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4/2/2009

Jim Brown: Cinematic Integration and Re-Segregation, 1967-1972

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An abstract of
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Abstract

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By Joshua Gleich

Jim Brown announced his early retirement from the NFL in 1966, leaving the league as arguably its most dominant player in history, to pursue a Hollywood acting career. After the extraordinary success of *The Dirty Dozen* (1967), he became a leading man by 1968, reaching the peak of his acting career in *100 Rifles* (1969). In the process, he shattered many of Hollywood's and America's most deep seated racial taboos; however after crossing the onscreen miscegenation barrier for African-American men in *100 Rifles*, his career began a precipitous decline. By the early 1970's, he had been re-segregated to "Blaxploitation" features, losing almost the entire white audience that had supported his mainstream Hollywood career. This thesis examines the major industrial, cinematic, and cultural changes that rapidly ballasted and later destroyed his popular cinema stardom.

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Introduction

Before his early retirement from football in 1966, Jim Brown broke nearly every rushing record in the NFL. Between 1967 and 1970, he broke some of Hollywood and America's most daunting racial taboos. In *The Dirty Dozen* (1967), he became the first black action hero, playing a defiant military prisoner who smilingly incinerated a bunker full of German women and officers. In *Ice Station Zebra* (1968), one of Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer's biggest productions of the late 1960's, he won one of the first roles not specifically written for a black actor. With *The Split* (1968), Brown became a leading man while breaking away from the idealized roles typical for black stars such as Sidney Poitier. *100 Rifles* (1969) allowed Brown to break arguably the most controversial Hollywood taboo: miscegenation. The film revolved around a love scene between Brown and Raquel Welch, who was at the peak of her sex symbol status.

Jim Brown's Hollywood stardom saw a meteoric rise and a precipitous fall. *100 Rifles* was likely the last major production deal that he signed; while the film was a minor hit, it only exacerbated Brown's increasingly controversial image. Following the release of *El Condor* (1970), he disappeared from American screens for over two years. This long hiatus was quite abrupt, considering that Brown had appeared in ten films, starring in six of them, in the span of only three years. Following the success of *Shaft* (1972), Brown hoped to reestablish his stardom with *Slaughter* (1972). Combining elements of Blaxploitation and James Bond films, *Slaughter* attempted to appeal to both black and

white audiences. While the film earned a small profit, it failed to reach white viewers, and performed similarly to Blaxploitation films such as *Blacula* (1972).¹

At his peak popularity in the late 1960's, Brown was considered a major Hollywood star, promising bigger and bigger hits; by 1972, he was only one of many Blaxploitation stars. By 1974, he could no longer even carry a Blaxploitation picture alone; he paired with Fred Williamson and Jim Kelly (a black karate specialist) in *Three the Hard Way* (1974), where the threesome fought an attempt to kill every black American by poisoning the water supply. Brown, apparently, had ceased to offer any crossover appeal to white audiences.

Brown's rapid fall from Hollywood A-Pictures to Blaxploitation raises essential questions about Hollywood and America's turbulent shifts during the late 1960's and early 1970's; however the unique arc of Brown's tumultuous career has never been explored in depth. Brown was the crucial transition figure between the desexualized sanctity of Sidney Poitier and the hyper-sexualized empowerment of "Blaxploitation" heroes. Scholars have primarily defined Brown as a separatist black star, but his film career more accurately represents an attempt to establish an uncompromised black masculinity in the mainstream Hollywood cinema. Each of Brown's films presents distinct strategies towards integrating his racial difference into a profitable action film. This cinematic integration, successful or unsuccessful, could affect every phase of production, as well as the public discourse surrounding these films. Brown embodied a strength and a defiance that resonated in the separatist movements of Black Power and Blaxploitation; yet he continued to fight for recognition in the dominant national and

¹ "Big Rental Films of 1972," *Variety*, 2 January 1973, 36. *Slaughter* and *Blacula* each grossed \$1,200,000.

cinematic culture. American moviegoers could accept Brown's violence and cockiness; but as the cultural polarization of the late 1960's grew, they failed to accept his threatening sexuality.

In his two and a half pages devoted to Brown in *Toms, Coons, Mulattos, Mammies, and Bucks*, Donald Bogle hints at the complexity of Brown's onscreen persona. "The most interesting aspect of Jim Brown's characters in the 1960's was that their strength was always used to work with the dominant white culture rather than against it... Jim Brown's brute force, if not properly guided, would be blind and indiscriminate and too much of a threat to white males in the audience; thus he could never be cast as a politically militant black man."² Despite these suggestions of racial integration, in his next paragraph Bogle concludes that "Brown was a hero for a distinctly separatist age³," and relegates him to his "buck" category. Brown's characters' prowess and defiance fulfilled certain masculine ideas of separatist Black Power groups; yet as Bogle's earlier comments suggest, they functioned in narratives that could accommodate his explosive power without obviating racial separation. Brown is equally miscast as another buck. Playing a quick-thinking criminal mastermind in *The Split* (1968), he clearly defies this stereotype of an animalistic brute; while Brown possessed the physical traits of a buck, his characters often exceeded these constraints.

Bogle correctly notes that Brown's characters rarely expressed outright political views; however his characters never prevented white viewers from making associations between the star and his racial politics; Brown in fact encouraged these associations by

² Donald Bogle, *Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies, & Bucks*, 4th ed. (New York: Continuum, 2002), 220.

³ Bogle, 223.

speaking openly about America's race problems in various interviews. Furthermore, as Eldridge Cleaver detailed in his 1968 best seller, *Soul on Ice*, physicality, sexuality, and political power were inextricably bound together in race relations. These interconnections continually arose in the national discourse on racial violence and about Jim Brown himself during the 1960's.

While racial tensions escalated in America during the post-Civil Rights era, how did Brown successfully overcome strong cultural taboos without completely alienating white viewers or promoting segregation? In *Framing Blackness*, Ed Guerrero articulates how Brown's football persona and character narratives contributed to his onscreen success.

Brown's celebrity status as a top football player also bolstered his film career, for he was often cast as a member of a coordinated team, the integrationist paradigm that finds expression in every American media enterprise from professional sports to the biracial buddy flick and television news teams. Thus Brown fit well in *The Dirty Dozen* as part of yet another skilled American team, this time commandos on a wartime mission. Moreover, Brown's interracial sex scenes with Raquel Welch (somewhat less controversial because she was cast as Mexican) in *100 Rifles* paid off for the studio as a sexploitation strategy, making the picture moderately successful in urban areas.⁴

Guerrero correctly identifies how the star black athlete's integration into team sports provides a model for cinematic integration, as well as other narrative techniques designed to diminish the impact of Brown's racial transgressions. However in Brown's case, he had to become a better teammate on the screen than he had been on the field. He had forced the Cleveland Browns to fire his Hall of Fame Coach, Paul Brown, yet he fought to the death for his captain in *The Dirty Dozen*. While Guerrero hints at the complexities of Jim Brown's star image, he concludes that, "the 'football heroes' offered only

⁴ Ed Guerrero, *Framing Blackness: The African American Image in Film* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1993), 79.

superficial variations of older codes and themes,” and later confirms Bogle’s assessment of Brown and other ex-athletes as bucks.⁵

In *100 Rifles*, redefining the buck as a desirable lover for a white actress (playing a Mexican) rather than her fearsome potential rapist constitutes more than a “superficial variation.” Defining Brown as simply the most successful of many ex-football stars also obscures his unique position. While Brown lost his special Hollywood niche during the Blaxploitation era, he still remains the only black athlete to regularly appear as a leading man outside of black-oriented films. His most memorable supporting roles came in big budget, aggressively advertised films such as *The Dirty Dozen* (1967) and *Ice Station Zebra* (1968). Before his film career began to flourish, Brown had already become a living NFL legend, breaking nearly every record for his position. The introduction to a 1968 *Playboy* interview with Brown gives this description: “Brown’s phenomenal prowess led the editor of *Sport* magazine to label him the ‘Babe Ruth of football,’ who ‘sits alone, indestructible, superhuman.’”⁶ Thus while inspiring (and sometimes directly assisting) former black athletes to become movie stars, his celebrity as an actor and athlete far surpassed figures such as Woody Strode or Fred Williamson.

This mistaken categorization of Jim Brown as a separationist black star has continued in recent scholarship. In his 2006 work, *Masculinity in the Interracial Buddy Film*, Melvin Donaldson contrasts the movie roles of Brown and Sammy Davis, Jr: “Brown’s angry and radical roles reflected the black male image of the inner city and black power, making the integrationist brotherhood emphasized by Davis’s character

⁵ Guerrero, 80.

⁶ Stephen Randall ed., *The Playboy Interviews: They Played the Game* (Milwaukie, OR: M Press, 2005), 100.

irrelevant to the social and political changes at the end of the decade.”⁷ This description repeats Bogle and Guerrero’s descriptions of Brown as a separationist figure while omitting their descriptions of Brown as an apolitical team player.

Keith Harris’ 2006 book, *Boys, Boyz, Bois*, offers a compelling corrective to Donaldson:

As an athlete, the virtue of manhood, and the virtuosity of Brown’s masculinity, exceeds race, allowing Brown to enter laterally, into a seemingly egalitarian celebration of the masculine ideal... The black athlete turned actor is integrated into filmic masculinity as a sexual unit, expressing a sexuality which is incorporated into whiteness as masculine difference; the difference of race is disavowed, denied as racial difference and integrated into the spectrum of masculinity and the economy of filmic masculinity.”⁸

Harris correctly defines Brown as an integrationist figure, as well as validating how his athletic stardom mitigates the controversy of miscegenation. Unfortunately, his argument belies the level of controversy generated by *100 Rifles*, which required, for example, disparate advertising strategies in the North and South, and revived censorship in Charlotte, NC.⁹

Why has Jim Brown’s film career proven so difficult to define? The primary challenge for scholars may be the ambiguous period in film history surrounding the peak of Brown’s stardom. Sidney Poitier, a widely studied figure, reached his highest acclaim with the success of *Guess Who’s Coming to Dinner?* (1967) and *In The Heat of the Night* (1967); Blaxploitation began its rise in 1970, with films such as *Cotton Comes to Harlem*. Brown thrived between 1967-1970, years marked by radical shifts in American culture

⁷ Melvin Donaldson, *Masculinity in the Interracial Buddy Film* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland and Co., 2006), 42.

⁸ Keith M. Harris, *Boys, Boyz, Bois: An Ethics of Black Masculinity in Film and Popular Media* (New York: Routledge, 2006), 68-69.

⁹ *100 Rifles* ad, *New York Times*, 13 April 1969, D12; Harry Golden, “Only in America: Progressive Community,” *Chicago Daily Defender*, 30 June 1969, 15.

and film content; this specific period, resting between two major eras of African-American film scholarship, has received too little scrutiny.

While few works address Brown in great detail, existing studies of cinematic racial representation provide valuable methods for analyzing Brown's film career. In Hollywood *Fantasies of Miscegenation*, Susan Courtney demonstrates the value of applying Eldridge Cleaver's gendered racial structures in *Soul on Ice* to the racial mythology of Hollywood and America in the late 1960's. Courtney applies Cleaver's archetype of white masculinity, the "Omnipotent Administrator," to the white protagonist of *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner*, Matt Drayton (Spencer Tracy). Drayton's authoritative purview provides a safe position for the spectator to liberally embrace miscegenation without surrendering the power to define the acceptable conditions for interracial relations.¹⁰ Brown's salient physical prowess (as well as sexual prowess in *100 Rifles*), highlighted onscreen and offscreen, demands a similar interrogation of Cleaver's archetype for black masculinity: "The Super-Masculine Menial."¹¹

While Cleaver's description of the black male is rather similar to Bogle's "buck" stereotype, his model explores the complex, interrelated hierarchies of race and gender that intersect with political and sexual power structures. Cleaver also addresses the special role of black athletes within these structures. As a 1968 bestseller, *Soul on Ice* provides a unique theoretical window into the public discourse on race coinciding with the release of Brown's most popular films; and as the work of a Black Panther leader, it gives voice to the radical politics that greatly influenced public perception of Brown.

¹⁰ Susan Courtney, *Hollywood Fantasies of Miscegenation* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005), 276.

¹¹Eldridge Cleaver, *Soul on Ice*, 1st ed. (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1968), 163.

Cleaver, Courtney, and Brown himself all provide valuable approaches to interrogating the miscegenation taboo.

The Dirty Dozen and *100 Rifles* provide fitting bookends for the rapid rise and fall of his popularity. Despite the racial violence boiling over in the streets in 1967, Brown enthralled white and black audiences alike with his heroic performance in *Dirty Dozen's* integrated combat unit. Yet just as the late 1960's saw the limits of white tolerance for Civil Rights, Brown divided the film audience by breaking the miscegenation taboo. As racial politics became increasingly polarized, Brown's universal stardom waned, and by 1972, his film persona would be re-segregated to Blaxploitation.

I will focus my analysis of Brown's star image on five films made between 1967 and 1972: *The Dirty Dozen*, *Ice Station Zebra*, *The Split*, *100 Rifles*, and *Slaughter*. Each chapter will address how filmmakers integrated Brown into existing Hollywood narratives and stylistics, as well as the success of these efforts to attract black and white audiences. However like these films, each chapter will exhibit varied strategies to best establish Brown's position within industrial and cultural trends. Chapter 1 will compare *The Dirty Dozen* and *100 Rifles*, focusing specifically on how publicity, genre, film technique, and historical context affected each film's success. *The Dirty Dozen* was an enormous hit that established Brown as an asset at the box office; however it safely circumscribed Brown and his character to avoid alienating white viewers. *100 Rifles* failed to become a major hit or a coherent film; by ambitiously crossing the miscegenation taboo, the film fractured its narrative, its audience and its publicity.

After establishing Brown's mainstream career trajectory, Chapters 2 and 3 will focus more specifically on the industrial and historical factors that influenced Brown's

evolving persona. In Chapter 2, I will analyze *Ice Station Zebra* as a Super-Actioner, a generic model essential to Brown's career. The film also appears to ignore Brown's racial identity; however a closer analysis of the film's narrative structure reveals a subtle coding of racial hierarchies within the film. Lastly, *Ice Station Zebra* exemplifies M-G-M's failure to repeat the success of the *Dirty Dozen*, largely due to major industrial changes that would impact Brown's career and the success of his studio backers. Chapter 3 will discuss *The Split*, Brown's first star vehicle. I will look at various fissures emerging in Brown's star image and the composition of his audience during 1968, one of the most turbulent years in American history.

Chapter 4 will explore Brown's persona after his Hollywood career had all but vanished. *Slaughter*, Brown's attempted comeback film, was moderately successful with black audiences but failed to interest white viewers. Brown saw this vehicle as a path towards re-integration, but it revealed that his stardom had now been relegated to Blaxploitation. This chapter will also look at the variety of factors that contributed to Brown's two-year exile from American movie screens.

An analysis of Jim Brown's film career fundamentally alters our understanding of Hollywood's progress and retrenchment in depicting African-Americans during the late 1960's and early 1970's. Sidney Poitier provided a compromised, mainstream model for black masculinity, while Blaxploitation pursued an uncompromising, and at times unflattering, depiction of black manhood. Between the peaks of Poitier's career and Blaxploitation, Brown attempted to portray fully realized black men who could appeal to both white and black audiences. He succeeded in naturalizing and desanctifying the black persona defined by Poitier; however his overt, interracial sexuality further divided

an audience that was already splintering along racial and political lines. Jim Brown's fall from stardom proved the limits of cinematic integration for Hollywood cinema and American audiences. Yet in the process, he showed Hollywood the potential profits found in black audiences desperate for believable screen heroes. Thus Brown brought an end to an era of integrationist cinema, prompting a re-segregation of black leading men into Blaxploitation.

Chapter 1: *The Dirty Dozen* (1967) and *100 Rifles* (1969): Success and Failure Across the Mason-Dixon Line

The Dirty Dozen: Reception and Riots

The Dirty Dozen was the hit of summer 1967 for several reasons. The film featured an exciting story, a cast of well-known actors, and an aggressive promotional campaign. More surprisingly, this action blockbuster featured Jim Brown as a defiant strongman who openly attacks racism and violently attacks his enemies. At the climax of the film, Jim Brown smiles, drops a grenade down an airshaft, and runs before falling to Nazi gunfire. He leaves a basement full of Nazi officers and their mistresses to burn to death.

In *Toms, Coons, Mulattos, Mammies, and Bucks*, Donald Bogle documents the impact of Brown's onscreen persona: "Jim Brown suggested violence and power, a dash and daring never before exhibited by a black man." Why was this new black hero, with a streak of "overzealous sadism,"¹ popularly received without complaint? How could this movie succeed even in Atlanta, where racial tension and violence dominated that very summer? Key aspects of the production and promotion of *The Dirty Dozen* lead audiences to accept a black figure onscreen that they could never embrace outside of the theater.

On July 14th, 1966, Jim Brown announced his retirement from football on the set of *The Dirty Dozen*. On the same evening, a major race riot broke out in Chicago. The

¹ Donald Bogle, *Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies, & Bucks*, 4th ed. (New York: Continuum, 2002), 220.

film premiered on June 15th the following summer. Throughout its spectacularly successful run, rioting occurred in such cities as Buffalo, Newark, Detroit, and Atlanta. While Atlanta's Dixie Hills riot was small by comparison, it was the second in less than a year. In September, hundreds of black residents joined with members of the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) to protest a police shooting of an auto-theft suspect. The group took to the streets of Summer Hill, a neighborhood near Atlanta's Fulton County Stadium, the home of the Braves. Rioters threw rocks and bottles, and shook Mayor Ivan Allen down from a car as he tried to restore order. Police released tear gas to disperse the crowd.²

As the character Jefferson in *The Dirty Dozen*, Brown magnified the defiance, violence, and destruction that characterized race riots throughout the summer. Yet while cities exploded in racial tension, Atlantans flocked to see *The Dirty Dozen*. The film ran at the Fox Theater from June 30th until August 10th of 1967. The next day the film opened in Smyrna. Another four Atlanta theaters began showing the film at the end of August.³

MGM marketed *The Dirty Dozen* with an extensive and sophisticated advertising strategy. On June 9th, the *New York Times* described their approach:

Local papers and television and national men's magazines will get the ads for Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer's "Dirty Dozen", which opens in New York next Thursday. But first there'll be a "superduper" press junket - the biggest in recent M-G-M memory. Forty-four markets and 20 foreign countries will be represented in the press corps. One-third of the group will be regional TV personalities. The picture people will put film and tape crews at their disposal for interviews.

² "15 Injured as Hundreds of Negroes Riot, Toss Rocks at Police, Smash Cars Here," *The Atlanta Constitution*, 7 September 1966, 1.

³ Various movie advertisements: *The Atlanta Journal*, 30 June 1967- 31 August 1967.

M-G-M figures the audience for these TV shows at 80 million persons and puts the circulation of the papers represented at 21 million daily and 23 million Sunday.⁴

MGM produced a media blitz with a monumental premiere in New York. By inviting regional TV reporters to interview the cast, MGM reached markets throughout the country with a single event. More importantly, TV viewers saw their local reporter face to face with the stars of the film. Weeks before the regional openings, viewers could associate *The Dirty Dozen* with the glitz of a celebrity gala.

This connection to stardom played perfectly into Atlanta's long held spirit of "boosterism." Terry Kay, who attended the press event for *The Atlanta Journal*, described his near meeting with Brown: "Jim Brown, a native Georgian (born on St. Simons) who is better known for his former fullback services to the Cleveland Browns, was only a few seats away. Unfortunately, the meeting adjourned before the rounds were completed."⁵ Here Kay gladly claims Brown as a native son of Georgia (despite the fact that he left at the age of seven).

While this star-struck account depicts Brown as a special individual, a story in the next day's *Journal* condescendingly generalizes about Civil Rights marchers in Alabama. The headline reads like a sports story: "Police Line Routs Alabama Marchers." It continues, "Most of them fled screaming when police reinforcements rushed up."⁶ *The Journal* can assume protest marchers are misguided black hordes, but as a sports celebrity, Jim Brown is never treated with this kind of simple dismissal of identity. He

⁴ Philip H. Dougherty, "Advertising: A 'Star' is Born—in Advance," *New York Times*, 9 June 1967, F73.

⁵ "Tinsel for Dirty Dozen", *Atlanta Journal*, 19 June 1967, 14A.

⁶ "Police Line Routs Alabama Marchers", *Atlanta Journal*, 20 June 1967, 4A.

exists in a separate sphere of fame that allows viewers to accept him without racist dehumanization.

The promotion of *The Dirty Dozen* went far beyond this three-day premiere event. A short showing the making of the film in London aired during prime time on CBS. The magazine campaign began as early as the spring of 1966. Stories appeared in news magazines such as *Time and Newsweek*, as well as more specialized magazines such as *Sports Illustrated*, *Argosy* (a men's magazine), *Ebony*, and *Jet*.⁷ Jim Brown was well known as a dominant NFL player to *Sports Illustrated* readers. Yet his *Jet* interview had quite a different focus. The cover showed Jim Brown and Lee Marvin working together on set. While mentioning Brown's upcoming role in *The Dirty Dozen*, the story also explored the success of Jim Brown's Negro and Industrial Economic Union (NIEU), an organization designed to provide loans for black businesses in black neighborhoods.⁸ This diverse campaign took advantage of Brown's renown as an athlete and a black celebrity. With a cast full of well-known actors, news items could focus on the most suitable celebrity for each targeted readership demographic.

Football to Film Star

In her 1968 article "The Negro That Movies Overlook," Renata Adler describes how mixed audiences appreciate *The Dirty Dozen* and *In the Heat of the Night*. "People applaud at the movies, I think, because they want to insist on seeing more of something; and these movies they applauded had Negroes in them, involved with whites in some

⁷ "All-Out Campaign for MGM's 'Dirty Dozen,'" *Motion Picture Herald*, 10 May 1967, 24.

⁸ Francis Ward, "Jim Brown Tackles Film and Black Power," *Jet*, 11 August 1966, Vol. 30, 20 – 25.

fairly credible way.” She further describes the effect of Jim Brown’s unique presence in the climactic grenade scene.

What is extraordinary about Brown’s grenade run, aside from the way it is timed in the film’s own terms, is that it seems to work so well for audiences just because they know who James Brown really is. It is not as an actor that he makes his run with those grenades; it is as a great Negro football star and a man with a public career. (Of course, it is not New Yorkers in the chateau he is blowing up; perhaps his run would arouse less enthusiasm in Düsseldorf.)⁹

Adler shows how distancing Brown from American racial politics allowed him to break onscreen stereotypes. Brown was not only a phenomenal football player; he wrote autobiographies, appeared regularly on television, and developed NIEU branches in several cities. Furthermore, his character, Jefferson, mirrored his confidence, strength, and athletic prowess in a non-contemporary story. The audience’s familiarity with Brown diffused his onscreen violence as if it were just another brutal game. Furthermore, by blowing up Nazis rather than New Yorkers, his violence destroys an enemy palace in a wartime past while riots currently wreck American cities.

White critics generally praised Brown’s performance. *The Atlanta Constitution* commended the film’s casting, which “manages to unearth some real acting ‘finds’” in Brown and Donald Sutherland.¹⁰ *The Washington Post* appreciated his “surly Negro.”¹¹ Bosley Crowther, the long-time *New York Times* film critic, despised the film’s sadism, yet he mentioned how “Jim Brown as a white-hating Negro stands out in the animalistic

⁹ Renata Adler, “The Negro That Movies Overlook,” *New York Times*, 3 March 1968, D1.

¹⁰ Diane Thomas, “‘The Dirty Dozen’ Should Clean Up,” *The Atlanta Constitution*, 6 July 1967, 31.

¹¹ Richard Coe, “Rough, Tough ‘Dirty Dozen,’” *The Washington Post*, 29 June 1967, E7.

group.”¹² These last two descriptions reduce Brown’s defiant yet heroic character to his negative traits. Yet they simultaneously acknowledge how magnetic Jim Brown appears onscreen.

Black newspapers regularly featured articles about Brown’s performance before and after the film’s release. Soon before Jim Brown’s public retirement from football, the *New York Amsterdam News* ran an article covering his NFL contract dispute and budding acting career. A production still shows Brown standing tall, armed with a machine gun in front of a group of soldiers. The caption reads, “‘Nobody Move!’ – Jim Brown leads four of ‘The Dirty Dozen’.”¹³ In a September article, *The Chicago Daily Defender* ran another production still and bills Jim Brown ahead of Lee Marvin.¹⁴ While the amount of coverage was likely part of MGM’s promotional strategy, black papers quickly moved to define Brown’s stardom in their own terms. He became the leading man rather than a single member of an ensemble cast.

An interview with Jim Brown in the *New York Amsterdam News* distinguishes itself by focusing extensively on Brown’s economic organization, which promoted investments in black businesses throughout the country: “Abject apologies to MGM, because we talked about Muhammad Ali and the Negro Industrial and Economic Union, because this was the exposed nerve to lengthy conversation with Jim Brown. The immortal ex-Cleveland Brown footballer has a new approach to the uplift of

¹² Bosley Crowther, “Screen: Brutal Tale of 12 Angry Men,” *New York Times*, 16 June 1967, 36.

¹³ “Jim Brown Makes His Movie; Grid Future Uncertain,” *New York Amsterdam News*, 9 July 1966, 19.

¹⁴ “Looking For A Holiday Weekend Treat? See a Movie!”, *The Chicago Defender*, 2 September 1967, 12.

underprivileged youngsters.”¹⁵ This wry disclaimer positions MGM as a white, commercial group, who are funding a junket to promote a film; the reporter cannot help discussing real race issues with Brown. It also emphasizes that Brown’s true passion is his support for the black community. While Brown’s football persona softens his image in the white community, it glorifies his image in the black community. The article implies that his “immortal” power on the field can somehow empower him to create social change.

The enthusiasm for Jim Brown’s performance continued well into the following year. The *Chicago Daily Defender* celebrated his awards, such as “New Male Star of Today” and “New Star of the Year”. Little regard was given to the obscurity of these awarding bodies, such as California’s Statewide Theatres and the International Show-A-Rama XI”¹⁶ An editorial in the *Defender* foreshadowed this aggrandizement, asking people to put their celebration of his stardom in perspective.¹⁷ Brown had yet to become a leading man, but black newspapers and audiences gladly anointed him the new black superstar.

Auteurs and Critics

Robert Aldrich’s careful direction helps guide the audience to view Brown and the other prisoners both as heroes and sadists. In “The Films and Career of Robert

¹⁵ “Jim Brown, The Actor Talks About ‘Operation Soul Brother,” *New York Amsterdam News*, 24 June 1967, 1.

¹⁶ “Jimmy Brown Wins Another Big Award,” *Chicago Daily Defender*, 25 July 1967, 11; “Jim Brown Is ‘Today’s New Star,’” *Chicago Daily Defender*, 12 February 1968, 10.

¹⁷ Walter Burrell, “It Happened in Hollywood,” *Chicago Daily Defender*, 6 November 1967, 11.

Aldrich,” Edward Arnold and Eugene Miller make a poignant criticism of *The Dirty Dozen*.

Still, we *do* cheer for these men in this final battle, and here Aldrich’s skill as an action director may have worked against him. We become so caught up in the excitement that we miss the central irony of the situation: that these men are now being praised for doing the very thing that most of them were imprisoned and condemned for in the first place.¹⁸

Throughout the film, Aldrich humanizes the anti-authoritarian squad of prisoners while unflinchingly portraying their penchant for savage violence. He develops a narrative and visual style just as confrontational as Jim Brown’s character, Jefferson, eagerly exploiting parallels between *The Dirty Dozen* and the failures of the American political leadership in the 1960s. The film opens with the graphic hanging of a distraught inmate, immediately casting military authority in a coldly brutal light. Yet as this criticism indicates, Aldrich’s ability to excite the viewer allows for escapism rather than introspection.

Jefferson exemplifies Aldrich’s ambiguous depiction of his characters. He emerges as a calm, rational leader among the men. During training, a wide shot shows him directing the soldiers’ fitness regime (another visual link to Brown the athlete). In another scene, he wakes Wladislaw (Charles Bronson) so they can physically prevent Franko (John Cassavetes) from escaping. Yet his quiet strength also appears in contempt for whites and authorities. He delivers his first line to Major Reisman (Lee Marvin), “Don’t sweet-talk me, whitey,” with blithe indifference. He often stands apart from the group, separate in the background space or isolated in close-ups. In a telling close up, he smiles as a prisoner steps forward to fight Reisman; his smirking anticipation of the soldier’s painful defeat is equally wise and cold-blooded.

¹⁸ Edwin Arnold and Eugene Miller, *The Films and Career of Robert Aldrich* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1986), 129.

Minutes before Jefferson's pivotal grenade run, Aldrich maximizes this oscillation between heroism and sadism. Jefferson attends to his fallen comrade before moving to the airshaft. He hesitates to drop grenades until Reisman yells for him to go ahead. Soon Aldrich cuts to a shot of Jefferson peering down the airshaft as he drops grenades. At the last moment, he smiles broadly and laughs. Aldrich cuts directly to the panicked officers and women trapped below.

The viewer sees Jefferson from a point of view shot of the doomed Germans, briefly emphasizing Jefferson's gleeful killing from his victims' perspective. Aldrich reinforces this disturbing viewpoint by intercutting Jefferson's excited face with the desperation of the basement crowd. Yet his final run creates the opposite impression. Aldrich's shots remain outside with Jefferson. The tension mounts as the soldiers cheer him on as he waits for the signal. He sprints off in a wide overhead shot, emphasizing his speed and intensity. Yet as he nears the awaiting jeep, Aldrich cuts to a Nazi ominously lurking below a bridge. The soldier fires and Jefferson falls dead in the foreground.

During this sequence full of quick cuts, Aldrich lingers for a few seconds on Jefferson's fallen body and the sunken faces of his fellow soldiers. His dramatically heroic death receives more screen time than any other prisoner's demise. Then explosions erupt in a rapid montage of images. Brief shots of the airshaft aflame and the basement filling with smoke remind us of the doomed captives. In this spectacular finale, Aldrich confronts the viewer with contradictory views of brutality and bravery.

In an article concerning film violence, Renata Adler compares this finale with an earlier scene where a demented soldier lasciviously stabs a woman to death. "In real life or in ethics seminars, one person dying slowly is less monstrous than a hundred blowing

sky high. Not so, I believe, on film, for none of the deaths was real, and only one was made cruel and personal.”¹⁹ Her argument also applies Jefferson’s death within the finale. An image of violent black power fails to resonate against an athletic display of courage.

Bosley Crowther devoted several columns to attacking *The Dirty Dozen* as a new low in cinematic morality. His indictment hinged on the explosive finale.

And then to bathe these rascals in a specious heroic light – to make their hoodlum bravado and defiance of discipline, and their nasty kind of gutter solidarity, seem exhilarating and admirable – is encouraging a spirit of hooliganism that is brazenly antisocial to say the least.... setting fire to a lot of them [the Germans] locked in an air-raid shelter, and then carrying it on to interminable length, is a studied indulgence of sadism that is morbid and disgusting beyond words.²⁰

This diatribe against Aldrich and his film fails to mention Jim Brown’s central role in the finale. Months later, he would mount a similar campaign against the goriness and droll tone of *Bonnie and Clyde*.²¹ Yet as a critical, conservative viewer, Crowther becomes just as oblivious to Brown’s new type of black hero as the escapist viewers he deplors.

Months later, *The New York Times* interviewed Robert Aldrich, who deflected Crowther’s complaints by describing the political impact of the film: “‘It is not just civil rights, or Vietnam; this country has lost faith in its leadership, any leadership.’ Aldrich attributes the fantastic success of the film to the pervasive neo-anarchy and the ability of Americans to identify with it...”²² Aldrich becomes the only voice commenting on *The Dirty Dozen* who links the film in any way to civil rights. Yet he instantly incorporates

¹⁹ Renata Adler, “The Movies Make Heroes of Them All,” *New York Times*, 7 January 1968, D1.

²⁰ Crowther, “Screen: Brutal Tale,” 36.

²¹ Bosley Crowther, “Screen: ‘Bonnie and Clyde’ Arrives,” *New York Times*, 14 August 1967, 36.

²² Robert Windeler, “Aldrich: To Shut Up and Take Your Lumps?,” *New York Times*, 3 September 1967, 65.

this struggle within the larger “neo-anarchy” of the late 1960s, marked by the violence in Vietnam, political unrest, and the developing young counterculture. While openly addressing the social context of *The Dirty Dozen*, he never links Brown’s pioneering performance to the larger struggle for black equality.

Genre Bending

Well-established genres create another distancing layer between Brown’s character and America’s racial violence. The inherent brutality of war can justify Jefferson’s more sadistic moments. Furthermore, Brown’s athletic ability and towering physique imbue Jefferson with potential merit within this generic context. As the combat unit coalesces, the viewer can see Jefferson as a part of the whole rather than an individual. While racial strife deepens rifts in the outside world, Jefferson’s violent acts serve to create unity within the context of the film.

Yet *The Dirty Dozen* defies a simple generic classification. While the film is ostensibly a World War II combat picture, the “dozen” only fight the Germans in the third act. For the majority of the film, Reisman’s blunt description fits: “The US army is their enemy, not the Germans.” In fact at the climax of the second act, the squad defeats American soldiers in a live war game. Within this framework, the film more closely resembles prison films such as *Brute Force* (1947) and *Cool Hand Luke* (1967), where prisoners fight for their humanity and individuality against an oppressive authority. Reisman further complicates the generic structure of the film. He serves as a central authority figure, yet he defies his commanding officers with the same panache as the

prisoners. By combining two well-established frameworks, *The Dirty Dozen* allows contradictory reactions to Jim Brown's character.

Miller and Arnold hint at the effect of these intermingled genres.

The fact remains, however, that Aldrich does not play entirely fair with us in this film. He wanted, he said, "to show the necessity for collective courage in circumstances that would make collective cowardice more likely, and to show that almost anybody can be redeemed if certain circumstances and pressures are sufficient." The theme of redemption would be more valid if the Dozen were really as "dirty" as is suggested at the beginning of the film. We soon come to see that there are "good" and "bad" criminals among the Dozen, however, and they are treated with differing amounts of respect, allowed differing degrees of redemption. Wladislaw (Charles Bronson), for example, for killing a man in combat, but we learn that the man was trying to make off with needed medical supplies at the time. Jefferson (Jim Brown) killed some "cracker bastards" who were trying to castrate him...²³

The Dirty Dozen's success with a broad range of audiences relies on the dual identity of the collective group of prisoners. As "bad criminals" in a combat film, they begin as a gallery of degenerates. Under the firm hand of Major Reisman, they learn to work together as a single unit. The valiant raid on the chateau proves their heroic ability to overcome their differences and defeat a common enemy.

In prison films, the convicts are either unjustly imprisoned or excessively punished; they unite through a common hatred of authority. Fittingly, this group becomes the "dirty" dozen by growing beards in protest against shaving with cold water. Similarly, Reisman's disregard for his superiors prompts his assignment to the suicide mission. He identifies with this rogue group and leads them to best his rigid supervisor in a combat exercise. In the finale, the convicts' fearless bravery further demonstrates that the autocratic military has misjudged these men but cannot suppress their innate heroism.

²³ Arnold and Miller 129; see Windeler for quotation.

This duality promotes the universal acceptance of Jim Brown's character. Conservative viewers can follow a combat storyline showing the triumph of discipline and unity in World War II; diverse Americans fighting together defeat the ultimate racists: the Nazis. Black viewers can also celebrate Jefferson's defiance and courage within a racist military and social structure. The counterculture can applaud the triumph of social outcasts as well as the indictment of military leadership during the Vietnam War era. This generic ambiguity leads viewers to enjoy the film from their own socio-political perspective. Thus despite the boldness of Brown's character, the audience is never forced to confront their conception of race.

Combat and prison films predominantly feature male characters. This exclusion of female roles allows *The Dirty Dozen* to avoid the more controversial topic of sexuality and miscegenation in relation to Jim Brown. The film contains one scene that could have raised this concern: before the soldiers embark on their suicide mission, Reisman brings a car full of prostitutes to their barracks. Here Aldrich vaguely hints at Jefferson's sexual confidence: he is one of the few prisoners not awestruck by the presence of these unglamorous women. Yet Jefferson soon disappears from the scene; instead, Franko, a white sociopath, initiates a dance with the prostitutes. Aldrich cuts away to an exterior scene and dodges a potentially controversial implication of interracial sex. Two years later, *100 Rifles* would do the opposite, attempting to profitably exploit the controversy over miscegenation.

100 Rifles: A Calculated Western

100 Rifles was far from a flop; it became the twentieth most popular film of 1969 and grossed \$3,500,000, more than any other picture with Brown as the leading man.²⁴ However the film never became the runaway hit that exhibitors and critics almost unilaterally predicted; it also marked the beginning of the end of Brown's mainstream career. He would never again work with a major co-star such as Welch, nor receive as much publicity as an actor. The promotional and narrative focal point of *100 Rifles* is the interracial lovemaking scene between Jim Brown and Raquel Welch. The filmmakers hoped to promote this unprecedented, controversial event without completely alienating a mainstream audience. Just as the integrationist, World War II combat genre of *The Dirty Dozen* ameliorated the threat of Brown's violent action hero persona, *100 Rifles* attempted to confine Brown's shocking sexuality to the mythical, cinematic past of the Western.

While *100 Rifles* sought the stability and fantasy of Hollywood clichés, other films were simultaneously contemporizing, lampooning, and inverting generic models of the Western. In Atlanta, the film premiered on the same weekend as *Support Your Local Sherriff* (1969).²⁵ Even the title of this comedy places the ubiquitous Western sheriff figure within the language of a contemporary public relations campaign. Classical Western tropes had been employed *ad nauseum* for decades, making them ripe for parody by 1969. Meanwhile, the success of "Spaghetti" Westerns such as *The Good, The Bad, and the Ugly* (1967) had imbued the genre with new aesthetics, violence, and heroic ambiguity. Within a year of *100 Rifles'* premiere, hit films such as *The Wild Bunch*

²⁴ "Big Rental Films of 1969," *Variety*, 7 January, 1970, 15.

²⁵ "On Screen This Week," *The Atlanta Journal and Constitution*, 30 March 1969, 8F.

(1969) and *Butch Cassidy and The Sundance Kid* (1969) redefined the Western for the popular counterculture (Ironically, several narrative events in *100 Rifles* appear lifted from the script of *The Wild Bunch*). *Little Big Man* (1970) satirized and inverts the moral order of “cowboys and Indians.”

100 Rifles also becomes muddled by the importance of inviolable racial roles in classical Westerns. Jim Brown stars as Lydecker, a sheriff out to prove his worth to his white townspeople. A tan Burt Reynolds plays Joe, a half-Indian, half-good ol’ boy rebel who seeks to profit from a Yaqui Indian revolt. Raquel Welch appears lighter skinned than Reynolds as Sarita, the leader of the Yaqui resistance. Who can oppose this inter-racial coalition marketed to a white audience? Mexican soldiers serve as the bad guys, financed by a vacillatingly callous/sympathetic white industrialist. A German advisor also appears to aid the Mexican general. He further identifies the villains by referencing (despite obvious anachronisms) decades of movie Nazis while allowing the film to advertise an international cast.²⁶

This confusing web of racial identities grows more bizarre as the filmmakers continue to rely on classical Western archetypes. Jim Brown voices his disdain for Indians, who appear as primitive victims in desperate need of outside leadership (they later bestow the title of “General” on Brown). While they engage in debauchery and drunkenness, Brown has sensitive sex with Raquel Welch, who belies the simplicity of her fellow Yaquis. Here race serves a contradictory role for Brown and Welch. In contrast to the “alien” Indians, Brown invokes a brash “John Wayne” figure, mitigating his black identity. Conversely, as an ostensible Indian, Welch can mask her white

²⁶ “100 Rifles,” *Motion Picture Herald*, March 1967, 136.

identity. The narrative logic of *100 Rifles* casts sex between a black man and a white woman in the cinematically acceptable context of sex between a cowboy and a squaw.

This delicate construction of race is also undermined by the contemporary impulses of the filmmakers. A shot of Lydecker on horseback zooms towards a hanging group of Yaqui Indians; this imagery of lynching links the racial violence of the West to more recent violence against African-Americans. Lydecker also espouses an ideal of desegregation. He will arrest Joe to prove that a black sheriff can be just as effective as a white sheriff. Furthermore, when Sarita expresses a desire for a long-term relationship, Lydecker quips, "You have to be careful about that." Lydecker shows a full awareness of the taboo of miscegenation, abandoning the narrative logic of Welch's non-whiteness.

Even if the script had somehow created a cohesive racial logic, the appearance of Jim Brown and Raquel Welch may have inevitably undermined it. Terry Kay of *The Atlanta Journal* surmises this in his review:

First, Brown and Miss Welch are both being exploited, and I do not care if Miss Welch is supposedly playing the role of an Indian. I cannot believe the producers honestly think an audience will accept Jim Brown as a man named Lydecker or Raquel Welch as a Yaqui Indian named Sarita. They are Jim Brown and Raquel Welch, two names worth merchandising.²⁷

Just as Renata Adler had found to be the case in her review of *The Dirty Dozen*, Jim Brown stands out as himself onscreen. His athleticism and machismo is fully displayed in *100 Rifles*, just as it was displayed in his football career and his promiscuous life as a Hollywood celebrity. Raquel Welch appears equally extricable from her characters. Films such as *One Million Years B.C.* (1966) extensively highlight her physique over her acting. *100 Rifles* is no exception; under the pretense of creating a diversion, she

²⁷ Terry Kay, "100 Rifles," *The Atlanta Journal*, 9 April 1969, 21A.

provides the viewer with an extended wet t-shirt performance. These two physically distinguished stars stand out even more dramatically when they partially disrobe in the pivotal sex scene.

The Sex Scene

The highly publicized sex scene between Raquel Welch and Jim Brown far surpasses the guarded interracial kiss of *Guess Who's Coming To Dinner*, which premiered less than a year and a half before *100 Rifles*. Shortly into the film, Sidney Poitier and Katherine Houghton kiss briefly in the reflection of the rear view mirror of a disapproving cab driver. A shadow obscures the actual touching of their lips. They never kiss again in the film, as if physical intimacy must be neglected in order to deal with the larger family and societal consequences of intermarriage.

In *100 Rifles*, the entire film revolves around the sex scene. As Raquel Welch recalls in Spike Lee's documentary *Jim Brown: All-American (2004)*, the producers first gauged her interest in appearing alongside Brown. This initial inquiry implies the cautious sensitivity placed of pairing an interracial couple onscreen. They proceeded to shoot the sex scene on the first day of production.²⁸ Appearing in the second half of the film, the scene serves as a sensational attraction to ballast the remainder of the action plot. Advertising and reviews placed a similar emphasis on this key event.

Lydecker stands tall and confident as Sarita flits around her bedroom. As she moves to her dresser, he appears beside her in the mirror, calm and still as she nervously moves. Lydecker finally grabs her and violently takes control. He throws her against the

²⁸ Spike Lee, *Jim Brown: All-American (2003)*.

wall and pulls at her clothes while she protests. As her pleas continue, he pulls back momentarily. She says, "Not with you," then guides Lydecker towards a kiss. The camera shows them making out in a close up, before pulling back to a long take wide shot as they passionately kiss and circle towards the bed. After they undress each other by the bedpost, they move onto the mattress. Sarita moans and clutches Lydecker's muscular back as they simulate sex.

The director, Tom Gries, achieves his primary goal of onscreen sizzle and controversy. Rather than obscuring the scene, he prolongs it with long takes, which emphasize the interracial kissing. A wider shot reinforces the immediacy of the event. Rather than cutting back and forth between Lydecker and Sarita, he keeps both of their faces clearly in the frame, allowing the viewer time to process the groundbreaking miscegenation. He further emphasizes the color difference by showing Jim Brown's dark, chiseled physique on top of Welch's paler features. This wider focal length highlights two bodies in action rather than disembodied faces.

Gries creates more troubling connotations with the violent beginning of the love scene. As a rugged cowboy, Lydecker is barely dressed in an open vest. However Welch is attired in a white dress and corset. In this ornate boudoir, which only appears for this scene, the viewer can easily recall the cinematic and literary history of the field hand attempting to violate the pure Southern belle. Why invoke these timeworn stereotypes? In a certain sense, Gries reinforces this cinematic "first" by recalling Gus from *Birth of a Nation* (1915). When the scene switches abruptly from violence to sensuality, a new form of racial and sexual equality can be explicitly established. Conversely, reestablishing stereotypes can elevate the controversy of the scene. Brown's forceful

sexuality could provoke an uncomfortable twinge of racism for a more liberal viewer. Finally, establishing Brown as a sexually active leading man of the late 1960s may have required brutality. James Bond's seduction of Pussy Galore in *Goldfinger* (1964) progresses from possible rape to female pleasure and acceptance.

In interviews, Brown suggests that his insistence may have affected the scene. He describes the director wanting a violent scene, misinterpreting his "smooth" character in the film.²⁹ This difference of opinion could account for the near contradictory beginning and end of the sex scene. Raquel Welch also unquestionably voiced her opinion. She refused to show any nudity, deeming the film too unimportant in a 1969 interview.³⁰ Their mutual dislike of each other during shooting soon became another subject for controversy. *100 Rifles* was Tom Gries second feature following several years working as a television director; unlike Aldrich making *The Dirty Dozen*, he did not have the credentials to overrule his two stars.

In *Hollywood Fantasies of Miscegenation*, Susan Courtney applies Eldridge Cleaver's archetypes from *Soul on Ice* to the characters in *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner* (1967); while she applies Cleaver's model of white masculinity to Spencer Tracy, Cleaver's model for black masculinity has a strong correlation to Brown's role in *100 Rifles*.

His [Cleaver's] figuration of the "Supermasculine Menial" as pure body, even pure penis in some passages, does not match up with historical accounts of a system that regularly denied black men any such potent claims, but it does of

²⁹ Lee, *Jim Brown: All-American* (2003).

³⁰ Mike Freeman, *Jim Brown: The Fierce Life of an American Hero* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 2006), 202.

course describe revisionist representations of black masculinity throughout white culture after the Civil War.³¹

Within Cleaver's rubric, Lydecker's sexual violence appears as an inevitable embodiment of the "Supermasculine Menial." The film's historical setting further elicits comparisons to this racialized, sexual mythology of the old South. As Jim Brown breaks the cinematic boundary of miscegenation, the filmmakers reinforce his empowerment with a display of dominant machismo. First Lydecker demonstrates that he can physically control Sarita; her admission of love allows sensitivity to take over. As the first sexualized, black leading man, Brown cannot reverse racial hierarchies without first wielding hyper-masculine virility.

While the actual sex scene provides the controversial centerpiece, the later onscreen relationship between Sarita and Lydecker is more radical. She cooks him breakfast, hugs him, and states, "Lydecker, you are my man". Brown's sexual power may cast him as a more successful "buck"³²; by achieving love and domesticity with Welch, he briefly becomes a fully integrated movie hero. Yet like most interracial couples in film, they go their separate ways in the end.³³

Segregated Advertising

Advertisements for *100 Rifles* in *The New York Times* fail to identify the film as a Western. Jim Brown and Raquel Welch appear without their cowboy hats and without their shirts. Jim Brown stands tall and confident with his arms on his hips. His dark,

³¹ Susan Courtney, *Hollywood Fantasies of Miscegenation* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005), 257. See endnote on pg. 358.

³² Bogle, 222.

³³ Robin Wood, *Sexual Politics and Narrative Film: Hollywood and Beyond* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), 268.

muscular chest is tucked into a belt. This provides the only hint of clothing, as Welch appears undressed and draped around him. Her bare arms clutch his neck and shoulders. She gives her perfected vampish expression as her head rests next to Brown's stoic face. The black and white newsprint further emphasizes their difference in color.³⁴ This ad provides the fundamental reason to see *100 Rifles*: two beautiful bodies breaking the taboo of miscegenation.

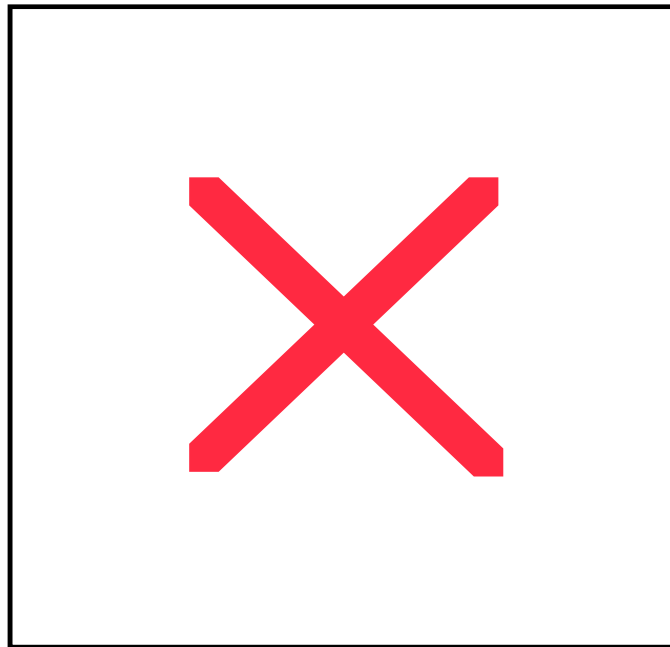


Figure 1.1: *100 Rifles* ad, *New York Times*, April 13, 1969.

Two quotations from critics flank the actors and vouch for this promised onscreen physicality. “All that violent action, the heroic torso of Jim Brown, the curves of Raquel Welch, makes it pure entertainment”; “Raquel Welch plays the sexiest, fightingest revolutionary south of the border.”³⁵ These quotes bookend the strident associations of

³⁴ *100 Rifles* ad, *New York Times*, 13 April 1969, D12.

³⁵ *100 Rifles* ad, *New York Times*, D12.

the picture: bodies and sex. The controversy of interracial romance is obvious enough to eliminate the need for a third review.

While the imminent sex between Welch and Brown promotes *100 Rifles* in New York, ads in Atlanta borrow Nixon's "southern strategy" from the previous year's election.³⁶ They depict racial segregation without explicitly promising it. An ad in *The Atlanta Journal* proclaims, "Meet the Slaughterers!" Below this tagline, the image is divided into three discreet sections by horizontal white lines. Jim Brown appears in the top panel, gun in hand, beside an action scene full of billowing smoke; "The man-hunter who captured a town!" appears as the same explosive action star of *The Dirty Dozen*. In the middle panel, Burt Reynolds appears in a cowboy hat as "the hunted-gun runner", holding dynamite next to a speeding train. A third panel shows Raquel Welch shooting a soldier. Beside this image, her figure dominates the bottom right of the ad. She unbuttons her blouse, ready to reveal another reason to see the film.³⁷

³⁶ Peniel E. Joseph, *Waiting 'Til The Midnight Hour: A Narrative History of Black Power in America* (New York: Henry Holt and Co., LLC, 2006), 239.

³⁷ *100 Rifles* ad, *The Atlanta Constitution*, 28 March 1969, 34.



Figure 1.2: *100 Rifles* ad, *Atlanta Constitution*, March 28, 1969.

This newspaper ad creates a multi-layered deception, right down to the false promise of nudity. The ad in *The New York Times* promotes the pivotal sex scene without providing the context of a Western; in contrast, the Atlanta ad defines the film as an action-packed Western. The ad offers sex appeal as well, with the notable exclusion of Jim Brown. Burt Reynolds provides a visual buffer between Welch and Brown. One could imply that this emerging white actor will become her love interest. Yet by isolating all of the characters in separate panels, Welch may merely flaunt her sexuality without bestowing it upon a given man. While Brown and Reynolds are characterized as Western

figures, lawman and outlaw, her role (as Brown's love interest) is never divulged. Despite this separation, each figure appears next to an action scenario. As fellow "slaughterers", their interpersonal relationships become even less important. They may merely form a rag-tag group of violent adventurers, much like the men in *The Dirty Dozen*. Lastly, the solid lines separating blacks and whites create visual "segregation". As the South was still grappling with de-segregation five years after the 1964 Civil Rights Act, a film boasting miscegenation in New York used segregated advertising photographs in Atlanta.

Both the trailer and several ads for *100 Rifles* features a tagline that synthesizes these contradictory images. "This movie has a message – Watch Out!"³⁸ As a conscious transgression of a racial taboo, this film could be viewed as a "message movie." Yet rather than promising a sanctimonious, liberal agenda, the audience much "watch out" for the action and excitement of the three slaughterers. By mocking serious message movies, the film can promote the controversy of miscegenation as spectacle rather than a political statement.

100 Rifles assumes yet another identity in a promotional piece in the *Chicago Daily Defender*, emphasizing the international cast and production value of the film.³⁹ An interview with Gries emphasizes the film's historical details, rather than the obvious attraction of interracial sex, which is featured in a production still accompanying the article.⁴⁰ Yet these factoids could shift the discussion to cinematic realism, masking a

³⁸ "Trailer," *100 Rifles*, DVD, directed by Tom Gries (1969; Century City, CA: Twentieth Century Fox Home Entertainment, 2003).

³⁹ "A Non-Violent Director Talks of '100 Rifles,'" *Chicago Daily Defender*, 5 April 1969, 19.

⁴⁰ "A Non-Violent Director," 19.

preposterous plot constructed solely for an overtly controversial sex scene. While the Atlanta ad hides the threat of miscegenation from Southern whites, this puff piece justifies a commercial exploitation of race for Northern blacks. Compromises in advertising and content dissipated some of the film's controversy; yet by doing so, the film had a harder time competing with films that unambiguously flaunted sexual content.

Desegregated and X-Rated Reception

Movie reviewers in *The New York Times* and *The Atlanta Journal* both found *100 Rifles* preposterous. Howard Johnson of *The Times* describes it as a "loud, churning and triumphantly empty exercise". While complementing Welch's "bite" and Brown's "presence", he fails to make any mention whatsoever of the sex scene.⁴¹ This omission allows him to attack the film's obvious flaws rather than address its central taboo. Terry Kay of *The Journal* focuses extensively on the sex scene, yet he reaches a similar conclusion. "Brown and Miss Welch deserve better, though Brown shows nuances of improvement- the thing he wants desperately as an actor."⁴² Both reviewers complete the picture omitted by their respective advertisements; Johnson reveals the silly story surrounding the sex scene, while Terry Kay attacks the exploitative sex scene omitted from the advertisement.

The Motion Picture Herald sees a major profit in *100 Rifles*' daring casting.

Casting Jim Brown and Raquel Welch in one film is a bold and brilliant move. Overlooking either one has always been impossible if for no other reason than their overwhelming physical presences. Combine this, not forgetting the interracial element, with a tough energetic Western that calls for a love-making scene with the two, and you have several dynamite elements to be reckoned with at the

⁴¹ Howard Thompson, "100 Rifles," *New York Times*, 27 March 1969, 54.

⁴² Kay, "100 Rifles," 21A.

box office. The love-making scene alone, with its forthright handling, should make “100 Rifles” a source of much comment. No peck on the cheek here, that’s for sure.⁴³

This review perfectly encapsulates the marketability of Welch and Brown based purely on race, body, and sex. Terry Kay, who also acknowledges the sex appeal, agrees. “It will sell. It will make a fortune.”⁴⁴ However following the film’s release, an interview with Jim Brown in *The New York Times* suggests a critical lack of “dynamite”.

“Although most movie love scenes these days show both partners in the buff, this is certainly not the case in *100 Rifles*.”⁴⁵

The Journal and *The Motion Picture Herald*, reflecting a strain of industry wisdom, make the same erroneous prediction: the film will be highly controversial and highly successful. Despite the careful promotional strategies for different regions, viewers had a remarkably similar response to *100 Rifles* throughout the country. Following its March 26th opening⁴⁶, average sized audiences went to see an adequate film and appeared to adequately enjoy it. In Atlanta, the film played for five weeks at the Rialto, premiering on April 4th and running through May 8th, 1969. It expanded to the suburban Cobb Theater for a limited run.⁴⁷ In the *Motion Picture Herald*, theater exhibitors rated the overall financial performance of the film as perfectly average.⁴⁸

A larger discrepancy appears between expectation and actual audience response than between black and white or Northern and Southern viewers. Why did a film

⁴³ “100 Rifles,” *Motion Picture Herald*, 136.

⁴⁴ Kay, “100 Rifles,” 21A.

⁴⁵ Judy Klemesrud, “Jim Brown: ‘I’m No Angel, But...,’” *New York Times*, 6 April 1969, D13.

⁴⁶ *100 Rifles* ad, *New York Times*, 24 March 1969, 55.

⁴⁷ *100 Rifles* ads, *The Atlanta Constitution*, 4 April 1969- 8 May 1969.

⁴⁸ “Film Buyer Ratings,” *Motion Picture Herald*, 7 May 1969, 18.

crossing an undeniable onscreen barrier make such a tepid impact? The turbulence characterizing American politics and the Hollywood industry in the 1960s helps explain *100 Rifles* failure to become a provocative hit.

While the ads in *The Atlanta Constitution* reveal the producers' concern over alienating Southern viewers, Atlantans were constantly adapting to changing cultural norms in the spring of 1969. On March 29th, various articles on the front page of *The Atlanta Constitution* covered the death of President Eisenhower.⁴⁹ Days later, on April 4th, the first anniversary of Dr. Martin Luther King's assassination, *100 Rifles* premiered. "Ike's" death provided an opportunity to fondly remember the South before the 1964 Civil Rights Amendment, while tributes to King provoked Atlanta to reexamine its identity as a desegregated city by memorializing their own slain Civil Rights leader.

A front-page headline quotes Lyndon Johnson: "It'll Be a Lonely Land, For Ike Was a Friend".⁵⁰ As a boldface title without quotation marks, these words lose their national context and suggest Eisenhower was a friend of Atlanta and the South. A few months earlier, Richard Nixon won the 1968 election in large part due to the South's shift from Democratic to Republican over the issue of desegregation.⁵¹ While Atlanta enjoyed its national image as a model for desegregation, newly Republican Southern voters displayed nostalgia for the recent past. As racial violence in America and warfare in Vietnam perpetually continued, a yearning for simpler times became inevitable.

⁴⁹ Various articles, *The Atlanta Constitution*, 29 March 1969, 1.

⁵⁰ "It'll Be a Lonely Land, For Ike Was a Friend," *The Atlanta Constitution*, 29 March 1969, 1.

⁵¹ Jason Sokol, *There Goes My Everything: White Southerners in the Age of Civil Rights, 1945-1975* (New York: Vintage Books, 2006), 274-5.

Memorializing Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. showed the complexities of de-segregation. His pacifist struggle ended with a violent death and urban riots in 1968. A lengthy article describes an Emory University study revealing disparate reactions to his death: “White Atlantans for the most part were unaffected emotionally and convinced that the civil rights leader’s death would not change the nation’s climate of race relations. Negroes, in contrast, were deeply moved by King’s loss and most of them thought the killing would elicit “better” attitudes from white Americans.”⁵² These widely conflicting views among Atlantans foreshadow widening differences of opinion along racial lines. Both predictions of the future soon prove false as the radical, separationist nationalism of the Black Panthers come to overshadow the integrationist views of King’s successors in the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC).⁵³ While supporting Dr. King’s views and achievements, Mayor Ivan Allen hints at the complex reactions to this anniversary. He asks Atlantans to honor him “each in his own way,”⁵⁴ suggesting that he deserves universal recognition while acknowledging disparate views on King’s legacy.

Unlike the widespread riots of 1967, a surprisingly stable few months followed Nixon’s election. An editorial in the May 1st, 1969 *Atlanta Constitution* titled, “The Quiet 100 Days” summarizes this period of relative calm during a chaotic era. Vietnam peace talks and desegregation policies continue without noticeable changes from the Johnson administration. As the writer concludes, “We give Nixon high marks on his first

⁵² Lee Simowitz, “Reactions to Dr. King’s Death Studied,” *The Atlanta Constitution*, 31 March 1969, 6.

⁵³ Joseph, 178 – 181.

⁵⁴ “Honor King Memory, Allen Asks Atlantans,” *The Atlanta Constitution*, 4 April 1969, 1.

100 days. We will observe the next 100 with interest – and perhaps impatience.”⁵⁵ Nixon’s election also coincided with the departure of two vocal leaders of the Black Panthers. In late November, Eldridge Cleaver fled to Cuba to avoid charges from an April shootout with police; in December, Stokely Carmichael departed for Guinea, further embracing his growingly Pan-African revolutionary ideology. While still growing in numbers, the Panthers were hampered by the diverging viewpoints of their members, a tension which culminated in Carmichael’s July 3rd resignation.⁵⁶

100 Rifles appears in the thick of these tenuous reflections on national leaders. The film also competed for attention with Easter celebrations and the start of baseball season.⁵⁷ While onscreen miscegenation may have troubled or surprised certain viewers, this cinematic milestone paled in comparison to these major events concerning politics, race, religion, and professional sports. Furthermore, by stripping Southern ads of racial controversy, *100 Rifles* failed to capture enough attention among overwhelmingly sexualized movie advertisements.

Just as Dr. King’s death in 1968 became a major turning point in race relations, the inception of the MPAA ratings system in October of 1968 spurred radical changes in film content.⁵⁸ Instead of censoring films based on the Hays Code, Hollywood established ratings guidelines to warn viewers of inappropriate material rather than eliminating it. While allowing mainstream films to offer edgier content not available on television, it also opened the door for a wave of independently distributed soft and

⁵⁵ “The Quiet 100 Days,” *The Atlanta Constitution*, 1 May 1969, 4.

⁵⁶ Joseph, 239 – 240.

⁵⁷ Various articles, *The Atlanta Constitution*, 15 March 1969- 30 April 1969.

⁵⁸ David A. Cook, *Lost Illusions: American Cinema in the Shadow of Watergate and Vietnam, 1970-1979* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 2000), 70- 71.

hardcore pornography films.⁵⁹ This influx of racy films further sexualized Hollywood's cinematic images and advertising. The Academy Awards provide a perfect benchmark for this momentous shift. *Oliver!*, a G-rated musical version of Charles Dickens' novel, wins best picture in 1968; *Midnight Cowboy*, a bleak X-rated story of a country boy turned gay New York hustler wins in 1969.

While the ads for *100 Rifles* continued to shrink in size each week, large advertisements for *Inga* and *Vixen* remain. A European import, *Inga* shows a nude girl with her arms ecstatically thrown in the air. A review reads, "So graphic I could have sworn the screen was smoking."⁶⁰ Russ Meyer, who became famous for his voluptuous naked actresses and absurdly violent endings, directed *Vixen*. The ad brags, "Held Over 10th Record Week!"⁶¹ Readers seeking further thrills could attend strip clubs, which have begun to advertise on the same page as these eroticized movie ads.

Ads for mainstream films try different strategies to rival this brazen sexuality. *Romeo and Juliet*, an Oscar-nominated Italian film, includes a nude sex scene that also serves as its principal advertised image. Raquel Welch opening her blouse in the Atlanta *100 Rifles* ad may be the tamest sexual image on the page. While New York ads for *100 Rifles* were competitively titillating, reviews and word of mouth would reveal that unlike *Romeo and Juliet*, it features no actual nudity. Other film ads, such as *Hell in the Pacific* and *Where Eagles Dare*, feature greater violence. The guns in the Atlanta *100 Rifles* ad pale in comparison, as do the stars. Brown must compete as an action hero with former fellow cast member Lee Marvin, as well as Clint Eastwood and Steve McQueen in

⁵⁹ Cook, 271- 273.

⁶⁰ *Inga* ad, *The Atlanta Constitution*, 21 March 1969, 34.

⁶¹ *Vixen* ad, *The Atlanta Constitution*, 21 March 1969, 34.

Bullitt. Disney cannot offer sex or violence in *The Love Bug*; instead they appealed to the counterculture with a psychedelic font and the VW, a popular car for hippies. As a western, *100 Rifles*' cultural relevance faded away.⁶²

While *100 Rifles* never achieved the national controversy its producers sought, it was far from universally accepted. In a syndicated column in *The Chicago Defender*, Harry Golden, a white, Jewish national writer reporting on Civil Rights issues from Charlotte⁶³, describes a problematic screening in Charlotte.

The love scene between these two which has been extensively described in magazines and newspapers was missing. The film clips which had touted the main event in the coming attractions had been deleted. I asked the manager about it. He said the City of Charlotte had asked him to cut this section out. The irony of it was that battle scenes which portrayed bloody [sic], dying men constituted three-fourths of the picture. To show a battle scene and cut out a sex scene is as ridiculous as life itself.⁶⁴

Years after state and local censorship had virtually disappeared⁶⁵, Charlotte decided to make a stand against miscegenation. This defiant reactionary act reflects a lingering struggle with desegregation. Just like *Birth of A Nation*, interracial romance serves as the last straw. This indictment by a liberal journalist is equally important, showing the ongoing frustration with immutable racial boundaries that belie the progress of the Civil Rights movement. Lastly, white viewers' acceptance of black male violence but not sex helps clarify the divergent receptions of *The Dirty Dozen* and *100 Rifles*.

⁶² Various ads, *The Atlanta Constitution*, 15 March 1969- 4 April 1969.

⁶³ The Library of America Presents Reporting Civil Rights, "Harry Golden," <http://www.reportingcivilrights.org/authors/bio.jsp?authorId=21>.

⁶⁴ Harry Golden, "Only in America: Progressive Community," *Chicago Daily Defender*, 30 June 1969, 15.

⁶⁵ Pat Murdock, "The Lone 'Lady Censor': Christine Smith Gilliam and the Demise of Film Censorship in Atlanta," *Atlanta History*, Vol. XLIII, 2, Summer 1999, 73.

The Hollywood Player

100 Rifles was far from the only opportunity to see Jim Brown in the spring of 1969. Days before its Atlanta release, *Riot!* (1969) still played at the Lakewood, North Dekalb, and Rhodes theaters. William Castle produced this film following his 1968 hit, *Rosemary's Baby*, and Brown received top billing over Gene Hackman.⁶⁶ The *New York Times* ad for *100 Rifles* ran beside an ad for *Ice Station Zebra* (1968) picturing Brown beside Rock Hudson.⁶⁷ A May 1st movie listing in the Chicago Defender featured Brown in four films, including a double feature of *Kenner* (1968) and *Dark of the Sun* (1968).⁶⁸ *Kenner* marked Jim Brown's sixth movie released in nine months.⁶⁹

This over-saturation simultaneously cemented and diluted Brown's stardom. His incredible output shows the high demand for the only black action star of the 1960s. Yet by proving the profitability of appealing to black audiences, he paved the way for less expensive imitators. *Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song* (1971) demonstrated that a cheaper made, black-oriented film with no stars could be just as profitable.⁷⁰

Over a month before the premiere of *100 Rifles*, a *Motion Picture Herald* piece featured Jim Brown as one of their "stars of tomorrow".⁷¹ The article also featured Katherine Houghton, Sidney Poitier's fiancé in *Guess Who's Coming To Dinner*. The only similarity between Brown and Houghton was their appearance in hits integrating white and black stars. These efforts became less culturally significant as Blaxploitation

⁶⁶ *Riot!* ad, *The Atlanta Constitution*, 27 March 1969, 30.

⁶⁷ *Ice Station Zebra* ad, *New York Times*, 13 April 1969, D12.

⁶⁸ "Cinema Happenings," *Chicago Daily Defender*, 1 May 1969, 17.

⁶⁹ Vincent Canby, "The Screen," *New York Times*, 24 April 1969, 43.

⁷⁰ Ed Guerrero, *Framing Blackness: The African American Image in Film* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1993), 86.

⁷¹ "Stars of Tomorrow," *Motion Picture Herald*, 12 February 1969, 7- 10.

and Black Power soon pushed greater racial separation on and off screen. The only lasting star mentioned in the piece was Dustin Hoffman, following the success of *The Graduate* (1967).⁷² As a non-macho, countercultural icon, he better exemplified the changing young white audience of the 1970's than Brown.

By 1969, Brown could no longer rely on the football success that helped make him palatable to white viewers. He moved to Hollywood, where his frequent films further characterized him as a movie star. While he appeared with his wife at his side at *The Dirty Dozen* premiere, she did not follow him to Hollywood; she began seeking a divorce in the summer of 1968.⁷³ Well before the divorce was finalized, Jim Brown openly courted a variety of other women; in 1968 he dated a black/Asian model from Germany, Eva Bohn-Chin, and feminist Gloria Steinem, at the same time.⁷⁴

Reports of Brown and Welch's stormy relationship on the set further blurred the lines between Brown and his character in *100 Rifles*. Months after *100 Rifles* had left the screen, A.S. Young recounted the gossip on the December 16th sports page of the *Chicago Defender*.

According to one rumor, Jim Brown and Raquel Welch had a romance going. According to another rumor, they hated each other. According to a third rumor, they were merely putting on the hate act in order to prevent Miss Welch's husband, Patrick Curtis, from learning about their romance. The final rumor was that the hate act worked so well Curtis didn't realize what was going on...⁷⁵

⁷² "Stars of Tomorrow," 10.

⁷³ Judy Klemesrud, *New York Times*, D13.

⁷⁴ Freeman, 205.

⁷⁵ A.S. "Doc" Young, "Good Morning Sports," *Chicago Daily Defender*, 16 December 1969, 24.

The columnist also described the film as “a big money-maker for 20th Century Fox”;⁷⁶ while this seems unlikely, it further elevates Brown’s image as a major star for black readers. The story further quotes Brown and Welch’s ensuing war of words in a comical tone. Rather than threatening racial solidarity, Brown’s sparks with Welch appear to bolster his stardom and sex appeal for black readers.

The *New York Times* interview from April focuses on the louder rumors of hatred on the set: “While the film was being shot in Spain, rumors swept the movie industry that Jim and Raquel were feuding furiously. In fact, it was even said that he spat on her during one spat. Jim denies it. ‘That’s terrible—you don’t even spit on a dog,’ he says.”⁷⁷ These reports of this fierce animosity reinforced the mythical disharmony of miscegenation. Along with the less substantiated rumors of an illicit affair, interested viewers could not help but wonder what happened in real life between the two leads. While innuendo helped promote the film, it also destroyed the distancing effect of framing the sex scene as limited to a fantastical Western.

If interracial dating already alienated white America, a violent public incident further tarnished Brown’s image. An April 6th, 1969 *New York Times* interview titled, “Jim Brown: ‘I’m No Angel, But...’” summarized these events:

... he was accused [summer 1969] of beating his 22-year-old half-Negro, half-Oriental girl friend, Eva Marie Bohn-Chin, and tossing her from the balcony of his West Hollywood apartment. (The girl refused to press charges, saying she had slipped while crawling down to escape police.) But Jim, who later paid \$300 for assaulting a policeman, remains Mr. Cool.⁷⁸

⁷⁶ Young, 24.

⁷⁷ Klemesrud, D13.

⁷⁸ Klemesrud, D13.

This widely reported event makes the aggressive beginning of the love scene in *100 Rifles* even more shocking. Rather than diffusing the question, Brown openly attacks his critics.

My greatest problem is that I don't run away, buy off, or hide out... The cops had ransacked her apartment a couple times, and had tailed her car. They were after me because I'm free and black and I'm supposed to be arrogant and supposed to be militant and I swing loose and free and have been outspoken on racial matters and I don't preach against black militant groups and I'm not humble.⁷⁹

In defending himself against accusations, Brown gives a laundry list of other reasons for whites to dislike him. He is outspoken, unapologetic, politically minded, and acutely aware of police racial profiling.

While he never defined himself as a black militant, Brown's defiant, sexualized persona closely resembled Eldridge Cleaver. As Peniel E. Joseph writes in *Waiting 'Til The Midnight Hour*, "Initial reviews tended to ignore or gloss over Cleaver's depictions of women, preferring instead to bask in his triumphant machismo: an image of himself that at once defied and embraced American fantasies regarding black men's strength, resilience, and violence."⁸⁰ Brown's "triumphant machismo" had a similar impact in Hollywood. He could break taboos of violence and sex as a black action hero; yet, for certain viewers, his off-screen behavior could justify labeling him with the old buck stereotype. Brown's similarity to Cleaver posed a particular threat in the South, where in many areas the late-1960s brought greater challenges than the passing of the 1964 Civil Rights Act. Jason Sokol summarizes this period in *There Goes My Everything*.

White fears intensified as African-Americans clenched their fists in cries of "Black Power" and urban disorders flared. For thousands of white southerners, the movement only started to take effect in the late 1960s. Communities that had

⁷⁹ Klemesrud, D13.

⁸⁰ Joseph, 212.

resisted school integration for the better part of two decades began to buckle under the Supreme Court's 1969 integration mandate, *Alexander v. Holmes*. When all the battles ended and the struggles subsided, blacks and whites across the South were left to negotiate the terrain of everyday life.⁸¹

Cleaver's synthesis of black violence and sexuality linked black political power to miscegenation, a threat to "everyday life." As a living embodiment of Cleaver's fantasies, Jim Brown served as a public reminder of a crumbled racial hierarchy. His constant appearance in newspapers and movie theaters nationwide brought the threat of the Supermasculine Menial closer to home. Even in Northern cities like New York, Brown's comments could easily alienate liberal readers. In the *Times* interview, the caption under his photo reads, "I'm generally suspicious of white people, but I love 'em individually."⁸²

Brown courted further controversy in a subsequent issue of *Ebony*, which Mike Freeman quotes in his biography, *Jim Brown*. First Brown describes his wife's desire for a stay-at-home-man, something she knows he will never be.⁸³ Brown also bluntly addresses questions about the sex scene: "Some white reporters have been down here asking me all kinds of silly things about how I feel to be making love to a white woman. I have one standard answer: 'It's not like this is the first time I've done it, baby. You know what I mean? That's what shakes the hell out of them.'"⁸⁴ In interviews, Brown gleefully shattered taboos and shocked white Americans who preserved them. In a quick turn of phrase, he shows the charisma that made him a Hollywood star and the frankness that shortened his mainstream career. Brown refused to assuage the racial fears that he provoked in conservative white viewers, eroding his appeal to mainstream audiences.

⁸¹ Sokol, 11.

⁸² Klemesrud, D13.

⁸³ Freeman, 200 – 201.

⁸⁴ Freeman, 201 – 202.

In a certain sense, *The Dirty Dozen* allowed Jim Brown to sneak his way into Hollywood. Promotion, genre, direction, and Brown himself perfectly dissuaded the viewer from associating his onscreen violence with offscreen racial violence in the summer of 1967. In 1969, *100 Rifles* failed to make an impact as it oscillated between promoting and diluting its crucial, interracial sex scene. While the film made a profit, Brown was never again offered a role with a major white co-star; the lasting power of Hollywood's miscegenation taboo appeared to persist as Brown's career quickly declined. Filmmakers and viewers could not seem to overcome the convoluted power dynamics of interracial sex.

100 Rifles came at the pinnacle of Jim Brown's barrage of productions that demonstrated the profitability of black-oriented films. The cautiousness of the sex scene compared with the increasing explicitness of other contemporary films indicated the need for an expression of black sexuality outside of mainstream Hollywood pictures. *100 Rifles* also illustrated Hollywood's struggle to keep pace with the increasingly graphic depictions of sex; the producers create a film that is much too controversial for some viewers and much too tame for others. Meanwhile, as Black Power further challenged the racial hierarchy, Jim Brown openly did and said what he pleased. He followed the same public trajectory as Cleaver, shifting from popular interest to popular resistance, and finally exile from white audiences.

Chapter 2

Ice Station Zebra: Jim Brown and the Super-Actioner

The all-male adventure spectacular typified by films such as *The Magnificent Seven* (1960) and *The Dirty Dozen* (1967), was a crucial vehicle for 1960's Hollywood to attract a declining and splintering movie audience; I will refer to these films as Super-Actioners. Super-Actioners have not been fully analyzed as a coherent group of films due to one of their principal strengths: an ability to cross generic boundaries while maintaining a cohesive marketable product type. Only Super-Actioners by established auteurs such as Hawks and Aldrich have been widely written about, primarily within the context of these directors' other works. Will Wright provides a detailed analysis of professional westerns in *Six Guns and Society*, and in *New Hollywood/Old Hollywood*, while Tom Schatz explores *The Dirty Dozen* within his model for the combat genre; however by working within these rigid generic categories, the similarities between Super-Actioners are left undeveloped. Super-Actioners work within a variety of genre contexts, such as Westerns like *Rio Bravo* (1959), war films like *The Longest Day* (1962), heist movies like *Ocean's Eleven* (1960), and more commonly after the 1960's, disaster and science fiction films.

As Hollywood fought to meet the unpredictable demands of a dwindling audience, the Super-Actioner emerged as the ultimate hedge bet. By combining stars of different generations, media, nationalities, and races, Super-Actioners could appeal across a broad spectrum of demographics. For Jim Brown, the first black action star, Super-Actioners provided the perfect context for cinematic integration while still highlighting his unique individual appeal. Brown could appear as part of an ensemble

cast in the mainstream media, while functioning as the star of a picture for black audiences. As he gained wider recognition, he could lead a cast of white supporting actors who in turn helped cultivate a larger white audience. The Super-Actioner also effectively incorporated music stars, television stars, and foreign stars, allowing Hollywood to appeal to fans outside of the established movie audience. Thus Jim Brown could almost seamlessly apply his football stardom to movie stardom in *The Dirty Dozen* (1968), *The Spit* (1968), and *Ice Station Zebra* (1968). Finally, as the 1960's audience grew younger and increasingly male, the violence and heroism of the Super-Actioner perfectly suited their tastes. By 1969, a film such as *The Wild Bunch* could satisfy both a young counterculture and members of the aging audience for the Western genre.

I will define the structure of the Super-Actioner genre, building upon core elements of Wright's, Schatz and Jeanine Basinger's generic frameworks; these films provided a crucial narrative structure for Jim Brown to achieve onscreen integration through his exceptional physical abilities. Next I will discuss how the economic turmoil of 1960's Hollywood, detailed in Paul Monaco's *The Sixties*, promoted the abundance of Super-Actioners throughout the decade. *Ice Station Zebra* will serve as a test case for the genre while exposing a carefully modulated tension between minimizing and exploiting racial codes. Finally, the promotion, exhibition, and reception of *Ice Station Zebra* will help explain the film's failures as a Super-Actioner and a Jim Brown vehicle.

Defining the Super-Actioner

Multi-star casting appeared throughout the classical Hollywood era, perhaps best exemplified by *Grand Hotel* (1932), the MGM super spectacular which won box office

success and the Academy Award for best picture.¹ Less frequently and often with lesser stars, adventure films would employ similar strategies; *Stagecoach* (1939) has been described by some as “a *Grand Hotel* on wheels.”² Both of these films set up melodramatic structures for their male and female stars to act out conflicts of class, honor, and emotion. *Grand Hotel* is episodic; while nearly all of the characters cross paths and affect each others’ subplots, they are mainly involved in a specific, personal love story or struggle: Joan Crawford’s descent as a kept woman, Wallace Beery’s corruption as a businessman, Greta Garbo and John Barrymore’s doomed romance, and Lionel Barrymore’s struggle with facing imminent death. *Stagecoach* offers a spectrum of character types, joined together on the stagecoach for their own separate reasons. The characters of the Super-Actioner are by no means identical; however they all share the same goal, whether to gain freedom from jail through combat in *The Dirty Dozen*, or gain a fortune robbing a casino in *Ocean’s Eleven*. Whether the group achieves perfect unity or not, each character works towards the same goal for similar reasons. The lone variant on this heroic character type is the traitor, exemplified by Maggot (Telly Savalas) in *The Dirty Dozen* or Vaslov (Ernest Borgnine) in *Ice Station Zebra*.³ In this broad sense, the group coalescence of the combat genre permeates all Super-Actioners.

As Robert Ray has demonstrated, the Western narrative has often structured other genres, creating a useful paradigm for analyzing the Super-Actioner across established

¹ For a detailed analysis, see Tom Schatz, *The Genius of the System* (New York: Henry Holt and Co., 1988), 108-120.

² Joseph McBride and Michael Wilmington, *John Ford* (New York: De Capo Press, 1975), 54.

³ This character type exists in Classical Hollywood multi-star films such as *Lifeboat* (1944) and *Stalag 17* (1953).

genre categories.⁴ Will Wright's definition of the professional Western provides an excellent starting point for defining the Super-Actioner. In fact three of his four examples are Super-Actioner Westerns: *Rio Bravo* (1959), *The Professionals* (1966), and *The Wild Bunch* (1969).

The heroes are now professional fighters, men willing to defend society only as a job they accept for pay or for love of fighting, not from commitment to ideas of law and justice... The final gunfight that climaxes such films as *Shane* or *Stagecoach* has become a battle extending throughout the film with skirmishes, strategies, and commanders... The group of strong men, formed as a fighting unit, come to exist independently of and apart from society... Heroes in the professional plot have little or no interest in women except insofar as the women become part of the group....⁵

Wright uses these criteria to trace the evolution of the Western genre. Analyzing the 1960's combat Super-Actioner yields similar results. In *The Dirty Dozen*, social outcasts fight for the sole purpose of gaining their freedom from death sentences. Nonetheless they form a combat unit, stage escalating mock conflicts, and form a highly coordinated group that raids a villa teeming with Nazi officers. The only women are Nazi mistresses and prostitutes, who are nearly superfluous to the story. In *Ice Station Zebra*, a submarine captain (Rock Hudson), a British spy (Patrick McGouhan), and a marine captain (Jim Brown) make a treacherous journey to the North Pole. These career professionals form an expedition party, and eventually face off against an army of Russian paratroopers. Women are entirely absent from the story.

⁴ Robert Beverley Ray, *A Certain Tendency of the Hollywood Cinema, 1930-1980* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1985), 70-88.

⁵ Will Wright, *Six Guns and Society: A Structural Study of the Western* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1975), 85-86.

Wright adds the criteria that the villains are very strong and fellow professionals, while each member of the fighting group is a specialist.⁶ Again, *Ice Station Zebra* pairs leaders from the navy, marines, and espionage forces. In *The Great Escape* (1963), the POWs all assume different roles in completing the tunnel and achieving their escape. Like the imposing villains of the Westerns, such as a Mexican army in *The Wild Bunch*, the villains whom heroes must face in combat Super-Actioners are legions of men, such as Nazis or Russians. In other variations, the antagonist remains extremely powerful, such as the lethal desert in *The Flight of the Phoenix* (1965) or the five large casinos in *Ocean's Eleven*.

The Super-Actioner often defies Wright's model for group cohesion, which defines mutual respect and affinity as a fundamental generic trait of the professional Western. The Super-Actioner allows for varying degrees of group synthesis. One instance of this is the traitor figure, whether a spy or a rogue, who can undermine the group in their final conflict. Other groups, such as the prisoners of *The Dirty Dozen*, unite for a common goal while maintaining mutual distrust and disrespect. Even *The Wild Bunch* features a splintered group. Robert Ryan must hunt down his former gang, serving as a reluctant leader of the villains. After their last stand, he rides off with the one remaining outlaw, living out the group legacy. Yet Super-Actioners more often leave no indication that the group will remain intact after the film; at the end of the mission in *Ice Station Zebra* or the escape in *The Great Escape*, the heroes will all go their separate ways.

⁶ Wright, 97-101.

While Wright's structure is valuable, his conclusions contradict a fundamental aspect of the Super-Actioner: anti-authoritarianism. First he deemphasizes one of his central binaries, the conflict between "wilderness/civilization," in the professional Western.⁷ By eliminating this distinction, the heroes lose their diametric opposition to civilized authority, becoming just an independent company within capitalist society. However as a whole, Super-Actioner heroes are roving groups fighting ensconced villains. The Mexican forces in *The Magnificent Seven* (1960) and *The Wild Bunch* (1969) are confined to fortified towns and haciendas that the heroes must infiltrate. The Nazi villa of *The Dirty Dozen* and the casinos of *Ocean's Eleven* similarly serve as concrete bases of operation for the antagonists. Thus the villains occupy a perverted but well-established locus of civilization, while the heroes, roaming through frontiers, forests, or alleys, seek to destroy this corrupt semblance of social order.

Wright further distorts this anti-authoritarian impetus by equating professional heroes and villains. "The good/bad distinction now depends solely on sympathy, not on commitment to social values... both [the good guys and bad guys] are typically professionals. The autonomous individual may still exist, but he is no longer needed for anything and so he is less important."⁸ This conclusion supports his argument that Westerns mirror capitalist structures; the group of heroes is merely an elite cadre serving as a corporate alternative with no more room for individuality. While some individuality must be sacrificed to the group, the group leader of the Super-Actioner always opposes larger authorities. Rock Hudson challenges his superior's secretive mission to Ice Station Zebra; his suspicions are proven correct when spies nearly ruin the mission. In *The Dirty*

⁷ Wright, 121.

⁸ Wright, 182.

Dozen, Lee Marvin tells his commanders that the mission is insane; he seems to enjoy defeating American troops in war games as much as he does defeating the Nazis. In fact, heroes in Super-Actioners often fight two enemies: flawed social institutions, such as the military or law enforcement, and the outright villainy of enemy forces. Thus the *Wild Bunch* must elude a reprehensible posse in order to attack the sadistic Mexican army. The heroes of the Super-Actioner form a small, loose group to defeat larger, regimented foes; they surrender their individuality only to fight these insidious conglomerates.

The Super-Actioner adds ambiguity to the values of civilization and authority, embodying the genre evolution detailed in Tom Schatz' *Old Hollywood/New Hollywood*.

Accompanying the sense of irony associated with the Westerner's inability to accommodate his characteristic individuality to the society he has helped tame, there is a sense of loss which becomes more pronounced in the later Western films. Either the various individuals form a collective and sell their services to whomever will pay the price, thereby undercutting the Westerner's code of honor (as in *El Dorado*, *Rio Bravo*, *The Wild Bunch...*), or else the isolated individual's sense of honor and personal freedom are overwhelmed by society's collective strengths.⁹

In *Ice Station Zebra*, Cold War combat appears as an indirect game for intelligence agencies; Hudson feels stymied by a lack of information, and in the end, destroys the key piece of military information to prevent apocalyptic conflict. In *Flight of the Phoenix*, Jimmy Stewart plays a skilled pilot reluctant to be replaced by mechanical instruments. While he gains one last chance to steer a makeshift plane, he knows his human assets will inevitably become obsolete. Much like the sense of nostalgia for a dying frontier in *The Wild Bunch*, Super-Actioners contain ironic inversions or open paeans to the heroic determinism of their generic predecessors. The climactic action spectacles in Super-

⁹ Tom Schatz, *New Hollywood/Old Hollywood* (Ann Arbor, Michigan: UMI Research Press, 1983), 137-139.

Actioners serve as a last hurrah to the individual human heroism overtaken by the technocracy of the 1960's, aptly described by Wright.¹⁰ The collective group still highlights the individual prowess of each specialist; however this violent individuality threatens larger institutions, pushing Super-Actioner groups to the fringes of society (as far as the North Pole in *Ice Station Zebra*).

Schatz describes how the *Dirty Dozen* bridges the extremes of group integration and individualism.

In *The Dirty Dozen*, the motif is played to the hilt: twelve anarchic and utterly antisocial criminals (all of whom are in an army prison awaiting execution) are molded into a suicidal combat unit by a maniacal officer (Lee Marvin) for a secret mission. Marvin's transforming this motley crew into a cohesive unit sustains the film's narrative until the climactic resolution, in which the group's diligent training and cooperation result in a virtual orgy of violence.¹¹

This Super-Actioner follows the logic of a World War II combat film, yet the results are quite ironic. Combining violent criminals into a group results in a magnification of their potential to cause destruction and anarchy. In fighting to save American society, they exhibit the innate savagery that caused this society to incarcerate them (as noted in Chapter 1). This tension between stable groups and explosive individuals provides a key source of irony and nostalgia in many Super-Actioners.

The composition of the Super-Actioner heroic group draws directly on the World War II combat genre. Jeanine Basinger's "Apotheosis of the Hollywood War Film" describes several elements of the fighting unit that the Super-Actioner retains.

The group of men is a mixture of unrelated types, with varying ethnic and socioeconomic backgrounds. They may be men from different military forces, and/or different countries. They are of different ages... They are both married and

¹⁰ Wright, 178.

¹¹ Schatz, *New Hollywood/Old Hollywood*, 150.

single, shy and bold, urban and rural, comic and tragic... Minority figures are always represented: black, Hispanic, Indian, and even Orientals.¹²

The combat groups in *Ice Station Zebra* and *The Dirty Dozen* reflect nearly all of these criteria for diversity. Other Super-Actioners contain racially diverse characters, such as Woody Strode in *The Professionals*, Sammy Davis Jr. in *Ocean's Eleven*, and Yul Brenner in *The Magnificent Seven*. The universal element is the age range, which appears in virtually every Super-Actioner.

In summary, the Super-Actioner centers on an all-male group, working or fighting towards a climactic conflict. They are driven either by professional duty or some form of reward.¹³ The group must number at least three and include a range of ages; it will usually contain other forms of diversity, such as race, nationality, or class (British and black characters are the most common additions). Women are either superfluous to the plot or absent from it (unless masculinized to become a group member). The group can achieve various levels of cohesion, however it will always provide a platform for specialized, individual feats of skill and heroism. The group or group leader will resist all higher authorities while fighting more regimented, civilized, and/or stationary villains. The plot will invoke some form of irony and/or nostalgia related to past battles or generic influences.

The Super-Actioner perfectly met the demands of the reeling Hollywood industry of the 1960's. Wright compares the group of heroes in the professional Western to larger capitalist entities; however they more closely resemble the unique group of professionals

¹² J. David Slocum, ed., *Hollywood and War: The Film Reader* (New York: Routledge, 2006), 176.

¹³ In some instances, such as *The Wild Bunch*, bloody retribution becomes a personal reward; however for most of the film the characters only seek monetary gain.

assembled to create each film through package production. By combining stars appealing to different demographics, the Super-Actioner served as a highly adaptable model for creating an attractive, multi-talented package. The violence and spectacle provided by the narrative could also regularly attract a younger, male-dominated audience. Just as a motley crew of adventurers joined together to pursue great rewards onscreen, Super-Actioners combined diverse attractions to reintegrate a divided audience and realize large box office returns.

The Industrial Impetus for the Super-Actioner

In *The Sixties*, Paul Monaco summarizes the major economic challenge for Hollywood during that decade:

A studio such as Paramount, for example, which once had produced more than a hundred films per year, averaged just fifteen features annually during the 1960's. The decline in the number of Americans going to the movies and the erosion of the family habit of a weekly "night at the movies" in favor of staying home to watch television for free meant that the double bill disappeared from most movie theaters... That shift had a double effect: fewer movies were being produced, and the business risk was increased on each of those being made.¹⁴

While the "blockbuster" mentality did not emerge until the mid-1970's, by 1961 roughly "three-quarters of the movies released by Hollywood lost money."¹⁵ Meanwhile, the profits from hit features were greatly increasing.¹⁶ Thus the Super-Actioner, featuring a deep list of stars and a near epic scope, represented a particularly attractive formula. Films such as *The Magnificent Seven* (1960), *The Dirty Dozen* (1967), and *The Wild Bunch* (1969) could reap large profits while safeguarding large budgets against major

¹⁴ Paul Monaco, *The Sixties, 1960 – 1969* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 2001), 68-10.

¹⁵ Monaco, 11.

¹⁶ Monaco, 11.

losses with the drawing power of multiple stars; even less successful Super-Actioners such as *Ice Station Zebra* (1968) nearly broke even after their foreign runs.

Monaco lists other changes in production economics that similarly benefited these pictures. A trend toward runaway production in the early 1960's fit well with the war and western genres that most often underpinned Super-Actioners. Even later in the 1960's, shooting the *Dirty Dozen* (1967) in England took advantage of realistic European locations while benefiting from a cheaper labor force abroad. The successful Sergio Leone westerns further exemplified how studios could shoot westerns as well in Europe as in America, and by 1970 nearly one third of studio productions were still shot overseas.¹⁷ Similarly, these outdoor films with several stars in action perfectly exploited widescreen aesthetics; thus they improved upon an earlier method of drawing viewers away from television by filling a bigger frame than television with more stars than television could afford to feature in a single program. The resolution of the SAG strike of 1960's guaranteed actors a share of a film's telecast profits, and this revenue growth helped popular actors gain greater control over production.¹⁸ However this change also helps explain why older known actors would agree to appear lower on the bill; by hitching their wagon onto younger stars, they could finally gain their share of television profits and appear in more of the dwindling number of productions. For example, Ernest Borgnine is omnipresent in Super-Actioners (especially after *McHale's Navy* went off the air in 1966), adding his rusty but recognizable star image to deepen impressive casts. For a rising action star such as Jim Brown, these changes provided access to the increased production value of European settings and stronger supporting casts

¹⁷ Monaco, 15.

¹⁸ Monaco, 18-20.

The first half of the 1960's followed the "package" model that dominated the end of the 1950's, with scripts, stars, directors, and independent producers being assembled on a picture-by-picture basis. Monaco emphasizes some of the increased formulaic restraint this could place on films. Without a full production slate to amortize losses, each picture posed a greater risk.¹⁹ The Super-Actioner fit well into this fiscal environment, with an assembly of stars to make an enticing package with an established generic formula to employ these assets. The second half of 1960's marked the corporate conglomerate takeover of many of the major studios; ownership by outside industries again favored more predictable models for profitability. Historically, stars remained the best assets to guarantee returns on investment, so once again the bevy of stars linked to Super-Actioners would remain attractive.

The Super-Actioner also bridged the generational and cultural gap between the new audience and the old audience. *Rio Bravo* (1959) provided a streamlined prototype for this approach. Pairing the aging star (John Wayne), current star (Dean Martin), and young singer and potential star (Rick Nelson) provided an attraction for all ages (as a musical heartthrob, Nelson could also bring female viewers to the largely male audience for Westerns). This demographic spectrum would be further refined and expanded, with *The Dirty Dozen* featuring the black star (Jim Brown), the music star (Trini Lopez), and television guest stars (Charles Bronson, Ralph Meeker, Telly Savalas). Unlike the musical, which failed to find a teen audience until the mid-1970's, action films were tailor-made for multi-purpose casting. While World War II combat films provided a rubric for integrating diverse figures in action, westerns could also rely on a range of

¹⁹ Monaco, 26-27.

veteran gunfighters and cocky upstarts. Super-Actioners not only provided an established narrative model, but one that was adaptable enough to seamlessly include characters of divergent appeals.

The Super-Actioner courted quite a wide audience, which was especially important during the exhibition crisis of the 1960's. Monaco demonstrates how film exhibition was particularly hard hit by audience and industrial changes during the 1960's.

Movie theaters, moreover, were in a terrible position to try to follow middle-class America's exodus from the cities to the suburbs. Suburban land values rose quickly. Since the major Hollywood companies were prevented by federal antitrust decisions from owning movie theaters, the burden for expansion of cinemas to the suburbs was left largely to independent owners of the new theater chains. With suburbanization came changing patterns of life within America's cities. Increasingly, "downtown" business districts were abandoned after business hours, and impoverished neighborhoods grew up around them.²⁰

The studios were powerless to pursue a core audience fleeing from areas of high theater concentration. They instead focused on drawing these lost returns directly from the exhibitors. Studios scaled back production and demanded a "floor figure" for films, a guaranteed rental fee in addition to a percentage of attendance.²¹ Controlling this smaller output of films through distribution forced exhibitors to accept paying more per film during a marked drop in audience attendance. Making matters worse, the remaining audience was increasingly young and male. A precipitous drop in attendance among middle-aged women prompted the closing of matinee shows, where they represented most of the audience, and a sharp decrease in romances and biopics onscreen. These

²⁰ Monaco, 42.

²¹ Monaco, 45-46.

mounting expenses and shrinking audiences left theater owners without the necessary capital to build new theaters to pursue suburban audiences.²²

These conditions made the Super-Actioner all the more desirable. The male-oriented genres of the combat film and the western perfectly fit this demographic, while the presence of older stars could hopefully entice middle-aged viewers to return to the theater. Later in the 1960's, Jim Brown could serve as a special asset to Super-Actioners; adding black or Hispanic actors to the ensemble cast could reclaim some of the lost business in urban centers. Finally, the increasing impotence of the Production Code, leading to the adoption of the ratings system in 1968, naturally favored action pictures. Hollywood could transition from the poetic violence of *Magnificent Seven* (1960) to the lurid brutality of *The Wild Bunch* (1969) without severely altering the established package. Once again, the growing young male audience showed the greatest demand for the growing violence onscreen. As broadcast programs remained strictly regulated, increased violence further differentiated films from television.

The drive-in theater appeared to temporarily fill the gap as urban movie palaces were supplanted by suburban multiplexes. While Monaco clearly explains the rise and fall of the drive in, he never fully addresses how much profit it generated for major studio productions. The young drive-in audience ballasted independent companies such as A.I.P who produced cheap, youth oriented films with racier content than the studios could produce before 1968. With the studios fully divested from exhibition, they had to compete for or ignore a thrill-seeking audience while still following the remnants of the Production Code. While Monaco describes the effect of European films and the rise of

²² Monaco, 45.

the art house on mainstream production, he never explores how more prurient films, such as Russ Meyer's work, affected the studios' production policies. This is a clear example of the contradictory impulses of the era, where the tropes of lowbrow and highbrow pictures were both incorporated into mainstream films, including Super-Actioners such as *The Wild Bunch*. Furthermore, the success of art films could also rely on nudity and sexual frankness to attract viewers. As noted in the first chapter, this increase in adult content particularly hurt *100 Rifles*, a film relying on a sex scene without nudity.

This turmoil in production and exhibition inevitably impacted the careers of star actors of the 1960's. Through a mixture of circumstance and rapidly changing industrial and cultural trends, many actresses failed to maintain consistent stardom throughout the 1960's. Monaco concludes, "The stakes for an acting career had gotten higher with the demise of contract playing, and as a result, both startling career triumphs and abrupt eclipses of a given star's popularity became more common among Hollywood leads."²³ Popular actresses of the early 1960's such as Doris Day, Audrey Hepburn, and Natalie Wood saw their stardom decline by the second half of the 1960's

The two most successful African-American actors of the late 1960's, Poitier and Brown, faced a similar bind in the late 1960's. Sidney Poitier rose to be the highest drawing star of the late 1960's, yet he failed to maintain consistent success after *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner* (1967). As Poitier's popularity slowly waned, Jim Brown rose to leading man status following Super-Actioners such as *The Dirty Dozen* and *Ice Station Zebra*. Yet Brown's rapid rise ended with a rapid descent from mainstream stardom to marginal Blaxploitation projects. Both actresses and African-American stars remain

²³ Monaco, 138.

particularly sensitive to the dramatic shifts in male dominated cultural and industrial trends. Doris Day and Poitier both represented appealing models of femininity and racial difference for older generations. Upcoming stars such as Jane Fonda and Jim Brown harnessed an appeal to a more liberal and outspoken younger generation. For Brown, the polymorphous appeal of Super-Actioners (including his leading role in *The Split* (1968), a Super-Actioner heist movie), served to insulate his star image from these cultural rifts. As detailed in the previous chapter, when he co-starred with Raquel Welch in *100 Rifles* (1969), their interracial onscreen couple became the central draw of the film; this effectively narrowed his appeal to liberal audiences, while conservative and liberal viewers alike had enjoyed his earlier Super-Actioners.

Monaco further illustrates the male star's dominance over an increasingly young male audience. The variety of stars, such as Woody Allen, Steve McQueen, and Dustin Hoffman, illustrate the greater flexibility for male stardom. The Super-Actioners take advantage of this, combining a remarkably wide range of male types, such as Jim Brown, Donald Sutherland, Charles Bronson and John Cassavetes in *The Dirty Dozen*. Ballasted by the collective star power of these films, their standout scenes in several Super-Actioners launched these supporting players into leading roles in the late 1960's and early 1970's.

However one important star type overlooked by Monaco is the veteran actor, who outlasted his peers of the 1950's well into the 1960's. John Wayne remained a key star of the cinema, increasingly appearing as the older cowboy teaching the younger upstart, often another future star (such as James Caan in *El Dorado* (1968)). Lee Marvin provides a more uniquely 1960's rise to stardom, from Classical Hollywood villain to

leading man, specifically through the industrial changes of the era. In the early 1960's, he still played the supporting role of the villain in films such as *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valence* (1962). He also starred, albeit as a villain, in Don Siegel's *The Killers* (1964), a violent crime feature made specifically for television (it was released in theaters when the network found it too brutal to air). The next year he won "Best Actor" playing a parody of his tough image opposite Jane Fonda in *Cat Ballou* (1965). In 1966, he appeared as the second lead to Burt Lancaster in the Super-Actioner *The Professionals*. As *The Dirty Dozen* pushed the envelope on onscreen violence, his past brutality made him the perfect leading man as the captain of a platoon of military criminals. He subsequently starred as a leading man, and the only actor listed above the title, in *Point Blank* (1967). Marvin exemplifies a mixed medium, mixed genre, and mixed star image progression from character actor to star in the erratic post-studio era. Furthermore, the violent behavior that defined him as a villain in the early 1960's could be exhibited by a leading man in the later 1960's. Brown would follow a similar trajectory with less success.

Box-office success in 1960's Hollywood was remarkably unpredictable, but the Super-Actioner provided one of the safest models for gaining profits; roughly one and a half to two dozen of these high profile films were produced during the decade. By exploiting the largest target audience, young men, while including a spectrum of stars to draw in other demographic groups, the Super-Actioner could consistently draw a large turnout. For a rising star such as Jim Brown, this genre offered a chance to cement his image and popularity before headlining his own films. As the only black action star of the late 1960's, this genre allayed many of the fears of racial integration; yet these films also relied on moments of assumed racism towards Brown's characters to invigorate the

plot. *Ice Station Zebra* exemplifies how the Super-Actioner could deftly mask and unmask Brown's black identity.

Race Narratives: Above and Below the Surface

In an early article promoting *Ice Station Zebra*, John Sturges said, "What's important about Jim Brown's role is that it doesn't make any difference whether he's Negro or not."²⁴ Throughout his career, Jim Brown took pride in winning this part that had not been explicitly written for a black character. In fact *Ice Station Zebra* represents the only film of this period where Brown's race is never mentioned. However as in all of Brown's films, this role reveals a thorough awareness of the possible threat of a strong black male appearing onscreen in 1968. Furthermore, in a Super-Actioner where the group suspects that one member is a spy, Brown's racial identity amplifies a drama of misjudgments based on appearances.

Typical of the Super-Actioner, *Ice Station Zebra* features an all male cast of career officers traveling on a submarine towards a distress signal from a polar military base. This narrative structure immediately removes the most common sources of anxiety for white Americans who struggled with Civil Rights integration: black political power, black sexual prowess, and miscegenation. Once Brown parachutes onto the submarine, he enters a situation dramatically removed from America and any woman. He journeys underwater in an iron hull on its way to the North Pole. Thus Brown's physically powerful, authoritative marine captain functions in a world fully isolated from the movie

²⁴ Kevin Thomas, "He-Man Movies for Feminine Tastes," *Los Angeles Times*, 6 September 1967, E1.

audience. As in *The Dirty Dozen*, his character dies during the climactic conflict, eliminating a possible return to everyday America.

Brown perfectly complements the other cast members. Rock Hudson serves as the major star and all-American leader. Patrick McGoohan delivers witty dialogue with a British accent, while adding his television stardom from *The Secret Agent* and *The Prisoner*. Ernest Borgnine, popular aboard another vessel in *McHale's Navy*, adds age, humor, and surprise as the Russian defector (his persona as a wacky character actor masks his identity as the traitor). Brown thus distinguishes himself from each character through his youth and race. Together, this small group provides a wide, marketable appeal to viewers of different ages, nationalities and races, as well as myriad television viewers.

Each member of the group serves a special function. Commander Ferraday (Hudson) takes command during crises. He leads his crew to stop the ship from flooding and later, guides the submarine to dangerously surface through a layer of ice. In the final standoff with Russian paratroopers, he cagily destroys the secret film to prevent global war. Brown's character, Captain Anders, specializes in fighting as a forceful military leader who commands the marine troops aboard the sub. As a spy, Jones (McGoohan) provides an intelligent counsel to Hudson. He also finds the secret film and kills Vaslov (Borgnine), who has stolen the film from the Russians. Vaslov appears to double Jones's role, but also provides crucial knowledge of the enemy; his real specialty is as the traitor, sabotaging the ship and stealing the film to further the action.

This group of heroes comprises a particularly dysfunctional unit for a Super-Actioner. In *The Dirty Dozen*, the presence of a traitor is only revealed when Maggot

sadistically betrays his comrades and threatens the mission. For the majority of this film, the characters know that a member of their group is a saboteur, which prevents total coalescence. Regardless of this lack of cohesion, the group unites during crises such as the flood scene. Anders uses amazing physical strength to push a hatch closed through a few feet of water. Meanwhile Ferraday commands the crew to contain the flood. Jones and Vaslov both offer help, although the latter does so only to hide that he has caused the flood. In another group adventure, everyone helps to rescue a man who falls through cracking ice. However with characters covered by ski masks and parkas, this scene fails to clarify the group effort for audiences.

The group disunity also stems from the generic anti-authoritarianism. Ferraday's superior will not tell him the true purpose of the mission: to rescue special film from a satellite that reveals every missile base in the world. Thus when Jones arrives, in command of this information but refusing to reveal it, the captain and spy resist each other's authority. Later, Anders parachutes in with his unit of marines, causing yet another leader to enter the submarine. While these characters demonstrate resistance to other authorities, this internal chafing is atypical of the Super-Actioner. Consequently, *Ice Station Zebra* lacks the satisfying coalescence of other group adventures, which may have contributed to its disappointing box office returns.

This unique grouping sets up some fascinating external and internal parallels. Distancing himself from Sidney Poitier, the dominant black star of 1968, Brown's character thrives on physical action and imperiousness in contrast to Poitier's dignified intellectualism. By playing against Poitier, he also falls closer to Donald Bogle's stereotype of the black "brute." However Brown's role as Anders has a strong continuity

with Hudson's role as Ferraday. Both men stand tall with strong physiques, and display unquestioned command over their military units: each a classic man's man. They both speak their mind, always tell the truth, and stay focused on their role within the mission. When Jones spouts facts about the Arctic cold, Anders replies that machine guns work the same way everywhere. Despite these similarities, Anders' leadership appears as petty and vindictive; he calls for a full inspection of his troops and promises that it will be "a bitch." Ferraday retains the respect of his men and never berates his crew. These collective traits establish a parallel as well as a hierarchy between Ferraday and Anders.

The spies present opposing paired characters. They constantly talk and whisper, scrutinizing each piece of information. They hide their knowledge and motives among themselves. In moments of action, they cede control to the military leaders. While Hudson and Brown lead groups, they are loners. In a telling scene, Ferraday catches Vaslov sneaking around the submarine. Vaslov puts on a suspicious act, and Hudson chastises him for skulking around alone. Yet Jones's motives also remain oblique, preventing the viewer from identifying Vaslov as the traitor (he seems more like a red herring). Ferraday remains suspicious of Jones and Vaslov throughout the film based on both their joviality and secrecy. Meanwhile they suspect Anders is a traitor for the opposite reasons: his humorless demeanor and overt aggression (a typical assumption, appearing in films such as *Stalag 17*).

After the ship floods, all of the central characters meet except for Anders. They determine that the flood was an act of sabotage, and Anders emerges as the prime suspect. The deadly consequences of this misplaced suspicion come to a head when the crew reaches Ice Station Zebra. Jones sneaks away and finds the secret film. Vaslov

reveals himself as the traitor as he sneaks behind Jones and shoots him. Next Anders appears with his machine gun drawn, but Vaslov aims his handgun at Anders first. In devious double agent fashion, he tries to convince Anders to beat him with an axe; Anders could survive but appear to be the traitor, while Vaslov would maintain his secret identity and hand the film over to the Russians. Instead Anders attacks to kill Vaslov, overpowering him with the axe before he can shoot. As he gains control, he falls dead to gunshots fired from offscreen; Jones has survived and shoots Anders, convinced that he was the traitor attacking a loyal Vaslov.

This ending is convoluted to say the least. It becomes more complex as Russian paratroopers descend on Ice Station Zebra. Jones kills Vaslov, who reveals his duplicity when the Russians appear, and Hudson manages to destroy the film and maintain the cold war stalemate. However these plot turns also reveal a structure that demands an analysis of race roles:

Ferraday	Anders	Jones	Vaslov
White American Military Commanders (honest)	Black American	White British	White Russian Spies (dishonest)
Ally	Enemy (false)	Ally	Ally (false)
Suspects everyone	Suspects everyone	Suspects Anders (wrong)	Suspects Anders (false)
Elsewhere	Catches Vaslov (fails)	Kills Anders (wrong)	Shoots Jones (fails)
Unharmed	Killed	Wounded	Killed
Destroys film (success)	Fights Russians (fails)	Kills Vaslov (success)	Delivers film (fails)

Figure 2.1: Character traits and development in *Ice Station Zebra*.

Thus we begin with two parallel, inverse dyads: the earnest military commanders and the devious spies. Hudson represents the dominant race paired with the suspect race, Jones the dominant nationality with the suspect nationality. Anders emerges as the false enemy, while Vaslov emerges as the false ally. After the flood, Hudson and Anders make no assumptions while Jones and Vaslov determine Anders is the traitor. While Hudson eventually succeeds in his mission, Anders and Vaslov both fail. Jones wrongly kills Anders before redeeming himself by killing Vaslov.

Over the course of the film, the culturally dominant figures live and succeed while their partners die. We are left in the end with a new partnership between an unscathed American leader and a wounded British co-patriot. Implicit racism is displaced onto the weaker English ally; he misjudges Anders's allegiance, based on false assumptions, and almost ruins the mission. Yet despite his failings, he succeeds and lives to fight another day. Meanwhile Ferraday has the privilege of abstaining from this murky battle of racial mistrust and dishonor; his moral turpitude is never brought into question.

Anders's death corresponds with the arrival of a new character: the Russian commander, who lines up with his soldiers parallel to Hudson and his soldiers. Hudson destroys the film before the Russians can retrieve it, but the commander shows no anger. Because the film contains information that would win the Cold War, the Russian commander declares both the American and Russian missions as successes and failures; while failing to retrieve the film, both armies have defended their countries from annihilation. Anders's death terminates his parallel with Ferraday to make room for a new parallel between Cold War warriors, who race furiously towards a fight that never occurs.

This climax foregrounds the ironic and nostalgic tone of the Super-Actioner. The explicit irony is the stated paradox of mutual success and failure. However a sense of nostalgia for the World War II era and combat genre permeates the scene. The epic journey to Ice Station Zebra will end with a cover-up of the incident rather than a momentous battle. Exciting footage of racing jet fighters stands in for the lost spectacle, but this cannot replace the lost resolution of a firefight between good and evil forces. Instead, the delicate stalemate of the Cold War remains intact without a violent crescendo. A more typical Super-Actioner such as *The Wild Bunch* creates irony and nostalgia through a massive but pyrrhic gun battle; the elimination of such a climax helps explain *Ice Station Zebra's* failure to become a hit.

Yet Brown's role reveals larger ironies within *Ice Station Zebra*. Appearing during an era of heated racial conflict in America, implied racial prejudice overtakes the British spy rather than the all-American leader. The tough black military commander contradictorily parallels both the American hero and the Russian traitor, allowing viewers to embrace either comparison. A similar ambivalence surrounds Anders's casting in the film; the role was not intended for a black actor, but it provided a perfect vehicle for a black actor to show strength and authority without threatening America's racial hierarchy.

Released months after the conviction of Huey Newton, the film also echoes the dubious convictions of black leaders throughout the Civil Rights and Black Power eras, as well as the sinister history of lynching. Vaslov threatens to frame Anders for a crime he did not commit; Anders fights him, only to be executed by Jones for this assumed crime. Did producers conceive of these associations when they cast Anders? Did the

film implicitly argue against making judgments based on race, despite maintaining America's innocence? Regardless of the filmmakers' intentions, the racial climate of the late 1960's made it impossible for Jim Brown to appear in this role without carrying allusions to falsely punished black leaders and black victims (That same year, the ending of *Night of the Living Dead* (1968) created similar associations).

Roadshow 1968

In 1975, *Jaws* established saturation booking as the paradigm for blockbuster exhibition. Opening in a wide array of theaters across the country, films could exploit massive, television centered ad campaigns to raise a film to "event" status.²⁵ MGM tried a near opposite strategy to promote their potential blockbusters in the late 1960's. Following on the heels of successful roadshow releases of *Doctor Zhivago* (1965) and *Grand Prix* (1966), MGM planned four more premiere engagement releases for 1967-1968: *Gone With the Wind* (1939), *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968), *Far From the Madding Crowd* (1967), and *Ice Station Zebra*. *Gone with the Wind* was re-struck as a 70mm print, while *2001* and *Ice Station Zebra* would premier in Cinerama.²⁶ While the success of *Gone with the Wind* and *2001* prevented larger losses, this high-budget, high ticket price strategy was disastrous for MGM. Losses in motion picture returns and other divisions led MGM's head of production, Robert O'Brien, to fully resign in 1969.

A 1969 *Los Angeles Times* article profiling the new president of the company, Bo Polk, summarized MGM's predicament:

²⁵ David Cook, *Lost Illusions: American Cinema in the Shadow of Watergate and Vietnam, 1970-1979* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 2000), 40-43.

²⁶ "MGM Reveals Film Plans of 1967-1968," *Los Angeles Times*, 28 September 1967, D14.

Since Polk's chief boosters now have a collective paper loss of about \$34 million on their MGM holdings (the stock is selling \$10 below its January level), many of his most important initial activities have been financial. The \$19 million loss is being produced from well over \$50 million worth of write-downs and write-offs. A sizeable portion is being derived from such current MGM films as *The Shoes of the Fisherman* (which cost \$6.7 million) and *Ice Station Zebra* (which cost \$10 million), which have been bombsville at the box office; during a recent week, according to a tabulation by *Variety*, only two of the 25 top-grossing movies were made by MGM.²⁷

Part of *Ice Station Zebra*'s failure occurred onscreen; it failed to include several of the common pleasures of the Super-Actioner, such as group camaraderie, a spectacular final battle, and a clear, potent enemy (the Russians appear very late in the film and do little more than parachute and stand menacingly). The roadshow exhibition strategy exacerbated the flaws of the film. Runs at exclusive venues with high ticket prices discouraged attendance by the wider audience for the Super-Actioner. Large segments of targeted demographics such as young men, fans of television actors, and black viewers were left disenchanted by the high prices and limited locations. Thus *Ice Station Zebra* had to rely on its dubious merits as a film rather than the pre-sold appeal of its diverse cast.

MGM still used a marketing strategy similar to their successful Super-Actioner, *The Dirty Dozen*. Hudson, McGoohan, Borgnine, and even the fifth billed Tony Bill all appeared in individual newspaper profiles to promote the film. The articles' titles focus on the star's current image in transition: "Dramatic Roles Lure Rock Hudson," "'Secret Agent' Star Quitting TV Cold," "Intricacies of a Double Life That Ernest Borgnine Leads," "Restless Intellect of Actor Tony Bill." Within the actual article, these new

²⁷ "Bo Polk and B School Moviemaking," *Los Angeles Times*, 3 August 1967, L6.

pursuits lead the stars to their roles in *Ice Station Zebra*.²⁸ Brown received wider publicity with an article and picture portrait in the February 1968 issue of the fashion magazine Harper's *Bazaar*.²⁹ On the eve of the Los Angeles premiere on October 20th, Hudson and Brown appeared together on *The Steve Allen Show*.³⁰

One newspaper piece also applies the star transition theme to Brown. Titled "Jim Brown's End Run Around Racial Prejudice," William Tusher's article details Brown's achievements gaining roles intended for white actors. Thus the focus shifts to several of Brown's films, as well as his offscreen work as a leader for his Negro Industrial and Economic Union.³¹ The piece echoes Sturges' assessment of Brown's role in *Ice Station Zebra*, "intended for a white man before it was turned over to him."³² The frequent reiteration of this fact reinforces the ambiguity of Brown's role: racial difference is both negated and emphasized a black actor playing a white actor's role. Brown's star transition story follows a black star becoming simply a star; ironically, his next major film, *100 Rifles*, would vividly reassert his racial identity in a taboo onscreen romance with Raquel Welch. Finally, Brown's star status still relies on his football past; the

²⁸ Norma Lee Browning, "Dramatic Roles Lure Rock Hudson," *Chicago Tribune*, 25 August 1967, B20; Dorothy Manners, "'Secret Agent' Star Quitting TV Cold," *The Washington Post, Times Herald*, 4 August 1967, B5; Norma Lee Browning, "Intricacies of a Double Life That Ernest Borgnine Leads," *Chicago Tribune*, 31 December 1967, E6; Wayne Warga, "Restless Intellect of Actor Tony Bill," *Los Angeles Times*, 22 July 1968, E1.

²⁹ "Magazine Profiles Brown," *Daily Defender*, 13 February 11, 1968.

³⁰ "The Steve Allen Show," *Los Angeles Times*, 20 October 1968.

³¹ William Tusher, "Jim Brown's End Run Around Race Prejudice," *Los Angeles Times*, 28 January 1968, D11.

³² Tusher, "Jim Brown's End Run," D11.

article begins with a running back reference in the title and a segue from fighting the “color barrier” on the field to fighting it in Hollywood.³³

During *Ice Station Zebra*’s long but disappointing run from October of 1968 through the end of 1969, Brown reached the peak of his stardom among white and black audiences. Yet the film itself appeared as more of an achievement than an attraction in black newspapers. Headlines such as “Ex-Footballer Assigned New Big Picture Role” in the *Chicago Defender*³⁴ and “Jim Brown Slated to Star in New Film” in the *Los Angeles Sentinel*³⁵ appeared in July and August of 1967. However by the time the roadshow release reached many cities, Brown was already the leading man in several other films.

Ice Station Zebra premiered in Chicago in April 1969. A *Chicago Tribune* columnist commented, “With the opening of MGM’s “Kenner” and “Dark of the Sun” at the McVickers Friday, Actor Jim Brown has an unprecedented four pictures playing in downtown theaters. The others are “100 Rifles” and “Ice Station Zebra.”³⁶ *Ice Station Zebra* did not reach the South Side, the predominantly black section of Chicago, until it premiered at the Avalon in August of 1969, almost two years after *Ice Station Zebra*’s world premiere in Los Angeles.³⁷ Further deflating the attraction, the film had to “deCinemaramatized” for second run theaters; by the summer of 1969 in Los Angeles, it merely formed part of a double bill with Brown’s newer film, *Kenner*.³⁸ A key segment of Brown’s audience, urban black viewers, had to wait well past the national promotion

³³ Tusher, “Jim Brown’s End Run,” D11.

³⁴ “Ex-Footballer Assigned New Big Picture Role,” *Chicago Defender*, 8 July 1967, 12.

³⁵ “Jim Brown Slated to Star in New Film,” *Los Angeles Sentinel*, 17 August 1967, B6.

³⁶ Robert Wiedrich, “Tower Ticker,” *Chicago Tribune*, 27 April 1969, 30.

³⁷ “Avalon Shows ‘Ice Station Zebra’,” *Chicago Defender*, 2 August 1969, 14.

³⁸ Kevin Thomas, “Jim Brown Featured in Film Drama ‘Kenner,’” *Los Angeles Times*, 20 June 1969, C15.

surge to see *Ice Station Zebra* at their neighborhood theater; this delay prevented the film from becoming an “event” movie for Brown’s African-American fans.

The Sheridan, a Loew’s movie palace in New York that could seat 2,394 people, was demolished in August of 1969. *Ice Station Zebra* was the last film to run there, closing on June 17th before the theater “went dark”.³⁹ The demise of this downtown theater serves as a poignant symbol for the devastating losses that crippled MGM, ended Cinerama, and began a three year Hollywood recession. More specifically, the death of the urban movie palace heralded the end of roadshow exhibition. The audience had become too small and unpredictable to depend on reserved seating engagements with high admission prices. Even the widely appealing Super-Actioner had to expand its audience in the early 1970’s, eventually becoming the disaster film, a genre allowing actresses and non-macho male actors to join the spectacular adventure.

Despite the film’s failures, the aggressive promotion of *Ice Station Zebra* (1968) certainly raised Jim Brown’s Hollywood profile. *The Split* (1968) appeared that same October, providing Brown with his first opportunity to play the leading man. *The Split* was a Super-Actioner on a smaller scale, featuring a very strong cast but no one as famous as Rock Hudson. Unlike *Ice Station Zebra*, this film delivered the constant action and excitement that audiences expected from the genre; nonetheless, *The Split* also failed to become a hit. While *Ice Station Zebra* exemplified the industrial changes that challenged Hollywood in the late 1960’s, *The Split* demonstrated the cultural changes would soon arrest Brown’s mainstream stardom.

³⁹ McCandlish Phillips, “For the Sheridan, This Is ‘The End’,” 28 August 1969, 47.

Chapter 3: The Split (1968) and the Splitting

Released in November of 1968, *The Split* would be a fitting title for the months that preceded it. As Rick Perlstein painstakingly details in *Nixonland*, 1968 saw the social and political fabric of America radically riven on several fronts. A wave of assassinations, student protests, Vietnam horrors and race riots pushed many Americans to doubt if the country could survive the era intact. These traumatic events splintered American consensus, promoting a violent polarization between races, regions, generations, and political parties.

Yet fittingly *The Split* also marked a dramatic turning point for Brown's stardom. For the first time, Brown appeared as the lead actor rather than as a supporting player. In the film's narrative, he led a group of white criminals on an audacious heist, rather than valiantly fighting for a white American cause, as in *The Dirty Dozen*, *Dark of the Sun*, and *Ice Station Zebra*. In the former films, Brown's bravado, power, and violence were circumscribed by his duties as a soldier; he shed this safety net in *The Split*, directing his abilities against society as a master criminal. And taking full advantage of post-Code cinematic freedom, he gets away with the crime.

The representation of Brown's racial identity onscreen also escaped its past limitations. As a strong black male, he was carefully compartmentalized in the *Dirty Dozen*, placed as one of several prisoners victimized by the law and valorized by death in combat. The treatment of race in *Ice Station Zebra* was sublimated, never mentioned but ever present. In *The Split*, racial antagonism appears explicitly within another dysfunctional Super-Actioner group. While racial slurs appeared in *The Dirty Dozen*,

they were fully relegated to offscreen characters (the “crackers” who tried to castrate Jefferson), bit players (the soldiers who attack Jefferson in the bathroom), and the traitor (Telly Savalas as Maggot). Yet in *The Split*, Warren Oates openly chafes at a black leader. Instead of Lee Marvin’s harsh philosophy of combat equality, this film’s characters merely tolerate Brown’s racial difference for financial gain, creating a striking similarity to Brown’s own philosophy of “green power” (black financial strength) over black power. Once Brown fails to promptly deliver each criminal’s share of the heist, his accomplices quickly turn on him with a renewed sense of racism.

However this open treatment of racism also offered a greater hope for mutual understanding. Towards the end of the film, Brown and a detective (Gene Hackman) can joke about racial prejudice without splintering their relationship, establishing a nascent form of the interracial buddy-cop film that gained popularity in the 1980’s. By playing a charismatic criminal, Brown invites the audience to appreciate a flawed black character, rather than the impossible perfection of Sidney Poitier in *Guess Who’s Coming to Dinner* (1967) or the encapsulated power of a career soldier in Brown’s earlier films. Finally, Brown establishes a paradigm for integration that perfectly meshes with his star persona. Rather than asking for acceptance, Brown will win begrudging respect through action. By directly proving his male superiority over each criminal, he forces them to accept his claim to leadership. Brown’s unique prowess gains him a pivotal role among racists and non-racists alike, just as it had during his football career.

In February of 1968, *Playboy* published Alex Haley’s lengthy interview with Jim Brown, providing a remarkable document detailing Brown’s persona and personality to date through a complex array of lenses. Significantly, an unprecedented turmoil engulfed

America between this interview and *The Split's* November release. The film wonderfully embodies this atmosphere of constant conflict; Brown emerges as the master competitor who wins racial integration through excelling in all conflicts. Ironically, as America violently splintered, *The Split* arguably offered the most realistic picture of integration in Brown's career.

Split Personality

The *Playboy* interview appeared As Brown approached full-fledged movie stardom. This piece offers three distinct perspectives: those of *Playboy's* editors, of Alex Haley, and of Brown himself. While these viewpoints establish fascinating contrasts amongst each other, they also provide inherent internal conflicts. *Playboy* existed primarily as a men's magazine dedicated to nude pinups and idealized bachelorhood; yet during the 1950's and 1960's, it published myriad stories and articles by highly regarded authors (such as Haley) who defied cultural norms. Thus *Playboy* adopted a split persona between the dominant societal objectification of women and the literary voice of the changing counterculture and sexual revolution. Alex Haley's *Autobiography of Malcolm X*, originally published in *Playboy* between 1964 and 1965, placed him as a preeminent voice of the growing black power movement. Yet by working for *Playboy* and publishing a best seller, he equally functioned as an interpreter of black political ideologies to a mainstream white audience. Finally, Brown approached this interview with conflicting objectives. Ostensibly, he aimed to further promote his film career to a wider audience; however this interview also provided the rare opportunity for Brown to speak to each aspect of his persona. Football, acting, and black community activism

were given nearly equal attention, and Brown offered a detailed self-analysis to his widest reading audience.¹

In an introduction to the interview, *Playboy* describes Brown's physical attributes with the elaborate precision usually reserved for their centerfolds.

At six feet two and 230 pounds, Brown was the most powerful and elusive running back ever to play the game. With a massive neck, steely arms and thighs thicker than most men's waists, he could drag tacklers with him as he ran, send them flying with a straight-arm, sidestep them with his misdirective footwork and out-distance them with his flashing speed.²

Here, in the second and third sentences of the article, the author begins the story of Brown with the story of Brown's body. Each individual part appears as legendary in strength and size; his physical stature alone emerges on par with his actual athletic achievements. The reference to "most men's waists" particularly emphasizes the exceptional status of his physical being; and by drawing attention to the size of waists and thighs, the description implies a similarly large phallus between these parts.

This glowing description of the black athletic body gains political implications in Eldridge Cleaver's analysis of black athletes in *Soul on Ice*, published the same year. He begins, "Haven't you ever wondered why the white man genuinely applauds a black man who achieves excellence with his body in the field of sports, while he hates to see a black man achieve excellence with his brain?"³ He finds evidence of this phenomenon in white

¹ Brown provides more detail about his political, racial and sexual philosophy in his two autobiographies; however this format is more widely read by established fans than the more general readership of *Playboy*. Jim Brown with Steve Delsohn, *Out of Bounds* (New York, NY: Zebra Books, 1989); Jim Brown with Myron Cope, *Off My Chest* (New York, NY: Doubleday, 1964).

² Stephen Randall, ed., *The Playboy Interview: They Played the Game* (Milwaukie, OR: M Press, 2006), 99.

³ Eldridge Cleaver, *Soul on Ice*, 1st ed. (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1968), 163.

America's adulation over Joe Louis' defeat of Max Schmelling in contrast to a white competitor's defeat of Floyd Patterson.

Joe's victory over Schmelling confirmed, while Floyd's defeat contradicted, the white man's image of the black man as the Supermasculine Menial, the personification of mindless brute force, the perfect slave? And Sonny Liston, the mindless Body, is preferred over loud-mouthed Cassius Clay, because, after all, it takes at least a birdbrain to run a loud mouth, and the white man despises even that much brain in a black man."⁴

While Cleaver makes an extremely categorical argument about race and gender roles, he illustrates how the black athlete, especially one with imposing physical power, represents a problematic figure for racial politics. Later in the piece, *Playboy* addressed Brown's intellect specifically in terms of his political activism; yet as Cleaver demonstrated, Brown's body fits a powerful symbolic register that remains irreconcilable with a developed mind. Thus while the interview disproved these physical assumptions, this may only have further frustrated readers who found comfort within these stereotypes. In fact Brown's image, onscreen and offscreen, oscillated between the outspoken controversy of Muhammad Ali and the pure action figure that Cleaver saw in Sonny Liston. Brown's film career trajectory lends some credence to Cleaver's argument; soon after he moved from one-dimensional action roles (*The Dirty Dozen*, *Ice Station Zebra*) to starring roles that challenge racial boundaries (*The Split*, *100 Rifles*), his universal appeal abruptly declined.

Playboy also identifies Brown as a contradictory figure in their synthesis of his persona. After describing Brown's demeanor as reserved and "icily aloof," the editors indicate a radically different personality in a summary of Brown's 1964 autobiography, *Off My Chest*:

⁴ Cleaver, 163-4.

In it, Brown demonstrated that his hard-driving, no-nonsense brand of football was a graphic metaphor for his lifestyle: He appraised various football personalities with a brutal candor that left many bruised and angry; and he revealed an attitude of racial militance—further explored here—that added a facet of passionate social commitment to his already complex image.⁵

Following a discussion of Brown’s 1965 sex trial in Cleveland (he was acquitted on charges of “molesting” underage girls and a paternity suit), they continue: “Not surprisingly, today’s controversial Jim Brown is the product of a diverse and paradoxical background.”⁶ As with Cleaver’s model, *Playboy* also configures Brown within binary oppositions. He is quiet and outspoken, brutal but socially committed.

Ironically, Brown reveals in the interview his rather moderate racial political philosophy, focusing on economic investments in black communities. However this moderation defies *Playboy*’s narrative of a divisive and divided Brown, which frames him within the widening conflict between racial and political groups in 1968. Rather than defining Brown as a successful hybrid, they exaggerate his controversial appeal. Thus they refer to his “growing image as a hard-line racial activist” due to a brief business association with Black Muslim fight promoters; they similarly describe Jefferson in *The Dirty Dozen* as a racial militant.⁷ Never mind that Brown’s character was apolitical and violent in *self-defense* against racists- or that white audiences failed to connect Brown’s character to racial militancy or rioting. Half a year after the film’s premiere, this association was not only obvious to *Playboy*’s staff; it was the core of Brown’s appeal to black viewers. “...*The Dirty Dozen* opened and Negroes in unprecedented numbers

⁵ Randall, 100.

⁶ Randall, 100.

⁷ Randall, 101-102.

flocked to see him—aptly cast as a racially militant soldier.”⁸ For *Playboy*, Brown signified both Black Power and the growing appeal of Black Power to all African-Americans.

The *Playboy* introduction also includes Alex Haley’s first impression of Jim Brown, which reaffirms *Playboy*’s initial summation. Haley notes, “I saw him consume two pounds of barbequed ribs as an appetizer while a four-pound T-bone broiled. Dessert was a quart of ice cream topped by a can of peaches.”⁹ Once again, the discussion of Brown begins with a near mythical account focused upon his body, describing him like a Paul Bunyan figure. Haley continues, “Dropping his well-known mask of impassivity, he became amiable and animated, especially when he was talking about football. When racial matters came up, however, he turned dead serious and often punctuated his pungent remarks with a baleful glare and a meaty forefinger jabbed in my direction.”¹⁰ Here Haley establishes himself as the conduit for white readers to comprehend an enigmatic black celebrity. While he can make Brown comfortable enough to talk freely, he clearly positions himself as a target of Brown’s critiques of racism rather than as a sympathetic listener. Haley reinforces this framing of Brown’s identity as a contradiction.

However a much greater contradiction emerges between this introduction and Brown’s actual responses. Brown’s opinions on nearly every aspect of his various careers and identities are far from radical. But by 1968, the fractiousness of the era dominates *Playboy*’s perspective on Brown. Furthermore, his frank analysis of racial issues in Hollywood, football, and American society echo a radical political language that

⁸ Randall, 102.

⁹ Randall, 102.

¹⁰ Randall, 102.

believes his essentially centrist position. Brown provides a remarkable assessment of his unique place in a country riven by racial unrest; by the time *The Split* was released in November, these fissures in American society had only widened. Yet in February of 1968, Brown could already alienate much of America merely by addressing racial inequality and violence. While Brown's star power continued to rise, his audience had already begun to splinter.

Discussing his football career, Brown disavows a superhuman body.

I learned that if I was going to make it with the pros, I was going to have to develop something extra, something more than sheer muscle and flashy footwork. I was going to have to *outthink* the opposition. I would say that I credit 80 percent of the success I enjoyed to the fact that I played a *mental* game. The purely physical part—keeping in condition, running, passing, stuff like that—I'd credit with no more than 20 percent. It's just common sense.¹¹

As the introduction to the interview demonstrates, Brown's opinion was far from "common sense." This assumption of pure physicality over mental power defined Brown's film career as well. *The Split* became one of the few roles where Brown could display such intelligence as a master criminal; yet even this plot provided for plenty of physical feats and direct allusions to football.

Brown also expresses concern over losing his personality to his physical achievements. "I think every record I've ever made will get wiped out, ultimately... As a matter of fact, I almost hated to break a record when I was playing, because I always felt I was becoming more and more a statistic in people's minds than a human being."¹²

Brown was not only realistic (O.J. Simpson would break his single season rushing record in 1974) but also justifiably concerned that his place in football history allowed people to

¹¹ Randall, 112.

¹² Randall, 105-106.

forget who he was and focus instead on his achievements on paper. While acting also foregrounded his body, it precluded the mathematical abstraction of sports fame.

Despite Brown's denials, Haley continues to emphasize his legendary body:

Playboy: Didn't your physical condition have anything to do with it? Dr. W. Montague Cobb, a Howard University anatomist, has said, "Jim Brown's bone structure must resemble forged vanadium steel..."

Brown: He's looking at the wrong part of my anatomy. I've always made it a practice to use my *head* before I use my body.¹³

Brown consistently objects to attributing his success to his physical form. However the body remains Brown's salient image on the football field, the movie screen, and the popular discourse. This argument highlights one of the perceived contradictions within Brown; he wants to define his celebrity in terms of his intellect, but it has been irrevocably forged by his physical stature.

Brown recognizes a similar misapprehension in his racial identity. He remembers a young white girl running up to hug him during an autograph session. "I anticipate the impulsive intent of a sweet, innocent little child—and I have to maneuver somehow to prevent her acting natural. Because too many times before, see, I had straightened up from a child's embrace and caught the disapproving white facial expressions."¹⁴ Here the symbolic image of miscegenation overrides the logic of the situation, and Brown has to once again draw his body away. Brown provides a moving image of the constant awareness of racial difference he must confront.

Brown expands upon this incident to make a blunter point: "Many a time since then, I have walked on through a crowd, not speaking to anybody, and it helped to build my "mean and evil" reputation. But this kind of bitter experience isn't unique with me, or

¹³ Randall, 111.

¹⁴ Randall, 118.

even with black athletes; it happens to every black man and woman in America.”¹⁵

Brown rightfully connects this story to the larger struggle against racial prejudice. Yet by totalizing “bitter experience” for all blacks, his language moves closer towards the rhetoric of Black Power. Speaking amidst rising fear and anger over racial violence, his added comments leave an opportunity for suspicious readers to affirm his militancy.

Brown’s assessment of black celebrity takes his argument even further. After recalling an incident at Syracuse when he was harassed by police, he describes fame as merely a mask for ongoing racism.

But you see, you don’t forget a thing like that, not if somebody handed you every trophy in football and 15 Academy Awards. That’s why a black man, if he’s got any sense at all, will never get swept away with special treatment if he happens to be famous, because he knows that the minute he isn’t where somebody *recognizes* who he is, then he’s just another *nigger*. That’s what the Negro struggle is all about; that’s why we black people have to keep fighting for freedom in this country. We demand only to live—and let live—like any ordinary American. We don’t want to have to be somebody *special* to be treated with respect. I can’t understand why white people find it so hard to understand that.¹⁶

In April, *Guess Who’s Coming to Dinner?* (1967) would win the Academy Award for best screenplay, while *In The Heat of the Night* (1967) beat it out for Best Picture. Both films featured Sidney Poitier playing exceptionally talented characters who finally won begrudging recognition from a less exceptional white man. Brown eviscerates the messages of these esteemed and popular fictions and Poitier’s roles. He frames racism in terms of how average African-Americans are judged; white adulation for black celebrities merely hides the ongoing racism faced by non-famous people. Brown’s notion of race relations is far from militant, but it flies in the face of popular discourse in Hollywood

¹⁵ Randall, 118.

¹⁶ Randall, 120.

films. By using words like “struggle” and “fighting”, while decrying white ignorance, he again allows readers to link his moderate opinions to radical politics.

Brown’s screen persona places him in a similar position to Poitier’s roles. Haley quotes Hollywood figures who have worked with Brown: “[Lee] Marvin has said there is an acting void that you can fill, especially among Negroes: ‘He’s seemingly more believable to the average Negro than guys like Poitier.’ And director Robert Aldrich has said, ‘There isn’t another Negro actor around quite like Brown. Poitier, Belafonte or Ossie Davis aren’t Brown’s style.’¹⁷ Here Brown appears as unique and natural in comparison to the idealized roles of his black peers. Yet Brown is often less “believable” as an actor, and his physical appearance is the least typical. However Marvin expresses these traits in terms of black viewers. Years before the Blaxploitation boom, Brown satisfies the need for actors with whom black audiences can identify, while Poitier’s roles remain unrealistically ideal. But Poitier’s remarkable, prolonged box office success implies that he is still the black star in whom white audiences believed or wanted to believe. Brown’s tenuous star image thus must satisfy both racial groups, while Poitier can succeed as long as he satisfies the white majority.

Brown also identifies himself in terms of black audiences.

Have you ever been to any Negro theater with a movie going, with a Negro in it? Well, you can just *feel* the tension of that audience, pulling for this guy to do something good, something that will give them a little pride. That’s why I feel so good that Negroes are finally starting to play roles that other Negroes, watching, will feel proud of, and respond to, and identify with, and feel *real* about, instead of being crushed by some Uncle Tom on the screen making a fool of himself. You’re not going to find any of us playing Uncle Toms anymore... That’s why I can say, before this picture [*Ice Station Zebra*] is even released, that a lot of Negroes are going to come to see it.¹⁸

¹⁷ Randall, 104.

¹⁸ Randall, 104-105.

Brown accurately describes his star images as having a counter appeal to that of Sidney Poitier; while Poitier was not a mere stereotype, black viewers found it harder to relate to his righteous persona. While Poitier offered a more realistic body, the escape he offered was an idealized picture of racial struggle; conversely, Brown offered an ideal of strength with a less idealized personality. When he appeared alongside established white stars in major action films, drawing additional black viewers was a difference maker in the film's profits.

However as the star attraction, Brown would have to convince white viewers to accept a less perfect and respectful black figure who still commanded respect from his white onscreen accomplices. *The Split* attempted to achieve this mass appeal by inverting the formula. They surrounded Brown with a cast of well-known white actors to broaden his appeal. However as the dominant audience, white viewers seemed less likely to settle for concessions than black viewers desperate for onscreen identification figures. While historically, a black supporting actor could draw in black audiences, white audiences had much less experience ceding the spotlight to black characters.

Later in the interview, Brown addresses the most controversial associations of his public image: racial violence and miscegenation. As always, Brown's views are far from radical, but he openly confronts a much more powerful racial mythology than Poitier's films had done. Brown's comments simultaneously show why he is not a radical and why he will continue to be perceived as one for many Americans. His responses are as brave as they are impolitic for a time when many Americans believed a racial civil war as immanent and inevitable.

Haley asks Brown about Martin Luther King, Jr.'s nonviolent activism. Brown sees this approach as “outdated,” but he appears equally dissatisfied with racial violence. Instead he advocates an economically focused solution, reminiscent of Booker T Washington’s philosophy.

Think what could have been accomplished if the nation’s black leaders, at that time had actively mobilized the goodwill of all the millions of white people who were willing, even anxious, to help the Negro help himself. We could have had millions, white and black, working toward that goal with tremendous results. That was what I felt and what I tried to do, in forming my National Negro Industrial and Economic Union. But no one listened—not in the movement and not in Washington. What happened, instead, was that the marching went on and on, getting more and more militant, until a lot of white people began to resent it—and to feel threatened. Whenever any human being feels threatened—it doesn’t matter if he’s right or wrong—he starts reacting defensively, negatively. We lost the white sympathy and support we’d fought so hard to win... On the threshold of real progress, the door simply closed in our faces. The inevitable consequences of that frustration set fire to Watts, Detroit, Newark and two dozen other cities.¹⁹

Brown’s perspective mirrors the viewpoint of many white liberals. Since Watts in 1965, race riots had dampened much of the support for Civil Rights legislation that had swept Lyndon Johnson to a landslide reelection in 1964.²⁰ Furthermore, economic programs were the least controversial side of racial politics. However even this moderate statement ran counter to the opinions of a growing number of conservatives who would chafe at Brown’s analysis of the riots. Many Americans began to see Civil Rights legislation as the cause of the violence, unconvinced by the ongoing racial inequality and non-enforcement of Civil Rights laws that helped fuel riots. Nixon would campaign on this wave of white resentment to win the 1968 election.²¹

¹⁹ Randall, 120-122.

²⁰ Rick Perlstein, *Nixonland: The Rise of a President and the Fracturing of America* (New York, NY: Scribner, 2008), 6.

²¹ Perlstein, 117-123.

Brown's later statements are even more explosive. Asked directly about "Negro violence," he responds, "The greatest violence this country has ever known has been on behalf of the various vested interests of white people... outright criminal violence depicted in the history books and on television as heroic!"²² Asked again, he answers, "I am a 100-percent advocate that if a man slaps you, you should slap him back."²³ Haley also asks him directly about a future race war. Brown answers, "If nothing is done to *prevent* riots—and I don't mean with more tanks—race war is a very real and immediate probability."²⁴ Later he continues, "I hope that black freedom can be won peaceably. That's my *hope*. But things I keep seeing make me skeptical. Historically, great battles for freedom have seldom been won peacefully."²⁵ Brown even mentions the rumor of black concentration camps. While Brown's language is direct and seemingly confrontational, it is a far cry from the philosophy of groups such as the Black Panthers, who actively sought to instigate violence.²⁶ However Brown's argument for self-defense was more widely associated with whites frightened by the riots; even retaliatory violence placed Brown within widespread fears of Black Power.

The core of Brown's views on racial politics is largely pragmatic. On the subject of "black-power firebrands", Brown replies, "I feel there is a need for them. Unfortunately, the average white seems to need a good scare from the Carmichaels and the Rap Browns before he'll listen to less dramatic requests. Speaking for myself, I think it's too easy to just go out and threaten Whitey. What is that doing to help black

²² Randall, 122.

²³ Randall, 122.

²⁴ Randall, 123.

²⁵ Randall, 125.

²⁶ Perlstein, 376.

people?”²⁷ He addresses Black Muslims in a similar fashion: “Like many, many Negroes—maybe 90 percent of us privately—I agree with much of what they say, but I don’t personally accept their separatist philosophy, and I’m not a member.”²⁸ Much like the riots, Brown sees Black Power groups as an expression of frustration. He shows no affinity for their radical aims and stances against integration.

Brown advocates an economic method to promote racial equality:

Only I call it *green* power. That’s my idea of what needs to become the black people’s special interest. I want to see black people pooling their monies, their skills, their brains and their political power to better themselves, to participate more fully in the mainstream of American life. And that requires white support. The black people simply don’t have the money to support the programs needed to train them in what they can do for themselves.²⁹

Brown’s philosophy rests upon capitalist integration; his goals are to promote greater involvement in American society, rather than the new world order pursued by many Black Power groups. However Haley and *Playboy*’s framing of his views in the introduction suggests that his more divisive opinions override his moderate aims among the larger public. At the very least, *Playboy* could exploit Brown’s more controversial statements to draw reader interest, which in turn predisposed the reader to radicalize Brown’s opinions.

The deepest controversy surrounding Brown’s star image was his open confrontation of miscegenation. While he would break this barrier onscreen in *100 Rifles* over a year later, he was already clearly breaking the taboo in public. In an anecdote at the opening of Toback’s biography of Brown, he tells the story of a 1966 television interview between David Susskind and Martin Luther King, Jr. After a lengthy on air

²⁷ Randall, 126.

²⁸ Randall, 125.

²⁹ Randall, 127.

discussion of race and politics, King told Susskind during a commercial break that sex was the central issue.³⁰ Jim Brown rarely showed such reservations; in fact he was more than happy to clarify his thoughts on the subject for Alex Haley.

Brown begins by clarifying Haley's indirect question:

Playboy: Quite apart from paternity suits, it's fairly common knowledge that you've long been the target of demonstrative admiration by many female football fans. Is it just coincidence that most of them happen to be white?

Brown: You're just tipping around the edges of the big question at the bottom of the mind of every white man in this country: "What about you blacks and white women?" Right? Well, OK, let's talk straight about that.³¹

Haley does a wonderful job of neutrally framing the question. He even allows Brown the option of disavowing these insinuations of miscegenation as a mere coincidence. This question is essential to an interview in a magazine dominated by sexual images and humor; but unlike more explicit magazines, even the interviewer attempts some airbrushing. Instead, Brown confronts the topic head on.

Much like Cleaver, Brown details his specific interpretation of the miscegenation myth:

For generations, he [the white man] has painted the black man as such an animal that it's not only natural but inevitable that the white woman's mind occupies itself with this big, exciting *taboo*. And yeah, a lot of them do more than *think* about it; they decide to find out. And when they do, they find that the black man isn't the gorilla the white man has painted; that he may be as much of a gentleman as any man she has known and may even pay her more respect than her own kind.³²

Brown quickly establishes that his knowledge of miscegenation stems from extensive personal experience. Even more radically, he reverses the inherent meaning of the taboo.

³⁰ James Toback, *Jim: The Author's Self-Centered Memoir on the Great Jim Brown* (Doubleday and Co, Garden City, NJ: 1971), 9.

³¹ Randall, 116.

³² Randall, 117.

While miscegenation appears to be an exotic, forbidden pleasure for a white woman, the actual pleasure and threat comes from her realizing racial equality. Much like his discussion of his body in football, Brown never mentions any special sexual prowess as a black man, an essential part of the myth. In Cleaver's terms, he introduces a much more substantial threat to the white male ego: black men can interest white women not through mere physicality or taboo; they can compete for their affection on equal terms.

Brown courts further controversy by discussing the historical roots of the taboo in slavery.

You can't blame her for responding—and you can't blame him for responding to *her*, because he's the same man who for 300 years couldn't open his mouth or he would *die*, while he saw the white man having sex as he pleased with the black woman... It might help you to do some thinking about who genetically changed the color of a whole *race* of people, diluted them from black Africans not into black *Americans* but into *Negroes*; even the word is a white man's creation, a stigma, a kind of proper form for "nigger." Historically, there's been about a thousand times more sex between white men and black women than between black men and white women—and a thousand times more black man-white woman sex goes on in white men's *minds* than ever does in fact. And I'm not in the least criticizing where it *is* fact... The white man may consider it *his* business; in, fact most do; but I don't feel that it's *mine!*³³

Again, Brown combats the myth with an opposite interpretation, this time with historical support. The black menace to white womanhood appears largely as a figure of white imagination, while all African-Americans have been shaped by white slaveholders raping black women. Furthermore, Brown concludes that he cannot be troubled by the taboo, regardless of white outrage. In this amazing soliloquy, Brown embodies the same threat that he sees in the Black Muslims: "The main reason they're so disliked by whites is that

³³ Randall, 117.

so much of what they say about the black condition is the truth, and white America doesn't like to hear the truth about its own bigotry."³⁴

At the end of the interview, Brown summarizes his controversial image in terms of sexuality.

“Jim,” they tell me, “it’ll hurt your image. It’ll alienate the goodwill of your public”—meaning the *white* public. Well, I don’t need that kind of concern for my welfare. I’m not going to be anybody’s little boy. I’m a *man*, a *black* man, in a culture where black manhood has been kicked around and threatened for generations. So that’s why I don’t feel I need to take too much advice about how I’m supposed to think and act. And that’s why I have to tell the truth like I see it. Maybe some people will holler; maybe they’ll hate me for it. But I’ll just stick it out, walk tall and wait for the truth to be vindicated.³⁵

Jim Brown identifies himself as an uncompromising fighter for unrestrained black masculinity. While his racial politics were labeled as militant, his sexual politics provide the strongest challenge to cinematic and cultural taboos. Brown gained universal appreciation for his onscreen machismo, but Brown’s popularity waned after the interracial sex featured in *100 Rifles*. By 1974, his films no longer reached the white public, whether he provoked their hatred or not.

In many ways, *The Split* was Brown’s best opportunity to fully exploit his complex persona detailed in the *Playboy* interview. *100 Rifles* revolves around the interracial sex scene, leaving little emphasis on developing Brown’s character. By avoiding this sexual controversy, *The Split* allows Brown to perform in full force. Supported by his strongest cast as a leading man, Brown plays a brash criminal leader assembling a suspicious gang of white thugs. Brown’s race is never ignored; instead, Brown’s success in a multitude of situations convinces others to ignore it. When the heist

³⁴ Randall, 125.

³⁵ Randall, 132-133.

goes wrong, racism boils back to the surface. But through it all, Brown does what he pleases whether his white accomplices like it or not. His role also highlights his intellect and attitude, as well as his requisite physical strengths.

1968 Redux

It is impossible to summarize how much America changed between Brown's February interview and the October opening of *The Split*; but a rough account of the many events that occurred in less than a year is vital to understanding the film's reception context. While American views on race and violence had already begun to polarize, 1968 drove competing opinions to their extremes. The opening salvo came on February 29th, when the Kerner Commission, initiated by Lyndon Johnson to study the riots, released their results. The introduction was as jarring as any of Brown's responses to Haley:

This is our basic conclusion: Our nation is moving toward two societies, one black, one white—separate and unequal... Segregation and poverty have created in the racial ghetto a destructive environment totally unknown to most white Americans. What white Americans have never understood—but what the Negro can never forget—is that white society is deeply implicated in the ghetto. White institutions created it, white institutions maintain it, and white society condones it.³⁶

However as Rick Perlstein emphasizes in *Nixonland*, many white Americans were unready and unwilling to shoulder the blame. “In a fifteen-city poll only one-fifth of whites agreed that Negroes suffered “some job discrimination; 40 percent thought they didn't suffer any at all.”³⁷ While the report emphasized debilitating poverty and segregation, the “totally unknown” ghetto remained an imaginary space for most whites, allowing them to dismiss the validity of the Kerner Commission's findings.

³⁶ As quoted in Perlstein, 239.

³⁷ Perlstein, 240.

Prior to 1968, riots had been largely confined to the summer; now racial violence could erupt at any time. Even peace demonstrators, such as Martin Luther King, Jr., found it impossible to avoid. King had to flee a March 18th march in Memphis once looting and police brutality broke out. As Perlstein concludes, “This was all the proof some needed: the appearance of Dr. Martin Luther King brought forth riots. Or at least, couldn’t stop them.”³⁸ King’s April 3rd assassination caused unprecedented destruction nationwide. Riots broke out in as many as 125 ghettos; in Newark alone 600 residents were left homeless by nearly 200 fires.³⁹

Further violence exceeded racial motivations. Robert Kennedy was assassinated on June 5th. On August 24th, the right-wing separatist Minutemen raided a pacifist farm, initiating a shootout with state troopers.⁴⁰ August 28th brought the almost surreal violence between protestors and police officers in the streets of Chicago at the Democratic National Convention. Yet this broadening conflict was conflated, especially for political gain, with the existing racial unrest. Perlstein describes how Nixon’s campaign commercials deftly took advantage of this confusion: “No black people were seen rioting in commercials like these; that would have been labeled “racism.” Instead, only the *aftereffects* of black rioting were shown: rubble and flames. Rioting white hippies in Chicago were thus a visual godsend.”⁴¹

Perlstein also demonstrates how Nixon subtly took advantage of fears of miscegenation.

³⁸ Perlstein, 251.

³⁹ Perlstein, 256.

⁴⁰ Perlstein, 340.

⁴¹ Perlstein, 338.

Let us recognize that the first civil right of every American is to be free from domestic violence. (More burning buildings, rubble; the naked torso of a female mannequin. No black men in these pictures, just depictions of the consequences of what black men did—and in that naked white female torso, a suggestion of the most awful thing black men did of all.) So I pledge to you we shall have order in the United States.⁴²

Nixon's insinuations paid off; he narrowly won the election a month after *The Split* premiered in Chicago. While ongoing violence suggested a larger cultural war erupting in the late 1960's, all civil unrest could inevitably be tied back to deep-seated racial fears. In February, Brown's controversial statements could already radicalize his image. Perlstein comments, "The old distinctions and gradations on the left—freak, pacifist, New Leftist, black militant—were breaking down into an undifferentiated, and paranoid, insurrectionism."⁴³ Brown had already been framed as a divisive figure; the growing fear and ambiguity of 1968 only exacerbated this split.

The Split neither denies this cultural schism nor posits it as insurmountable. In fact Brown appears as the ideal unifying figure for this bellicose era. He is far from a paean of virtue, playing a criminal who revels in overpowering his accomplices. Brown succeeds because his unique talent convinces white characters to tolerate and eventually appreciate him. He embodies "green power," providing the financial incentive of a bank heist to assemble his crew. Criminal success translates into a skilled competition, and befitting his football legacy, Brown emerges as the top competitor.

⁴² Perlstein, 345.

⁴³ Perlstein, 339.

Splitting the Gang

Early in *The Split*, Brown's character, McClain, embraces Gladys (Julie Harris). This flirtation with miscegenation is quickly displaced. After Brown gives Gladys a peck on the cheek, they merely discuss a possible robbery. This hint of sexuality is displaced to a black woman, McClain's ex-wife Ellie (Diahann Carroll), in the very next scene. They fight over McClain's disappearance, but soon end up in bed together; the sex scene is non-explicit, but supplies the narrative impetus for Brown to appear muscular and shirtless for the following scene. Ellie slaps him and calls him, "A black son of a bitch," establishing early on that race will be openly mentioned in the film.

After McClain's masculine body and sex appeal are established, he accompanies Gladys to a football game at the Los Angeles Coliseum, the site of the heist. Director Gordon Flemyng cuts from Brown's POV to a football program featuring a uniformed player on the cover; here the editing further enforces the extra-diegetic connection to Brown the football player, as if he's viewing an image of his former self. Yet the narrative also disavows this persona. Gladys has to inform McClain that an upcoming playoff game will bring in a huge amount of money from concessions; here Brown's character, almost implausibly, appears to know less about football than his female accomplice.

The next section of the film provides a series of action vignettes; these scenes establish each member of the gang. Later the audience realizes McClain has attacked each one of them to gauge their criminal skills. Following the professional plot featured in other Super-Actioners, each character brings a specialized skill to the team. However in each exchange, McClain proves that he can outperform them at their own specialty.

The casting also places McClain as the handsome straight man leading a group of semi-comical character actors. At a gym, he starts a brutal fistfight with Clinger (Ernest Borgnine), the strongman of the team. He outmaneuvers Kifka (Jack Klugman), the getaway driver, in a car chase. He reaches his gun before Negli, (Donald Sutherland) the shooter. Gough (Warren Oates), the safecracker, provides no clear opportunity for conflict. Instead, McClain establishes his sexual superiority over Gough. He secretly hires a prostitute to lure Gough into a sealed room, where he must escape to prove that he can open locked safes. Aside from Clinger, Brown never reveals his face to any of his competitors; he simply wins, smiles, and moves along. Logically, McClain might want to hire specialists who could actually beat him, but instead this section serves to establish his right to leadership of the group.

Soon Gladys and the other crewmembers are called to assemble, and the viewer quickly learns why Brown has hidden his identity. Most of the crew appears enraged to have been secretly tested. Yet once McClain appears, Gough makes another point of contention rather clear. He refers to McClain as a “big black idiot” and a ”smart ass nigger”. Gough, played up for comedy by Warren Oates, becomes the open bigot. Yet the scene clearly suggests that none of the characters would have worked for McClain if they had known he was black. This implication makes the series of tests all the more important. In order to enlist white assistance, the black character must prove his exceptional worth. This was exactly how Brown had described his success against racism at Syracuse and in the NFL.

Negli succinctly voices Brown’s philosophy of “green power.” As Gough rages over the idea of working for a black man, Negli focuses on the size of the heist. He

states, “Money’s green.” No racial conciliation or understanding occurs, but economic potential holds the motley crew together. And much like Brown’s view on miscegenation, once the criminals get to know him, they realize their prejudice was unjustified. After perfectly engineering the heist and driving away with the money, Kifka enthusiastically tells McClain, “You’re beautiful!” While the Kerner Report offered an opportunity to better understand racial discrimination, many Americans appeared predisposed to dismiss its findings. McClain represents a figure who never bothers to convince anyone they should like him. Instead, he shows them the value of joining him, and in the process they come to like him.

The rest of the film is far less optimistic about race but maintains its pragmatic outlook. The title refers to the “split” of the money, which goes terribly awry. The deadly results are instigated by an unrelated act of racial brutality. Ellie’s loathsome landlord (James Whitmore) spies on her and catches her with the money. Overcome with lust at the sight of her, he moves forward to rape her. Close-ups of his ugly face are cut against Carroll’s terrified screams. After manhandling her, he shoots Ellie dead. The scene is the distant descendant of the older white slave owner raping a slave in Oscar Micheaux’s *Within Our Gates* (1920). While Brown controversially discussed this historical correction to the myth of miscegenation, *The Split* brought it gruesomely to the screen.

Through a series of plot twists, the money ends up in Detective Brill (Gene Hackman)’s hands. The gang, including McClain’s longtime financial backer, Gladys, quickly turn on McClain. While they have reason to suspect him, their vicious ambush of McClain seems excessive. Adding to this suggestion of racial animosity is Gough, who

had seemingly overcome his hatred. “On the spot, boy!” he yells, revealing how quickly his prejudice returns when things go wrong. Here McClain is falsely accused, (just like Brown’s character in *Ice Station Zebra*), stripped of his shirt (a common motif in Brown’s films), and beaten on his abdomen with a towel; the scene provides a racialized and eroticized sadomasochistic image of Brown’s gleaming torso whipped by a white gang.

This turn of events allows McClain to further display his intellect, already exhibited by the ingenious testing of accomplices and a perfectly planned stadium heist. While ambushed and tortured in a steam room, McClain plays the criminals’ suspicions against each other. Gladys realizes this, commenting, “That mind of yours- it never stops working.” This line, occurring in a scene where Brown reaches the peak of physical objectification, wonderfully establishes his character as more than a simple brute. However Brown’s athleticism never rests for too long. He seizes the perfect chance to fight his way out of the room, killing Negli with hot steam in the process.

For the remainder of the film, Brown’s former cohorts become the enemies out to kill him; but the film markedly maintains its integrationist tone. After a series of conflicts, McClain and Brill form a partnership to replace the fractured bi-racial gang of thieves. While they begin at odds, they quickly form a begrudging respect for each other. The cop and the criminal fight side by side against the remaining criminals; Brill wants to crack the case while Brown wants his share of the money (he honorably refuses to take more than his one-seventh split, despite eventually killing off all of his associates). In the final shootout, the two even joke about race. Not wanting to risk his life, Brill offers an excuse for Brown to run into gunfire: “You’ll be harder to see.” McClain provides a

friendly retort: “You know you’re quite an opportunist, bro.” In these final moments of the film, Brown and Hackman provide the model for the interracial buddy cops of *48 Hours* (1982) and *Lethal Weapon* (1987).⁴⁴

McClain outthinks, outfights, and outlives the rest of his gang. It’s hard to conceive of a better star vehicle for Brown’s unique abilities. In the process, he visualized both the power and the irrationality of racial prejudice. Brown also broke two major onscreen taboos in *The Split*: having a black love scene and portraying a criminal. Hollywood producers had generally assumed that white audiences had no interest in either subject⁴⁵; they may have been right. Despite its excellent casting and favorable reviews, *The Split* never became a hit. The turmoil at MGM (discussed in the *Ice Station Zebra* chapter) may have contributed to this weak performance; but several newspaper articles point to larger problems that appeared to stunt Brown’s career after *100 Rifles*. *The Split* delivered an entertaining vision of action-packed integration; but realistic roles and centrist sentiments faced an audience drifting to extremes.

Split Reception

For his first leading role, Brown was supported by his deepest cast since *The Dirty Dozen*: Gene Hackman had recently been nominated for Best Supporting Actor for his role in *Bonnie and Clyde* (1967) and was on his way to becoming a household

⁴⁴ For a detailed look at this trend, see: Melvin Donaldson, *Masculinity in the Interracial Buddy Film* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland and Co., 2006).

⁴⁵ Kevin Thomas, “Chartoff and Winkler: Entrepreneurs of the Offbeat Film,” 16 January 1968, D1.

name.⁴⁶ Ernest Borgnine again appeared with Brown, as he had in *The Dirty Dozen* and *Ice Station Zebra*. Julie Harris had appeared opposite James Dean in *East of Eden* (1955), and made regular film and television appearances following the “prestige” of a Broadway career.⁴⁷ Diahann Carroll appeared on television as the star of the sitcom *Julia*, and presented awards at the 1967 and 1968 Academy Awards. Jack Klugman and Donald Sutherland were character actors who would become television and film stars respectively by the early 1970’s. The film even featured a score by Quincy Jones, who had written the music for 1967’s Best Picture, *In the Heat of the Night* (Warren Oates, an established character actor, also appeared in both films).

Motion Picture Herald saw this strong assembly of talent as one of many reasons that *The Split* would be a major hit.

MGM’s “The Split” has the potential of a great box office winner and the reasons are manifold. First the cast reads like a Who’s Who in Hollywood, secondly, the star Jim Brown has his most important and believable role to date, and third and foremost the film as a whole is one of the slickest, most entertaining offbeat capers to reach the screen since Paul Newman’s “Harper.”⁴⁸

The reviewer rated the film as excellent for exhibitors. Critics had a similar opinion, with rave reviews appearing in the *New York Times* and *Chicago Tribune*. However *The Split* failed to attract large audiences. As reported in the *Motion Picture Herald*, the film performed only average for its first two months of release before falling to “below average” in January. Meanwhile, Sidney Poitier appeared on the cover of the January 1st

⁴⁶ Kevin Thomas, “Oscar Nominee: Actor Gene Hackman Unaccustomed to Fame,” *Los Angeles Times*, 18 April 1968, OC_C1.

⁴⁷ Norma Lee Browning, “The Actress and TV Westerns...,” *Chicago Tribune*, 5 June 1968, C2.

⁴⁸ “Reviews,” *Motion Picture Herald*, 9 October 1968, 35.

edition as the top star of the year.⁴⁹ Despite delivering a believable role, an alternative to Poitier's fantastical character in *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner*, Brown had little success competing against him and other major stars onscreen that year.

Brown's outspoken interviews may have hurt box office returns. Yet the film's content also boldly confronted racial issues. The term "offbeat," mentioned in the *Motion Picture Herald* review, was repeated in a profile of the producers in the *Los Angeles Times* titled, "Chartoff and Winkler: Entrepreneurs of the Offbeat Film." After the success of *Point Blank* (1967), which was criticized for "excessive violence and artiness," they saw a different controversial appeal in *The Split*.

This Negro is no Harvard graduate on his way to winning a Nobel Prize," promises Chartoff. "He doesn't hit a white man just because he had been hit by him first." He and Winkler made contact with a chess-playing Harlem underworld leader to insure authenticity for the character Brown will portray. "It was 3 a.m. when this man finished reading the script and he was in tears. He said 'It's the first time somebody tried to tell a story about a Negro and hasn't copped out. This guy stays black to the end!'"⁵⁰

Here the producers explicitly describe Brown's role as a counter to Poitier. Such a move may have raised black attendance, but it ran contrary to the white public's adulation of Poitier. This formula was highly successful for Blaxploitation, but not for general audiences in 1968.

The Split contained a challenging scene where Ellie was raped and killed by her white landlord. Renata Adler appreciated this moment but found it disjunctive in her November 1968 review:

⁴⁹ Exhibitor reports; *Motion Picture Herald*, 13 November 1968; 1 January 1968; 29 January 1969.

⁵⁰ Kevin Thomas, "Chartoff and Winkler: Entrepreneurs of the Offbeat Film," *Los Angeles Times*, 16 January 1968, D1.

But in the last half hour the picture (based on a novel by Richard Stark) makes a sudden and extremely ambitious leap outside its genre: a white neighbor, originally almost irrelevant to the story, tries to rape Miss Carroll and existentially spoils the crime. It is hard to adjust one's mood from pleasant, color-transposed genre thriller to something racially serious, yet the movie is tactful about it... and the film is almost completely successful in its two unmatched parts.⁵¹

Brown's films often crossed racial boundaries, but they rarely broke generic boundaries.

Adler notices yet another split in the film, between a message movie and an action film.

In fact the tone of the film lightens in the scenes between Brown and Hackman, but for Adler, the "racially serious" rape scene prevented further escapism. Viewers sought meaning in Poitier films and adventure in Brown films; while they expected Brown to break taboos, they expected his films to satisfy their genre.

While Adler enjoys the plot, she finds little depth in Brown's role: "Brown's part is not written with much characterization (his job is mainly to humiliate a series of whites until they are sufficiently impressed to accept his leadership)."⁵² While departing from genre disrupted the film, here maintaining genre prevented a racial reading. While structurally the film addresses integration, it never explicitly references the larger racial discourse. If the film involved Brown soliciting white men to help him start a business, a message would be painstakingly clear to viewers; but the adventurous, criminal elements mask any larger meanings, even for insightful viewers such as Adler.

Clifford Terry of the *Chicago Tribune* also enjoyed the film, but was left unsatisfied with the treatment of race.

On the plus side, Brown gives a smooth performance, swaggering rather than walking, displaying the cockiness of a Joe Namath, and for the second time in a Hollywood movie [following "For Love of Ivy"] a black couple is shown in a

⁵¹ Renata Adler, "Screen: Holdup at a Pro Football Game," *New York Times*, 5 November 1968, 55.

⁵² Adler, 55.

bedroom love scene. [Later, they even take a walk on the beach, just like white folks do!] Predictably, however, there is plenty of forced black comedy. When the bigoted Oakes [sic] threatens to walk out on the leadership of a “nigger,” a colleague reminds him, “Money’s green.” Later in a night gun battle, a shady, splenetic police detective [Gene Hackman of *Bonnie and Clyde*’s notoriety] tells Brown to make a break first—“you’d be harder to see.”⁵³

Terry reveals that white viewers can also appreciate Brown’s natural presence. He also seems to mock viewers alienated by viewing black couples. Terry credits a 1968 Poitier film for breaking this boundary first, but fails to see how Brown’s “cockiness” raises the stakes of the love scene. He also never mentions the rape scene, suggesting a sharp gender distinction in responses to the film (Instead he discusses an “inside football joke” about the Los Angeles Rams). Terry’s biggest complaint focuses on the “black comedy.” Decades later, similar comic moments became an essential part of the interracial action film; but appearing amidst the violence and militancy associated with race relations in 1968, this light humor could easily feel forced. Alternatively, the humor may appear artificial to Terry because it fits awkwardly within the film. As in Adler’s review, issues of race disproportionately affect the enjoyment of a genre. While action films can reveal messages, such does John Wayne’s controversial *The Green Berets* (1968), or often contain comic moments, as does *The Dirty Dozen*, the delicate subject of race exacerbates these tonal shifts.

Brown’s realistic performance, enjoyed by Terry, could equally disappoint left wing, black viewers. By May 1969, the film had reached black theaters in New York. At the same time, LeRoi Jones ridiculed Brown and his co-star Diahann Carroll in a stage

⁵³ Clifford Terry, “Jim Brown Scores in a Violent Flick,” *Chicago Tribune*, 15 October 1968, B6.

performance at the University of Pennsylvania, as reported in the *New York Times Sunday Magazine*.

Any reference to “Julia,” Diahann Carroll’s TV show, or Bill Cosby—Uncle Tom images to Jones—brought appreciative shouts... Take as a case in point a poem called “Jim Brown on the Screen.” Written after Jones had seen Brown in “The Split” it characterizes the football-player-turned-actor as the new, rough surfaced variation on the established Negro and, after showing the delight of naïve black kids in Brown’s beating up white men or making out with white women, it suggests that once again, the blacks are being had.⁵⁴

As cultural rifts widened, Brown grew further from certain conservative and liberal segments of his audience just by remaining in the center. He had spoken of obliterating Uncle Tom roles in 1968, only to see the label applied to him a year later.

Brown’s first leading role in *The Split* was arguably his best starring performance. The film and the *Playboy* interview of 1968 highlighted the variety of personae and opinions that made Brown such a charismatic Hollywood figure. Brown made few compromises as a black celebrity, and his brash image masked a passionate attempt at integration on his own terms, offscreen and onscreen. The widening fractures in American consensus challenged Brown to find a unified audience, especially given his overt sexuality. Even Poitier’s much less controversial star image had begun to decline as racial tensions soared through 1968. *100 Rifles* successfully broke the miscegenation taboo, but revealed deeper audience divides, particularly between the North and the South. *100 Rifles* was the peak of Brown’s career; it may also have precipitated his rapid fall from stardom.

⁵⁴ Gerald Weales, “What Were the Blacks Doing In the Balcony,” *New York Times*, 4 May 1969, SM38.

Chapter 4: *Slaughter* (1972): Comeback and Throwback

Where Did You Go, Jim Brown?

Slaughter (1972) undeniably marked a comeback film for Jim Brown. After releasing three films in 1969 and 1970, Brown's only film appearance came abroad in a West German *The Love Bug* (1968) knockoff.¹ This precipitous decline in Brown's film career has never been fully explained, but a myriad of factors show just how many challenges Brown faced in remaining the preeminent black star. While Brown and others attribute specific personal reasons for his decline, radical changes in the film industry provide an equally compelling explanation for Brown's predicament.

James Robert Parish and George H. Hill provide the most common hypothesis for Brown's loss of stardom: "The unstated reason was attributed to his bad temper both on and off sets, which led to bad press and court appearances."² Freeman echoes this sentiment in his 2005 biography of Brown.³ Following the much-publicized Eva Bohn-Chin incident, Brown was arrested for hitting a man with his car and assaulting a golf pro.⁴ These incidents also appeared nationally in local papers. Brown himself came to

¹ James Parish and George Hill, *Black Action Films: Critiques, Casts, and Credits for 235 Theatrical and Made-for-Television Releases* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 1989), 269. A dubbed version of *Ein Käfer geht aufs Ganze* gained limited release in America as *Superbug* in 1975.

² Parish and Hill, 269.

³ Mike Freeman, *Jim Brown: The Fierce Life of an American Hero*, (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 2006), 204.

⁴ Freeman, 210-211.

believe that this bad publicity helped sink his career, citing the Bohn-Chin arrest as a factor in producers' reluctance to hire him.⁵

However there is little evidence that this notoriety single-handedly destroyed Brown's career. *100 Rifles* was released soon after the peak of the Bohn-Chin headlines and the film still became a minor success. Arguably Brown's public association with sex and violence fit perfectly with the conceit of the film as an action movie with a controversial sex scene. While this incident may have further alienated conservative viewers, it hardly contradicted Brown's established star image as a brash, physical power. Furthermore, the young male audience seeking action and a skimpily clad Raquel Welch would be the least likely dissuaded from viewing the film by reports of Brown's domestic violence.

James Toback recounts an incident that further elaborates the possible appeal of Brown's arrests. In 1970, he chides a young black boy from hawking newspapers detailing Brown's latest arrest. The boy responds, "You just watch. Jim Brown gonna beat it. He always beat it. He gonna whip their ass, boy. He got pride."⁶ Thus during an era marked by specious arrests of black leaders, Brown's ability to defend himself in court could increase his heroic stature for young African-Americans. The often cynical Toback even allows for white readers to react sympathetically to Brown's arrests: "And yet short of assuming that public reaction was founded on the insight of a moth, one had to believe that some people, at least, would have serious reservations, would wonder whether the reporter's efforts at research and induction might not be wanting somewhat

⁵ Jim Brown and Steve Delsohn, *Out of Bounds* (Kensington Publishing, New York: 1989), 235.

⁶ James Toback, *Jim: The Author's Self-Centered Memoir on The Great Jim Brown* (Doubleday and Co, Garden City, NJ: 1971), 106.

in rigor.”⁷ Regardless of Brown’s actual guilt, (the admittedly biased Toback provides some compelling evidence supporting his targeting by police), the negative impact of his arrests was mitigated by a young audience’s distrust of authority (shared by Brown’s onscreen characters) and salacious Hollywood reporting.

The American distribution for Brown’s 1968-1970 releases point to an erosion of Brown’s career well before his later arrests. Of Brown’s six films of 1968 and 1969, four were distributed by MGM, one by 20th Century Fox, *100 Rifles* (1969), and one by Paramount, *Riot* (1969). However while MGM released *tick...tick...tick* (1970), National General Pictures released *El Condor* and *The Grasshopper* (1970). Brown received third billing in *The Grasshopper* under Jacqueline Bissett and Joseph Cotten, playing Bissett’s illicit lover. This film could capitalize on the promotion of *100 Rifles* while placing the interracial romance in the tawdrier realm of infidelity. Thus Brown’s work for a major studio ended with *tick...tick...tick* in January of 1970. Brown would not appear in another major studio release for nearly three years, Columbia’s *Black Gunn* in December of 1972.

Brown’s decline in stardom occurred in the midst of an industry wide recession between 1969-1971.⁸ While his pictures as a leading man rarely lost money, they never materialized into full-blown hits. As budget constraints and a reduced output of films spread throughout the industry, he lacked the box office track record to appear in the dwindling number of productions. His pictures also lacked the powerful stylistic and generic shifts that produced the few hits of this period, such as *Easy Rider* (1969), *Butch*

⁷ Toback, 107.

⁸ David Cook, *Lost Illusions: American Cinema in the Shadow of Watergate and Vietnam, 1970-1979* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 2000), 10-14.

Cassidy and The Sundance Kid (1969), *The Godfather* (1971), and ironically, *Shaft* (1971).

In the introduction to its 1968 interview with the star, *Playboy* reported that Jim Brown had signed a three-year contract with MGM⁹; between 1967 and 1970 they distributed five of his films. However following the success of *The Dirty Dozen* (1967) and *Blow-Up* (1967), MGM fell into dire straits. After a series of shareholder challenges, the studio was eventually taken over by Edgar Bronfman of the Seagram Company, followed by Kirk Kerkorian's partnership in 1969. As one of the last major studios to be purchased by a corporation, MGM was faced simultaneously with a management changeover and the recession. Kerkorian directed much of his attention to developing MGM's ancillary businesses, such as the MGM Grand Hotel and Casino. The company's greatest asset at the time was its film library rather than current production, and the larger box office recession gave little optimism to a reinvestment in filmmaking.¹⁰

Probably the biggest blow to Brown's career came when Bronfman replaced Robert O'Brien as C.E.O in 1969, on the heels of MGM's announcement of expected losses and the elimination of its dividend.¹¹ In an interview with Gene Siskel promoting *Slaughter*, Brown explains the pivotal role that O'Brien played in his career.

I had this idea of breaking down some of the taboos in film and Robert O'Brien, who was head of M-G-M at the time, helped me do it... See at the time I did 'The Dirty Dozen' O'Brien was aware of the black market. He attributed between \$1

⁹ Stephen Randall, ed., *The Playboy Interviews: They Played the Game* (Milwaukie, OR: M Press, 2006), 99.

¹⁰ Monaco, 39.

¹¹ Leslie Eaton, "Robert H. O'Brien, 93, MGM President in 60's - New York Times," <http://query.nytimes.com/gst/fullpage.html?res=9907E2DA133CF932A25753C1A961958260#>.

million and \$2 million of the picture's gross receipts to me. That's the main reason my career took off.¹²

While Brown again cites his arrests (without convictions) as the cause of his career problems, O'Brien's departure directly coincided with Brown's career slide. Brown also lost his crucial corporate support for breaking onscreen racial taboos, which had become a critical part of his box office attraction. While Fox's *100 Rifles* offers the most controversial first, Brown elaborates on several other important "firsts" he achieved.

Another thing was in 'The Split' where I played the boss crook. If you remember back then [1968] they didn't want to show a black man as a criminal... They also said they didn't want to show black men making love with black women. Well I had Diahann Carroll in 'The Split.' They said there were no black cowboys in the movies, so I played a black cowboy [in "The Mercenaries"] and later a sheriff [in "tick...tick...tick"].¹³

Brown confronted a new corporate conglomerate with a film career defined by crossing racial barriers. In 1972 this could have served as an asset, but at the close of 1969 it was risk at the box office and the shareholder's meetings. However Brown's onscreen breakthroughs helped set the market for the Blaxploitation boom following Sweet *Sweetback's Baadasssss Song*, released in April of 1971.

In the ultimate irony, Brown's career reached its nadir while Blaxploitation neared its apex. In fact MGM produced the definitive Blaxploitation hit, *Shaft*, in 1971, the year Jim Brown failed to release an American film. MGM rejected Jim Brown's image as a powerful, sexualized black man during the 1969-1971 recession; now this black male image defined a new genre that some credited with pulling Hollywood out of the recession.

¹² Gene Siskel, "Jim Brown: Is He An Actor or Just a Big, Black Body?," *Chicago Tribune*, (Aug 13, 1972) L3.

¹³ Siskel, L3.

Fifty Roaring Years of MGM was published in 1975; this glossy coffee table book to promote MGM confirms Brown's role as a studio asset. The yearbook begins each year with a two-page photo, followed by large, medium and small sized photographs. Brown appears in large photos for *Ice Station Zebra* and *tick...tick...tick...*. Yet he dominates the two-page spread for 1968 with a production still from *Dark of the Sun* (alternately titled *The Mercenaries*), now an all but forgotten action vehicle starring Rod Taylor. The caption describes him as if he was the star of the picture. Written only a few years after Brown's final MGM film, it appeared as one of the few public records of Brown's importance to the studio during the late 1960's.

Faced with few other projects, Brown appeared in *Slaughter* for American International Pictures; he spearheaded their move into Blaxploitation. While effectively leaving his mainstream career behind him, Brown was still not ready to fully concede his integrationist appeal. While ostensibly a Blaxploitation picture, *Slaughter* attempted to appeal to white audiences as well; this strategy resulted in a peculiar and ultimately irreconcilable character for Brown.

Somewhere between Bond, Shaft, and Poitier

In August of 1972, Jim Brown spoke rather pragmatically about his newest release, *Slaughter* (1972). While alluding vaguely to a studio "blackballing" which had halted his steady stream of releases through 1970, he unpretentiously explained its place within the newly discovered market for black-oriented pictures. "I guess you could say *Slaughter* was influenced by *Shaft*, but only because *Shaft* was so big it influenced all black movies... And I still think black movies can talk to whites, too. You can start with a specialized market, that's fine, but the big money is still in the general market and black

films will have to face that fact or we'll never have a real black movie business."¹⁴

Brown indicates the central goal of *Slaughter*: releasing a film that will appeal to a black audience while exhibiting enough mass appeal to reach white viewers as well. Yet finding this middle ground within a racially polarized film industry and American political landscape would be no easy task. Furthermore, Brown attempted this feat at the height of Blaxploitation in 1972; this “crossover” strategy became much more common as Blaxploitation began to wane by late 1973.¹⁵

The result is a fascinating amalgamation of narrative elements from integrationist and black-oriented films. *Slaughter* not only emulates *Shaft*, but mainstream Sidney Poitier vehicles such as *The Organization* (1971). Similarly, Brown’s character oscillates between “badass” icons like John Shaft and suave white action stars like James Bond. While *Slaughter* was sufficiently profitable to launch a sequel and reenergize Brown’s career, it never became a massive success with either black or white audiences. The film attempts to navigate the intricacies of emerging black and established white filmic identities and narratives. Yet as in *100 Rifles*, a narrative logic built on racial and generic codes often provides insurmountable contradictions.

The opening credits of *Slaughter* directly allude to the iconic graphics at the beginning of James Bond films. More importantly, they serve the same purpose of establishing the central character and wedding the star’s image to this character. The first credit reads, “Jim Brown *is* Slaughter”. This common turn of phrase not only establishes the film as a Brown star vehicle, but defines him as the embodiment of the action and

¹⁴ Parish and Hill, 269; Quotes from *The Chicago Daily News*, August 1972, as reported by David Elliott.

¹⁵ Ed Guerrero, *Framing Blackness: The African American Image in Film* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1993) 105, 110.

excitement of his character. The credit sequence closes with animated bullet holes forming a dot matrix graphic of his face, leaving the audience ultimately with a pure iconic abstraction of Brown/Slaughter.

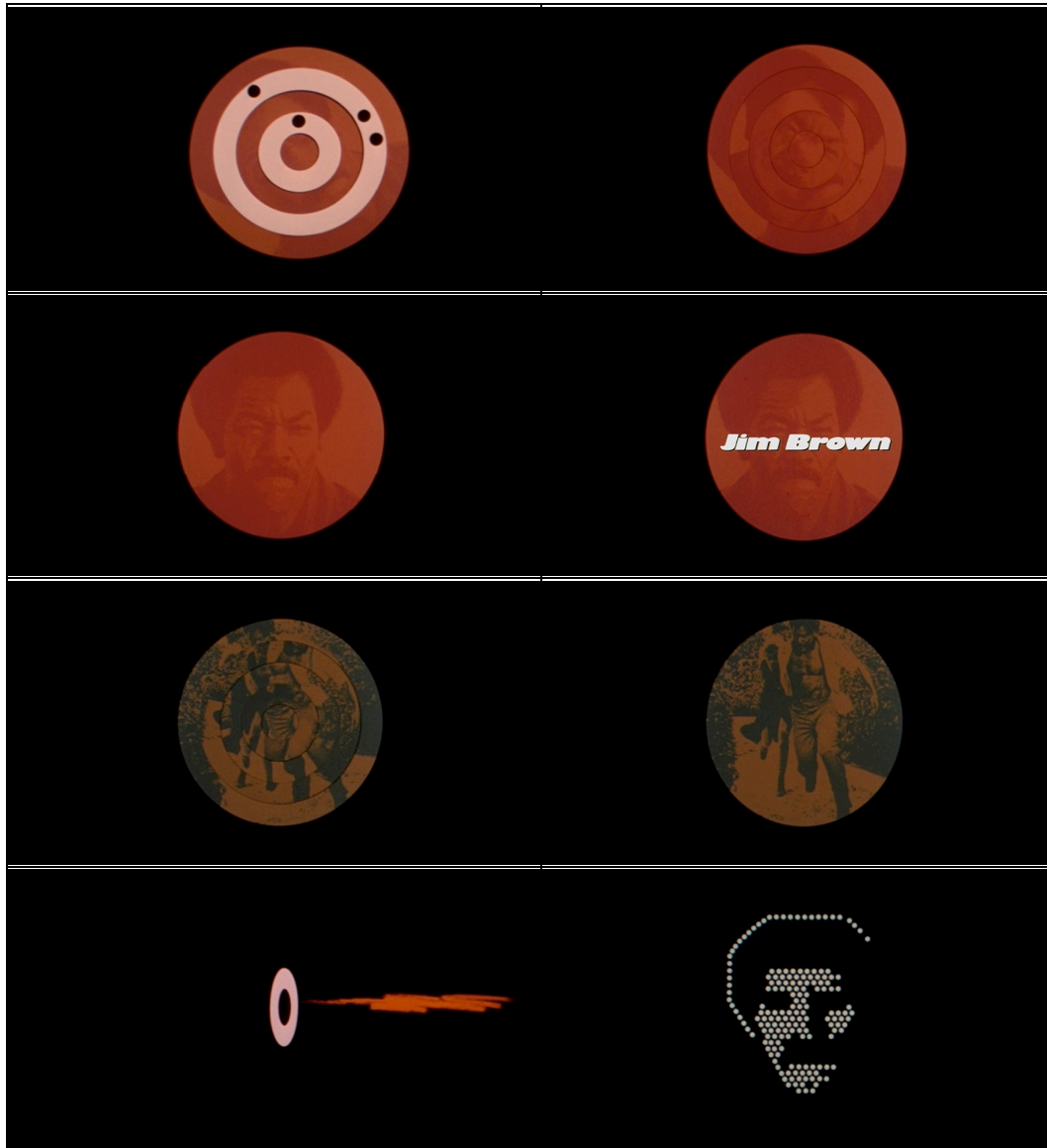


Figure 4.1 – 4.8: Image stills, *Slaughter* (in chronological order, left to right).

Furthermore, while “as” emphasizes Slaughter as a character name, “is” emphasizes the word “slaughter”. Jim Brown becomes synonymous with the vengeance and graphic violence that permeates the film, as well as the “Blaxploitation” genre. While

James Bond films are quite violent, Bond's personal use of violence is marked by a cool suavity. The credit sequences of the Bond films preceding *Slaughter* had opened with the deadly accurate handgun shot toward the camera. In contrast, *Slaughter's* credits begin with a machine gun blast riddling an animated bull's-eye with bullet holes. These opening moments immediately position Brown's character as a combination of Bond and Shaft; he can play a smooth agent like Bond who can dish out the excessive violence associated with Blaxploitation films.

The graphic style of the opening credits creates a rough synthesis with the opening credits of *Dr. No* (1962) and *Goldfinger* (1964). *Slaughter* borrows the imagery that established the dominant action film franchise; yet on an AIP budget, *Dr. No's* *sequence* is the most economical stylistic choice. Facing their own budget constraints, the Broccolis used avant-garde, geometrical animation in the credits that added a touch of sophistication that could be cheaply produced on film.¹⁶ *Dr. No* begins with colored dots appearing and disappearing into suggestive, abstract forms. *Slaughter* begins with a circular bulls-eye appearing ring by ring from the center. As the credits progress, the rings rotate in alternating directions as the colors and images on the bull's-eye change. While *Goldfinger* can afford to project moving action shots of Bond on gold-painted women, *Slaughter* places monochromatic stills of Brown in action, tinted by the cycling colors of the bull's-eye.

The stills featured in the credit montage continue this dichotomy between Bond and Shaft through costuming. Brown alternately appears in a tuxedo and a dark leather coat, the definitive outfits for the referenced characters. Even the theme's composer,

¹⁶ Gemma Solana and Antonio Boneu, *Uncredited: Graphic Design and Opening Titles in Movies* (Barcelona: Index Book, 2008), 177.

Billy Preston, embodies the intended synthesis of white and black appeal; he achieved success both as a soul musician and a collaborator with the Beatles. His upbeat score over the credits blends soul keyboards and rock guitar riffs. Much like Isaac Hayes' famous *Shaft* theme, "Slaughter" is sung repeatedly. A third portrait of Brown hearkens back to *100 Rifles*. He appears shirtless, either running or fighting, foregrounding his muscular physique. While Bond can walk shirtless on the beach, and Shaft and Bond appear unclothed in sex scenes, neither Richard Roundtree, Sean Connery, nor Roger Moore can recreate Brown's physical presence. His imposing torso stands out athletically and erotically, frozen in mid-action; the "body" foregrounded in advertisements and football stardom remains a central element of Brown's screen persona.

The opening two shots of *Slaughter* are pure Blaxploitation. An older, well-dressed black couple enters a car. Director Jack Starrett cuts to a wider shot of the car exploding. He then cuts to Slaughter in a hospital waiting room. A black female reporter reveals that Slaughter is an ex-Green Beret and a police officer. In the next shot a doctor tells him his father is dead. Within only four shots, the audience can already infer the familiar story structure. Slaughter has lost a close relative and must violently avenge his violent murder.

While the plot begins conventionally, stylistic decisions quickly distinguish the film from the rapid, jarring editing of its contemporaries such as *Superfly* (1972). The third shot of the film is a long take lasting nearly a minute and a half. The shot opens on a close-up of Slaughter, emphasizing a solemn reaction to the preceding violent events. As he walks left, the camera smoothly zooms out and pans left into a medium shot as

Slaughter purchases coffee from a vending machine. Slaughter lugubriously operates the machine as if sleepwalking, often looking up to reveal that his thoughts remain on the killing. The camera follows him right, settling on a two shot where the reporter badgers him about his father's criminal past. He tries to turn away from her twice, his body language showing a forced restraint while his voice quickens with frustration. The camera follows him further right as he sits in the waiting room with a sigh; his worried expression is delicately framed within a gap in a foreground plant. After several seconds, the camera again pans right with Slaughter, who moves to speak with a doctor entering the waiting room. This long take is punctuated by a cut to Slaughter's reaction shot as the doctor reveals his father is dead.

This scene bears a greater resemblance to classical Hollywood film techniques than the syncopated montage of Harlem location shots that begin *Superfly*. While both films are classified as Blaxploitation by the trade papers¹⁷, the wide stylistic range within this genre is immediately apparent. In fact, one critic describes Starrett (who had directed *Run, Angel, Run* (1969)) as “one of the top talents to emerge from the bikers,”¹⁸ linking him to the artistic acclaim emerging from *Easy Rider* (1969) and other films of this popular American International Pictures (A.I.P.) exploitation genre. Yet perhaps more importantly, this type of long take both allows and depends on performance. While often described as “wooden”, here Brown must act through gesture and dialogue while hitting several precise marks in a complicated panning shot. The fact that this unbroken establishing shot appears as Brown's introduction shows not only faith in his performance but an attempt to foreground his acting ability.

¹⁷ “Blaxploitationers of 1972,” *Variety*, January 3 1973, 52.

¹⁸ Kevin Thomas, “An Exercise in Violence,” *Los Angeles Times*, 30 August 1972, G10.

However to classify *Slaughter* as a generic narrative with a sophisticated style belies the wild inconsistency of the film. Slaughter leaves the hospital to speak with Jenny (Marion Brash), his father's white mistress, who reminisces about their caring relationship. She politely refuses to help Slaughter; he softly replies, "Sure Jenny, I can see it. I understand you're safe here. But I still need your help." It's hard to imagine this sympathetic response to an elegant white woman, sitting in her stately apartment, from characters such as Priest or Shaft. Yet as assassins shoot down Jenny through the window, the shot/reverse shot editing gives way to an indulgent montage featuring slow motion, rapid zooms, and a conventional exploitation redux of the action style popularized by *The Wild Bunch* (1968). Thus *Slaughter* shifts between classical and exploitation style as readily as it shifts between white and black narrative staples.

The racial composition of the romantic plots of *Slaughter* and *Superfly* are diametrical opposites. Priest appears in bed with a naked white woman, a pure sexual trophy lacking characterization beyond her desire for Priest. Meanwhile his hopes for escaping the ghetto rest with his black lover. After Jenny's death, Slaughter shoots at an approaching figure behind his front door. The frightened black reporter emerges in a towel, ready to seduce him. "I could have killed you, you dumb bitch," shouts Slaughter. She reveals she lied about being a reporter. Moments later he throws her out the door. The towel flies off to reveal her naked body as she flees. The remainder of his sexual attention goes to Ann, played by Stella Stevens, as the film progresses. Here white women such as the father's mistress and Ann represent love and understanding, while the black woman appears as a scheming seductress.

Slaughter flies to South America, going undercover to investigate his father's death. The reporter picks him up, revealing that she is part of their operation. Yet aside from her subsequent brief appearances, this is the last time a black character appears alongside Slaughter. In this foreign setting, Slaughter operates as a black man in a white world, the narrative setting that Poitier perfected and Brown continued through the 1960's.¹⁹ Films such as *Shaft* and *Superfly* exploited the all black neighborhoods of Harlem, with the few white characters largely representing corrupt policemen and mob bosses. While Shaft journeys to a predominantly black continent the following year in *Shaft in Africa* (1973), Slaughter leaves the black world of the opening scenes for a fantastical South America filled with wealthy white aristocrats. Slaughter departs from the realm of Blaxploitation, falling back on an outdated mode of cinematic integration.

The first major scene in this new setting begins with Slaughter entering a casino dressed in a tuxedo. He sits at the table among the formally dressed, white patrons and begins to calmly gamble. This direct visual reference to James Bond adds a new suavity to Slaughter's characterization. However, while villains confront Bond through glib repartee, Hoffo (Rip Torn) exudes overt racism. He approaches the table and sneeringly refers to Slaughter as "brother." Thus while the setting is pure Bond, the villain is straight out of Blaxploitation.

Yet this particular mixture of genres creates an immediate paradox. As an undercover spy like Bond, Slaughter must rely on his ability to seamlessly immerse himself in any high-class setting. He can walk into a casino like he owns the place, while his comical white partner, Harry (Don Gordon), scuttles around behind the scenes. Yet

¹⁹ Guerrero, 76-78.

Torn reveals that his blackness makes him immediately stick out like a sore thumb. He makes a conspicuous target who will remain under Hoffo's constant surveillance. The narrative solution to this paradox is Hoffo's boss, Mario Felice (Norman Alfe), a gentrified (and apparently unprejudiced) don with a Hispanic accent who treats Slaughter as an equal. Hoffo kills Felice late in the film to assume the lead villain's mantle.

Throughout the film Hoffo remains at the center of the love triangle as Stevens tries to leave him for Slaughter. In another poignant moment during the casino scene, Torn tells Stevens, "I saw you looking at him". This fetishization of Brown as a virile black male against Hoffo's impotence and insecurity reaches a fever pitch towards the end of the film. Hoffo violently grabs her and confronts her about her affair with Slaughter. "Did he teach you something? Show me!" Hoffo shouts. As he nearly strangles her, she confesses, "Yes, I want him." Here the racial sexual mythology explored by Eldridge Cleaver and alluded to by James Toback rises to the surface. This narrative involving the physical and sexual prowess of slaves dominated by the violence of white masters will be explicitly confronted in *Mandingo* (1975) a few years later. However in *Slaughter*, this allusion further strains the tensions between Brown as the pure athletic body and the smooth, sophisticated spy.

Several action sequences add further brutality to the image. Dressed in a tuxedo and wielding a shotgun (an image centrally featured in advertisements), Slaughter runs down the long gaming table and shoots up the casino in a gunfight with Hoffo's henchmen. His weapon of choice, also appearing in a mansion shootout, is an explosive contrast to Bond's Walther pistol. Other sequences merely highlight Brown's athleticism and physique. Slaughter nimbly climbs a wall to avoid a car speeding towards him. He

removes his shirt to wrap around his fist for a hand-to-hand fight with several thugs on a rooftop.

The two sex scenes between Slaughter and Ann feature the nudity that was conspicuously absent from *100 Rifles*. While the sex scene in *100 Rifles* tentatively addressed interracial coupling, *Slaughter* embellishes these scenes, which just like the action sequences, are aesthetically distinguished from one another. Before the first sex scene, Harry awkwardly hits on Ann, emerging from the pool in a bikini, while Slaughter laughs at him. Ann walks directly over to Slaughter, seated in the foreground of a wide shot, as Harry sulks away in the background. In a shot/reverse shot conversation, Brown immediately tells her that he believes the mob has sent her after him. She admits it, while he admits he's pleased it was her. Starrett cuts away to Harry striking out with a pair of poolside girls. He then hard cuts to a medium shot of Slaughter and Ann naked in bed.

While it takes onscreen negotiation to move Raquel Welch to the bed in 1969, by 1972, an ellipsis can accomplish this. The high key lighting and several medium long and long shots of them in bed clearly reveal the characters bodies, offering glimpses of Brown's pubic hair and Steven's breasts. As sensitive music plays, both appear blissful and uninhibited, with a particular emphasis on their sustained kissing. While the groundbreaking scene in *100 Rifles* must be specially handled narratively and visually, the first sex scene of *Slaughter* blithely highlights the character's bodies and sexual confidence.

The second sex scene again follows a revealing conversation between Slaughter and Ann. He angrily confronts her about Hoffo's attempt to kill him; this intensity quickly turns sexual. "Why are you here?" Slaughter asks, and Ann responds, "I want to

be with you.” With her desire for Slaughter clearly demonstrated over her allegiance to Hoffo, she quickly gets her wish. Again a hard cut from this scene moves to a nude sex scene, however the intensity of this scene has similarly be elevated. A high angle wide shot rotates around a dark bedroom, with a shaft of light clearly exposing Stevens breasts framed within the bedposts. As a love song plays, this rotating camera work in the wide shot dissolves into closer shots of the two figures. Aside from Stevens’ breasts, which get several close-ups, the other emphasized image is her face moaning in pleasure. This longer sex scene is much more intricate and indulgent than the first one, and dramatically more explicit than *100 Rifles*, released just three years earlier. Similarly, traditional sexual gender roles are reestablished. While Lydecker’s race motivated Sarita’s dictation of sensitive lovemaking techniques, here Slaughter is the established expert. In fact, the sex scenes best solidify Brown’s casual smoothness in his James Bond inspired role.

At the climax of *Slaughter*, Hoffo lies trapped under his overturned car. At Slaughter’s mercy, he unwisely yells, “You stinking nigger, get me out of here!” Slaughter responds by blowing up the gas tank with a shotgun, incinerating Hoffo. As the car burns, the funk/rock theme song plays into the credits, the violence abruptly contrasting with the upbeat tone of the music. Furthermore, the musical bridge goes back to the Bond-style opening credits, creating yet another contrast with this “Blaxploitation” ending. This final scene leaves questions that the sequel, *Slaughter’s Big Rip-off* (1973), cannot answer. Slaughter is both the avenger against a racist white world and the black spy who is so slick that white women love him and white men respect him. This split identity between Bond and Shaft is ultimately untenable. No wonder it must take place in this strange, all-white South America, as imaginary as the world of *Guess Who’s Coming*

to *Dinner* (1967). Yet what wealthy, tuxedo-clad black milieu could a black super spy go to in 1972? This impossibly conflicted cinematic reality inevitably sacrifices coherence for the remarkable goal of combining the most popular black and white action stars within Jim Brown.

More A Star...

Slaughter never reached the runaway success of extraordinary hits such as *Shaft* and *Superfly*, but it turned a profit and merited a sequel, *Slaughter's Big Rip-off* (1973). However while Richard Roundtree and Ron O'Neal only achieved fleeting fame, Brown remained a national celebrity, despite his decreased film output and move towards black-oriented features. Brown's transcendent star status reveals the complex role that his black celebrity played in national public life. Brown's multi-faceted mass popularity placed him in a unique position during the early 1970's, when race was the salient issue on and offscreen.

Brown himself merited a full-page article in *The Chicago Tribune* to promote the film. A week before *Slaughter* opened in Chicago, Gene Siskel interviewed him in Los Angeles, resulting in a wide ranging piece titled, "Jim Brown: Is He an Actor or Just a Big, Black Body?" This controversial title exemplifies the tone of the piece and Brown's public persona in 1972, preparing the reader for Brown's frank, intelligent opinions which belie his jock status and confront the stereotypes inherent in the facetious question. Siskel's article provides a rich encapsulation of the major elements that defined Brown's star persona in 1972. As in earlier publicity concerning Brown, a reference to athleticism leads into a discussion of his movie role.

Jim Brown gave me a couple of tennis lessons here along with an interview. Lesson I: Do not attempt a passing shot when the greatest running back in the history of football is playing net. Lesson II: Do not attempt a lob when the greatest running back in the history of football is playing net. In other words, give up. Brown is a fine, graceful tennis player, and considering his size [6-2, 230 pounds] that is quite remarkable.

Almost as remarkable is Brown's film career, which includes a dozen films in eight years, but only one in the last two. That film is "Slaughter," a James Bond style adventure...²⁰

Like Alex Haley in *Playboy*, Siskel quickly and comically defines Jim Brown as an exceptional physical specimen, whose incredible feats extend to his cinema career.

Brown is also defined by extremes and contradictions: massive yet graceful, surprisingly successful yet unsuccessful in Hollywood.

Introducing Brown as "the greatest running back in football history" was a greater accolade in 1972 than it was when Brown retired in 1967. Not only had no one seized this title from Brown, but football itself had been catapulted towards the center of the national sports scene. The first Super Bowl was played in 1967, and the Jets upset of the highly favored Baltimore Colts in 1969 made it a pre-eminent, nationally televised event. "Broadway Joe" Namath became an instant celebrity sex symbol, and despite his retirement, Brown's legacy allowed him a similar status. A May 1972 *New York Times* piece entitled "Young Women Who Prefer Gridiron to the Steam Iron" profiled a female football team. While attesting to football's growing national popularity, the article also mentions a team survey of football heroes; Jim Brown and Joe Namath lead the pack.²¹ Placed among a patronizing title and descriptions of broken fingernails, the survey can easily imply a sexual attraction to these figures.

²⁰ Siskel L3.

²¹ Judy Klemesrud, "Young Women Who Prefer Gridiron to the Steam Iron," *New York Times*, 5 May 1972, 36.

Brown was inducted into the Hall of Fame in 1971, leading to a further conceptualization of his role as football and movie star. “The bearded Brown, striking in a white knit jump suit, was more humble than many had reason to expect of a critic of pro football’s leaders. Now a movie star elected to the Hall of Fame in the first year of his eligibility, Brown talked of the parade here this morning, of his mother, and Manhasset.”²² Here handsome looks, outspoken opinions, and movie star status coalesce on the podium. Yet by choosing to speak positively and mention his mother, Brown imbues his football persona with the honor and dignity that his movie roles rarely offer him.

Brown’s aura of football greatness kept him in the news during his career slump and helped counteract the negative publicity of his arrests. *Jim Brown: The Golden Year: 1964*, published in 1970, elegized his pivotal role in the Cleveland Brown’s championship season.²³ Brown’s \$80,000 salary set the bar (and implicitly, the criticism) for holdouts in the increasingly profitable NFL.²⁴ His celebrity endorsement promoted other books on football, such as *They Call it a Game*, “what Jim Brown calls ‘the hardest-hitting sports book ever written.’”²⁵ The storied football career that paved the way for Brown’s movie stardom maintained his image as a winner while his film career lost ground.

Early in his article, Siskel personalizes his reaction to Brown: “I wanted three things from Jim Brown. One was to break his serve, two was to know why he quit

²² “Brown, Tittle, Robustelli and Lombardi Inducted Into Pro Football Hall of Fame,” *New York Times*, 1 August 1971, S2.

²³ “A Listing of New Books,” *New York Times*, 7 October 1970, 44.

²⁴ Gerald Eskenazis, “Ron Johnson is Giants’ First Holdout,” *New York Times*, 20 July 1971, 27.

²⁵ Display ad, *The New York Times* 22 September 1971, 44.

football at the top of his game, and three was to learn if it bothered him that he had been used in many films as little more than a piece of black meat. The service break came in the third game of the second set.”²⁶ This internal monologue could be chalked up to quasi-gonzo journalism if it were not so similar to James Toback’s *Jim: The Author’s Self-Centered Memoir on the Great Jim Brown* (Toback also waged a pyrrhic battle to best Brown at tennis). As described in a *New York Times* review, “the young white man (Toback) was eager to perform and succeed--socially, intellectually, athletically and sexually—in this temple of the black masculine mystique.”²⁷ Siskel hints at the new role that Brown played in the media, especially after the publication of Toback’s book in 1971. As groups like the Black Panthers alienated and terrified much of white America, the once controversial Brown was pushed towards the center. As a transcendent figure in a palatable context (football), an outspoken Brown could function as a conduit towards understanding black manhood.

Jim recounts vignettes from Toback’s extended stay at Brown house, after the writer had met Brown while researching an *Esquire* article. Toback explicitly sought out Brown as a cipher holding sacred truths concerning race and masculinity.

So by coming to know Brown and, finally, by writing about him, one could hope to approach and to understand certain mysteries in America, as well as to measure one of her largest and darkest heroes. The question of race had become the most complicated and serious force in national life... There was more, however, to my interest in Brown, to the intuition that he was important beyond himself—to America—and that I would be able to answer questions about myself if I could come to understand something of him.²⁸

²⁶ Siskel, L3.

²⁷ Robert Lipsyte, “The Way it Is: Sex, \$, Politics,” *New York Times*, 1 May 1971, 23.

²⁸ Toback, 7-8.

As in Siskel's account, Brown serves as a barometer for athletic performance, i.e. raw masculinity, while his career decisions appear rife with political and philosophical implications. Ironically, both writers view Brown's physicality in athletics as poetry and his onscreen physicality as sexually exploitative "black meat"; somehow his football legend erases his egregious physical and economic exploitation as a pre-free agency professional athlete.

Toback's book revealed detailed, sordid accounts of Brown's hyperactive sex life. However Toback implies (and Siskel confirms) that this was already a public assumption: "By reputation at least, which alone informed my impression of him at the time, Jim Brown was without peer in affording insight into that issue (race and sexuality); lurid tales of freak scenes, brutality, an ineluctable erotic flow."²⁹ While this reputation may have hurt Brown in the late 1960's, its impact was dulled three years after "The Summer of Love." Furthermore, the previously controversial sexual icon of *100 Rifles* was rather tame onscreen compared to Sweet Sweetback and Superfly. Siskel's casual description of Brown as "black meat" shows a dramatic change from the white reporters who in 1969 had asked Brown what it was like to have a sex scene with a white woman (see Chapter 1).

Brown also emerges as a practical businessman in Siskel's piece. He left football because he had a chance at a twenty-year movie career, while the physical toll of football would have made that kind of longevity impossible. This pragmatism extends to politics as well. Brown belittles the Black Panthers and armed revolution, expressing a

²⁹ Toback, 8.

fundamental belief in capitalism as the only tool towards racial equality.³⁰ After Brown describes his work with the Black Economic Union, Siskel articulates how well Brown's conservative opinions soften his image for white viewers. "Brown's participation in such an organization does not match his popular screen image as a black Superman or his offscreen image as a black Bizarro. But he says he really doesn't believe in violent revolution."³¹ By effectively distancing himself from the Marxist revolutionary leanings of the Black Panthers, especially Eldridge Cleaver, he eliminates the political threat associated with his sexual threat to white viewers.

However Brown's conservative politics alienated him from some of his core audience, young urban black men, who were also the principal audience and membership of the Black Panthers. In June of 1972, Brown attended a Nixon sponsored event geared towards winning over black leaders.³² Days after *Slaughter's* August release, Brown attended a campaign event with a group of Hollywood stars supporting Nixon, including Frank Sinatra, George Hamilton, and Charlton Heston.³³ In the October article "Black Supporters of President Under Fire," the sub-headline reads "Sammy Davis a Key Target, With James and Jim Brown." Baltimore African-Americans announced plans to picket Jim Brown's films. The article continues: "Charges of 'Uncle Tom' and 'political prostitutes' have kept black Republicans on the defensive and under intense pressure."³⁴

While Brown's support of Nixon may have angered portions of his black audience, he echoed the sentiment of economic conservatives in the black leadership.

³⁰ Siskel, L3.

³¹ Siskel, L3.

³² Paul Delaney, "Black Parleys in Capital Hail Nixon and Thurmond," *New York Times*, 12 June 1972, 30.

³³ Robert Semple Jr., "Nixons Entertain Their Hollywood Backers," 28 August 1972, 30.

³⁴ Delaney, "Black Supporters of President," 29.

The Congress of Racial Equality (CORE), a major Civil Rights group that was eventually overshadowed by Martin Luther King Jr.'s Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), supported Nixon along the same capitalist economic grounds as Brown.³⁵ Nixon actively wooed black groups with the promise of economic investment in black businesses in exchange for political support.³⁶ Brown's own organization would likely benefit from this policy. In other ways, Brown's predicament shows the extreme challenge he faced as one of the rare black celebrities encouraged to talk openly about politics. Holding out hope for renewed popularity among white viewers may have influenced his decision. In his 1985 autobiography *Out of Bounds*, he theorized that his friendship with Malcolm X and other black Muslims precipitated his blackballing from Hollywood.³⁷ In a remarkably polarized era of black politics, he could do little to mollify both the white and black audiences.

Siskel ends his article with an optimistic football metaphor. "Jim Brown may just have caught his second wind. And if that is true: Look out, Hollywood."³⁸ Brown did recover from a disastrous star decline, but he never again took Hollywood by storm; he never reclaimed the widespread popularity he enjoyed during his MGM films. However, Hollywood was on the look out for Jim Brown. The runaway success of Blaxploitation made Jim Brown a desirable commodity once again.

...And Less A Star

³⁵ Peniel E. Joseph, *Waiting 'Til The Midnight Hour: A Narrative History of Black Power in America* (New York: Henry Holt and Co., LLC, 2006), 277.

³⁶ Delaney, "Black Supporters of President," 29.

³⁷ Brown and Delsohn, 236-7.

³⁸ Siskel, L3.

Jim Brown was relatively late in joining the wave of Blaxploitation films. A *Variety* article published a week after *Slaughter*'s release and titled "Black Pix: 'Menial' to 'Mean'" listed fifty other black oriented films released in the past two years.³⁹ Brown, a demonstrated draw for black audiences, may have shunned offers to appear in early Blaxploitation films. If so, Brown waited too long for a chance to return to mainstream stardom; once the only black action star, he now faced a barrage of newcomers with no resistance to pure racial exploitation.

However Brown still retained a celebrity and Hollywood resume that the new Blaxploitation stars lacked. It is hard to imagine Siskel coming to Los Angeles to write a full-page article on Ron O'Neal or Fred Williamson. The casting of *Slaughter* further set it apart from Blaxploitation as well as other AIP films. Along with various television appearances, Stella Stevens had played the female lead in such films as Sam Peckinpah's *The Ballad of Cable Hogue* (1970) and Columbia's women's liberation comedy, *Stand Up and Be Counted* (1972), released a month before *Slaughter*. She went on to costar in the big-budget *The Poseidon Adventure* (1972) later that year, demonstrating that for her, *Slaughter* did not represent a significant fall from stardom. Rip Torn had starred in the critically acclaimed independent film *Coming Apart* (1969) and played Henry Miller in Paramount's *Tropic of Cancer* (1970). Martin Campbell, who briefly appears in the film, had costarred in the TV western *The High Chaparral* from 1967 through 1971. While hardly the all-star cast of *The Dirty Dozen*, these established actors were a stark contrast to the unknown leads of *Shaft* and *Superfly*, whose composers were the only recognizable names on the bill.

³⁹ "Black Pix: 'Menial' to 'Mean'," *Variety*, 28 August 1972, 5.

Despite its deeper cast and better-known star, *Slaughter* did no better than *Blacula*, which also earned \$1,200,000 in rentals.⁴⁰ Both of these films were profitable enough to produce sequels, however it is hard to imagine that *Blacula*'s profit margin with no stars and an even lower production value was not higher than *Slaughter*'s take. This discrepancy between production budget and box office performance was even wider between Blaxploitation hits and A-List Hollywood productions. *The Candidate* (1972), starring Robert Redford, barely distanced itself from *Slaughter*, grossing \$2,500,000. Meanwhile *The Legend of Nigger Charley*, starring Fred Williamson, took in \$3,000,000. *Superfly* and *Straw Dogs* each earned \$4,000,000.⁴¹

While Blaxploitation films never reached the top ten in 1972, films lacking established stars and massive budgets such as *A Clockwork Orange* (1972) and *The Last Picture Show* (1972), did. *The Godfather* (1972) shattered box office records featuring a then-unknown Al Pacino and a has-been Marlon Brando. While Kubrick and Bogdanovich could be marketed as “auteur” filmmakers, Francis Ford Coppola was relatively unknown upon *The Godfather*'s release. Promoting a film based on a best-selling novel (*The Godfather*) or controversial content (*A Clockwork Orange*) produced more reliable profits than depending primarily on a star's appeal. While Clint Eastwood and Barbra Streisand delivered hits in *Dirty Harry* (1972) and *What's Up, Doc?* (1972), Dustin Hoffman performed better in a re-release of *The Graduate* (1967) than in *Straw Dogs*. Why pay his or Peckinpah's salaries when *The Legend of Nigger Charley* could earn a greater net profit?⁴²

⁴⁰ “Big Rental Films of 1972,” *Variety*, 3 January 1973, 7; 36.

⁴¹ “Big Rental Films of 1972,” 7; 36.

⁴² “Big Rental Films of 1972,” 7; 36.

Jim Brown's attempted comeback from a sunken star image coincided with an overall nadir for the entire star system. In the same January 3rd issue of *Variety* announcing 1972's grosses, Lee Beaupre anointed "violence" as the successor to the star system. "No sooner had the star system been officially buried than Hollywood miraculously discovered a replacement to lure audiences into theatres. That new "star," now shining more brightly than any Gable or Garbo of old, is violence." He continues, "Just as these recent outpourings of violence have rescued film distributors and theatres, so they have provided new work for the nation's film critics and instilled new zest in the missionary efforts of various citizens' organizations."⁴³ Beaupre implies that the 1969-1971 recession pushed studios to reassess the economics of the star system. Increased violence could attract audiences, yet unlike a star performer, it added a negligible cost to the production. Furthermore, public outcries over violence provided free publicity for controversial films.

This shift in emphasis towards marketable content over marketable stars would soon lead to the "blockbuster" promotion of *Jaws* (1975), a massive hit featuring minor stars such as Roy Scheider, Richard Dreyfuss, and Robert Shaw. This shift can also explain the diminished impact of *Slaughter's* main differentiation from other Blaxploitation films: Jim Brown heading a recognizable cast. The high concept appeal of *Blacula*, whose title and advertising can instantly promote the first black vampire film, fares better than *Slaughter*, which merely sells the violence present in the vast majority of Blaxploitation films. Ads for *Slaughter* feature the same ambiguities of the film; in the central image, Brown wears a Bond-like tuxedo while wielding a shotgun; smaller

⁴³ Lee Beaupre, "Debate Over Brutality," *Variety*, 3 January 1973, 16; 32.

images feature him in a Shaft-style leather jacket and in shirtless hand-to-hand combat. Thus the ad exemplifies Brown's multi-faceted screen persona.

Slaughter's James Bond plot shifted the narrative from an urban locale to wealthy, predominately white casino resorts in South America. At the same time, urban exhibitors were shifting from a diverse film slate to a program entirely targeted at black viewers. A January 1973 *Variety* headline succinctly describes this phenomenon in Chicago theaters: "'Black' and 'Other Action' Rule Loop; Chi's Downtown Not for Varied Fare."⁴⁴ By 1973, even the most recalcitrant theater owners came to focus exclusively on black and action-oriented patrons. "The Chicago Theatre, completely dropping its Xmas time family image has National General's "Getaway," an action film which in previous years would never have been hooked at the ABC-Great State conservative flagship theatre during the holidays..."⁴⁵ Brown's "Black Gunn" appeared at The Oriental, another downtown theater. Thus Brown's ambition to appeal to white audiences after winning black audiences was nullified by segregated exhibition trends. His films opened in downtown theaters to predominantly black audiences. Even if they performed well, these runs would provide little evidence that his films would appeal to white viewers. While higher budget, high concept white films such as *The Getaway* (1972) and *The Poseidon Adventure* (1972) could draw black viewers downtown, a low budget Blaxploitation film would need a remarkable performance and a repackaged marketing approach if it were ever expanded to white suburban theaters.

⁴⁴ Ron Wise, "'Black' and 'Other Action' Rule Loop; Chi's Downtown Not for Varied Fare," *Variety*, 3 January 1973, 48.

⁴⁵ Wise, 48.

Slaughter's distributor, American International Pictures, specialized in profitably and quickly exploiting films among a targeted demographic. *Slaughter's* run exemplified AIP's approach. *Slaughter* opened in five cities in late August of 1972, premiering at number ten on *Variety's* box office chart. The next week, it appeared in only one theater on a double bill with *Box Car Bertha* (1972). A wider release in eleven cities drove *Slaughter* up to the number four film. However after falling from the top ten in its sixth week, it disappeared from theaters.⁴⁶ Still, *The Motion Picture Herald* dubbed it a "Box-Office Champion" for September and October of 1972.⁴⁷

Slaughter premiered to large crowds in a large scale nationwide fitting an exploitation booking strategy. The film failed to retain audiences after successful premiere weekends, and was quickly shelved by AIP for a moderate profit. By contrast, Warner Brothers' *Super Fly* gradually expanded to fifteen cities and twenty-seven theaters after eight weeks of release, becoming the number one film in the country. Another black-oriented Warners picture, *Come Back Charleston Blue* (the sequel to *Cotton Comes to Harlem*), remained at number four after thirteen weeks.⁴⁸ While *Superfly* represented a cultural phenomenon, *Come Back Charleston's* success showed the power of a larger distributor over AIP. AIP's exploitation release strategy nearly guaranteed profits, but targeted releases and quick runs left less potential for breakaway hits. Warners could afford to build towards wider releases and larger advertising campaigns based on audience response. While *Slaughter* may have lacked the appeal of

⁴⁶ "50 Top-Grossing Films," *Variety*, 30 August 1972- 4 October 1972.

⁴⁷ "Box Office Champions," *Motion Picture Herald*, October 1972- November 1972.

⁴⁸ "50 Top-Grossing Films," *Variety*, 30 August 1972- 4 October 1972.

Warner's releases, it is difficult to conclude how much the box office results of Blaxploitation releases were predetermined by distribution strategies and resources.

Slaughter represents a curious mixture of hopeful gestures towards a white audience and pragmatic appeals to a targeted black audience. While Jim Brown remained a celebrity for white Americans, he only remained a movie star for black Americans. Brown aspired to regain mainstream stardom, but he faced a box office recovering from a recession and relying heavily on newly realized profits from black moviegoers. Ironically, films such as *Shaft* and *Superfly*, whose characters and narratives appealed even more narrowly to black audiences (with the critical exception of soundtracks with widespread appeal), gained much greater popular attention than the faintly integrationist *Slaughter*. Yet *Slaughter* brought Jim Brown back onto American screens, and Blaxploitation kept him there throughout the 1970's. Abandoning his attempts at filmic integration, Brown appeared in a reconfiguration of the Super-Actioner genre that had cemented his Hollywood stardom; the result was *Three the Hard Way* (1974), a "Super-Blaxploitationer."

Conclusion: How We Remember Jim Brown

In his 1989 autobiography Out of Bounds, Jim Brown reflects on his acting career in a chapter titled “Misadventures in Hollywood”:

Today people don’t know that I was the top star in films with some famous people. Though Gene Hackman and Donald Sutherland and Ernie Borgnine and Jack Klugman were all in *The Split*, I played their boss, in an attempt to rob the Coliseum. I recruited my men, I strategized—I was the leader. And although my role had nothing to do with being black—although most of my roles were not defined by race—today people think I made black exploitation films. Not only did I not make black exploitation films, I was playing roles that normally went only to white guys. But that’s how people are. They talk but they don’t do their homework.¹

Twenty years after Brown wrote this, his place atop the cast of *The Split* can still surprise both scholars and general audiences. Brown’s assessment is largely accurate in describing his career from 1967-1970; and by 1972, Brown likely aspired to make *Slaughter* as a non-Blaxploitation film. However beginning with Columbia’s *Black Gunn* in November of 1972, Brown certainly made black exploitation films. These later works have largely overshadowed Brown’s mainstream stardom, placing him among the various athletes, such as Fred Williamson, who followed him to Hollywood.

By 1974, reviews for *Three The Hard Way* indicate that Brown had lost nearly all of his white audience. Consider the opening of *The New York Times*’ curt review of the film: “‘Three the Hard Way,’ which opened yesterday at the DeMille and Loews Cine Theaters, is a hideously inane black exploitation movie that glories in reverse racism.”² *The Motion Product Digest* (previously *Motion Picture Herald*) rated it “poor,” only

¹ Jim Brown, *Out of Bounds* (New York: Zebra Books, 1989), 220.

² Vincent Canby, “Screen: A Fatal Flavor,” *New York Times*, 27 June 1974, 55.

suitable for “blacks who hate whites, whites who hate whites, or anybody who hates another person on the basis of race.”³ These scathing reviews helped audiences forget that two years earlier, Jim Brown could still top the bill over Stella Stevens, and less than five years earlier, over Gene Hackman or Raquel Welch.

1974 was a symbolic year for Jim Brown that saw many of his achievements surpassed by his younger peers. Lawrence van Gelder emphasizes this point in his review of *That Man Bolt* (1974):

It hasn't been much of a year for Jim Brown. First O.J. Simpson bettered his National Football League rushing record. And now—judging by “That Man Bolt” which opened last week at the DeMille—Fred Williamson is expanding his inroads on Mr. Brown's hegemony over the black action genre that has become one of the gilt-edge Bonds of cinema in the seventies. Already Mr. Williamson has surpassed Mr. Brown's statistics for emotional range (two: menacing and furious).⁴

Brown's better developed characters in *The Split* or even *Slaughter* had already been forgotten or dismissed. His friend and imitator, Fred Williamson, had now eclipsed his stardom for black audiences. Less than five years after Brown fell from Hollywood stardom to Blaxploitation status, he was already losing this marginal stardom. Brown had predicted in early 1968 that all of his records would be broken, but O.J. Simpson would soon overshadow Brown onscreen as well. He made films, television appearances, and a popular Hertz commercial where he dashed through an airport like a running back to catch his flight. Simpson combined Brown's athleticism and football fame with the clean cut image and calm demeanor of Sidney Poitier. Until his notorious murder trial in the

³ Richard Gertner, “Reviews of New Pictures,” *Motion Picture Product Digest*, 17 July 1974, 16.

⁴ Lawrence van Gelder, “Screen: That Man Bolt,” *New York Times*, 24 December 1974, 37.

early 1990's, Simpson would represent an ideal of the successful black man for many white Americans.

By 1989, Brown had fully realized how much race relations had changed in America and Hollywood:

Hollywood gave me roles that weren't specifically written for blacks. I didn't plan my career that way, but I understood the significance, albeit temporary, and I enjoyed breaking down some barriers. In the 1970s, those barriers went right back up. America regressed, Hollywood did the same. Hollywood opened its doors to blacks in the 1960s, pulled in the money, slammed them back shut.⁵

It is hard not to agree with Brown's cynicism. By supporting Blaxploitation, major studios largely relegated black talent to black audiences, reversing the push towards onscreen integration that Brown had helped lead. Once Blaxploitation profits dried up, major studios shed nearly all of the stars of the genre.⁶ For the remainder of the 1970's and 1980's, black comedians such as Richard Pryor and Eddie Murphy became the principal black stars. While their roles and salaries were a vast improvement on earlier black caricatures, their genre placement mitigated the physical and sexual threat to white masculinity embodied by Jim Brown.

Brown further detailed how a growing current of conservatism helped ruin his career and rebuild the barriers that he had broken in Hollywood.

I was also a casualty of timing, just as timing had been my ally when I broke in. In the 1960s Hollywood reacted to the liberal mood of the country, some of its own liberal leanings, the pressures exerted on it by the civil-rights movement, and gave blacks some decent roles. I played in scenes that were unprecedented: I made love to white women on the American screen. In America, in Hollywood, that is not small potatoes. When Hollywood returned to business as usual in the 1970s, it made sense that I would be the first guy they'd prefer to forget. I symbolized a screen image they wanted nothing but distance from, and have been

⁵ Brown 230.

⁶ Ed Guerrero, *Framing Blackness: The African American Image in Film* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1993) 110-111.

avoided to this day: it's been twenty years since a major Hollywood studio has filmed an interracial love story.⁷

The miscegenation taboo never lost its power. Only during a wave of liberalism could Brown be positioned to break it onscreen, and this transgression may very well have ruined his Hollywood career. Only recently has this barrier been regularly crossed, rarely in big budget productions. *Jungle Fever* (1991) was still topical and controversial when Spike Lee released it in the early nineties. In *There's Something About Mary* (1998), *interracial* marriage could still appear successfully as a sight gag.

This year, Will Smith, a black action star, has established himself as the most bankable actor in Hollywood.⁸ He has still failed to appear in a love scene with a white actress, as Jim Brown did in 1969 and 1972. *Hitch* (2005) provided a soft crossing of racial barriers by romantically pairing Smith with a Hispanic actress, Eva Mendes. Last year, in *Hancock* (2008), he played a superhero in love with a white female superhero (Charlize Theron); his kryptonite was miscegenation. Their mutual super-powers weakened when they came into close contact, forcing them to leave their love affair unconsummated.

The continuing power of the miscegenation taboo shows how critical Jim Brown must be to our understanding of Hollywood's representations of African-Americans; unfortunately, he became a "casualty of timing" in film scholarship as well. The decline in Brown's Blaxploitation career coincided with the publication of Donald Bogle's *Toms, Coons, Mulattos, Mammies, and Bucks* in 1973. Bogle's interview with *The New York*

⁷ Brown, 235.

⁸ "Hollywood's Most Valuable Actors - Forbes.com," http://www.forbes.com/2009/02/10/forbes-star-currency-business-media-star-currency-09_0210_star_currency.html.

Times helps explain why Brown received such a brief analysis in the work that still underlies much of film scholarship on black representation.

I'm very cynical about the whole thing. The black people who are really making money from movies now—Jim Brown and Fred Williamson—are not going to change unless there is a tremendous fight against them. It's going to take very honest, dedicated people trying to do the best they can. It may be my naiveté, but I cannot excuse Jim Brown's corruption. Perhaps I can understand it, but I can't accept it.⁹

Bogle hoped that his book could change the “corrupted”, Blaxploitation stereotypes that defined Brown's roles after 1972. Writing during a wave of criticism against the glorified criminals and violent enforcers of Blaxploitation, Bogle hoped that the money earned by black stars and filmmakers could be re-channeled into positive black stories. No wonder Brown was so easily characterized as a “brute.” Yet Bogle was not naïve, as he suggested; he merely tried to promote positive black characters at the peak of black participation in film. However the boom in black films sharply fell off in the later 1970's, leaving an absence of black representation rather than an improvement upon it.¹⁰

Black critics of Blaxploitation tried to institute a Black Review Board in 1972. Just five years after Hollywood had abandoned censorship, the sex, violence, and dereliction of Blaxploitation inspired some black leaders to regulate content for themselves. Never one to back away from a fight, Brown responded to this outcry in an editorial to the *New York Times*:

There is *opportunity*. The one approach that will work is to approach movies as an industry, as a business. Black people must stop crying “*Black*” and start crying “*Business*.” Business, business and business *techniques*—they hold up whether the film is black or white. When you have money, talent, and a good story and

⁹ “Is it Better to be Shaft than Uncle Tom?,” *New York Times*, 26 August 1973, 117.

¹⁰ For a detailed account of the wave of criticism against Blaxploitation, see Guerrero, 101-103.

you put them all together, you don't have to worry about whether the film is black or white, and we will then be a part of the mainstream of American life.¹¹

While Bogle accurately criticized Brown's Blaxploitation characters as shallow stereotypes, Brown still fought for black integration into the larger white society through economic empowerment. Scholarship on the industrial structures of Hollywood has widely expanded since Bogle's book first appeared in the early 1970's; this movement in film studies helps validate Brown's emphasis on capital over content to better establish a black presence in mainstream Hollywood. For example, Guerrero indicates how Blaxploitation had to follow the economic model for Hollywood "B" movies, severely limited the possibility for alternative black narratives.¹²

In economic terms, Brown was also a "casualty of timing." At the peak of his career, Hollywood fell into a deep three-year recession. MGM, his biggest supporter, all but collapsed, undoubtedly affecting the production and promotion of Brown's films. While Blaxploitation helped Hollywood rebound financially, it ensured a temporary abandonment of integrationist dramas and action films. Furthermore, the cultural split between black and white audiences correlated with a geographical split between increasingly black urban centers and continued white flight to the suburbs. Why produce integrated films when theater locations promoted highly segregated audiences?

Extensive cultural and industrial changes in America and Hollywood effectively combined to sink Brown's career at the peak of his Hollywood stardom. For all of 1971, he sat idle in the lonely center between black and white, conservative and liberal, Old Hollywood and New Hollywood, Poitier and Richard Roundtree. If Brown had not faced

¹¹ Jim Brown, "Approach It as Business," *New York Times*, 17 December 1972, D19.

¹² Guerrero, 104.

such a confluence of obstacles, he may have kept black film history on an integrationist path. Yet Brown's failure to achieve full integration makes him all the more important to film scholarship.

More than Poitier, Brown established the black audience as a vital segment of the American audience. While Poitier made incomparable breakthroughs in the positive representation of black manhood on the screen, Brown pushed black masculinity to its logical extremes. He introduced viewers to the pleasure of seeing black leading men who were realistic, powerful, sexual, and unapologetic. Aside from these credible traits, he offered the fantasy image of a seemingly super-human physical form. Brown personified his characters' frank realism and legendary physical achievement in his public life.

Arguably Brown's two-year absence from the screen helped precipitate the enormous boom of Blaxploitation films in 1972. His fall from Hollywood prominence left a gap that took a new generation of black actors and filmmakers to fill. The cinematic history of African-Americans has failed to place Brown prominently enough in its narrative. He significantly changes a story that too often generalizes Blaxploitation as a libidinous response to Sidney Poitier. Before black films radically abandoned white audiences, Jim Brown made a crucial breakthrough. He introduced a fully realized black masculinity to mainstream audiences, and they failed to wholly accept it. By exposing the sexual limits of racial integration, Brown spurred the re-segregation of Blaxploitation.

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