the trash genres Tarantino is trying to commemorate. But Todd McCarthy in his *Variety* review describes the film as a "chickpower movie…divided into two parts, both of which are exhilarating for the vibrant bonding and camaraderie they develop among two different sets of young women" (25). This makes it a curious choice for a type of film so traditionally marketed towards young adolescent males. Damien Love speaks of the real power of 70s cult films: "The new audiences brought a new way of seeing, and so a movie that had once been chased out of town as work of base exploitation found itself held up by a cult as a pioneering social document" (3). Tarantino is consciously trying to suggest a new way of seeing, whereby cinematic references exist only for the purpose of undermining the traditional use of referentiality.

As mentioned above, *Death Proof* is patterned after another popular exploitation genre – the rape-revenge movie. Clover explains, "In the 1970s, rape moved to center stage and the rape-revenge story as a drama complete unto itself came into its own" (137). Tarantino puts his own narrative novelties in his version of the rape-revenge movie, recycling elements that have been present in such films for the past forty years to

create a new effect: allowing previously marginalized characters to stand victorious at the end.

The first section of the film following the credit sequence introduces the audience to Jungle Julia (Sydney Poitier[12]). She is on her couch, taking a bong hit. Above her is a monstrous sepia-toned picture of Bridgette Bardot similarly reclined on a couch (minus the bong, of course). The next forty minutes of the film show the girls smoking weed and getting drunk at a bar. Stephanie Zacharek, in her critical review of *Grindhouse* in the anthology, *The B-List: The National Society of Film Critics on the Low-Budget Beauties, Genre-Bending Mavericks, and Cult Classics We Love*, writes "The first half of *Death Proof* has a definite 70s vibe…" (56). It is fitting that the girls are behaving like teenagers from seventies horror films. Matt Becker in his essay "A Point of Little Hope: Hippie Horror Films and the Politics of Ambivalence" explains how "…the victims of these hippie horror films also have significant traits that undermine their elicitation of sympathy" (49) such as binge drinking and drug use. It really doesn't come as too much of a surprise when they're killed in a violent car crash.

What is surprising is that Stuntman's Mike collision with the group of girls is driven by his sexual perversion, as the Sheriff in the film suggests (although he's already been sexually turned on by a lap dance). The *Cahiers du Cinema* article confirms this, writing "Indeed, in the interview, [Tarantino] does not explain Mike's obsession otherwise: bumping into girls with his death proof car (as per the title) is his own way of

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[12] This Sidney Poitier intertext may suggest that she is a new generation of black representation and, in doing so, link her to Poitier's successors of black representation – the blaxploitation protagonists.

reaching orgasm" (Burdeau). He further explains that he decided not to show Mike masturbating after the accident because his sexual motivation was strongly implied.

The first section then ends with something of a brutal "rape." The girls are shown being killed, each in slow motion, despite the simultaneous nature of their deaths: one is thrown from the passenger's seat; one has her neck snapped; one has her leg detached; and the other has half of her face blown off by the front tire of Stuntman Mike's car. While Tarantino doesn't show an *actual* rape, he does suggest four of them metaphorically.

The structuring of the first segment as distinctly 1970s is an important one for understanding the film's commentary on exploitation cinema. Part one contains elements of graphic male on female violence facilitated through Stuntman's Mike use of his death-proofed car. On his way to murder the girls, Mike maliciously and horrifically kills a female passenger, Pam (Rose McGowan), whom he had encouraged to accept a sober ride home from the bar with him. It is additionally instructive to look at what was *included* in this segment of the film when it was released as its own separate entity: a strip tease and an instance of romantic coupling.

The film opens with an immediate objectification of women. A woman's foot with painted toenails is shown on the dashboard of a car as the opening credits roll, perhaps fetishizing the female body. Several ensuing scenes individually objectify the women in the first segment. Jungle Julia is shown in sexually suggestive billboards throughout the first segment and, as discussed above, she is connected to the image of Bridget Bardot, famously exploited by Roger Vardim in *And God Created Woman* (Kingsley International Pictures, 1956). The first inclusion to the director's cut is a scene

that shows Arlene (Vanessa Ferlito) exit the bar to go have a sexual encounter with her current love interest in the parking lot. This seemingly counters the overall sexual politics of the movie, but this is precisely the point because it is contained within the 70s segment of the two narratives. Not long after this incident, Arlene gives Stuntman Mike a very provocative lap dance, fulfilling a promise that Julia had made on the radio earlier that day. This combined with the rape and the girls' inability to *use* their car align the film with a traditional seventies exploitation film. The second segment exists to offset the first through its more contemporary reimagining of exploitation film. It is here that Tarantino focuses on the nostalgia-inducing visual cues.

Clover explains how in the rape-revenge movie "…women seek their own revenge – usually on their own behalf, but sometimes on behalf of a sister (literal or figurative) who has been murdered or disabled in an act of sexual violence" (138). The second (more contemporary-feeling according to Zachareck) narrative of the film follows the group of girls who, unbeknownst to them, will enact this revenge. Their vigilantism is both for those killed/"raped" in the first part of the movie and because of the harassment they suffer from Stuntman Mike. They do so with several masculine phallic signifiers – a gun, a steel rod, and the car.[13]

Often in the rape-revenge films of the seventies "two sets of politics come into play and are played off against one another: the politics of gender and the politics of urban/rural social class" (160). The move from the Austin, Texas of the first segment of *Death Proof* to the Lebanon, Tennessee of the second segment comes close to

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[13] The fact that Kim is "raping" Stuntman Mike is made obvious by bits of dialogue while ramming the back of his car: "Don't like it up the ass, do you?!" "Bust a nut up in this bitch right now!" "I'm the horniest mother-fucker on the road!" and "You know I can't let you go without tapping that ass one more time!"

approaching the socioeconomic politics but never successfully incorporates them.[14] The

girls' excursion into the country to test-drive the Challenger is one that lets the girls

experience the thrills that were denied them in the original cycle of car movies,

specifically *Vanishing Point*. Stuntman Mike is not the "lunatic redneck bastard" that the

girls assume he is. The audience actually doesn't know enough about Stuntman Mike to

really evaluate his socio-economic situation (except that he can pay expensive hospital

bills, rebuild and death-proof a car, and buy a $1000+ Rebel Canon camera with which to

take pictures of his victims). Further, nothing about him suggests that he takes any kind

of racist stance or backcountry conservatism. In individualizing and pathologizing

Stuntman Mike, Tarantino removes another political element from his generic imitation,

concentrating the focus on gender politics. The traditional formula is followed: the girls

enact revenge on an aggressive male who has threatened their lives and previously

"raped" a group of girls. However, they all live to enact their revenge. In doing so, they

subvert the formula of the first narrative.

Perhaps regressively, the images of the violent female avengers in Tarantino's

film are not really representative of anything new. Coulthard writes, "Marked by popular

appeal, narrational centrality of active female characters, genre hybridity, and

sophisticated fight choreography, a number of recent films have foregrounded the

presence of violent women in genres usually associated with male characters, actors, and

audiences" (154), Clearly this film follows that description faithfully. The action genre,

and Tarantino himself in *Kill Bill: Vol. 1* (Miramax Films, 2003), has been much more

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[14] Lebanon is a city with an airport, a multi-lane highway, a population of 20,000 or
more, and a newspaper available for delivery in New Zealand.

inclusive of women over the course of the past two decades. Lisa Coulthard in her essay

"Killing Bill: Rethinking Feminism and Film Violence," contends:

> Although they are powerful, visually pleasurable, and appealing, it is
> important to recognize the role these fantasies of gendered violent action
> play within popular culture and to note that in many of these images of
> (and responses to) violent women, we can recognize an apolitical,
> individualistic, and capitalistic celebration of the superficial markers of
> power that dominate much of the popular discourse of postfeminism. Seen
> in this way, the violent woman of contemporary popular action cinema
> does not upset but endorses the status quo (173).

Death Proof, considerably tame when it comes to Tarantino's own violence, ends with a

sequence that literalizes the "capitalistic celebration" that Coulthard describes. Following

a quite literal "male-bashing" segment where the girls volley Stuntman Mike back and

forth with their fists, the film finally concludes with a fade to a black screen on which the

text "Written and Directed by Quentin Tarantino" is written. The film then cuts back to

the females joyously celebrating over Stuntman Mike's unconscious body as April

March's song "Chick Habit"[15] is cued up. One of the girls then delivers a (quite literal)

crushing blow to Mike's face. The song and the credits continue. Somewhat curiously,

Tarantino splices the credit sequence with retro looking (with film stock marred)

photographs (as well as one scene including one of the girls from the first segment). His

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[15] The lyrics of the song, which are undoubtedly feminist, are worth quoting in a
footnote: "Hang up the chick habit / hang it up, daddy / or you'll be alone in a quick /
Hang up the chick habit / Hang it up, daddy, / or you'll never get another fix / I'm telling
you it's not a trick / Pay attention, don't be thick / Or you're liable to get licked / You're
gonna see the reason why / When they're spitting in your eye / They'll be spitting in your
eye / Hang up the chick habit / Hang it up, daddy, / A girl's not a tonic or a pill / Hang up
the chick habit / Hang it up, daddy, / You're just jonesing for a spill / Oh, how your
bubble's gonna burst / when you meet another nurse / She'll be driving in a hearse /
You're gonna need a heap of glue / When they all catch up with you / And they cut you
up in two / Now your ears are ringing / the birds have stopped singing / Everything is
turning grey / No candy in your till / No cutie left to thrill / You're alone on a Tuesday"

message is clear that his film celebrates contemporary girl power.[16] The rape-revenge exploitation genre has already explored this terrain: "Actually, the rape-revenge films not only have female heroes and male villains, they repeatedly and explicitly articulate feminist politics. So trenchant is the critique of masculine attitudes and behavior in such films….that, were they made by women, they would be derided as male-bashing" (Clover 151). Tarantino intended the *group* of girls to represent female solidarity in the genre.

As far as progressive feminist politics in the film, I think *Death Proof* falls short of its potential in relying so heavily on generic tropes that are mostly depoliticized and dehistoricized**.** The women have to be incited to violence by a crazed male. Instead of using generic pastiche to strengthen its politics, the film seeks to create something that exists *outside* the realm of original exploitation. It is in this regard that it succeeds in being neo-exploitative. The second part of the film imagines a utopian exploitation image where women are more capable than men in the traditionally male arena of the road. The generic pastiche then is a commentary on cinematic history and its ability to be reinvented in order to include the excluded. Tarantino would continue with this trajectory in his next film, *Inglourious Basterds* (The Weinstein Company, 2009), in which Jews during World War II are put in a threatening position of power over their oppressors. This strategy is akin to the ending of *Black Dynamite* that will be discussed in the next section. The influence of Tarantino's subversive use of exploitation nostalgia in mainstream cinema has been an important and influential one, as will be evident in the remaining two chapters.

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[16] The lyrics (contained within the above footnote) even seem to reference *I Spit on Your Grave* (Cinemagic Pictures, 1978).

Chapter 2: Contemporary Blaxploitation and Pastiche in *Black Dynamite*:

About *Shaft* (Paramount Pictures 2000), Matthew Henry notes in his article, "He *Is* a 'Bad Mother*\$%@!' *Shaft* and Contemporary Black Masculinity", "America is currently caught up in an odd nostalgia for the 1970s, and American popular culture is now overflowing with the simulacra of that decade…Among the cultural artifacts being resurrected are the popular blaxploitation films of the era" (114). Although I do not think this phenomenon is as widespread as Henry suggests, I want to consider how Blaxploitation has been 'resurrected' since its demise in 1975. Briggs's article complains that John Singleton's version of *Shaft* minimizes the radical politics in some of the original, more experimental blaxploitation films (this does not include the original *Shaft*). For one, the plot starts out by countering racism but quickly devolves into a personal revenge film, starring the updated Shaft as little more than a thug. Jack E. White calls the figure "another ego-tripping homicidal misogynist" (qtd. in Henry 118). All of this is very surprising considering John Singleton's previous work in the hood cycle of the early nineties. The potential for progression is certainly present but seemingly avoided. Why wasn't *Shaft*, made roughly thirty years after the original, updated in a way that progressively considered the original blaxploitation cycle? The film features many of the problematic aspects of the blaxploitation cycle that were available in the original *Shaft*. Henry sardonically concludes:

> I will go so far as to say Singleton's *Shaft* is a modern-day blaxploitation
> film, for certainly it stunts the development of a black political voice and
> is complicit in charting a shift in the black community away from
> collective political struggle and toward individualist, self-indulgent
> activities – although this time around it is the single-minded pursuit of
> vengeance and, consequently, the reification of a very narrowly defined
> masculinity (119).

Samuel L. Jackson's other starring role in a reimagined Blaxploitation film,

Quentin Tarantino's *Jackie Brown* (Miramax Films, 1997), was met with criticism

(according to the documentary *Baadasssss Cinema* (IFC, 2002)) for its over-indulgent

use of the n-word. Gangster features, such as Hype Williams's *Belly* (Artisan

Entertainment, 1998) and the series of rapper biopics (*Get Rich or Die Tryin'* (Paramount

Pictures 2005) and *Notorious* (20th Century Fox, 2009)) similarly attracted critical

disapproval for their promotion of violence and retrograde endorsement of the options

(such as killing and drug-dealing) available for "making it" in the world. One film that

escaped negative criticism was the Wayans Brothers' *I'm Gonna Git You Sucka* (United

Artists, 1988) that, much like *Black Dynamite*, uses humor and pastiche to comment on

the blaxploitation film cycle. Regarding the film's use of stereotypes, Harriet Margolis in

her article "Stereotypical Strategies: Black Film Aesthetics, Spectator Positioning, and

Self-Directed Stereotypes in *Hollywood Shuffle* and *I'm Gonna Git You Sucka*" argues

"that self-directed stereotypes can be used defensively within a stereotyped community to

protect itself from the harmful potential of negative stereotypes and…to speak *outside* the

stereotyped community against the effect of negative stereotypes" (62). *Black Dynamite*

is a film that (mostly) avoids stereotypes and finds a way to use the mythology created by

the blaxploitation cycle to examine its heritage in the presentation of heroic black male

figures.

This chapter demonstrates the ways in which *Black Dynamite* uses the visual

language, music, and narrative structuring of the original blaxploitation cycle in order to

honor and update a dynamic period in African American film history. Therefore, I

examine the film as belonging to a generic sub-category of neo-exploitation: neo-

blaxploitation. In *Pastiche*, Richard Dyer writes, "The prefix 'neo' suggests the notion of a return to an earlier form that has been in abeyance, and at times it seems almost a synonym for pastiche" (119). This description can be applied to *Black Dynamite* as neo-blaxploitation, as it is a multi-layered pastiche of the original 1970s blaxploitation film cycle. Dyer describes generic pastiche as "…a special case of the way more generally pastiche's signaled imitation at once mobilizes the qualities of and indicates a relationship with prior works…In other words, pastiche is always and inescapably historical…First, to understand what any given pastiche is doing, one has to return to its historical context" (132). *Black Dynamite* recycles aesthetic features and attributes of canonical blaxploitation films that highlights what was so interesting and appealing about those films.

Black Dynamite and Neo-Blaxploitation: What It Is?

Black Dynamite is a faithful homage to the 1970s blaxploitation cycle. Actor Michael Jai White came up with the film's concept while listening to the James Brown song "Super Bad."[17] As White explains on the DVD commentary, he took several still photographs of himself in vintage seventies clothing and pitched his idea to director Scott Sanders. Several brief scenes were then shot on Super 8 mm film. This footage was spliced with clips from old blaxploitation movies to produce a five-minute trailer costing a mere five hundred dollars. The finished product was shown to Jon Steigart[18] who, excited by what he had seen, began raising money for the project. Michael Jai White,

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[17] This was originally supposed to be the title of the movie, but it was dropped in favor of *Black Dynamite*, as White explains on the DVD commentary.

[18] The producer of Scott Sanders' first movie *Thick as Thieves* (GAGA, 1999) also starring Michael Jai White

Scott Sanders, and Byron Minns developed a collaborative script within three weeks.

Shooting took place over the course of twenty days on a modest $2.9 million budget in

Los Angeles. To amplify the authentic look of the film, it was shot in Super 16 Color

Reversal Kodak film stock that added grain and heightened the color contrast.[19]

      The film premiered at the Sundance Film Festival and was picked up for

distribution by Sony Worldwide Acquisitions for around two million dollars (the

domestic release was handled by Apparition).[20] It had a limited release in only seventy

theaters over the course of two weeks. In contemporary exploitation film fashion, a mock

campaign entitled "Fight Smack in the Orphanage" was launched on the Internet in order

to create a buzz around the film's limited distribution.[21] The film, which tells the story of

Vietnam vet and ex-CIA badass, Black Dynamite, was generally well received by critics.

Robert Abele of *The Los Angeles Times* called it "an enjoyable celebratory ode to a

fiercely entertaining counterculture-inspired genre." Rob Nelson of *Variety* suggested,

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[19] White and Sanders, in various interviews contained on the DVD special features and youtube, credit Minns with many of the plot details. They attest to his encyclopedic knowledge of the cycle. Director Scott Sanders explains on the special feature "Light the Fuse" how this film stock "basically crushes the blacks. Like the blacks are just black. You can't change it. You can't bring any detail out of the blacks…it really made it look old."

[20] The movie was very successful on the film festival circuit, beating out *The Hurt Locker* (Summit Entertainment, 2008) at the Seattle Film Festival in the category of Best Film. It also earned "Official Selection" status at Sundance, Tribeca, and Edinburgh.

[21] Classical exploitation films garnered attention through extensively developed marketing campaigns that promised something unique. African-American actor William Marshall has commented on the enormous popularity of the blaxploitation trailers, noting that sometimes the feature had to be delayed as people cheered for the trailers. Similarly, Quentin Tarantino reflects on the awe-inspiring marketing campaigns of blaxploitation movies in the documentary *Baadassss Cinema*. The marketing campaign of *Black Dynamite* updated and capitalized on the popularity of blaxploitation film campaigns employing (free) social networking services such as Twitter and Facebook.

"This film will delight both the discriminating fans of the blaxploitation tradition and ordinary lovers of goofy, in-ya-face thrills."

The movie begins with the death of Black Dynamite's brother, Jimmy (Baron Vaughn). Black Dynamite proceeds to avenge his brother's death; declare war on neighborhood drug dealers; clean up the ghetto; and uncover (and ultimately thwart) a multi-national plot against African-Americans. The film culminates with Black Dynamite's nunchuck battle against President Nixon in the White House. In several key ways, the film elevates itself above parody or send-up (as suggested by the back cover of the DVD case) and rests more securely in the category of pastiche. Further, because of its contemporary release, it is able to highlight and correct some of the compromises[22] forcefully made by its predecessors that were released during a time when hegemonic whites controlled the screen.

As a whole, the film uses an aesthetic pastiche of genre, narrative structure, and music in its vision of a black visual aesthetic.[23] This is where it successfully diverges from most other attempts to reincarnate the blaxploitation genre. Dyer writes:

> Pastiche is a widely used but little examined term. It has two primary
> senses, referring to a combination of aesthetic elements or to a kind of

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[22] Many of the films that were financially successful during this time were targeted at crossover audiences and were modeled on the successes of the films that initiated the cycle: "The creators of *Super Fly* responded by constructing their own less passive version of ghetto masculinity that catered primarily to black appetites but also appealed to a receptive secondary white youth audience" (Quinn 92). Many of the films contained drug dealers and pimps as problematized protagonists. Further, the "man" almost always remained an apocryphal figure. Also, many of the films depicted blacks against blacks. Militants and religious figures were often ridiculed. Nudity was foregrounded in many of the Pam Grier movies (and spinoffs).

[23] The film also makes loving in-jokes such as having a boom mic dip into the frame. One of the black militant reads his stage directions whenever he delivers dialogue. These are tributes to the low-budget crews that put together the films. This becomes part of the film's reference to the black visual aesthetic developed during the blaxploitation era.

> aesthetic imitation…A preliminary definition of the sense of pastiche is a kind of imitation that you are meant to know is an imitation (1).

The film is unquestionably intended for an audience familiar with the blaxploitation genre. The soundtrack is one of the more obvious examples of this, as it frequently comments on what is being shown on screen[24] and was traditionally produced. Jay Potts, the man responsible for WorldofHurtonline.com (a blaxploitation blog) explains:

> Adrian Younge follows in Blaxploitation's unique, and proud cinematic tradition, of having a single artist craft the entire soundtrack. Younge wrote, composed, and performed every song on the album…[he] receives powerful assists from singers…and is backed up on several cuts by musicians…[his] music straddles a line between humor and homage…He used analog recording techniques, not digital, and to the extent possible, every piece of equipment used to record the album was created prior to 1979.

Director/writer Scott Sanders and actor/writer Michael Jai White comment in several YouTube interviews how much they wanted to reproduce the feeling of those films and offer the same cultural inspiration they had growing up. In doing so, they explain that they wanted to correct some of the failings of the inspirational texts. One way to do this was a version of blaxploitation that "took out the slow parts." Sanders describes the project as "blaxploitation condensed."

The historicity of the cycle is important in assessing the transformative aspects of *Black Dynamite* that make it more than a sheer imitation or parody. The original blaxploitation movies such as *Cotton Comes to Harlem* (United Artists, 1970), *Shaft*

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[24] One interesting use of music as a tribute occurs while Black Dynamite investigates his dead brother's apartment. Over a mournful backbeat the lyrics are sung as follows: "Somebody broke into Jimmy's pad. Are they still there? Suckers could be anywhere. In the streets or uptown. I got a feeling I shouldn't be hanging around…" While intended to be comedic, the lyrics serve to reflect the Black Dynamite's inner thoughts as he explores the apartment. This is a commentary on how the music often spoke to black consciousness in ways that were complexly explored by the black musicians of the era.

(MGM, 1971), and *Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song* (Cinemation Industries, 1971)

depicted entirely new ideas about black masculinity and urban realism. It is necessary

then to follow his suggestion and provide a cursory summary of the Blaxploitation cycle.

History of Blaxploitation: What It Was

Junius Griffen was the first to coin the term 'blaxploitation' following the release

of *Super Fly* (Warner Bros., 1972) in his article "NAACP Takes Militant Stand on Black

Exploitation Films". Consequently, it was used to refer to the phenomenon of cheaply

made films featuring black actors in the period between 1970 and 1975. These films

became notorious for their appeal to a young urban audience. While they were targeted at

young blacks, they succeeded in having crossover appeal for a curious white (often male)

audience. More often than not, the films resulted in an impressive return on the fairly

modest investment put in to their production.

Most critics agree that blaxploitation cinema was the result of several critical

historical factors. Novotny Lawrence explains that it "…began as a result of a

combination of three main social, political, and economic factors: The Civil Rights

Movement, the historic misrepresentation of blacks in motion pictures, and Hollywood's

financial trouble" (14). Following the collapse of the studio system and the increasing

popularization of television, Hollywood was desperately seeking a more financially

secure product. Noticing the large influx of young African Americans in urban sectors,

Hollywood sought a way to capitalize on the increased spending power of this new

demographic. Action films seemingly promised the largest return margin, but only about

one in five blockbusters were successful in doing so. Following the increase to

prominence of the Black Power movement and the quest for equal rights and representation, African Americans were eager for a more powerful representation of themselves on the big screen. Where was the black corollary of Clint Eastwood or Charles Bronson? Critics generally agree that the fairly staid depictions, such as those predominately offered by Sidney Poitier, were falling out of vogue. Thus several films emerged which are generally considered the beginning of the blaxploitation movement: *Cotton Comes to Harlem*, *Shaft*, and *Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song*.

It is really no surprise that the action film was the genre chosen to test the market for these new types of films. In her book, *Spectacular Blackness: The Cultural Politics of the Black Power Movement and the Search for a Black Aesthetic*[25], Amy Abugo Ongiri notes:

> Because the urban African American filmgoing population was thought to
> be largely young and male, and also because movie-marketing 'folk'
> wisdom dictated that only horror and action movies sold to 'ethnic'
> audiences, formulaic action films dominated the entire genre. In an
> attempt to appeal to an African American urban youth market that was
> transforming its identity in relationship to Black Power discourse, the
> genre also focused intensely on an omnipotent, omnipresent African
> American masculinity, in effect catering to but also proscribing the group
> that could read and identify with these formulas as a spectatorial
> community (168).

And of course these assumptions of audience taste proved accurate. The films were revolutionary and lucrative, if not controversial.

Shaft was seen as more problematic than the other initiators of the cycle largely because the character could very well have been white. This is not surprising, as it was a major Hollywood production capitalizing on the success of *Cotton*. The story falls a lone

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[25] The similarity of this title to Yvonne Tasker's influential *Spectacular Bodies: Gender, Genre and the Action Cinema* is telling in the way that both research the connections between onscreen masculinities and the subtextual political appeal to film audiences.

black detective (a "superspade") who is employed by a black gangster to rescue his kidnapped daughter from the Italian mafia. The best description of Shaft is offered in the "Theme from Shaft", which won Isaac Hayes an Oscar in 1972. It begins: "Who's the black private dick / That's a sex machine to all the chicks? / Shaft, ya, damn right. / Who is the man that would risk his neck / For his brother man? / Shaft, can you dig it? / Who's the cat that won't cop out / When there's danger all about? / Shaft, right on". These lyrics would clearly be inspirational to a black audience (especially young black males), despite some of the problems created by his character's inconsistencies, which where largely the result of Hollywood's intervention and his creation by a white journalist.

Shaft works as a renegade with the police department and black militants to get paid, but is not committed to either (similarly, he's not committed to his black girlfriend but rather depicted early on in the film as a sex machine who picks up a white woman at a nearby bar). Ed Guerrero, in his book *Framing Blackness: The African American Image in Film*, quotes Mario Van Peebles as saying, "Originally, the script of *Shaft* was written for a white actor, but they changed to a black. They threw in a couple of 'motherfuckers' and that became a black film." (91). *Shaft* was an adaptation of Ernest Tidyman's 1970 novel of the same name. Tidyman was a middle-aged white editor at the *New York Times*. Joe Bob Briggs, in his article "Who Dat Man: *Shaft* and the Blaxploitation Genre" claims the following: "What's ironic about Shaft, in retrospect, is that the movie that put black actors and directors into the mainstream was frequently regarded by the black community as an embarrassment" (25). Clearly the political implications of the film remain contested. Certainly one of the more positive things that can be said for *Shaft*, as noted in the previous quote, is that it did result in black actors and black film crews getting into

Hollywood and the filmmaking business at large and it put forth an image of an uncompromised black masculinity previously unseen at the movies. Further, its soundtrack was monumentally successful. The problem would remain how to create a black film that was not a reductive commodification of blackness. The film called into question the complications involved in making a black film with corporate money. This was a problem that plagued much of the blaxploitation output and led to the retroactive critical ambivalence about the cycle.

Pam Cook, in her book *Screening the Past: Memory and Nostalgia in Cinema*, notes "…there can be friction or tension between commodities and the interests of capital, which allow those groups whose needs were initially exploited by capital to appropriate those commodities and use them against the dominant ideology" (125). This idea can explain how *Cotton Comes to Harlem* and *Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song* were successful as more distinctly and culturally black than something like *Shaft*. Both films progressively worked toward creating the black aesthetic that is prominently featured in *Black Dynamite*.

The first of these films was *Cotton Comes to Harlem*, based on the Chester Himes novel. The film was notable for its New York City setting, providing an urban aesthetic and language that centered on black culture. Ongiri explains:

> In its novelistic form, *Cotton Comes to Harlem* both anticipated and
> helped to create several important trends in the articulation of African
> American popular culture during the Black Power era, especially as it was
> translated through the idioms of visual culture. Chief among these
> concerns was negotiating a rhetoric of Black empowerment through a
> discourse of Black masculinity, especially in relation to the law (11).

An important part of this Black masculine discourse was the way in which the film used humor to diffuse stereotypes and, in doing so, suggested that there was a way in which

blacks had a privileged rhetoric. The idea that a film could use specifically black cultural elements in its aesthetics was finally beginning to be realized onscreen, as the officers took to the streets of Harlem.[26]

Gravedigger Jones (Godfrey Cambridge) and Coffin Ed Johnson (Raymond St. Jacques) are depicted as a cool, gun-wielding police duo working for the black community. On their quest to recover $87,000 that had been stolen from the black community in a fraudulent back-to-Africa scheme, the duo engage in a fast-paced car chase; go where white cops feel uncomfortable such as pool halls, the docks, and nightclubs; outwit the white men in the film; and bring justice to the community. They also seemingly have mythical powers, at one point casually throwing a man at least ten feet into the air (these types of powers can be seen in the figure of Black Dynamite). Director Ossie Davis made Harlem a character in his movie by filming on location in the streets and showing community landmarks. He also strategically used music to comment on what he felt the film represented. The opening credits begin while a car drives through the streets of Harlem. The accompanying lyrics sung by Melba Moore and written by Ossie Davis explain, "Ain't now, but it's gonna be / Black enough for me to be. / Ain't now, but it's gonna be / Black enough for me to see." These lyrics can be seen to represent Davis' artistic hope for the development of a black visual aesthetic. He also included many elements of Southern folklore, integrating the community with its past while representing the advancements both made and still to come. This is most notable in a scene where a stage dancer sings and dances to "Cotton Comes to Harlem" as a

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[26] One of the major complaints about the film, and one that would later be noted in regard to almost every film in the cycle, was that it depicted members of the black community working against each other.

triumphant celebration over slavery. The opening lyrics to the song are as follows:

"Down South, we sweat and strain / We were the prisoners of cotton, / but when Cotton

come to Harlem / we gon kick Cotton's ass! / Down South, Cotton was king / a black

man's life meant not a damn thing / so when Cotton come to Harlem, / Boy, I kick

Cotton's ass!" Davis set the groundwork for new ideas regarding the state of black film in

the 1970s

     A similarly, if not more, revolutionary experiment in developing a new black

aesthetic was in Melvin Van Peebles's *Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song*. Director Van

Peebles was determined to start a cinematic revolution. In order to fund his film, he

claimed that he was making pornography. This resulted in the recruitment of cheap labor

from the porn industry and his consequent filming of the sex scenes first (with him in the

starring role). As Van Peebles struggled to find funding, Bill Cosby donated $50,000.

The film was the highest grossing one of 1971 (at $15 million) and the most successful

independent feature released that year.

     The style of the film is indeed politically and aesthetically revolutionary. The

narrative is disjointed and largely consists of Sweetback running from a racist society (all

the way to the Mexican border on foot), after killing two black police officers who were

beating a black revolutionary in an act of racial violence. Most of this running is done in

near-psychedelic montage form to a repetitive soundtrack[27], emphasizing the feel of a

man on the run. The montages employ split-screens, mirror images, and jump cuts. This

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[27] The soundtrack, performed by Earth, Wind, & Fire, was released prior to the film to generate public interest as a means of advertising for it – a strategy that had not been popular prior to this film. Van Peebles comments, "Very few look at film with sound considered as a creative third dimension. So I calculate the scenario in such a way that sound can be used as an integral part of the film" (Peebles 286).

feeling of alienation and being on the run was meant to embody the disquieting position

of uncertainty felt by blacks in a racist white society. They were constantly being

targeted. S Torriano Berry, in *The 50 Most Influential Black Films: A Celebration of*

African-American Talent, Determination and Creativity writes the "odd camera angles,

superimpositions, reverse-key effects, box and matting effects, rack-focus shots, extreme

zooms, stop-motion and step-printing, and an abundance of jittery handheld camera work

all helped to express the paranoid nightmare that [Sweetback's] life had become" (116).

The introduction to the film claims that it was for all the brother and sisters who were

tired of being kept down by the man. The Black Panther party endorsed the film as

revolutionary and required that all of its viewers see it. For the first time, the protagonist

was not a criminal investigator. Ed Guerrero explains the lasting impact of the film:

> After *Shaft* in 1971, there came a flood of productions, extending through
> 1974, that while they crudely tried to emulate the success of *Shaft* and
> *Sweetback*, repeated, filled in, or exaggerated the ingredients of the
> Blaxploitation formula, which usually consisted of a pimp, gangster, or
> their baleful female counterparts, violently acting out a revenge or
> retribution motif against corrupt whites in the romanticized confines of the
> ghetto or inner city (94).

While Lerone Bennett Jr. (in an *Ebony* essay entitled "The Emancipation Orgasm:

Sweetback in Wonderland") echoed other critical complaints that the film's superhero

was problematic[28], *Sweetback, Cotton*, and (to a much lesser degree) *Shaft* crystallized

the elements of the blaxploitation formula. The important gains of the films toward

creating a black visual aesthetic and generating a profit are a large part of their legacy.[29]

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[28] Often quoted, Bennett suggests that the film is "neither revolutionary nor black"
because Sweetback is "ahistorical" and "acts out of panic and desperation" as he "fucked
his way to freedom" (98-101).
[29] Spike Lee explains that the film "…gave us all the answers we needed. This was an
example of how to make a film (a real movie), distribute it yourself, and most important,
get *paid*. Without *Sweetback* who knows if there could have been a *Shaft* or *Superfly*? Or

Ongiri explains how revolutionary the newly developing black film aesthetic was in representing black cultural power. She locates it as a combination of ideals projected by the Black Power movement and the Black Arts movement of the 1960s and early 1970s. Ongiri cites Van Peebles's film as representative of what was occurring in blaxploitation cinema: "Blaxploitation films provide a telling counternarrative, not only to myths of white supremacy, but to national myths of visuality and visual culture created in traditional Hollywood cinema and through the conventions of the mass media" (164). Music played an important role in affecting how critics evaluated the films of this genre and how audiences consumed them.[30] The films, seemingly haphazardly, sampled a wide variety of African American musical genres to create a new soulful sound and this sampling provided a larger commentary of what was taking place in the film. Discussing the *Sweetback* soundtrack, Ongiri writes:

> [*Sweetback*] creates new relationships among soundtrack, film narrative, and spectator. It is the ideas expressed in the soundtrack, rather than the characters themselves or the political dialogues they engage in, that the characters within the narrative and eventually the spectators should adopt. Furthermore, and most importantly, the album negotiates a new relationship between a black cultural tradition and the emergence of new formulations of that tradition made manifest in soul music (155).

The tools of the hegemonic film industry were being used against the master.

Undoubtedly, problematic depictions of blacks as drugdealers and pimps preying on their own people emerged during this period. These figures**,** however**,** are complicated

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looking down the road a little further, would there have been a *She's Gotta Have It*, *Hollywood Shuffle*, or *House Party*?" (Lee 12).

[30] Music critic Nelson George claims that the Curtis Mayfield soundtrack to *Super Fly* was "arguably the single greatest black pop effort of the decade" (qtd. in Quinn 97). Its subversive potential rested heavily in its ability to provide an ironic commentary on what was being shown onscreen. The most pronounced example of this is the use of the song "Pusherman" to contrast the visual imagery drug-dealing montage that it accompanies.

in the ways that their use in the films facilitated an artistic articulation of ethnic

masculinity intertwined with the racist society it critiques. Further, as previously stated,

the movement represented an unprecedented participation in the film industry by African

Americans. Films such as *Super Fly* may well be glorifying the life of the drug dealer,

but, as Donald Bogle comments, they provided a realistic depiction of the urban black

lower class: "*Super Fly* looks authentic: the Harlem settings, the streets and alleyways,

the bars, and the tenements all paint an overriding bleak vision of urban decay" (91). He

goes on to explain that Priest Youngblood (the *Super Fly* protagonist) became a "signifier

of black pride and success" (95). And this is the real value of the cycle (and what *Black

Dynamite* is ultimately about). The cycle put forth mythic figures (both those on the

screen and those who made the films) that left behind a cultural legacy still felt today.[31]

Sweetback may have used sex in his quest for freedom but, as Dorothy Broaddus

suggests (in her article, "Exposing Himself: Sweet Sweetback's Body") Sweetback "is

the very definition of [a] hetero-masculine black sexuality and offered a change from the

sterile portrayals of Sidney Poitier" (qtd. in Bates 173). A level of artistic independence

and collaboration between African Americans resulted in the proliferation of a mythic

Black masculinity (albeit with all the attendant issues of patriarchy and homophobia).

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[31] One need not look much further than in hip-hop: From Snoop Doggy Dogg's lyric "clockin' a grip like my name was Dolemite" of his groundbreaking single "Nuthin' but a G Thang" to the name of Notorious B.I.G./Biggie Smalls (the name of a gangster, Hiawatha 'Biggie' Smalls (Calvin Lockhart), in the Blaxploitation film *Let's Do it Again* (Warner Bros., 1975). On the documentary *Baadasssss Cinema* Tupac Shakur's mother explains how religiously he watched the films: "These and Bruce Lee's films. That was his basic culture." Not surprisingly, the hip-hop industry has received well-documented critical and cultural complaints that they were providing poor examples for low-income youths.

Indeed, this lasting impact can be seen in the 1990s hood films, such as *Menace II Society* (New Line Cinema, 1993) and *Boyz N the Hood* (Columbia, 1991)) as well as other more contemporary forays into the Blaxploitation genre. The film, *American Gangster* (Universal Pictures, 2007) was based on a magazine article called, "The Return of Superfly". It starred Denzel Washington as Frank Lucas, a heroin dealer who, by smuggling heroin into Manhattan from Vietnam, earns millions of dollars. However problematic some of these attempts at recreating blaxploitation have been, I want to consider how *Black Dynamite* succeeds.

While *Sweetback* exemplified the creation of new stories intended to distinguish themselves from white film, many blaxploitation films had scattered plots that were loosely held together. *Black Dynamite* consciously engages this trend, opting for a generic pastiche that makes defining its narrative very difficult. It could best be described as a comedic-martial arts-buddy-vigilante action film. The plot fractures and weaves in several competing directions. However, unlike *Shaft 2000* the film develops its political message as part of the larger revenge narrative. Black Dynamite collaborates with the black militants[32], the Nation of Islam, and even the pimps as he cleans up the ghetto and ultimately succeeds in toppling the Nixon administration. Like *Sweetback*, *Black Dynamite* is replete with split-screen montages, chase-scenes, and jump cuts revealing itself as what Pam Cook would label a nostalgic memory film. As such, "it conjures up a golden age… Some memory films use the conflation of the past and present characteristic of nostalgia to question ideas of progress" (11, 12). In the following scene analyses, I will

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[32] The black militants and the blaxploitation protagonists were often shown at odds in blaxploitation films, noticeably the original *Shaft* and *Super Fly*. Here they work together reflecting Ongiri's argument that the Black Power movement was a large motivating force behind the Blaxploitation movies.

show how the film endorses the progressive nature of the films it pays homage to. In doing so it fulfills Thomas Cripp's definition of 'black film':

> "Black film" may be defined as those motion pictures made for theater distribution that have a black producer, director, and writer, or black performers; that speak to black audiences or, incidentally, to white audiences possessed of preternatural curiosity, attentiveness or sensibility toward racial matters; and that emerge from self-conscious intentions, whether artistic or political to illuminate the Afro-American experience (1).

Black Dynamite as Black Film

Cripps does not consider blaxploitation to fall within the category of "black film" because it "redundantly depicts only what has been done *to* blacks, not *by* them…" (12). Using this definition, *Black Dynamite* is something other than blaxploitation and fits comfortably into what I describe as neo-blaxploitation. Rather than dwelling on what could be considered wish fulfillment, *Black Dynamite* shows the degree to which that wish has been fulfilled. *Black Dynamite* draws on several different masculine mythologies developed in the blaxploitation cycle. It also comments on the situation of African American actors of the time and the legacy they created. This becomes very clear at the onset of the film.

The film opens with a prologue of sorts as a clicking noise mimics the sound of television turning. This is followed by a brief period of static before text appears on the screen: "Leon St. James for Anaconda Malt Liquor." The voiceover, an analog recording of a standard-sounding 70s white advertiser reads what has just appeared. A hip looking African American (replete with afro and healthy mustache) is shown wearing a chest-revealing robe staring seductively into the camera while holding a bottle of the malt liquor. He explains that Anaconda malt liquor is the "Only malt liquor that carries a seal

of excellence from Uncle Sam himself." The screen fades to black before presenting the man from another angle. He turns back toward the camera and continues "And when you pop the top, the panties drop." An attractive looking woman comes is shown asking, "Is that Anaconda malt liquor? The only malt liquor to be approved by the United States government?" She proceeds to sit on the actor's lap as he tells her, "That's right Anaconda malt liquor." As the camera zooms to a close up, he croons in falsetto, "Anaconda malt liquor! Gives you OOOOO!" The screen fades to a close up of several of the liquor bottles with text superimposed in the corner reading "Anaconda gives you Ooooooooo." The white advertiser voice explains, "Anaconda malt liquor, brewed in Piedmont Georgia." The sound of the television turning off is heard as the screen fades to black and the film's production company, Ars Nova, appears in retro rhomboid fashion.

With this prologue, the film acknowledges the beginnings of the blaxploitation period as a commercial experience sold to blacks through sexually dominant (and commodified) masculinity. Cripps explains how advertisers had a keen awareness then of a developing black urban market: "As a early as July 1949, the *New Republic* predicted that in view of TV's control by advertisers and the Federal Communications Commission, both of which were responsive to social pressures, the Negro should be able to open up television as a potent medium of black expression" (58). Black masculinity was directly exploited for its ability to sell a product. Following the ad with the production label of the film serves as a subtle acknowledgment by the films developers that what occurred during the blaxploitation era was an assumption of this power by black creative individuals. The scene that follows reinforces this.

The camera frames three African American men standing on the street as a limo

rolls up in front of them. They are dressed in the typical garb of street hustlers from the period. Special attention is given to the man in the middle (who is later revealed to be Jimmy, Black Dynamite's younger brother). As white thugs step out of the car, the men approach in unison. Focusing on a man's silhouette in the car, the camera zooms in on the interior of the limousine. This figure addresses the men on the street verbally acknowledging them as the best dealers in their respective territories but suggesting that one of them is not who he says they are. Jimmy pleads, "Come on you jive turkeys, what kind of rundown is this?"[33] The camera zooms in on Jimmy in one of the film's few close-ups. It is at this point that the audience is cued to the theatrical artifice of his performance. He continues, "Look man. I gotta get back to the *streets* where I come from." This dialogue is communicated in a Shakespearean fashion as he opens his eyes widely and delivers his best English accent. On the film's commentary, Scott Sanders mentions this is an homage to stage actors who sought desperately to bring a Poitier-type dignity to the screen, particularly William Marshall.[34] Jimmy rhythmically delivers the line, "I told you jive chumps, I ain't *no snitch*" as he shakes his head. The screen splits, showing the armed thugs in the right frame as they shoot Jimmy. He falls in slow motion.

Cripps explains how Marshall's TV show, *Harlem Detective*, was one of the only such shows to portray African Americans in a positive light. As such, it encountered a

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[33] The actor that plays the character Cream Corn, Tommy Davidson, comments on this dialogue explaining how many of the blaxploitation scripts were written by whites. The artificial delivery of the lines reflects the corny way in which this vernacular language was embraced by a black audience.

[34] William Marshall starred in the first blaxploitation film, *Blacula* (AIP, 1972). Lauding Marshall's performance in the film, Novotny Lawrence explains that Marshall did what he was able to with the role, establishing Blacula as a regal figure. The film represented the first African American horror film and was the first horror film to use a contemporary soundtrack.

fate similar to Jimmy's: "Problems of sponsorship and blacklisting helped cancel the show without a murmur from black pressure groups. The fate of *Harlem Detective* and *Amos 'n' Andy* became a model for the future. Sponsors' timidity and political pressures combined to dampen the prospects for a black TV genre" (58). The split screen, prominently featured in blaxploitation films such as *Super Fly* and *Sweetback* as a formal/aesthetic strategy to comment on the presence and situation of the black man, then alludes to an area where black actors *were* able to construct a visual presence. As the goonish looking thug pronounces Jimmy dead, a white detective investigating the murder unveils Jimmy's dead body and introduces the film's title character: "My God men! Do you know what this means? Do you know whose brother this is? This ghetto is going to be turned upside down…The streets are going to run crimson with the blood of the men responsible for his brother's death. The man I'm thinking of is a veritable one man army. If you get on his bad side, brother, you're done for. Now it's only a matter of time before he finds out and when he does, no matter where he is, get ready gentlemen because hell's-a-coming." This dialogue is cut with several clips, some of which are stock footage from seventies action movies[35] and others which introduce us to the kung-fu of Black Dynamite himself. The final word, "coming," is repeated several times as a medium close up of Black Dynamite is alternately juxtaposed with clips of three different women (each of different color) lying next to one another, simultaneously in the throes of an orgasm.

This opening introduction to the character of Black Dynamite is efficient in constructing all the mythic legends of the blaxploitation protagonist: he's a sexual

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[35] While the persistent use of stock footage throughout the film was largely due to budget constraints, it has the additional effect of 'sampling' scenes from white television shows such as *Charlie's Angels* thus appropriating white hegemonic visual culture to its own end.

machine and he's a lone vigilante figure. Importantly, it also parodies them. The use of

real porn stars in the filming is a direct reference to *Sweetback*. While critics often

debated their value, *Black Dynamite* uses mythic constructions for the power they

brought to black visuality and representations of masculinity. Courtney E.J. Bates in her

article, "Sweetback's 'Signifyin(g)' Song: Mythmaking in Melvin Van Peebles' *Sweet*

Sweetback's Baadasssss Song" explains:

> Myths are an integral part of every culture. While many myths disintegrate
> after they have surpassed their cultural relevance, those that remain
> significant to a particular culture illuminate both lived realities and
> projected fantasies within that culture…In other words, myths create the
> signs and codes of a culture, easily recognizable to members of that
> culture…African American myths and folklore can therefore be viewed as
> artifacts of the social, cultural, and political history of black people in the
> United States (171).

While these myths are powerful, they're also comedic. Viewers of the genre retroactively

see this, providing the reenactment of the myths with all their subversive potential.

The credits finally begin after Black Dynamite is shown is his *Mack* (Harbor

Productions, 1973) style blue and white plaid suit.[36] Like Priest Youngblood, *Mack*

protagonist Goldie (Max Julien) exploits the black community and in doing so amasses a

large fortune. His style of clothing compounded the trend set by *Super Fly* and others.

Ruth Carter, the costume designer for *Black Dynamite*, explains (on the DVD special

features) that this was the hip nostalgic look was what she wanted to evoke.

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[36] To add to the absurdist portrayal of Dynamite's sexual prowess, the camera zooms out
from the bed in which the three women were shown to show at least two more women in
the same bed in what has to be one of the first onscreen sixomes. Dynamite, as played by
Michael Jai White, is most distinctly an amalgam of his three favorite blaxploitation
heroes: Jim Brown, Jim Kelly, and Fred Williamson.

This begins the official introduction of Dynamite as a narrative voiceover begins. The character Bullhorn (Byron Minns), Dynamite's best friend and club owner, introduces the film as a piece of African American folklore. He does so in a manner that is a direct invocation of Rudy Ray Moore, a comedian popularized by his role in the blaxploitation-era *Dolemite* movies. Rudy Ray Moore was notorious for using characters perpetuated by African-American folklore. Ongiri explains his legacy:

> For example, between 1975 and 1979, Rudy Ray Moore, a legendary underground African American comedian who had already had success independently producing, promoting, and distributing his own comedy record albums, created and starred in a series of films based on the classic toasts ('the signifying monkey'), folklore narratives ('peteey wheatstraw, the devil's son-in-law'), jokes, and traditions of the African American community that had been formulated in the South and carried north to urban areas during the Great Migration. Moore's films successfully mixed this 'down-home' humor and 'gut bucket' stylistic tradition with a post-civil rights northern urban sensibility that attempted to call the community into the service of a greater good through a tradition of witnessing (169).

The figure is further constructed as a myth according to the rap that follows. The introduction is worth quoting in its entirety: "I'm wanna tell you a story / about a friend I have. He's a mean motherfucker and he's superbad. So grab onto your seats / and hang on tight / while I tell you a story / about Black Dynamite!" The visual accompaniment is a montage showing Dynamite's car.[37] The still frames, stop motion, psychedelic styling, and jump cuts invoke the 70s films style, cleverly articulating the black visual aesthetic which they originally developed.

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[37] The license plate is shown in close up and is a clear invocation of the license plate used in the film *Willie Dynamite*. The title character of that film is a pimp who loses everything he has, but regains his humanity with the help of a female social worker. The difference between the two characters is important because Black Dynamite is a friend of the community. The film does deviates from Guerrero's blaxploitation formula in making its protagonist a noble hero as opposed to an anti-hero.

The film's narrative continues to twist from this point onwards, combining a number of plot elements from blaxploitation movies. Not settling into a personal revenge narrative for one injustice done against him (as many of these films did), *Black Dynamite* becomes increasingly political even as it moves toward its conclusion. After cleaning up the ghetto and wiping drugs off of the streets[38], the meaning of the opening prologue/ad is revealed when Dynamite discovers that the government, specifically President Nixon, has employed a treacherous kung-fu guru to develop a liquid that will only affect African American males (it shrinks their genitals).[39] As Dynamite soon discovers, this liquid is being sold in the Anaconda malt liquor in conjunction with smack on the streets in effort to destroy the African American race.[40]

In the film's final sequence, Black Dynamite parachutes onto the "Honky House" lawn from a helicopter. He dispatches the security and enters the "White House Powder Room" where he exchanges his paratrooper gear for a rhinestone studded blue suit[41]. Exiting into the hallway, he effortlessly combats more security guards maintaining a stolid, determined facial expression. He kicks the final guard onto the presidential desk in the Oval Office. He confronts "the man"[42] in the chair whose face is yet unseen: "I

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[38] The montage of Dynamite cleaning up the streets serves as a corrective to the *Super Fly* "Pusherman" montage. Shot in a similar fashion, the lyrics here directly *correspond* to what is being done in the film.

[39] This plot element is taken from *Three the Hard Way* (Allied Artists Pictures, 1974) where an evil scientist develops a poison that will kill only African Americans (in this movie, he likens it to sickle-cell anemia).

[40] Playfully engaging the assumption that black people only drink 40-ounce malt liquor.

[41] This suit he has changed into is the one that Michael Jai White first shot the film's conceptual photographs in.

[42] In almost all blaxploitation movies "the man" is the apocryphal figure holding down the black man. This film, because of its contemporary setting, is able to finally visualize what was really meant by "the man". Here, he's represented by leader of the United States government.

should've known it was you all the time. I should've asked myself, 'Who's a man so wicked, so cruel, to serve smack to the orphanage, kill my brother Jimmy and put out a drug to shrink black men's dicks?' Only one man. And that's you Tricky Dick!" Nixon proceeds to turn around as the camera zooms in on him. Black Dynamite informs the President that he's come "to deliver one presidential ass-whooping."[43] A drawn-out nunchuck battle ensues.

As the fight continues into another room (which houses the Presidential dinnerware), Mrs. Nixon shoots at Black Dynamite and calls him a "mooncricket." There is a somewhat startling jump cut as Mrs. Nixon utters this racist term. This, coupled with the china and the paintings that adorn this room, highlight how "white" the White House really is. The shot misses and Dynamite throws President Nixon over a couch and proceeds to pimp-smack Mrs. Nixon into the china cabinet.[44] The fight spills over into yet another room. The President breaks the glass frame of a gun on the wall. The plaque explains that this is the pistol used by John Wilkes Booth to assassinate President Lincoln. The inclusion of this article in the House again implicates the conspiracy by the US government against equal rights. As a corrective, the ghost of Abraham Lincoln appears and karate chops the gun out of Nixon's hand. This gives Dynamite the opportunity to sweep kick Nixon and deliver several blows to his face. A bloody Nixon warns Dynamite "You'll never get away with this." Dynamite responds: "Watch me you little insecure cracker. You think that shrinking our johnsons is going to make your situation any better? That's your problem Tricky Dick. You are paranoid." This final

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[43] As Dynamite delivers this speech, a Vietnamese flag is in the frame behind him. The film references the participation of blacks in the Vietnamese war throughout.

[44] The blaxploitation movies were undoubtedly misogynistic and frequently featured a pimp smack.

accusation is resonant with the country's regressive racist attitudes and explains some of the structuring of the original blaxploitation movies, like *Cotton* and *Sweetback*. The black man, unlike Sweetback, no longer needs to be on the run. Having gotten closer to achieving the equal rights that have so long been suppressed, he can confront his oppressors head-on.

The visual constructions of blackness during the blaxploitation era allowed whites to experience blacks onscreen, at a safe remove. Ongiri comments:

> [*Sweetback*] allowed a mainstream audience the opportunity to maintain and even potentially enhance, its view of African American masculinity as threatening, sexually potent, and extremely dangerous at the same time that it allowed an African American audience to enjoy the opportunity to identify with that threat and imagine the possibilities of its potential (185).

While simultaneously offering strong black male protagonists, the films began to perpetuate myths of African American criminality and ostentatious behavior. She goes on to explain how these pictures were made safe for whites: "Blaxploitation movies such as *Sweet Sweetback*, *Coffy*, and *Space Is the Place* all feature African American politicians, entrepreneurs, and wealthy pimps and businessmen who betray the movement in order to curry favor and financial gain from the white establishment" (192). This is clearly not the case with *Black Dynamite*. As the final sequence continues, Dynamite threatens to disseminate Watergate photos of Nixon engaging in S&M behavior. He is in a position of complete control. The White House becomes the ghetto of the 1970s where the black man is in a position of absolute power. Black Dynamite makes Nixon promise to treat his people better or he'll leak the photos to the press. The film imaginatively and progressively conflates the past with the present, both cinematically and historically.

The film ends with Black Dynamite standing proud in the Oval Office. It would

not be a stretch to suggest that this ending is a reference to the assumption of Barack

Obama to the presidency.[45] Further, on the commentary, director Scott Sanders

optimistically comments on the visibility of black independent film. He notes that the

year *Black Dynamite* premiered at Sundance, people were sneeringly referring to it as the

Blackdance film festival (*Precious* (Lee Daniels Entertainment, 2009) was also shown at

the festival that year). The political import of the film is significant for several reasons. It

is a representative case of successful black independent cinema that addresses black

political gain. In this way, it updates Van Peebles' message in *Sweetback*. The concluding

freeze frame epitomizes this. *Black Dynamite* realizes the suggestion at the end of Van

Peebles film that a "baad asssss n***** is coming to collect some dues."

Significantly, the film takes a moment to humanize its protagonist before

concluding. Black Dynamite spares President Nixon's life and exits the room. Freezing in

the hallway with a contemplative stare, he doubles back to the room where he left Mrs.

Nixon. He pats her on the head and apologizes for pimp smacking her. The new

blaxploitation hero is not a morally compromised character. Although definitely

portrayed as a superspade, he has a code of ethics; even his killing was justified, as the

CIA reinstated his license to kill. The camera freezes with a still shot of Dynamite in the

White House. This moment serves to stress the ability of the filmmakers to present

something that was previously unimaginable in the classical blaxploitation era, as

mentioned above. The film devotes a pause (like the stop-motion in *Sweetback*) to black

masculinity and a black film aesthetic. Further, the film suggests that although the system

is inherently flawed, there is hope for a new era of racial equality under the leadership of

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[45] Tellingly or not, one of the trailers contained in the DVD copy of the movie is for the HBO documentary of President Obama's election campaign.

Black Dynamite, ultimately a surrogate for President Barack Obama. In doing so, the film voices the hope that there will not be a lapse into the regressive Republican politics and economic restructuring that dominated the country in the time between the demise of the original blaxploitation cycle and this movie.

Chapter 3: Robert Rodriguez's Visual Vocabulary of Violence: Affective Aesthetic and US-Mexican Border Politics

Robert Rodriguez is one of the few Latino directors working in Hollywood today. Speaking of this position, he explains, "I think that one of the problems is that when Latin filmmakers get the chance to make a film, they try to do too much, and make up for all the movies that were never made before. And then it becomes too preachy. You can be much more subversive, you can be much more sly than that, and get everything you want in there" (Berg 255). The trailer for *Machete* offers a condensed version of what the film will ultimately explore.[46] It begins with a message to the audience from star Danny Trejo: "Hey Arizona, don't fuck with this Mexican! Machete has some Cinco de Mayo words for you!" (Knowles). While in a later interview with Ain't It Cool News[47] Rodriguez dismissed this as a tequila-induced gag, it's hard to deny the film's serious engagement with border politics, especially when close attention is paid to its visual structuring of violence. However, most critics *did* seem to ignore Rodriguez's serious intentions. Richard Corliss of *Time* magazine enjoyed the film and suggested its value as adolescent entertainment: "Designed and destined to win no awards, Machete is expert, cartoon-violent, lighthearted fun. Just the thing to send Junior back to school in a good mood" (Corliss). Similarly, Stephen Holden, in his *New York Times* review commented:

> For all its political button pushing, 'Machete' is too preposterous to
> qualify as satire. The only viewers it is likely to upset are the same kind of
> people who once claimed that the purple Tinky Winky in "Teletubbies"

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[46] This could be considered the second trailer. The first trailer appeared in his *Grindhouse* feature, but it was initially just a part of that movie. Only later did Rodriguez decide to expand the trailer into a feature film. This particular instance of direct address is in response to Arizona's controversial 2010 immigration law allowing someone to be investigated at random for legal proof of citizenship.

[47] Cited in the Works Cited under Knowles, Harry "A Family Friendly 'Machete'?

promoted a gay agenda. A pop culture conspiracy is usually in the paranoid eye of the beholder.

In this chapter, I argue that popular misinterpretations of the film disregard its visual vocabulary. Because of the film's positioning as an exploitation film, its evaluated only to the degree that it can provide gratuitous thrills.[48] In *Machete*, Rodriguez heightens the significance of what has been dismissed as a hyperbolic political allegory through a subversive affective aesthetic of violence against the Mexican body. This violence serves as a meditation on both current and past issues surrounding the US-Mexico border and thus fits within the neo-exploitation genre.

The film follows Machete (Danny Trejo), an ex-Mexican Federale who, in the prologue to the film, witnessed his wife and daughter murdered by a Mexican druglord, Rogelio Torrez (Steven Seagal[49]). Three years following the incident, in the present time of the film, Machete is working as a day laborer in a border town. He's hired by Michael Booth (Jeff Fahey) to assassinate Texas Senator John McLaughlin (Robert De Niro). The assassination attempt proves to be a set-up, as Machete becomes a fugitive forced in to hiding. Allegorically reflecting US politicians' criminalization of illegal Mexican immigrants, McLaughlin constructs himself as a political martyr, thereby strengthening

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[48] Increasingly, the boundaries between arthouse and grindhouse are slipping, as can be seen in the visual shocks conveyed through sex and violence in the films of prominent European arthouse autuers Michael Haneke and Catherine Breillat. Also, classical exploitation films were retroactively shown to have a political message corresponding to the violence in society. This trait is overlooked in contemporary evaluations of absurdly violent films.

[49] It's noteworthy that Seagal is Anglo. Charles Ramirez Berg, discussing Rodriguez's *El Mariachi* (where the drug-dealer is also a gringo) explains "Thus, in *El Mariachi*, drug trafficking is the logical extension of corporate America's international expansionism and exploitation" (237).

his campaign to build an electrified border fence. Machete and the Network[50] combat the political treachery at work throughout the film. Their work culminates in an intense battle sequence between them and border vigilantes.

The combination of gratuitous violence and sex with a topical political situation suggests that the film may be invoking the golden age of exploitation cinema. By providing a brief history of the cultural memory from which Rodriguez is drawing - for example, the films of Sam Peckinpah and New Hollywood - I will explain some of the overlooked complexities of the film's politics. Further, I will consider the inability of critics to engage all aspects of an R-rated movie (admittedly/deliberately softened by humor and excess) in a Hollywood era currently dominated by the PG-13 blockbuster.

Hollywood Action

For a variety of different reasons, Hollywood found itself on the verge of financial collapse in the 1960s. The rising popularity of the international film market began to call attention to the staid nature of US Hollywood films.[51] Social and political turmoil demanded a less homogenized cinema, thereby putting the already collapsing studio system in serious jeopardy. Increasingly, films dealing with more explicit adult material were receiving distribution. Under increasing pressure, the Production Code Administration collapsed along with the Catholic Legion of Decency in the mid to late

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[50] The Network is an organization in the film set up to aid Mexican immigrants

[51] Perhaps most apparent in the films of the French New Wave that (1) contained nudity and more realistic depictions of sex (Bridgette Bardot's body); (2) centered on poignant moments of violence (such as the suicide in Louis Malle's *The Fire Within*); and (3) parodied genre construction (largely through the films of Jean-Luc Godard)

1960s.[52] For the first time since the early 1930s, Hollywood was without a systematic

form of censorship. An ineffectually revised Code was soon replaced by the MPAA

ratings system in 1968, ushering in what critics have termed New Hollywood.[53]

The emergence of New Hollywood was represented by the release of a series of

violently realistic movies, including *The Dirty Dozen* (MGM, 1967), *Bonnie and Clyde*

(Warner Bros., 1967), and *The Wild Bunch* (Warner Bros., 1969). Perceptive critics such

as Pauline Kael noted the ways in which such movies were connected to increasing

political dissatisfaction of the American people with the government. There is one

director in particular worth calling attention to, Sam Peckinpah, as his visual style in a

few of his landmark films most clearly resembles that of Robert Rodriguez in *Machete*.

Stephen Prince, author of the seminal book *Savage Cinema*, retrospectively

labeled Sam Peckinpah (the director of *The Wild Bunch*) one of America's first "blood

auteurs." Prince explains the ways in which Akira Kurosawa influenced Peckinpah's

belief that film violence could visually convey things about society that could not be

expressed as effectively through words. Comparing the two directors, Prince writes:

> The violence in their films is embedded in a coherent moral and
> philosophical framework that gives it meaning and that makes of it a
> commentary on this world…and each perceived in his respective genre a
> configuration of artistic and historical elements that resonated with the
> filmmaker's existential situation in the lived present. By inflecting
> elements of genre, Kurosawa and Peckinpah imaginatively redrew the
> boundaries of the present age by making a strategic incursion into an
> aesthetically rendered past…furnish[ing] exemplary models of the finest
> achievements of which action cinema is capable. 343

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[52] The PCA was a regulatory censorship body established by the Motion Picture
Association of American in 1934 from which all films had to earn approval. As for the
Catholic Legion of Decency, it became exclusively a concern of the Catholic Church and
lost control of its censorship power in Hollywood.

[53] This rating system was comprised of G, M, R, and X

Peckinpah's films reflected the violence of the era: Vietnam, the Kennedy assassinations,

and widely broadcast urban riots (or uprisings). His contemporaries included Martin

Scorsese, Brian dePalma, Robert Altman, and Francis Ford Coppola. These auteurs

similarly reworked conventional genres in order to subvert them and comment on the

turbulent societies in which they lived. For the "blood auteurs," cinematic violence and

gore that had previously been contained to disreputable grindhouses had begun to seep

into their cinema.

     As the 70s came to a close, it became readily apparent that the 1980s would

represent a period of regression for American cinema.[54] Michael Winner, director of

Death Wish notes:

> This re-establishing of the pre-eminence of a Hollywood mainstream of
> the Right was notable for the way in which the experiential aspect of the
> New Hollywood cinema was assimilated, Disneyfied, and reproduced as
> an experiential cinema of escapism…Not only did this re-establishment
> end New Hollywood, but it sealed off the period of experimentation,
> (roughly 1967-1977). (Mendik 16)

Special effect technologies enabled and promoted the rise of the blockbuster action movie

beginning with the success of *Star Wars* (20th Century Fox, 1977) and *Jaws* (Universal

Pictures, 1975). Sylvester Stallone and Arnold Schwarzenegger starred in a number of

commercially driven vehicles such as *First Blood* (Orion Pictures, 1982) and *Predator*

(20th Century Fox, 1987).[55] Susan Jeffords (in her book *Hard Bodies: Hollywood*

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[54] The Academy Award Best Picture for 1979 was *Kramer vs. Kramer* (Columbia
Pictures, 1979) and in 1980 it was *Ordinary People* (Paramount Pictures, 1980). Both
films are somewhat conservative family dramas in a decade that saw two *Godfather*
(Paramount 1972/1974) movies win the award as well as *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's
Nest* (United Artists, 1975).
[55] Admittedly these films were violent and that violence had some things in common with
their predecessors as they also can be read as reflecting political and social tensions.
However, the aesthetic of violence was of a more spectacular nature and more

Masculinity in the Reagan Era) and Yvonne Tasker (in her book *Spectacular Bodies:*

Gender, Genre, and Action Cinema) look at the glorification of the white male hard body

in movies such as these and evaluate them as reflections of the Reagan administration.

Jeffords explains:

> As such, these hard bodies came to stand not only for a type of national
> character – heroic, aggressive, and determined – but for the nation itself.
> In contrast to what Reagan's public relations workers characterized as the
> weakened – some even said 'feminine' – years of the Carter
> administration, in which the United States was brought to a standstill by a
> Third World nation, the Reagan America was to be a strong one, capable
> of confronting enemies rather than submitting to them, of battling 'evil
> empires' rather than allowing them to flourish, of using its hardened body
> – its renewed techno-military network – to impose its will on others rather
> than allow itself to be dictated to. (25)

These films evoked the frontier myth, through which a marginalized hero came to the

forefront and saved the innocents from a threatening outside force. J David Slocum writes

that "the so-called Reaganite entertainment of the latter decade featured a return to

mostly innocuous films with violence bolstered by special-effects technology and devoid

of antiestablishment tenor" (8). Once this genre began subconsciously parodying itself,

masculinity was further depoliticized in dwelling on domestic concerns such as familial

antics (*Kindergarten Cop* (Universal Pictures 1990) and *Twins* (Universal Pictures

1988)). The hard body became domesticated. Even wrestler Hulk Hogan befriended and

became the protector of a suburban family in *Suburban Commando* (New Line Cinema,

1991).

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conservative in its meanings. Winner suggests, "…the make-believe of these films may
be read as a strong reaction against – a revenge even, on – the 'anarchy' of post-*Easy
Rider* Hollywood" (Mendik 15). After all, how many people looked like Stallone and
Schwarzenegger?

In the early 1990s, the excessively violent films of Quentin Tarantino and Oliver Stone (*Reservoir Dogs* and *Natural Born Killers* (Warner Bros., 1994) respectively) marked a resurgence in viscerally violent cinema. Negative critical responses suggested that this was violence for its own sake. As such, it was considered more a commentary on the pervasive violence in the media than anything subversive. Concurrently, Mark Gallagher notes that the R-rated action film was (and is) becoming increasingly rare in contemporary Hollywood cinema. It is being replaced instead by PG-13 action films "[w]ith their frequent recourse to fantastic worlds and consequent sidestepping of social questions" (194).

Generally speaking, contemporary actions movies are marketed as big budget productions with impressive digital special effects. The focus has shifted to how something looks, not what it might mean. Marsha Kinder notes, "violent spectacle is increasingly noisy and explosive, more blatantly stylized and parodic, more wildly humorous and energetic, and more specifically tailored to an adolescent male mentality" (76). A few promising blood auteurs have emerged, most notably Rodriguez and Quentin Tarantino. In several of their films, they self-reflexively exploit violence and generic conventions in films that manage to comment on both society at large and contemporary issues of filmic representation. They do so largely through a recycling of cultural memory, acutely aware of their participation in the legacy of the blood auteurs. Their violence is often times enacted in ways that are meant to connect to varying political concerns.

Robert Rodriguez's construction and production of the film *Machete* places it in the liminal genre of exploitation cinema where it functions as a tightly constructed (yet

apparently multivalent) satire. Roger Corman "has always maintained that for an exploitation picture to be successful it must contain a social statement along with its sex and action scenes. And while these films may surround their humanist concerns with naked breasts, fast cars, and dead bodies, that need not lessen the importance of their social statements" (Clark 8). *Machete* does not avoid making any heavy-handed commentary on the political situation of the Mexican-US border, but Rodriguez's entertaining command of violence and the absurd maintains the movie's status as entertainment. He then communicates his condemnation of border atrocities through an affective aesthetic. In what often can feel like a cartoonish world, there are poignant moments of the film that graphically show instances of violence against the Mexican body. Sylvia Chong argues that "one possibility for breaking out of the mimetic cycle of violence surrounding our film texts would be to return to *bodies and pain*, and examine the *affects* as well as the *effects* of violence. Whose bodies are produced, examined, incarcerated, or otherwise circumscribed by our deployment of violence in discourse?" (265). It is important that the moments that I will discuss in *Machete* are made conspicuous by the absence of the main protagonist. These acts of violence each engage a particular use of cinematic language in order to heighten their gravity – the first through documentary type footage and the second through its *absence* of stylized violence.[56] Read as such, they represent a pervasive critique of racism and manipulative rhetoric surrounding the issue of Mexican border immigration and the law. The "Peckinpah legacy" is here reinvigorated as a counterculture neo-exploitation film.

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[56] Where slow motion and multiple, skewed camera angles generally highlight violence in most contemporary Hollywood cinema, these scenes are devoid of stylistic trends, instead focusing on the real pain against the body.

Machete's Exploitation Aesthetic

In his book, _Latino Images in Film_, Charles Ramirez Berg recounts an incident

where a Disney producer encouraged Robert Rodriguez to make an English version of _El_

Mariachi (Columbia Pictures, 1993) that had a less ethnic protagonist. Berg suggests:

> One way to counter such attitudes is to slip progressive politics into mass-
> mediated genre formulas – as Cheech Marin once put it, 'so that they
> [viewers, but, presumably, producers as well] don't taste it, but, they get
> the effect." It's not a bad tactic. As Armond White has noted, speaking of
> recent African American cinema, there is much to be said for films that
> choose not to 'objectify their politics as an issue' but instead make their
> subversive statements 'inherent in the very presentation of character and
> setting, and in the manipulation of images." These sorts of manipulations
> will require the employment of a sophisticated filmmaking aesthetic by
> Chicano cineastes, and knowing reading by us. (219-220)

I argue that Rodriguez is slipping "progressive politics" into _Machete_ and is doing so

through its aesthetic and "manipulation of images."

The film begins with a visual link to Rodriguez's last film, _Grindhouse: Planet_

Terror. The film "stock" is marred and filtered to evoke the cheapened look of 1970s

exploitation features. Exploitation film, through shock value, has historically been used

as a mode of exploration to metaphorically foreground political situations in seemingly

ridiculous situations. Further, it establishes important links to the border cinema of the

1970s by Chicano directors. Berg, speaking of these movies recalls, "This type of cinema

was spawned by political, economic, and industrial conditions of the 1970s. It was then

that for all intents and purposes the state took control of Mexican film production and

forced independent producers out. Some of them found a highly profitable alternative by

making low-cost films along the US-Mexico border" (226).

The differences and similarities between the ironic and economic position of this

film today and the less self-conscious and cheap nature of films then are crucial to

understanding *Machete*'s aim. Firstly, Rodriguez's own Troublemaker Studios produced

the film, which gave him a large amount of artistic control. This puts him in a position

similar to that of the directors of the exploitation golden age, as their films were

independently produced and hardly regulated. It represents an example of an A-list

director purposefully appropriating an inexpensive B-movie look with predominately A-

list stars and a high budget.[57] This intentional appropriation is used to contrast specific

moments in the film that are representative of a contemporary border reality in order to

show Rodriguez's ability to engage his contemporary political moment. He does this

through a violent aesthetic with historical grounding in his own Chicanismo. Further,

Rodriguez's multifaceted genre pastiche is a cue that the film is *meant* to be read this

way.[58] Rodriguez is attempting to revive the exploitation genre in order to foreground its

political potential. References to exploitation genres such as the *lucha libre* films and the

Italian and Spanish Nunsploitation films invoke film genres that used exaggerated and

hyperbolic aesthetics to question bourgeois standards of entertainment. The various

allusions to Westerns and explicit references to Peckinpah's style further suggest

Rodriguez is self-consciously trying to revive the political violence of the blood auteurs

of the 1970s in an exploitatative style. Some of these elements are more apparent than

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[57] Julie Sanders defines appropriation as, "a decisive journey away from the informing source into a wholly new cultural product and domain" (26). This appropriation then is significant in that it represents a return to power for Latino filmmakers.

[58] As a side note, the film fits most comfortably into what Berg terms the "warrior adventure genre" which he explains evolved from Westerns (Peckinpah) and Samurai films (Kurosawa). He lays out the six basic principles that define this genre: (1) it focuses on a physically talented male protagonist who (2) has a personal code of justice. Further the protagonist (3) suffers a loss; (4) is motivated by revenge; and is at some point (5) spiritually rehabilitated before having a (6) climatic showdown with the villain.

others.[59] They are also subversively driven in a film that so topically situates itself in the debate around border policies.

Mondo Montage, Times Two

While nationally renowned critics dismissed *Machete* as playful, the right-wing radiohawk Alex Jones was one of the only people offended by Rodriguez's use of graphic violence. He claimed *Machete* was race-war propaganda and that he was particularly offended (even sickened) by the insinuation that vigilantes would kill babies on the border. However, the scene he's referencing (which I will discuss in the following analysis) is grounded in a very real Mexican border immigration situation. "Anchor baby" (or "terror baby" as Corliss calls the one in the film) is a derogatory term referring to the belief that a baby born in the US will help its parents gain citizenship. In reality, the baby born in the United States, while granted citizenship, is unable to file for visas for his parents until (s)he's 21. In discussing the film, Rodriguez commented, "Our immigration system is so screwed up, I didn't realize how much misinformation and misconceptions are out there…" (Knowles). The different scenarios involving violence against the Mexican body show how pervasive this misunderstanding is, as politicians and vigilantes alike enact it based on shallow assumptions and with no justification. The scene mentioned above occurs directly on the border and is a good representative case of Rodriguez's stance and his position as a "blood auteur."

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[59] It's interesting how readily every critic noticed the irony of Lindsay Lohan as a nun, but how few contextualized the Nunsploitation genre and asked why it might be invoked here. It was a cycle in the 70s in Italy and Spain and represented a rebellion against the patriarchal authority of the Roman Catholic Church. No one asks why two sequin-masked figures attack Machete, a clear allusion to Mexploitation cinema that combines sex and violence to "represent brutal studies of a modern world in disarray" (Greene 4).

The scene takes place at night. The fictional depiction of violence has real life corollaries, such as the 1996 victimization of Alicia Sotero Vasquez.[60] Nevins writes, "A variety of violent incidents took place from the mid-1980s to the early 1990s. These included a series of nighttime attacks by off-duty Marines against Mexican migrant workers (so-called beaner raids, beaner being a derogatory term for Mexicans), and an attack with guns by three teenagers in Encinitas against migrant workers" (69). In the film, a van of immigrants is unloaded despite not having reached their destination. Shortly thereafter, a truck enters the scene and begins to chase the helpless group. The next shot is set-up to mimic the point of view from behind a handheld camera. With the red "REC" signal in the upper right hand corner and the truck spotlights in the frame, the Mexican group is shown dispersing through a shaky camera lens. Here Rodriguez is cuing up a reference to the Mondo genre of exploitation films (often referred to as "shockumentary").[61] In this genre of filmmaking, fictitious happenings are photographed in documentary style and presented as real. Typically these films, such as *Mondo Cane* (Times Film Corporation 1962) and *Macabro* (Trans American Films, 1966), were used to highlight instances of death and were often social commentaries. In discussing the mondo film, Eddie Muller and Daniel Faris write:

> Happily for the curious but less adventurous among us, exploitation
> producers have always been willing to document the savage customs and

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[60] "A variety of violent incidents took place from the mid-1980s to the early 1990s. These included a series of nighttime attacks by off-duty Marines against Mexican migrant workers (so-called beaner raids, beaner being a derogatory term for Mexicans), and an attack with guns by three teenagers in Encinitas against migrant workers" (Nevins 69).

[61] The most famous of these is perhaps *Cannibal Holocaust* (United Artists, 1980) that controversially showed impaled bodies and a turtle being taken apart and eaten. The filmmaker, Ruggero Deodato was taken to court where he was forced to present evidence that the footage was indeed fake. Critics such as Mark Goodall have contended that the theme of the film is to question "civilization" and the activity of the Western world.

witness the twisted rituals performed by isolated tribes…In the shocking, strange-but-maybe-true realm of Mondo movies, there can be only one answer: 'Judge for Yourself!' (113).

In *Machete*, the "savage customs" are those of the Vigilantes, a stand-in for the Minutemen Project.[62]

The jeep stops, following the sound of a few shots and the evident dropping of at least one Mexican body. Von Johnson (Don Johnson) steps out of the jeep and approaches a sickly, obviously terrified, pregnant woman. Highlighting the ignorance of the individual, Rodriguez's script cues the lines, "Well, I don't speak much Mexican neither," from Johnson after he asked the woman if she spoke English.[63] Clearly, he doesn't speak very good English, either.[64] As an ominous note begins to squeal over the soundtrack, the crying of the woman can be heard as she looks for help from her wounded husband. After accusing her of trespassing "on his daddy's land" (which of course, once belonged to Mexico), Johnson pulls out a pistol and fires. The movie immediately cuts to the POV of the hand-held camera to show the pregnant woman shot in the stomach and zooms in as she collapses to the ground. As Johnson delivers a speech in which he claims to be keeping watch "on this great nation of ours," there is a cut to the husband in painful disbelief. At this point, Senator John McLaughlin is introduced wielding a rifle from inside the Jeep. With the diegetic documentarian trained

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[62] The Minutemen are a real-life group of vigilantes campaigning against illegal immigration. A controversial video was posted by members of the organization who faked the murder of an immigrant crossing the border and posted it to YouTube in August 2007. Rodriguez is invoking this incident in order to condemn it and everything it represents as an extremely perverted realization of racism.

[63] Vasquez was similarly asked if she spoke English before being brutalized by the police. She didn't.

[64] Rodriguez is careful not to limit this racist behavior to ignorant Texas hicks. The other murderer of the group is a well-educated politician. The film eventually indicts an intermediary party.

on him, McLaughlin (in the stereotypical oil tycoon garb of a white cowboy hat and bolo

tie[65]) executes the husband. The audience is again given the handheld camera point of

view as the Senator addresses the camera with a sinister grin: "Burn me a DVD. My

supporters are going to like that, a lot."

This scene is one of the most chilling and stylistically distinct in the film. The

message should be clear: the fictional incident references a contemporary reality. This is

a mechanism attempting to scour away the artificiality of Hollywood cinema. The film

has progressed from marred stock, to a contemporary stock (as the border politics become

focal), to the documentary footage in a move that pinpoints the film's politics. This

depiction is meant to evoke real life instances of brutality by ignorant border patrols. One

member of the entourage vomits immediately after, while the Senator remarks, "Jesus

Von, can't you see she's with child?" The conscientious audience members are

encouraged to feel a sense of revulsion.

Ironically, one of the only "critics" to comment on this scene was Jones. In his

tirade, he complains that the movie is "race war propaganda hastily disguised behind a

stylized, bloodthirsty black comedy," invoking the murder of the pregnant woman in

several different places as supporting evidence.[66] He correctly suggests, "The murder of a

defenseless pregnant woman…is designated to elicit a visceral and emotional response on

the part of the audience," but then goes on to argue "[i]t far surpasses the 'ravishing' of

maidens by evil Huns portrayed in pro-war posters during the First World War. It ranks

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[65] The dress of Von and McLaughlin is perhaps another allusion to Peckinpah-cinema. Prince notes, "The killers in suits who populate Peckinpah's contemporary-life films are emblems of the political and social corruption and barbarism that he believed characterized twentieth-century America" (Savage 40).

[66] At one point, he incorrectly comments, "The film opens with Texans butchering pregnant illegal aliens" (Nimmo).

right up there with photos published in newspapers prior to the Second World War

showing sadistic Japanese soldiers skewering Chinese babies with bayonets" (Nimmo).

Here Jones completely ignores the fact that he is comparing a fictitious exploitation film

with blatant war propaganda. However, Rodriguez's ability to incite this reaction is a

testimony to his skill. The film clearly triggered anxiety and guilt in those who felt it was

a little too real for comfort. But why was this reaction so limited? Perhaps it is because

the film's presentation as an exploitation homage and its stressing on humor rather than

tragedy lightens its affective import.

Immediately following the border murder is a campaign advertisement for Senator

McLaughlin. The power of montage here should not be lost on the audience. In effect,

this version of political propaganda relies on similar devices just employed by the

director in the previous scene, thereby suggesting the political flexibility of visual

imagery. The images here are complemented with violently racist rhetoric. It also calls to

mind Peckinpah's use of "didactic tableaux" a Brechtian device defined by Prince as

"striking scenes and images presented formalistically so that they are detachable from the

immediate narrative context. Peckinpah intended such visualizations, I believe, to

declaim basic truths or principles of human cruelty" (*Savage* 169). The ad evokes

historically recycled political rhetoric that ties immigration to worsening socioeconomic

conditions. In this light, the first image of the campaign is certainly striking.

The ad opens with a brightly lit screen full of maggots. The voiceover is the

familiar voice of Rodriguez's exploitation trailers on which the movie is based: "The

infestation has begun!" The film cuts immediately to a shaky handheld camera shot of a

few Mexicans climbing a mountain and another scene of one swimming across a lake:

"Parasites have crossed our borders and are sickening our country; *leeching* [my emphasis] off our system; destroying us from the inside." Here, "…the policing of immigrants (by officers of the State) is accompanied by a rhetoric of defense of the nation's boundaries from an attack by foreigners" (Ruiz 67). The hidden camera-type filming of these scenes again evokes the mondo film. Alex Jones's commentary is helpful: similar propaganda *was* employed during WWII by the Germans in order to dehumanize the Jews. In these propaganda films, specifically Fritz Hippler's *The Eternal Jew* (Transit Film, 1940), the Jewish people were equated with rats spreading a plague across the country.

It is only after this introductory montage that we realize what is being shown is a campaign advertisement for the reelection of Senator McLaughlin. The voiceover continues as McLaughlin takes center stage in front of the capitol building: "State Senator John McLaughlin has a plan of attack." An American flag can be seen waving in the right hand corner of the screen, as a patriotic tune is cued and McLaughlin dons the same sinister smirk as in his last scene.[67] The ad then cuts to a scene of state agents chasing illegals. The sound effects are those of four bullets being shot, as red-white-and-blue lettering reading, "NO IMMIGRANTS" is visually punctured by four bullet holes. This text is replaced by an identical font reading "ELECTRIC FENCE" as the voiceover explains the Senator's bid for an electrified border obstruction. A corresponding animation of an electric fence is displayed. The American-flag font now reads "NO

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[67] This is not the first time McLaughlin shares the scene with a waving American flag. In fact, almost every time he is presented as a public figure, there is a flag waving in some corner of the screen. This is a clear indictment of the confusion of patriotism with racism.

AMNESTY" as the text partly obscures the detainment of two Mexicans by ICE[68] agents.

As the voice assures the audience, "John McLaughlin wants to protect you from the

invaders," the ad cuts to a pool of cockroaches. This scene is replaced by a shot of

McLaughlin holding his hand over his heart and standing solemnly in front of a waving

American flag that then gives way to a close-up of McLaughlin in front of a patriotically

colored banner reading, "VOTE McLAUGHLIN." The text above the banner reads,

"DON'T GET CAUGHT ON THE WRONG SIDE OF THE FENCE!" The irony of the

caption below this close-up ("Approved by Senator McLaughlin; Paid for by the Senator

McLaughlin for Senate Committee") is revealed when we find out Torrez is financing the

Senator's campaign so that he can construct the fence with strategic drug-running weak

spots.

> This again is a commentary on misinformation. Nevins notes the following:
>
> The so-called war on drugs waged by the two Republican administrations was certainly one of the most significant factors prompting the 'border build-up.' While the US-Mexico boundary had long seen efforts by US authorities to stem the flow of illegal drugs into the United States, It was the 'sustained sense of urgency' characterizing this interdiction effort that made the Ronald Reagan-George Bush 'war' unique. In this regard, the Reagan and Bush administrations also significantly helped to associate boundary enforcement with criminal activity. (69)

The similarities are clear. The Mexicans are shown to be criminals leeching on a

suffering economy. The rhetoric sets up a 'we' versus 'them' dichotomy that allows a

racist society to criminalize 'them' despite the fact that here 'they' are the victims of a

too often undocumented brutality.

The appearance and positioning of this campaign trailer is conspicuous and

significant. It reflects real life media events that promoted fencing as a way to stop illegal

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[68] ICE stands for Immigration and Customs Enforcement

immigration. Every attempt at building a fence in the past has failed because of political inattention. In recent US history, it has been largely a political platform to garner votes. The ad is demonstrating the Foucauldian notion that, "language itself communicates violence by giving a name to certain behaviors and constructing certain objects and subjects of violence" (Foucault 3). A commercial presented in a movie is later revealed to be on a television set as the camera pans out. Here, the commercial is just as much a part of the movie as any other scene. The blurring between reality and fiction is pronounced. This *could* be something presented on TV today as in the coverage of Arizona. How problematic is this? It certainly suggests an indictment of a pervasive desensitization to the media. Slocum contemplates this question when considering the broader representations of contemporary violence in American cinema:

> The issue, rather, is whether ubiquitous media representations of bloodletting remain connected to shared myths that still shape and define the society and the viewer's place in it – or whether the myths have been destroyed, individuals diminished, and the society depoliticized, leaving popular narratives of sacrifice without conventional ritual meaning and defined only by their value as commodities. (22)

Moreover, following the campaign ad, the film abruptly cuts to show some of the day laborers fighting each other for money. The placement of this campaign plug then produces a simple, yet powerful equation: border politics and border violence go hand-in-hand. Further, through the ordering of these scenes, the border problems are posited as the bastard progeny of a capitalist society.

The scenes discussed in this section have several functions in their references to particular exploitation genres. They invite the spectator to contemplate the dissemination of misinformation, and they also implicitly reference non-fictitious national incidents. They are divorced from the narrative flow of the film in order to highlight their

significance. Lastly, they are part of a montage that contrasts the difference between visual rhetoric and verbal rhetoric, equating the violence against the "anchor baby" to the violence of the current political rhetoric surrounding Mexican border policy.

Cheech Crucified in Church

In part necessitated by the popularity of the film's first trailer, Cheech Marin makes a pivotal cameo in the film as Machete's brother (and priest). Father Marin has a relatively loose set of morals as he agrees to help Machete kill some men; releases taped confessions; looks after two drunk women brought to him by his brother; and prefers Mexican (marijuana) cigars to Cubans. Playfully enacted in the film, Marin's activities, and star persona, make him a heroic and also counter-cultural Latino figure. His character is set in direct opposition to the white villains representing staid political institutions.

The scene following a shootout between Marin and several hired hitmen opens with Padre Marin crucified on the altar of his own Church in his priestly garbs.[69] Michael Booth is standing in the corner. The irony is heightened by the fact that Booth is one of the Padre's parishioners, but also Senator McLaughlin's campaign manager. Perhaps the most gruesomely and disturbingly over-the-top scene in a completely over-the-top movie is the one depicting this crucifixion. Again, Rodriguez shows himself to be a true "blood auteur" through his use of violence here. Foucault notes of punishment, "In the 'excesses' of torture, a whole economy of power is invested" (35). The connections between this and the previously discussed execution scenes are apparent as a Mexican body is

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[69] This image is even more meaningful within the larger context of the film because of the constant framing of an image of the crucified Jesus at the day laborer site. Whenever we are at that site, which is frequently, we see this image.

profanely dispatched by a white, apathetic villain representing a pervasively racist

society. To heighten the Jesus allusions, the Mexican hitman proceeds to drive nails

through Marin's forearms. This move is suggestive of Jesus's being turned over to the

Romans and condemned to crucifixion by his own people. The scene cuts to a close-up of

Padre's face writhing in pain and noticeably perspiring. This is torture and the first time

we see torture so explicitly and realistically detailed in the film. A cut to another slam of

the hammer is followed by a zooming-in on Marin's face. This extreme close-up

emphasizes an even more pained expression. Padre screams as his sadistic torturer is

shown wriggling the nail gleefully.

The connection to Jesus's death should prompt consideration of this visual

imagery. In his essay on scaffold speeches, Foucault explains that the beginning of the

nineteenth century inaugurated "an age of sobriety in punishment" (14). Political powers

had become aware of the potential power of torture and the ways in which it could turn

against them. He notes, "the body is also directly involved in a political field; power

relations have an immediate hold upon it; they invest it, mark it, train it, torture it, force it

to carry out tasks, to perform ceremonies, to emit signs" (25). This scene has none of the

stylistic excess typical of violence in most contemporary action cinema. It focuses on the

suffering of the martyr (obviously complicated), but it does so in a way that only the

viewer and the perpetrators of violence have access to. It's a scaffold speech to the

viewer: "Sacrifice becomes a site of transgression, a way of introducing disequilibrium

into a society of consumption" (Foucault 23). But is the power of this scene lost on the

viewer?

Now that Rodriguez has our attention, Padre, resigned to his fate, painfully asks Booth, "You really hate our kind that much?!" Booth, filmed over the shoulder of Padre, responds, "No Padre. I hate declining profits. A secure border limits supply; drives the prices up," essentially equating capitalism with racism. Joseph Nevins talks about the complexity of this situation when he states, "[i]t is not to the advantage of the system in the United States - that is, one of capitalist relations of production – to completely stop undocumented immigration" (Nevins 80). US-Mexican border legislation is always complicated by the economy, but this relationship is twisted in ways that position Mexicans as scapegoats. The orchestral soundtrack that becomes increasingly more pronounced further amplifies the mood and gravity of the scene. The scene concludes with Booth taking the hammer and lining a nail up in Padre's other arm. As he hits it, the film rapidly cuts back-and-forth between images of blood spurting out of the arm and images of the Padre screaming in pain. The violence has a distinct purpose here. This scene is a visual rendering of the pain resulting from political rhetoric against Mexicans. Ruiz again notes, "…in many instances racist sentiments disseminated by the press and public figures have resulted in hundreds of immigrants being physically brutalized" (66). While Booth represents the political machinery at work behind the scenes of Senator McLaughlin's campaign, Padre represents the Mexican body as a whole, in the same way Jesus on the cross is a pictorial stand-in for mankind.

It is soon revealed that the execution was taped on Padre's security monitors (positioned in the form of a cross). The recording is played at a live press conference for Senator McLaughlin, with shots identical to the way they were presented earlier in the film. This is another mechanism of interconnection within the film. It equates the

crucifixion with the Senator's filmed murder of illegals at the beginning of the film, which is shown immediately after on the television monitors. Notably, both scenes are repeated twice in the film (another clever visual strategy that suggests Rodriguez is a real "blood auteur"). Further, they have become true Foucauldian scaffold speeches. Regardless of the circumstances, murder is murder and racism is racism. McLaughlin's supporters do NOT like this. And the viewer shouldn't either. Referencing the publicized beating of Alicia Sotero Vasquez, Ruiz comments:

> In order to sustain the United States' self-image as a highly modernized and human society this public brutal enactment of public punishment should have never been allowed (or at least, should never have been televised). I do not mean to argue that public punishment is somehow not effective but rather that the capitalist system is best able to reproduce itself when coercion is not visible to the majority of the Nation State's members. (76)

Hence, the significance of the chaotic war that ensues. The film then serves a similar purpose as the clips shown to the diegetic audience: to suggestively expose the endemic racism of the United States. It is revealed that the Senator's aide had the hit staged, triggering the grand finale of the film. The Senator's crutch, which he does not need but uses to encourage sympathy, represents the ways in which regressive border politics are the result of political manipulation.

The Electric Fence

Senator McLaughlin suffers a series of meaningful near-executions during the film's final fight scene that serve to concretize the point that "[t]he ceremony of punishment, then, is an exercise of 'terror'" (Foucault 49). Tied to a chair by Von Johnson and his vigilantes, McLaughlin is forced to speak into a camera positioned

adjacent to a firing squad. His helplessness and Johnson's presence behind the camera

recreate the border murders from the beginning of the film. Johnson again has appealed

to his forefathers' 'heroics' explaining, "My great granddaddy did not give his life at the

Alamo so that we could sell our nation to a bunch of backstabbing politicians."

McLaughlin is forced to read the following into the camera: "I have desecrated the oath

of office and I am a traitor deserving of death." He then lashes out, "Fucking parasites!

Fucking terrorists!" *Now* the parasites are the vigilantes. Furthermore, they are homeland

terrorists. This exposes the real mechanics behind the political demonization of

immigrants both in the film and in the United States: "In order to preserve undocumented

labor as exploitable it is necessary to criminalize and racialize the workers, thus

maintaining a reign of terror against them so that their fear preclude them from

demanding their legal, human, and economic rights" (Ruiz 67). Rodriguez puts these

words of recognition associating the vigilantes with a reign of terror in the mouth of one

of the film's central antagonist, a stand-in for the US political machine, Senator

McLaughlin.

McLaughlin receives a last-minute reprieve as the Network[70] army storms

Johnson's headquarters. He is thrown a flannel jacket and the hat of a Mexican worker

and told, "If you want to survive your own war, you better become Mexican real fast."

The suggestion that one can "become Mexican" by wearing certain clothes provides a

subtle critique of the racist assumptions of difference that are prevalent in the film; if you

dress one way you become a target. The senator is aware of this as his own border

legislation promotes racism based on superficial assumptions. Donning this new outfit,

McLaughlin joins the mayhem only to be tracked down a vengeful Nun (Lindsay Lohan) who shoots him three times in the chest.

Following the Network's victory and the reestablishment of Machete and Luz as iconic leaders of a Revolution[71], the film begins its epilogue. Nighttime falls and we see that McLaughlin has survived again. He strips off his bulletproof vests and proceeds limping down a dusty road. In a perfect bookmark to the film, a jeep enters the side of the frame and begins to chase McLaughlin. A member of the posse screams, "There's one! Cockroach!" at which point McLaughlin is shot and caught on an electric fence. Unable to speak, presumably because of the voltage, he tries to explain that he is not what he appears to be – a Mexican. This scene recalls the first allegorical execution of the film, depicting the defenselessness of Mexicans near the border. The only response to McLaughlin is from Johnson's sidekick who shouts, "Welcome to America!" and unloads another few rounds into the Senator. His demise in this fashion resonates on several different levels. He appears crucified - and in the Mexican clothing evoking Padre's demise as well as the border murder from the beginning - as he is shot in cold-blood. Of course, it's fitting that he falls onto an electric fence, as that was a major part of his political campaign. At this point, the film can be seen to be referencing the Matthew Shepard incident and making one final comment on the atrocity of pervasive hate crimes still being enacted in this country. This visual affirms the critical observation of Richard Delgado and Jean Stefonicio who "state that racist sentiments are ingrained into the fabric of US society and that it is almost always impossible to avoid experiencing a

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[71] Machete steps onto a car and raises his machete. His supporters raise their machetes (and other various signifiers of support and unification, including a peace sign). Luz steps on another car and raises her rifle, literalizing the silhouette of Shé shown on her wall earlier in the film. This is meant to connect her to the revolutionary, Ché Guevara.

certain degree of racism when one lives in a racist country" (Ruiz 68). Whereas

Johnson's sidekick had thrown up witnessing two previous executions, he is the murderer

this time – and he can stomach it.

The connections between this series of events and those previous are that they are

blatant anomalies in a film so hyperbolized. Comedy is absent. None of the violence is

shown in slow-motion or through tilted camera angles to call attention to their artifice.

They are constructed to mimic real bodies suffering and dying and therein lay their power

as what Foucault called scaffold speeches presented onscreen to a mass audience.

A Violent Revolution

As neo-exploitation, *Machete* represents a unique exploitation of classical

exploitation cinema. It consciously parodies the genre but, in conjunction with its level of

blood auteurism, has powerful historical content. The film can be read as an exposition

on the current state of cinematic violence in the way that it uses exploitation to negotiate

political elements. Increasingly graphic representations of obscenity and violence have

apparently desensitized audiences to the degree that they are more inclined to consume

only the spectacle.[72] This has resulted in a regressive taming of the American action-

drama. The action movie has developed an increasing tendency to divorce itself from

social, economic, and political relevance. Discussing the current use of violence in film,

cinematographer John Bailey has commented:

> For them, violence is an image to be constructed, a special effect to be
> staged, but not a social effect that is produced. When characters die

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[72] Further, graphic mutilation needs to be offset by humor in order that the audience can
tolerate it. Hyperbolic humor, through one-liners and similar mechanisms, has played an
increasingly large role in defusing onscreen violence.

> spectacularly bloody deaths in contemporary crime and action films, they
> are, for the individuals who make these films, just movie characters,
> without real life correlates. (*Screening* 33)

In *Machete*, there are real life corollaries. However, as seen by the critical dismissal of

the film as crudely comedic, the message is perhaps lost on its audience. I would argue

that this speaks to the depreciating social value of Hollywood films in general and their

ability to connect their audience to their own society through visual material. *Machete*, as

the title suggests, should be viewed as an instrument with revolutionary implications.

Conclusion:

It is fitting that both *Machete* and *Black Dynamite* are titled after their main protagonists and that both of these titles refer to weaponry. Further, both films end with a revolution against a corrupt governmental figure. *Black Dynamite* picks up where blaxploitation left off and goes further in showing what the cycle was about – a mythic onscreen racial masculinity that was capable of toppling oppressive power structures – "the man." It does so through a sincere pastiche of elements from the classical blaxploitation cycle. Removing stereotypes, the film creatively conflates the present with the past. *Death Proof* serves as a meditation on the potential of this conflation. *Black Dynamite* concludes with an invasion of the White House by a black man, realizing the suggestions of more politically driven classical blaxploitation movies such as *Sweetback*. Like *Death Proof* and *Machete*, it creates a utopian situation of what could have and perhaps should have been, both historically and cinematically.

It might be fun to consider what a postmodern Black Dynamite could do if he had landed in the George W. Bush White House. It seems power is no longer located in the White House and fighting it is not as easy as just taking down the figurehead. Real power has been centrally and decisively located in military and industrial sectors. For now, Nixon will have to do (as well as the fictional Senator McLaughlin in *Machete*). As the film suggests, or imagines, a different president, a black one, perhaps a Barack Obama, can possibly make change to the ongoing oppressions and terrors of late capitalism. But is this really possible? As *Machete* demonstrates, power has been decentralized and disseminated throughout corrupt institutional structures. Still the onscreen presentation of mythical figures with cultural resonances is a powerful one.

The reinvigoration of exploitation, in the form of neo-exploitation, suggests the ways in which previous genres or periods can be recycled to a political end. As Tarantino demonstrates, a high level of modified and deconstructed referentially can produce something unique that a new generation can consume in its own playful way. His use of neo-exploitation proves that the films are something markedly different from their predecessors. *Black Dynamite* and *Machete* employ a similar pastiche. The difference is that its use in these films is intended to function more allegorically and strengthen the connective thread between them and their predecessors. Visual cues are suggestive and are meant to be read as political. Just as the grindhouse films of the seventies were a result of generational uncertainty and discontent, so are the films described above. I argue that this represents a positive return to a youth-targeted cinema that allows for violence and hyperbole and an awareness of the past. This past is creatively used in all of the films in different ways.

In discussing *Death Proof*, *Planet Terror*, *Machete*, and *Black Dynamite* as neo-exlpoitative films, I stressed the radical nature of the texts and their insistence on the presence of a deeply embedded cultural memory. The proliferation of the DVD market and online access to movies has vastly contributed to audience familiarity with seventies cinema, opening up a larger, more informed audience to neo-exploitation films. Further, these films bring to the screen bodies that most contemporary cinematic fare ignores. This represents the state of American Cinema. *Death Proof*, for example, imagines a place where women could have more equal (and less exploitative) participation than in an early era of exploitation cinema. *Black Dynamite* visualizes ways in which African-Americans have achieved previously unconsidered political equality. *Machete* presents a

heroic Latino community overcoming a political oppression that is still very much a sad reality. Based on the representations of the features discussed, we can only hope that there will be more neo-exploitation films in the future.

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Boyz N the Hood. Dir. John Singleton. Columbia: 1991.

Bullitt. Dir. Peter Yates. Warner Bros.: 1968.

Cannibal Holocaust. Dir. Ruggero Deodata. United Artists: 1980.

Convoy. Dir. Sam Peckinpah. United Artists: 1978.

Cotton Comes to Harlem: Dir. Ossie Davis. United Artists: 1970.

Dawn of the Dead. Dir. George A. Romero. United Film Distribution Company: 1979.

Day of the Dead. Dir. George A. Romero. United Film Distribution Company: 1985.

Death Proof. Dir. Quentin Tarantino. Dimension Films: 2007.

The Dirty Dozen. Dir. Robert Aldrich. MGM: 1967.

El Mariachi. Dir. Robert Rodriguez. Columbia: 1992.

The Eternal Jew. Dir. Fritz Hippler. Transit Film: 1940.

First Blood. Dir. Ted Kotcheff. Orion Pictures Corp.: 1982.

The French Connection. Dir. William Friedkin. 20th Century Fox: 1971

Get Rich or Die Tryin'. Dir Jim Sheridan. Paramount Pictures: 2005.

Grindhouse. Dir. Robert Rodriguez and Quentin Tarantino. Dimension Films: 2007.

The Hurt Locker. Dir. Kathryn Bigelow. Summit Entertainment: 2008.

I Spit on Your Grave. Dir. Meir Zarchi. Cinemagic: 1978.

Inglourious Basterds. Dir. Quentin Tarantino. The Weinstein Company: 2009

Jackie Brown. Dir. Quentin Tarantino. Mirimax: 1997

Jaws. Dir. Steven Spielberg. Universal Studios: 1975.

Kill Bill: Vol. 1. Dir Quentin Tarantino. Mirimax Films: 2003.

Kindergarten Cop. Dir. Ivan Reitman. Universal Pictures: 1990.

Macabro. Dir. Romolo Marcellini. Trans American Films: 1966.

Machete. Dir. Robert Rodriguez. 20th Century Fox: 2010.

The Mack. Dir. Michael Campus. Harbor Productions: 1973.

Menace II Society. Dir. Albert and Allen Hughes. New Line Cinema: 1993.

Mondo Cane. Dir. Paola Cavara. Times Film Corporation: 1962.

Natural Born Killers. Dir. Oliver Stone. Warner Bros.: 1994.

Night of the Living Dead. Dir. George A. Romero. Continential Distributing: 1968.

Notorious. Dir. George Tillman, Jr. 20th Century Fox. 2009.

Planet Terror. Dir. Robert Rodriguez. Dimension Films: 2007.

Precious. Dir Lee Daniels. Lionsgate: 2009.

Reservoir Dogs. Dir. Quentin Tarantino. Mirimax Films: 1992.

Shaft. Dir. Gordon Parks. MGM: 1971.

Star Wars. Dir. George Lucas. 20th Century Fox: 1977.

Suburban Commando. Dir. Burt Kennedy. New Line Cinema: 1991.

Super Fly. Dir. Gordon Parks, Jr. Warner Bros: 1972.

Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song. Dir. Melvin Van Peebles. Cinemation Ind: 1970.

Thick as Thieves. Dir. Scott Sanders. GAGA: 1999.

Three the Hard Way. Dir. Gordon Parks Jr. Allied Artists Pictures: 1974.

Twins Dir. Ivan Reitman. Universal Pictures. 1988.

Two-Lane Blacktop. Dir. Monte Hellman. Universal Pictures: 1971.

Vanishing Point. Richard C. Sarafian. 20th Century Fox: 1971.

The Wild Bunch. Dir. Sam Peckinpah. Warner Bros: 1969.